

Discerning personhood through *lena-dena*: Disability professionals, ethics, and communication

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Abstract

This article looks at practices of discernment in disability spaces in India by analyzing (hierarchical) relational contexts in which disability professionals and disabled people in India interact. We argue that discernment, which we explore through *lena-dena* (giving and taking), allows us to analyze the ethical stakes of processes of communication, interpreting, and facilitation. Vaidya analyzes how special educators make broad discernments about intellectually disabled people by interpreting their unconventional and nonlinguistic communicative cues. In contrast, Friedner examines how speech and language therapists that work with deaf children make narrow discernments regarding what counts as language and perform the labor of training deaf children to communicate in the normatively correct way—that is, using speech. While disability professionals produce specific kinds of personhood for disabled people through their practices of discernment, they also end up discerning themselves in the process as professionals with difficult yet rewarding jobs. We conclude by discussing a program for individuals with intellectual disabilities where both authors conducted ethnographic research wherein disability professionals discerned disabled people as having social needs and desires on par with nondisabled people and created enabling environments, scaffolded activities, and facilitated conversations to produce and enable complex personhood for them.

KEYWORDS

disability, communication, personhood, discernment, India

Resumen

Este artículo analiza las prácticas de discernimiento en espacios de discapacidad en India para analizar los contextos relacionales (jerárquicos) en los cuales profesionales de la discapacidad y personas discapacitadas en India interactúan. Argumentamos que discernimiento, el cual exploramos a través de *lena-dena* (dar y recibir), nos permite analizar los riesgos de los procesos de comunicación, interpretación y facilitación. Vaidya analiza cómo los educadores especiales hacen discernimientos amplios acerca de las personas discapacitadas intelectualmente al interpretar sus señales comunica-

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tivas no convencionales y no lingüísticas. En contraste, Friedner examina cómo los terapeutas de la expresión y el lenguaje que trabajan con niños sordos hacen discernimientos limitados con relación a lo que cuenta como lenguaje y realizan la labor de entrenar niños sordos para comunicarse en la forma normativamente correcta –es decir, usando el habla–. Mientras los profesionales de la discapacidad producen tipos específicos sobre la condición de persona para personas discapacitadas a través de sus prácticas de discernimiento, también terminan discerniendo ellos mismos en el proceso como profesionales con trabajos difíciles pero gratificantes. Concluimos discutiendo un programa para individuos con discapacidades intelectuales donde los dos autores llevaron a cabo una investigación etnográfica en la que profesionales de la discapacidad discernieron la persona con discapacidad como teniendo necesidades sociales y deseos al mismo nivel de personas sin discapacidad y crearon ambientes propicios, actividades de andamiaje educativo, y facilitaron conversaciones para mostrarles y facilitarles una condición de persona compleja. [discapacidad, comunicación, condición de persona, discernimiento, India]

सारांश

यह निबंध भारत में विकलांग लोगों की विविध जगहों में काम करनेवाले व्यावसायिक और विकलांग व्यक्ति इनके बीच की "परस्पर पहचान (आकलन) प्रक्रिया"ओं की विविध रीतियों की खोज लेता है। यह रीतीया सापेक्ष, श्रेणीबद्ध, संबद्ध परक होती है। इन "परस्पर पहचान (आकलन) प्रक्रिया"ओं की खोजमें "लेना-देना" (लेन-देन, giving & taking) इस संकल्पना का प्रयोग करनेके कारण हम "संचार प्रक्रिया, अर्थ की खोज करना, एवं सुविधा प्रदान करना" इन गतिविधियों की नैतिक-जिम्मेदारी का विश्लेषण कर सकते हैं। बौद्धिक-विकलांगों के अपारंपरिक और अशाब्दिक संचारी-संकेतों को विशेष शिक्षक किस प्रकार समझते हैं इसका विश्लेषण वैद्य करती है। इसके विपरीत, कर्ण बधिर बच्चों के साथ काम करनेवाले वाक-चिकित्सक, अपनी भाषा विषयक मर्यादित पहचान प्रक्रियाओं के अनुसार उन्हें कष्टपूर्वक "मानक रूपसे सही" भाषा सिखाते हैं- बोलना सिखाते हैं- इसका विवेचन फ्रीडनर करती है। विकलांगों के लिए काम करनेवाले व्यावसायिक अपनी पहचान प्रक्रियाओं के द्वारा विकलांगों के लिए "विशिष्ट व्यक्ति विशेष (या पहचान) को रूप देते समय उनके साथ खुदका आकलन "कठिन मगर सुकून देनेवाला काम करनेवाले व्यावसायिक" इस प्रकार करते हैं। इस लेखका समापन करते हुए बौद्धिक-विकलांगों के एक प्रकल्प में दोनों लेखिकाओंने किए हुए मानव वंश शास्त्रीय (एन्थ्रपोलोजी) संशोधन का विवेचन किया है। इस प्रकल्पमें काम करनेवाले व्यावसायिक विकलांग व्यक्ति का आकलन -सामान्य व्यक्ति जैसी सामाजिक आवश्यकता, आकांक्षा रखानेवाले व्यक्ति- इस प्रकार करते हैं। विकलांग व्यक्ति के व्यामिश्र व्यक्ति विशेष या पहचान को रूप देने लायक सक्षम परिवेश, उसे बढ़ावा देनेवाले मंच और बातचीत आसन बनानेवाला माहौल बनाते हैं। [विकलांगता, संचार प्रक्रिया, परस्पर पहचान (आकलन) प्रक्रिया, भारत]

INTRODUCTION

When the child is with you for six months or a year you come to know what things he reacts to, what are the things he is afraid of, or what are the things he is comfortable at, what things he likes; teachers are observing all these things, and we come to know from this. If a child does not want to go, he pulls us with him ... or if he does not want to eat, he will move away, throw away things, or push that food.

—Sadhana, the principal of *Sankalp*, a special school in Pune responding to Vaidya's question about how she understands her intellectually disabled students who do not use speech to communicate.

We know that she wants a biscuit because she has pointed to it. We will not give it to her until she uses words to ask for it in an appropriate way. This is why we use biscuits, to motivate her to use her words.

—A speech and language therapist in Bangalore responding to Friedner's question about why she did not give a deaf cochlear implanted child a biscuit when she pointed at it.

In these two quotations, a special educator and a speech and language pathologist discuss the interactive work that they do to make sense of the people with whom they engage. In these examples, this work involves pointing, pulling, pushing, and speaking as well as responding to such communication. These examples thus involve an interactive process of giving and taking, termed *lena-dena* (literally, take and give) in Hindi by a few of our interlocutors. What work do people engage in to understand others, what kinds of value are attached to this work, and what kinds of personhood are given and received as an outcome of such work? Moreover, how does this work, which we call discernment, then feed back into how people construct themselves and others as persons in the world? In this article, we draw from joint and separate research examining two distinct relationships: the relationships of special educators and intellectually disabled students and those of therapists and deaf children in India. We analyze the ways that educators and therapists discern signals as communicative (or not). We argue throughout this essay that discernment is a relational process for making personhood. Through discernment, disability professionals created and/or constrained communicative opportunities, which made it possible for those with whom they worked and for themselves as well to inhabit and enact personhood.

Despite the existence of disability rights activism (most of it organized by and focusing on people with physical disabilities), a new 2016 disability law, and a push for inclusive education (at least on paper), disabled people in India (still) experience interactional vulnerability (Green, 2022) in activities of everyday life, particularly education, employment, and engaging with others out in the world (Friedner, 2018). This is particularly the case for individuals with intellectual disabilities as well as deaf individuals, both of whom might not communicate or use language typically (Friedner, 2015; Vaidya, 2016). Recent work in medical anthropology and the anthropology of disability, and more broadly in the social sciences, has looked at the ways that nondisabled and disabled actors might communicate differently, either through using augmentative assistive communication (Reno, 2012; Rutherford, 2021; Wolf-Meyer, 2020), dancing and forms of play (Simplican, 2015), and through scaffolding of socialization and interaction (Friedner, 2022; Hart, 2014). An important strain of this work has focused on the role of mothers as pioneers in knowing their children's preferences, desires, and needs (Fietz, 2019; Landsman, 1998; Rutherford, 2020; Sargent, 2021). Here we focus on professionals, although many mothers do become professionals.

Our interlocutors, special educators, speech and language therapists, and volunteers, who we include in the broad category of disability professionals, performed relational and communicative labor (Buch, 2013; Driessen, 2018) in their interactions with disabled people. Carr (2015, 265) analyzes the professional experiences of social workers and frames them as "attentional actors" who productively engage with the here-and-now and carefully observe and respond to people's needs in the moment; in doing so, she identifies attention as a form of expertise. Similar to Carr's interlocutors, our interlocutors were also empathetic "attentional actors" who attended to the linguistic and nonlinguistic communicative cues of disabled people. We pay specific attention to how they discerned the linguistic and nonlinguistic communicative cues of disabled people. We argue that this act of discerning was moral in nature and it produced value, and ultimately personhood, for both professionals and disabled people.¹

COMMUNICATION, DISCERNMENT, LENA-DENA, AND PERSONHOOD

Communication and interaction have ethical stakes:² Green (2022) writes about the ways people might resist being interactional partners and explores situations in which individuals choose not to do the work of communication across modality or across gesture/natural sign with deaf people in rural Nepal who do not use conventionalized language. She argues that "less conventional situations offer generative material for thinking about the ethical processes of language" (24) and that in order "for interaction to take place, people must establish and maintain relations through corporeal and cognitive acts of attention and turn-taking" (23). Similarly, but not specifically to communication, McKearney (2018) writes about the work that carers of cognitively disabled people do to understand the wishes of those for whom they are caring and he posits such interpretation as moral. McKearney describes how new carers are taught not to view cognitively disabled people as passive objects of care. One way of doing this is by teaching carers to be more "vulnerable" and therefore open to those for whom they are caring (45). McKearney argues that "this cultivation of vulnerability" leads carers to be "more receptive to people with cognitive disabilities as unusual, distinctive, and surprising agents" (47). Sargent (2018) explores the stakes of moral labor by analyzing how mothers of children with Down syndrome in Jordan develop a "moral orientation" (87) of acceptance, which requires them to work on developing their child, themselves, as well as networks with kin and professionals (84). Sargent argues that the cultivation of acceptance as a moral orientation requires, "mothers working on their children, particularly through training bodily habitus in the pursuit of normalization," and, "mothers working on themselves, specifically by cultivating particular emotional states and forms of discipline" (85-86). Thus, working on and with a child also means working on oneself and comporting oneself as a specific kind of moral person.

Drawing on this body of work on the intersections of labor, communication, and ethics, in this article, we use the concept of discernment—as both a noun and verb—in order to stress that the work of interpreting, analyzing, translating, and responding to others is an ethical act. According to the *OED*, discernment can take place through the senses and the intellect and can be associated with passing judgment.³ Coleman and Dulin (2022, 413) write, “Admittedly, discernment is rarely used by social scientists as an analytical term. . . . However, in its most basic sense, divorced as far as possible from association with any particular religion, discernment refers to both the act and the quality of perceiving something—an object, action, relationship, motivation—that happens to be obscure or is deliberately obscured.” We see discernment as a practice that enables individuals to make up themselves and others as specific kinds of communicative actors and ultimately as persons. Discernment requires that individuals place value on and in the individuals that they are trying to engage (or not) and that they also attach value to the active work of interpreting, figuring out, investigating, tinkering, and trying to make sense of those with whom they are interacting. Like Klaitz (2016), we see discernment as tacit and as a set of embodied dispositions that develop because of time and experience spent with people with nonnormative communicative capacities. However, one must be willing to engage (Green, 2022). Discernment is a dialogic process as well in that while one is discerning someone else, one is also discerning oneself and one’s capacities simultaneously.

We argue that discernment takes place through *lena-dena*, as discussed in our opening paragraph, literally translated into English, again, as “take and give,” or give and take. This is a term that our interlocutors at the Latika Foundation (LF),⁴ an institute for children and adults with intellectual disabilities that we discuss below, used to talk about communication. They meant the giving and taking of language, signs, objects, facial expressions, intonations, and motions, among other things. Here we think expansively about how giving and receiving communication—and being able to discern it—functions to make up persons and relationships.⁵ This relational approach to personhood resonates with South Asian conceptions of personhood that instead of locating personhood in bounded individuals, approach it as fluid, relational, and transactional (Busby, 1997; Marriott, 1976). *Lena-dena* as an interactive process produces personhood.

SITES, METHODS, MOTIVATIONS

We draw from research conducted in special schools, vocational training centers, and therapeutic clinics. We view such institutions as shaping the capacities of those who can be found within them (Kulick & Rydström, 2015; Wolf-Meyer, 2020). Vaidya conducted ethnographic fieldwork with special educators in the state of Maharashtra in India from 2021 to 2022. Her work focused on relationships of care, categorization, and communication that emerged between special educators and intellectually disabled young adults in different vocational and recreational programs and schools. Friedner has conducted research with auditory-verbal therapy (AVT) therapists and other therapeutic professionals who are focused on producing children to be normatively sensing and communicating from 2016 to 2022 in different Indian cities including Pune, Bangalore, Delhi, Chennai, and Mumbai. Specifically, Friedner has conducted participant observation in AVT sessions, interviewed practitioners, and interviewed families about their therapeutic trajectories. To be sure, while we place special educators and AVT therapists in relation in this paper, the two groups had very different goals and worked with different constituencies of people in terms of age and disability category; however, what unites them is a focus on capacitating personhood through communication.

We also draw from shared experiences conducting research at the LF, an organization providing early intervention, education, vocational training, and social services and support to children and adults with intellectual disabilities and their families in Dehra Dun, India. We visited LF because its founder, Jo Chopra, has written many blog posts about the value of thinking expansively about communication and not taking it for granted that there is one way to communicate.⁶ For instance, Chopra (2019a) writes about “the subtle art of interpretation” and advocates for an approach toward communication in which support persons (such as special educators and caregivers) are encouraged to voice intellectually disabled people’s thoughts in the first person, instead of speaking on behalf of them in front of them in the third person a practice that is common in other institutions of special education in India. She writes about an example of taking a visitor around the school and introducing her to a child. She told the visitor the child’s name and then interpreted for her by telling her that the child was greeting her, showing her a picture, and wanting her to notice a new dress. However, she realized that this was not the best approach and that instead, she should voice for the child. She writes that alternatively, she could say, “Namaste, I’m Kashvi!” Pause while the other person responds. ‘What do you think of my picture?’ Pause for the other person to admire it. ‘I got this new dress yesterday. Pink is my favorite color.’ Pause while the other person comments.” While this is a particular technique that we did not see many people use, we share it here to foreground LF’s deep commitment to critically thinking about communication and interpersonal engagement. During joint research, we spent time in the social club and Vaidya visited the vocational training and transition program while Friedner spent time in the school. We both also attended LF’s afternoon program, which involved disabled and nondisabled children coming together in shared activities such as cricket, dance, and creative play with clay and other mediums.

We decided to write this article because we were excited by the investment that we saw LF teachers, staff, and administration place in communication and the ways that such an investment seemed to herald more complex understandings of personhood. We observed teachers, for example, using gesture, pictures, communication boards, Indian Sign Language (ISL) lexicon, and touch and physical manipulation of children’s bodies to communicate with children through *lena-dena*. Vaidya noticed how educators spoke to their students in the first person, in contrast to her other field sites, wherein the teachers spoke to Vaidya about their students in the third person in front of them. Friedner was struck by how, in a small class-

room with two instructors and a steady stream of aides, the two teachers knew what their seven students liked and their eclectic and singular ways of communicating, whether it be a smiling response to a whisper of “coo coo” in an ear or being given a basket of puzzles to manipulate. During the after-school program, teachers guided students’ hands over pottery on a potter’s wheel, laughing when a child chose to smash the clay instead of continuing. Friedner had a strong reaction to the different semiotic and communicative resources at play after spending time in deaf educational and therapeutic spaces in India that felt communicatively (linguistically and semiotically) spare, with nothing available aside from listening and spoken language. Vaidya was excited because she felt that the staff at LF were articulating the discernment practices which she observed at various organizations that work with intellectually disabled people in Pune and that they were thrilled to be discussing their techniques. We felt that the teachers at LF and the foundation’s communication philosophy put them on the vanguard of what communication could and should be, not just for disabled people, but for all people.

In an interview with LF’s communication specialist Nandini, Nandini told Vaidya, “So this is the thing, if we talk of communication, every child communicates. Every child. No matter what level they are. He communicates from his side. If we can’t understand him then as a teacher, or special educator, or parent ... it’s our lacking. We have to understand it.” She shared that the philosophy that LF uses is “Observe, Wait, and Listen,” or OWL. What is required of people, including families, is for them to attend to the child and discern what it is that the child is trying to communicate. As an example, she told Vaidya about a long exchange that she had with a former student who she had known for many years: she was talking to the student about different kinds of animals, using a book of pictures, and she noticed that the student seemed interested in something in the book. She thought about what he might be interested in telling her and wondered if it might be about one of his brothers. She knew, from knowing his family for many years, that he and his brothers were close, and they were a source of support for him. She said that he used his eyes to tell her to turn the page, which she did, and when they got to a page about chimpanzees, he said, “This!” using body language. She then asked, “Who is this?” in sign language lexicon and gesture. He signed “house” and then she asked if it was about “home” and went through kinship terms in ISL lexicon with him. When she got to “brother,” he blinked. Nandini noticed his blink and asked him if he was saying that his brother was a chimpanzee. He said yes and they both laughed (we do not know how the child said “yes”). In this reported example, Nandini uses gesture, sign, and pictures, and importantly, her knowledge of the child and his family from spending time with them. She believes in her ability, based on years of experience in the field of special education, to make sense with, for, and of those with whom she is working.⁷ Similarly, Nandini emphatically told Friedner, “Everyone can communicate.” She stressed: “We teach parents to recognize things: eyes blinking, looking a certain way at a certain place, all of this is communication.”

BROAD AND NARROW DISCERNMENTS OF *LENA-DENA*

Going forward, we start with Vaidya’s fieldwork with special educators and their students and then move to Friedner’s fieldwork. We argue that in the case of Vaidya’s fieldwork, special educators took an expansive view of communication and that they took pride in being able to discern what the individuals with whom they worked wished to communicate as well as their preferences, personalities, and attachments more broadly. For them, discernment was a process that was not confined to language. This often led to broad discernments of intellectually disabled people’s communicative cues, which were then tethered to personhood (which may or may not have been indicative of what they were expressing and/or who they were as people). In contrast, Friedner draws from fieldwork with therapists working with young deaf children who refused to see anything but spoken language as communicatively meaningful. In doing so, they argued for narrow discernment and took pride in their ability to produce deaf children as listening and speaking children who were effortlessly legible to others. This is not to say that they did not work diligently but rather that their work was a different kind of work, a work of continuing to maintain the world through stable and narrow linguistic communication as is.

While *lena-dena* in Vaidya’s field sites was unpredictable and expansive—one was open to receiving the slightest and most unpredictable and unconventional signs as communicative in order to adjudicate intent, meaning, and ultimately give a flattened or simplified personhood, in Friedner’s field sites, it was much more predictable because the goal was listening and spoken language and for communication to be normatively intelligible. There was give and take, yes, but it was much more constrained and mapped tightly onto actual denotative utterances. In both sites, *lena-dena* took place against the backdrop of different kinds of so-called scientific, professional, and embodied forms of expertise and expectations for what students and trainees could be and become as well as the general discounting and devaluing of special education and speech and language therapy in an Indian context.⁸ Just as disabled peoples’ personhood was constructed through *lena-dena*, so was the personhood of those with whom they interacted.

We conclude the article by returning to LF and examining a third approach to discernment, which was neither broad and simplified, unlike Vaidya’s special educators, nor normatively predetermined and exacting, like Friedner’s interlocutors. We examine how disability professionals at LF discerned intellectually disabled people as having the same needs as nondisabled people but performed the labor of scaffolding and facilitating to actualize these needs. In the process, disability professionals created social spaces and communicative opportunities, which made it possible for intellectually disabled people to inhabit and enact a more complex social personhood, perhaps more on their own terms.

LENA-DENA: GIVING EXPANSIVE YET SIMPLIFIED PERSONHOOD AND RECEIVING PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY THROUGH BROAD DISCERNMENT

Vaidya focused specifically on schools and vocational centers providing education and skill building to intellectually disabled people, who often require assistance with daily tasks and do not necessarily communicate using conventionalized language. Most of the professionals Vaidya interacted with were women who had been working for 10 or more years. While some had received a formal degree in special education from educational institutions approved by the Rehabilitation Council of India (RCI), the governmental body that regulates the field of special education in India, some had attended Industrial Training Institutes (ITIs) to earn degrees in specific vocations. The rest learned on the job by modeling their senior colleagues and attending in-house workshops. Before proceeding to the discernment practices of special educators, it is important to provide context for these everyday interactions. Special educators received low to modest salaries, ranging between INR 5000/USD 60 to INR 12,000/USD 144 per month.⁹ Most of the vocational centers where I conducted fieldwork were informal and home-based organizations. In these spaces, special educators would often have to do multiple tasks at once. They would do production work (such as stitching bags and consolidating gift packages for holiday season) while training intellectually disabled people by sitting on the floor next to them and giving them verbal instructions during vocational activities, such as painting oil lamps, or *diyās*, and medical envelopes. They would also assist their students with activities of daily life, such as toileting, washing hands, and feeding. It was within these resource-constrained environments, wherein time was of the essence, that special educators made their discernments.

Moreover, special educators often lamented to each other and to Vaidya that administrators as well as parents of their students routinely questioned their authority. They shared that they did not feel adequately appreciated by society. Indeed, special education institutions struggle to retain staff.¹⁰ Despite these challenges, special educators discerned themselves as doing important, challenging, and joyous work with people who were also undervalued by society. Patience, empathy, innovation, and quick thinking were common qualities listed by special educators as being essential for being good at the job. Vimla, a retired special educator from Pune said about the field of special education: "You must have a scientific approach towards everything. Why is this happening to the child? Why is their behavior changing?" As a special educator, you had to do it all; be a friend and a scientist at the same time. By giving personhood to intellectually disabled people through the work of discerning their nonconventional communicative cues, special educators discerned their own professional identity, an important aspect of their own personhood, in return. As Sadhana, the principal of Sankalp put it, "I have got my identity because of these children." However, as I demonstrate in this section, *lena-dena* here involved special educators giving broad and oversimplified personhood to intellectually disabled people.

One day in early January 2022, Ganesh, a nonspeaking young adult with Down syndrome, approached Meghana, the founder of Ananda Foundation, with a notebook in which he was practicing writing in Devanagari script. She spent time explaining to him what he did wrong and how to write properly. He was writing in an inverted form. Then she looked at Vaidya smilingly and said, "This is actually not useful for him, but he likes it." Here, Meghana worked with Ganesh on writing, which she thought was not useful for him, but continued helping him with, because she believed that he liked it. This was not the only claim she made about Ganesh during my visit to Ananda Foundation, a vocational center, in Karkamb, Maharashtra in 2022. Meghana suggested that we should play music, because Ganesh works best when there is music in the background. When he turned his hand into a small round shape and rotated it, she understood it to mean that he wanted the ball. Meghana did not come to her conclusions overnight. She had been working at the organization since 2019 and was in close contact with Ganesh's parents. She is one of the many special educators that I met during my fieldwork who discerned intellectually disabled people as communicative and desiring actors. While Meghana's approach toward communication was indeed expansive given that she discerned Ganesh's gestures and facial expressions as being meaningful, her discernments also flattened Ganesh's personhood; according to Meghana, Ganesh was easy enough to read and draw certain conclusions about. For instance, Ganesh may have genuinely enjoyed music while working, but did he enjoy it all the time? Could he have meant something else, instead of a ball, when he made a small round shape with his hand? Special educators did not ask such questions of themselves or each other.

The discerning practices of special educators were not limited to times when they taught academics or imparted vocational skills. They continued discerning communicative signals as they worked with intellectually disabled young adults in multiple domains of life, such as toileting, feeding, singing, and simply co-existing in the same space. Vaidya observed special educators interpret the needs, moods, and preferences of intellectually disabled people. Often their discernments were made in the absence of clear communicative signals, based on nonlinguistic cues. For instance, there was no verbal confirmation from Ganesh that he loved writing or music. While this expansive approach toward communication was sensitive to unconventional cues, making space for intellectually disabled people to be viewed as communicative actors and thus persons, it also entailed making certain claims, leaving no space for complexities, ambivalences, or ambiguities.

An instance of this was seen at Udaan, an arts and vocational center in Pune, when Vaidya was sitting one day along with special educator Sonali and a few of the students in the crafts room painting *diyās* (small terracotta oil lamps) in preparation for selling them for Diwali. Sonali complained to Sarika, the founder of Udaan, that two students named Gopal and Vishal were working slowly. Soon it was time for lunch. Vishal refused to eat and kept painting. Sonali pleaded with him to go eat and said, "You worked fast only today, go for lunch now." Then she said to me, "I said before he was working slowly, right? So now he does not want to go." He soon left for lunch. Here, Sonali discerned Vishal as someone capable of being affected by her statement. She based her discernment on Vishal's behaviors (his refusal to stop working) rather than any verbal statement. Indeed, Vishal

did not verbally say that he was affected by Sonali's remark about his speed. Thus, Sonali discerned Vishal as a responsive person, despite his lack of normative, linguistic capabilities. However, her claims were certain and final, with no space for error, ambiguity, or feedback from Vishal. Maybe Vishal wanted to finish his task. Maybe he was not hungry, maybe he did not like the lunch on offer. Sonali did not consider these possibilities while discerning Vishal's behavior and its underlying motivation.

Instead of focusing on conventional standards of personhood, such as rationality and autonomy, educators used measures such as love and care¹¹ to recognize the personhood of intellectually disabled people (Kittay, 2011). Teachers were ready to face adverse situations because they believed that their students were loving people. Sonali shared that a former student of hers had suddenly slapped her so hard that she thought she had lost her hearing. However, she said that once he realized what he had done, he never left her side because these "children have a lot of love." Viewing their students as loving was essential to special educators' professional identity and helped to smooth over difficult work conditions such as the violence of being hit by a student. However, in viewing them as "loving," special educators solidified the category of "special children" as being different from typical people and put them in a box which limited their access to a complex existence.

Further, akin to Zoanni's (2018) research wherein, in the absence of conventional language, intellectually disabled people developed a distinct personality signature based on certain patterns of behaviors and people's responses to them, special educators in my field sites discerned their students as being specific kinds of people, ostensibly to determine what they could or should do. Swarup, a student at Udaan labeled as the "helping type" would always perform errands for the teachers. Though Swarup was given a social role that allowed him to participate in certain spheres of work, this categorization hindered his participation in other activities (such as playing djembe drums or painting *diyās*). While special educators recognized intellectually disabled people as responsive and desiring subjects, their discernments were often broad and hierarchical (with little input from disabled people themselves) which resulted in them giving expansive yet simplified personhood to intellectually disabled people. It was expansive in that the educators did not expect normative linguistic cues to make their discernments (the domain of what counted as communication was expansive). However, the discernments simplified the personhood made available to intellectually disabled people because they flattened them out as single-toned people who had limited and unchanging interests or personalities, and whose internal states could be accessed by outside experts.

LENA-DENA: GIVING NORMATIVE EXPECTATIONS AND RECEIVING PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY THROUGH NARROW DISCERNMENT

On the surface, it might appear odd or even problematic to place special educators working with people with intellectual disabilities in relation to speech and language therapists working with deaf children in that for the most part, medical professionals and re/habilitation specialists expect that deaf children can become normatively communicative (Friedner, 2022) and use language and this same expectation does not hold true for children and adults with intellectual disabilities. However, such expectations result in the shrinking of semiotic, communicative, and linguistic repertoires and have moral stakes for communication and interaction. While the special educators that Vaidya observed engaged in expansive ways of making their students make sense to them and to others through acts of generous interpretation and creating connections, the auditory-verbal therapists with whom Friedner worked were decidedly not expansive in their work with children: there was a goal and a "right way to communicate."¹² To begin, AVT is a therapeutic technique, practice, and philosophy that requires certification via the Alexander Graham Bell Academy, headquartered in the United States, and becoming certified requires an educational background in speech and language pathology and/or hearing sciences, extensive mentorship (which often has to be paid for), and sitting for an exam in either English or Spanish.¹³ Currently, there are only four certified therapists in India although these therapists play an outsized role in consulting with other noncertified therapists around the country and introducing techniques. There are also AVT therapists located internationally who travel to India and conduct shorter trainings to build therapeutic capacity. AVT is based on the premise that deaf children can become listening and speaking and that they can develop typically but they need training. Being a credentialed AVT therapist comes with a higher status in therapeutic networks and often certified AVT practitioners engage in gatekeeping around who can say that they conduct AVT.

While AVT sessions can be playful and joyous, and many often are—Friedner has fond memories of visiting an AVT center in Delhi where the founder had developed elaborate art activities involving making butterflies out of dried pasta and using seeds for other art projects, in addition to music and dance sessions—what is at stake in AVT sessions and with oral therapeutic approaches more broadly, is making deaf children normatively intelligible, "easy" to talk with in terms of topic, lexicon and turn taking, and ultimately seamlessly absorbing them into the mainstream. As an AVT practitioner told Friedner, "I believe in AVT because it will integrate people into the mainstream." *Lena-dena* here is constrained and, in many cases, therapists will only accept a certain kind of interaction and ignore nonverbal communication or verbal communication that is not deemed to be clear or contextually appropriate. This narrow *lena-dena* marks a therapist as a competent therapist and a deaf person as a normative communication partner. Therapists attend only to a child's listening and speaking and while there is embodied play, cutting of vegetables, playing with toys, and other things, the focus is on speech.

What is key about AVT, in contrast to the scenes described above by Vaidya, is that there is little or no interpretation that happens. In a sample session at a clinic in Bangalore, for example, a therapist "played" with a child and engaged in joint attention activities such as pretending to eat and take a bath. She manipulated different toy animals and objects, such as a monkey, duck, tiger, frog, bus, airplane, cup, boat, train goat, and then the

child was told to do things with them: "Take the monkey and the frog and put them on the sofa." She then told the child, "The tiger and the goat want to sit on a bus and eat a mango," and the child was supposed to place the objects in the correct formation. The goal was for the child to do what she was being asked to do and to recite back what she was doing. If she did not articulate clearly, she was told to repeat herself again. There was no speculation and no interpretation.

Similarly, in another session at a Mumbai clinic, a therapist worked with a child to expand conversations by getting him to stretch his sentences. She gave the child five-step commands (which he could do) and she took out a big, plastic, fake birthday cake to have him put different fruits, chocolates, and candies on it. She then turned the activity into language games by asking, for example, "Why are there four candles?" And the answer, which the child was supposed to articulate, is that he just had his birthday and turned four. The therapist then asked him for specific pieces of cake: "I want the one with the strawberry and chocolate, I want the one with kiwi and cherry, etc." After the discussion of the cake flavors, she, the child, and his mother, who is also present in the session, sang "Happy Birthday" to him. The point of the session was to have an appropriate and coherent conversation and to develop the child's language skills in terms of a back-and-forth conversation tied to the objects at hand.

Even in non-AVT therapeutic spaces for deaf children, there is an attempt to turn everything into language that is then articulated by children. Every event, object, and person present becomes an opportunity for narration. At a celebration for Teacher's Day at a training program for mothers and children in Bangalore, there was a discussion about the psychedelically pastel-colored cake, the knife used to cut the cake, and the texture of the cake. There was a discussion of the visiting American anthropologist in which the head teacher asked a child to stand up and ask Friedner her name. Then the whole lesson went thus: "Where did auntie come from? She came from a foreign country. United States. Which is our country? India. We are Indians." The teacher then asked students to go find the classroom's world map, but they could not find it. The teacher instead put up the India map and pointed to Bangalore. "India is our country. Michele Auntie was coming to our school. She was observing the class. Was she teaching the children?" She replied, "No," and asked the children to also repeat. "Who is your teacher? Is Michele Auntie your teacher? Was Michele Auntie teaching you? She is a foreigner. Are you a foreigner? You are an Indian." The goals in this program were more "call and response" as a form of *lena-dena* (AVT practitioners often criticized the program's founder for this way of teaching and occasionally referred to it as asking kids to be parrots). However, in both AVT spaces and this program, there was always a "right" response and a "right way" to respond. Practitioners judged themselves and others by their results, with the best results considered to be a child who communicates using normatively intelligible language in contextually correct ways. Indeed, therapists often evaluated themselves and others based on whether children with whom they worked spoke without "deaf accents" and if they were at grade level in school. They spoke of gratitude from families as well, particularly when children achieved normative life goals. Ultimately, the goal was to not have to do much work to discern what a child is communicating and for the child to develop a normative personhood.

LENA-DENA: SCAFFOLDING COMPLEX PERSONHOOD BY CAPACITATING CHOICES

Returning to LF, we were excited to participate in "the club" for adults hosted at the vocational center. We were led to a bright room with plush sofas, a 40-inch flat screen television playing Bollywood songs, and board games. Here, people with intellectual disabilities, volunteers at the organization, and a teacher all hung out together. Some people were watching TV, some playing games, while some were just sitting, intermittently invited to participate in conversation by Heena, the teacher present at the scene. An eager volunteer engaged an attendee in a game of chess, which resulted in what looked like pieces being moved without purpose, although this was made into a game. As everyone hung out, Vikas, an older man with intellectual disabilities wearing an apron and a chef's hat, came up to each of us with a picture menu with drink and food options. The choice was between bread pakoras, hot and sour soup, and pasta of the day.¹⁴ Vikas also carried a notebook in which he noted down our names and orders. After collecting the orders, he left for the kitchen, wherein intellectually disabled trainees, along with a teacher and their head chef, a nondisabled man, prepared and plated the food and beverages.

We conclude this article with a description of the club because it illustrates how the staff at LF discerned intellectually disabled people, especially adults, as needing social connection, recreation, and leisure. This led to them creating environments wherein intellectually disabled people who had aged out of the school and vocational training program could engage with others, and/or just pass the time. Here, *lena-dena*, or giving and receiving, took place through social interactions and practices which were facilitated by the staff and volunteers. Discernment here happened at multiple levels. LF discerned that a space was needed for intellectually disabled adults and that the space needed to be both open and structured. In founder Chopra's words, the club offers "less structure, more options," (2019b) but there was still structure: the club was not a free-flowing space; people did not enter into organic conversations or engage in spontaneous activities with one another. It was supported by people in positions of authority, such as teachers and volunteers, who did the work of scaffolding conversations and activities. Intellectually disabled adults were supervised and supported by teachers and volunteers as they navigated the club and made choices (such as bread pakora vs. pasta vs. soup, or Jenga vs. TV). The club was an orchestrated space that provided an opportunity for intellectually disabled adults to do normatively adult things, such as make social connections and decide what to eat and how to spend time, in a facilitated manner. Teachers and volunteers were both present and absent, foregrounding and backgrounding themselves at different times.

Aside from the club, the vocational center at LF also ran a "tuck shop." The tuck shop was a temporary store within the vocational center wherein intellectually disabled trainees could practice their shopping skills. The day Vaidya visited, the shop was run by Rajesh, along with Sanjana, a special

educator at the center. They sat behind a table on which a variety of snacks were laid out. Other trainees came over with money and Sanjana told them the prices of various items. Sanjana prompted the trainees with questions such as, “What do you want?” Some of them responded by pointing to specific items. With others, she had to do further prompting, such as, “Do you want the chocolate?” “Do you want the chips?” Only if they did not respond to even those questions, she would make the choice for them. Further, even though Rajesh did not verbally communicate, the money collection box was kept in front of him, not Sanjana, and she often reminded customers to make their payments to Rajesh by saying, “Give your money to Rajesh, it is his shop today!” She would remind Rajesh to take the money from customers. While the tuck shop was used to teach trainees skills such as handling money, its main objective was to provide a space for intellectually disabled people to shop freely for things they enjoy, something nondisabled people take for granted. Despite not always being able to communicate their choice or perform their tasks, Sanjana viewed intellectually disabled people as capable of doing the same and facilitated the process by prompting them further, if she felt they needed the support.

The club and tuck shop are examples of disability professionals creating environments wherein intellectually disabled people can participate in sociality by engaging in everyday activities. Disability professionals at LF facilitate (what they discern to be) the social needs of intellectually disabled people. In doing so, we argue that our interlocutors there expand the categories of “social” and “person” (Friedner, 2018; Jaswal & Akhtar, 2019) and produce intellectually disabled people as social actors. Discerning intellectually disabled people as social actors also affects the nature of communicative contexts (made) available to them. This is demonstrated by a story shared by Nandini, the communication expert at LF mentioned in the introduction, about a trainee named Ujwal. While discussing the importance of the tuck shop, Nandini shared:

We have one trainee, Ujwal. He would never bring money (for the tuck shop). One day I told him—tell your family, you won’t go to school if you cannot bring the money. I asked him if he likes to bring money and he said yes. Then I asked him why does he not bring it. He said *Ma* (mother) ... he said she does not give the money. Then he went home and said what I told him to and told his mother that if he does not get the money for the tuck shop, he will not go to college. His mother gave him the money. This is not a question of 10 or 20 rupees, but that when he is coming to a center, where there is a canteen and he can shop and he feels like it too, then it is his right to do so. And his mother told us at a meeting later that he made my life so difficult (*durbhar*), until I gave him the money.

Here, Nandini demonstrates her belief that intellectually disabled people are social actors who have a right to participate in everyday life, much like nondisabled people and that they can be enabled to do so through consistent facilitation. She frames herself as someone who empowers her student to exercise this right by training him to communicate his demand for money to his mother. Not only do disability professionals at LF discern intellectually disabled people as social and communicative actors with rights they also capacitate them to communicate their demands and protests; we therefore see scaffolding and capacitation as less hierarchical forms of *lena-dena*, where sociality, games, bread pakoras, and money are given and taken. Furthermore, just as Nandini empowers Ujwal, within the structure of LF she also empowers her colleagues by sitting in on their classes and activities and providing feedback and suggestions on their communicative and pedagogical practices. LF’s structure is one in which special educators are encouraged to learn from each other and to see themselves and each other as experts who are constantly deliberating on how to best work with program participants. Indeed, Nandini’s is officially known at LF as the “communication expert” and “communication specialist,” thus demonstrating the high value placed on communication.

We conclude with these examples from LF, which represent two ends of the discernment spectrum—ranging from very broad to very narrow discernments respectively. Disability professionals in both sites give personhood to disabled people through *lena-dena* although in both cases, disabled people are seen as being “different” from nondisabled people, with special educators discerning them as being loving, easy-to-read, and special, and AVT therapists discerning them as potentially able to become the same as nondisabled people, “near to normal” or “almost normal.” At LF, disability professionals depart from the abovementioned discernment practices. There, intellectually disabled people are discerned as complex persons who have social needs and desires that are not dissimilar from those of nondisabled people. However, these needs and desires need to be capacitated in specific (unlike the broad discernments of Vaidya’s special educators) but not exacting (unlike the narrow discernments of Friedner’s AVT therapists) ways. This capacitation is achieved by creating enabling environments and training intellectually disabled people to exercise choice and even challenge authority. Disability professionals at LF facilitate spaces and conversations, all the while being careful about not overriding intellectually disabled people’s desires¹⁵ and giving them choices. It is important to note that disability professionals at LF did not view intellectually disabled people as rational autonomous beings who independently exercise choices. Instead, they acknowledge that intellectually disabled people require support as well as supervision to exercise choices. Thus, LF’s framework of discernment, which includes simultaneous scaffolding while upholding intellectually disabled people’s right to exercise their choices, opens more complex personhood for intellectually disabled people.

Finally, we argue that the concept and practice of discernment is helpful in theorizing the moral work that educators and therapists do in working with people who do not communicate normatively. Beyond these disability professionals, discernment allows us to analyze how it is that people do (not) engage with others and the way that such engagement then results in how the discerner discerns herself. Ultimately, giving and taking, or *lena-dena*, is always a process of discernment and interaction always has ethical stakes. In this article (and following Green, 2022), we argue that these ethical stakes are enhanced because of the existence of hierarchies and interactional vulnerabilities; special educators and speech and language therapists are in positions of authority and their interpretations have higher stakes than those of the disabled people with whom they

work. We contend that it is crucial to attend to interactional and structural hierarchies while examining the ideologies and practices of discernment as these have tangible consequences for both the social actors doing the work of discernment and those being discerned. Despite the presence of hierarchies, it is important to highlight practices of discernment that are more collaborative, capacity-based, and multifaceted than others and which could grant access to more complex and varied life opportunities, choices, and ultimately personhood. There are indeed high ethical stakes to discernment.

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ENDNOTES

¹ We also draw on anthropological scholarship that focuses on professional care work, such as social work, nursing, and elder care (Bolton, 2005; Buch, 2013; Carr, 2015; Driessen, 2018; Ibarra, 2002).

² In this article, we use moral and ethical interchangeably (Lambek, 2010) although we also note that special educators talk about their work as being “moral;” they mean that it is normatively good.

³ Discernment has been used mostly in religious realms. Writing about evangelical Christianity, Klaitis (2016, 1151–52) writes, “Within evangelical Christian circles, discernment is the focus of a wide range of practical instruction involving how to recognize and assess whether specific words, acts, and events have been inspired by God.” He notes that “discernment is a learned skill, a subject of explicit and tacit instruction within faith communities, as well as a set of embodied dispositions involving absorption in speaking to God, hearing God’s speech as an interior voice, and writing about God’s activity in one’s Life.” The goal is “perpetual attunement to the voice of God, experienced as an external presence within the believer’s consciousness.” (also see Ng, 2020).

⁴ We do not use pseudonyms for the Latika Foundation and its founder although we do for all other individuals and organizations.

⁵ See Henner and Robinson (2023) for a sustained critique of the ways that personhood is predicated on and in relation to normative communication.

⁶ Here we note that diagnosis of disability and placing individuals into disability categories appears to be contradictory to more relational understandings of personhood. In the case of intellectual disability, because the category is so broad and ambiguous, our interlocutors did a lot of relational work. In the case of deafness, however, our interlocutors had (more rigid) expectations of what they expected from deaf children in terms of language and communication.

⁷ We are aware of controversies around the use of facilitated communication, mostly in the United States and elsewhere in the West (see Jaswal et al., 2020). In this article, we do not adjudicate whether facilitated communication as a method empirically works or not but rather, we are interested in the ethical, professional, relational and semiotic work facilitation does.

⁸ While the National Education Policy (2020) Act calls for special educators to be hired by every government school in the service of inclusive education, this rarely happens, and special educators are largely to be found in disability-focused organizations and schools. When they are offered employment in private mainstreamed schools, we learned that they were often offered a lower salary than nonspecial educators. Similarly, speech and language therapists lamented the fact that their expertise was considered to be less than that of cochlear implant surgeons even though they claimed that they did most of the important re/habilitative work with children and families.

⁹ I conducted fieldwork at only one government-aided vocational center which I refer to as Sankalp where special educators received INR 30,000/USD 360 per month from the government, which was a much higher salary than what most special educators in nongovernmental institutions received. This was exceptional since most vocational centers in India do not receive government funding.

¹⁰ It is important to note that while the concepts of “special education” and “special children” might appear problematic to some (Linton, 2006), “special” here functions both affectively and authoritatively and served to make special educators feel skilled and competent.

¹¹ While care is an important theme to be addressed, specifically when it comes to intellectually disabled people, in this paper, we focus on the discernment practices of special educators, while recognizing that relationships of care shaped these discernment practices.

¹² We both talked with therapists and teachers who told us that they counseled parents of children with intellectual disabilities to recognize and engage in communication differently; this was not the case when therapists worked with deaf children unless these deaf children also had additional disabilities.

¹³ <https://agbellacademy.org/certification/become-a-lsl-specialist/>

¹⁴ Vaidya had the pasta of the day while Friedner had bread pakoras. Not many people wanted the soup.

¹⁵ Here we use the word desires and not just needs to indicate that the staff at LF were invested in activities such as shopping, food, social time, and recreation, which lie beyond providing intellectually disabled adults with their basic needs, such as vocational/educational skills and support with everyday activities.

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