Ethics and Deafness: A Matter of Perspective?

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In 2004, a conference was held in Sydney, Australia, entitled Perspectives on Ethics and Deafness. The questions underlying the conference were intriguing: What are the “ethical issues” that pertain to deafness? To what extent are such issues culturally relative? Are deaf and hearing individuals bound by the same ethical standards with regard to personal and professional relationships involving deaf people? How are ethical decisions concerning deaf children viewed differently depending on the hearing status of their parents?

The conference program provided a clear response to the first issue. Predictably, perhaps, there were ethical issues identified in areas such as medical and technological interventions with deaf children, genetic screening and manipulation, respect and support for linguistic diversity, educational placements, interpreting, and so on. As these issues were presented, discussed, and debated over the three days of the conference, the question of ethical standards became of much greater interest. The issue of “perspective” became a clear issue in itself.

The perspectives represented at the conference were many and varied. The meeting included deaf and hearing people from a range of backgrounds including members of the Deaf community, educators, linguists, interpreters, social workers, psychologists, doctors of a variety of specialties including cochlear implant surgery, ethicists, geneticists, lawyers, parents of deaf children, and others broadly interested in issues relating to deafness and how they may be viewed through the prism of ethical standards. Notably, many of the professional groups represented have written Codes of Ethics to inform or guide professional behavior. Some of the presentations related to the formulation or application of those codes, while discussion sometimes questioned the extent to which such Codes are actually followed... or should be. The breadth of debate revealed great diversity of views and positions, even within the membership of professional groups with codified ethical standards.

Essentially all of the views presented were argued from the standpoint of what is “right.” This is not surprising, because the very concept of acting ethically can be seen as a matter of doing the “right” thing. If we accept that being ethical means doing what is right, then we need some definition of “right.” Such a definition in any particular circumstance, however, is clearly a matter of perspective. The existence of multiple perspectives—professional, organizational, and cultural, to name a few—leads to the potential for great variability and likely disagreement about such a definition. In particular, such multiple perspectives may lead to conflict between personal ethics and those that may be determined as standards by a professional or other organization (particularly a cultural group). They become cloudy when individuals from outside of
such a group appear to take leading roles in arguments that affect individuals within the group (positively or negatively, depending on one’s perspective).

The potential for variation and conflict between professional and personal views clearly exists in regard to a variety of issues relating to deafness. This was certainly evident to us in regard to the topics raised during the conference, both in presentations and in responses to them. Individual participants’ views on questions such as the value of genetic screening or cochlear implantation could not be reliably predicted by their hearing status, nor their cultural or professional backgrounds. There were evident differences, for example, among professional views about the potential benefits or potential negative effects of certain technologies and practices involving deaf people and the Deaf community. Consensus was rare.

As participants came to know each other better over three days, discussion became even more enlightening, challenging, and in many ways, unsettling. If there was one point of agreement, it was that there is a wide range of ethical issues that are in great need of further discussion. Importantly, many of the ethical questions that do not enjoy any consensus among people engaged in this field are those that are most immediately pressing—particularly issues in regard to the application of medical science and associated technologies. Clearly, there is “an ongoing march of science and technology” (Power, 2001, p. 40) that relates very specifically to deaf people. Regardless of the ethical dilemmas that may be experienced by individuals and groups, there are constant developments in these areas and a prevailing medical ethical standard that identifies their application as “the right thing” to do. These become more complex when they conflict, or appear to conflict, with other ethical standards or strongly held personal and sociocultural beliefs.

In The Birth of the Modern, Johnson (1991, p. 1000) quoted Charles Lamb from a letter written in 1830. Lamb lamented that “There is a march of science. But who shall beat the drums for its retreat?” As was the case in 1830, and has been ever since, there will be no retreat. But the path of that march can and should be shaped by reasoned and informed debate and by the clarification of all relevant perspectives and applicable ethical standards. It is to these ends that we have sought to facilitate debate and the exchange of professional views via the Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education. In this issue of JDSDE are the first two articles to appear in a special section addressing the general topic of “Ethics and Deafness.” The section will appear in issues of Volume 10 and 11, and additional contributions are welcomed. These articles will range widely from medical issues to education, from Deaf culture/community perspectives to psychological research. We trust they will serve to stimulate much needed discussion and debate.

References
