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RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE PRACTICE OF PSYCHOLOGISTS WORKING WITH VISUAL IMPAIRED PEOPLE

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INTRODUCTION

The intention of this work is to become a tool of reference for psychologists working with visually impaired people. It also places the “Association de Langue Française des Psychologues spécialisés pour Personnes Handicapées Visuelles” ALFPHV (Association of French Speaking Psychologists Specialized for the Visually Impaired) as a major actor in professional ethics.

The ALFPHV, which brings together psychologists¹ and other professionals, mainly from French-speaking countries who work with the visually impaired,² recognizes and promotes a number of recommendations necessary in the practice of their profession and its specializations. These recommendations fall into three categories:

- The psychologist's status and role
- The psychologist's responsibilities
- The various methods of work

¹ According to French law: “The professional use of the title Psychologist, with or without a specification, is reserved for holders of a diploma, certificate or university degree attesting to a university-level education and training in psychology in preparation for professional practice and figuring on a list published by the “Conseil d'Etat” or holders of a recognized foreign diploma considered equivalent to French national diplomas.” The Law No. 85-772 of 25 July 1985 on various social propositions, Article 44 modified by the Ordinance No. 2010-177 of 23 February 2010, Article 14. For other countries, the provisions are those of their own legislation.

² ALFPHV brings up together “Members” (psychologist working or having worked in the field of visual impairment) and “Associated Members” (all professionals working in the field of visual disability or psychologists not specialized in this area).

I THE PSYCHOLOGIST'S STATUS AND ROLE

In France, a psychologist's status can be described more or less accurately by the Collective Conventions currently in force or according to the status of psychologists as described by the Public Hospital Federation.³ One should remember that psychologists in France have the status of technical cadres or managers, according to the first two criteria defined in the "Convention Collective Nationale de Retraite et de Prévoyance des Cadres (National Convention for Retirement and Contingency for Cadres) of 14 March 1947."⁴ In France, being A-category cadres in the public sector and class III cadres in the private sector, psychologists should have following required characteristics:

- A specified level of qualification
- A specified level of responsibility
- A degree of autonomy in making professional decisions (the level of responsibility is permanent concerning choices of techniques. His work requires a capacity for initiatives that can be considered delegations of authority for decisions that has to be taken in his specific professional practice).

We recommend that there is a reference in work contracts (private sector) and in the job description (public sector) to the Code of Ethics for Psychologists in force in each country. The *Code de Déontologie français* (French Code of Ethics) describes the psychologist's mission as: "the fundamental objective of the psychologist is to respect and recognize his or her patient and his or her entire being".⁵

More specifically, as psychologists we interpret this mission in greater detail as: the psychologist's function is to listen to a subject in his or her uniqueness, support and accompany psychical work with the idea of an internal reorganization, less painful and less costly in terms of psychical economy, while taking into account the particularities associated with their impaired vision.

II THE PSYCHOLOGIST'S RESPONSIBILITIES

The specific nature of the psychologist's function and practice – "to have the person recognized and respected in his psychical dimension"⁶ – leads to several levels of responsibility and institutional positioning:

A – Concerning visually impaired persons

- The psychologist's work focuses on the psychical dimension of the subject. However, visual impairment does not necessarily imply counseling or psychotherapy;
- There can be no injunction to see a psychologist:⁷ therefore the principle of the free consent must be respected;
- The psychologist respects and demands the respect by others of the privacy and intimacy of the visually impaired person.⁸ It is important to defend and preserve the autonomy of thought and decision of visually impaired persons, especially during certain periods of life when they are particularly fragile.

³ The *Fédération Publique Hospitalière* (FPH, Public Hospital Federation). Decree No. 91129 on the status of psychologists working in the FPH, Article 2, Decree No. 92-853 on the specific status of the psychologists working in the territorial administration.

⁴ "Employees who respond, with the exclusion of any consideration based on remuneration, to at least one of the three following criteria: To have a technical or administrative academic level similar to that of equivalent national professions, and exercise functions requiring the implementation of knowledge; To have a practice that involves responsibility and initiative, and may be regarded as having delegation of the employer's authority; Exercise authority, delegated by the employer, on employees or classes of employees."

⁵ *Code français de Déontologie des psychologues*, Article 2, Chapter 1, Title I, dated 4 February 2012.

⁶ "The basic task of the psychologist is to have the psychological dimension of every subject recognized and respected", Article 2, *Code français de Déontologie des psychologues*. In the header of the same *Code*, "The respect of the person in his or her psychological dimension is an inalienable right. Its recognition is the basis of the practice for psychologists."

⁷ Extract from Article 9 of the *Code français de Déontologie des psychologues*: "Before any intervention, the psychologist ensures free and informed consent of those who consult or participate in an evaluation, research or expertise."

B – About families

- The psychologist begins working with a young visually impaired person only with the consent of parents.⁹ The psychologist keeps them informed of the progress with their child, without revealing its content; that is to say, respecting the rules of professional confidentiality;
- The psychologist is aware that each family is unique and different, which must be respected in the team's work.

C – About team of professionals

- The psychologist participates during the welcoming sessions and the multidisciplinary meetings;
 - The psychologist clearly states the necessary rules of the psychologist's professional confidentiality and the shared professional confidentiality;¹⁰
- With professional team members:
- The psychologist should question the meaning and coherence of the various practices towards the person concerned and always remind the team's members of the visually impaired person's free consent¹¹ to the various proposed working arrangements;¹²
 - The psychologist accompanies and respects his colleagues and their work,¹³ reaffirming if necessary the particularities of visual impairment and of psychical functioning,

⁸ Extract from the general principles of the *Code français de Déontologie des psychologues*, Principle 1: "The psychologist protects the privacy and the intimacy of individuals by ensuring the observance of professional confidentiality. He or she respects the fundamental principle that nobody is required to reveal anything on him or herself." Article L.1110-4 of the *Code français de la santé publique* (French Code of Public Health), part of Law No. 2002-2, 4 March 2002: "Any person in the care of a professional, an institution, a health network or any other organization involved in prevention and care, has the right to be respected in his or her privacy and for the confidentiality of information concerning him or herself. Article L. 311-3 of Law No. 2002-2, 2 January 2002, updating social and medico-social action: "The rights and individual freedom are guaranteed to every person in the care of an institution or social and medico-social services. According to laws and regulations, the person is assured of: the respect for his or her dignity, integrity, privacy, intimacy and security (...)."

⁹ Article 10 of the *Code français de Déontologie des psychologues*: "The psychologist may receive, on their request, minors or adults protected by law, according of their status, their situation and legal dispositions in force." Article 11 of the *Code français de Déontologie des psychologues* The psychologist's evaluation, observation or long-term work with minors or protected adults, also requires the informed consent of the person, or at least his or her approval, and the consent of the holders of parental authority or legal representatives."

¹⁰ *Code français de l'Action sociale et des familles* (French Code of Social Action and the Family), Article L226-2-2, part of Law No. 2007-293, 5 March 2007, Article 15 of the *Journal officiel*, 6 March 2007: "In exception to Article 226-13 of the *Code pénal*, persons subject to professional confidentiality for the implementation of policy concerning child protection as defined in Article L.112-3 or participating in this policy, are allowed to share between themselves secret information to assess an individual's situation, identify and implement actions of protection and help which can benefit minors and their families. The sharing of information relating to an individual's situation is strictly limited to what is necessary to fulfill the mission of child protection. Father, mother, any other person exercising parental authority, the guardian, and the child (according to his age and maturity) are initially informed in an appropriate manner, unless such information is contrary to the interests of the child." Excerpt from Article 17 of the *Code français de Déontologie des psychologues*: "When the psychologist's conclusions are transmitted to a third party, they answer with caution to the question being asked and only include psychological elements if necessary."

¹¹ Article 23 of the *Code français de Déontologie des psychologues*: "The practice of the psychologist is not limited to the methods and techniques employed. It is inseparable from a critical appraisal and a theoretical perspective of these techniques."

¹² Article L. 311-3 of Law No. 2002-2 of 2 January 2002 updating social and medico-social specify that guaranty should be given for: "High-quality accompaniment and an individualized support favor the individual's development, autonomy and integration, in a manner appropriate to their age, their needs, and respecting their informed consent which should always be sought when the person is able to express his or her will and to participate in the decision. Failing that, the consent of his or her legal representative must be sought."

¹³ Article 4 of the *Code français de Déontologie des psychologues*: "The psychologist, whether working alone or with a team, demands the respect of the specificity of his or her approach and methods. The psychologist respects those of other professionals."

- The psychologist encourages the professional team members to think about their practice and to put into words their understanding and feelings about the situation.

D – Concerning the institution

In the framework of an institutional project:

- The psychologist is the only person responsible for the choice of his or her methods, decisions and conclusions,¹⁴ particularly in the case of requested evaluations. This being said, the psychologist is under the authority of the Director;
- The psychologist makes certain that the institutional framework guarantees the respect of the individual's psychical wellbeing and privacy, and takes into account their visual impairment. If this is not the case, the psychologist takes responsibility for calling attention to this lack of guarantee in the most appropriate way;
- The psychologist ensures that the institutional framework provides sufficient space and time for professional teamwork;
- In particularly difficult situations, the psychologist is required to alert the Director concerning the need and the possibility of an intervention by an external professional.

E – Concerning the psychologists towards themselves and towards the institution in which they work

- Throughout his or her professional life, the psychologist regularly updates his or her knowledge both in psychology and in the field of visual impairment;
- The psychologist also trains to be able to discern his or her personal involvement in the understanding of the individuals with whom he or she works (supervision, analysis of practice).¹⁵

III THE VARIOUS METHODS OF WORK

The psychologist's work with visually impaired people can be stated in different terms:

A – Clinical work, a space of "time and listening" centered on the person

The psychologist is fond of offering a special place for a special listening for each visual impaired person and their families, a confidential space and a length of time respecting the individual's "psychical time." The psychologist also provides a special listening capability for team member questions, especially during team meetings.

The psychologist participates with the multidisciplinary team and external partners, in the coordination of actions concerning the visual-impaired person, encouraging consideration of psychical dimension. Whether the psychologist has a private practice or works with a team of professionals, he or she accompanies the work of psychical elaboration and the search for meaning, ties and links.

As part of their work, some psychologists have to provide assessments to administrative, guidance and managing instances. Whoever is the requesting person, the psychologist will only provide the elements

¹⁴ Extract from the general principles of the *Code français de Déontologie des psychologues*, Principle 3 - Responsibility and autonomy: "Besides civil and criminal responsibility, the psychologist has a professional responsibility. Under his or her professional competence, the psychologist decides and is personally liable for the choices and application of methods and techniques that he or she plans and uses, as well as his or her opinions." Article 5 of the *Code français de Déontologie des psychologues*: "The psychologist accepts missions that he or she considers consistent with duties and competence." Article 7 of the *Code français de Déontologie des psychologues*: "An obligation to respect professional confidentiality is required regardless of the framework of practice".

¹⁵ Extract from the general principles of the *Code français de Déontologie des psychologues*, Principle 2 – Competence: "A psychologist's competence is justified by:

- Theoretical and methodological knowledge acquired in conditions defined by the law on the use of the title of psychologist;
- Regular updating of that knowledge;
- Her or his formation to discern personal involvement in the understanding of others. Each psychologist is responsible for his or her specific qualifications."

corresponding to the relevant question. In all cases, he or she makes sure the person concerned is fully informed and in agreement.¹⁶ A report written by a psychologist can only reflect a moment in the evolution of the person concerned. As such, one can not draw conclusions, either summarized or conclusive.

Whether early or late, partial or complete, congenital or acquired, visual impairment generates, on the psychical level, risk factors and specific vulnerabilities. According to age, life events, circumstances of occurrence, origin and evolution of the visual impairment, and possible existence of associated disorders, psychological work must be articulated differently, while still aiming at the articulation in words, the elaboration, and, when possible, the awareness of:

- The announcement of the disability
- The establishment of primordial relationships
- The stages of early development, including the structuring of personality, self-construction in interaction with the environment
- The possible psychical trauma related to visual impairment and the specific individual evolution
- The compensation strategies
- The development or restoration of self-image

The psychologist works with the usual tools of psychology and their specific implementation in relation to blind and partially-sighted people of all ages and, if the case arises, with the family. He or she has the following means (a list which is not intended to be exhaustive):

- Sessions of listening and support
- Clinical and behavioral observations
- Different psychotherapeutic approaches for individuals or for groups
- Other group techniques
- Psychometric and assessment tools, and projective techniques, possibly adapted for visual disabilities or specifically designed.

B – Working about relationships

A psychologist working in an institution participates in:

- work with his colleagues (meetings, discussion groups, etc.)
- institutional work
- work with families
- work with external partners.

A psychologist organizes the continuity of his or her action according to the professional code of deontology¹⁷ in force in the country of practice.

A psychologist writes the requested reports in a language accessible to the various recipients and in respect of the framework and the limits set by the *Code français de Déontologie des psychologues*.¹⁸ He or she keeps

¹⁶ Article 17 of the *Code français de Déontologie des psychologues*: "When the conclusions of a psychologist are transmitted to a third party, the conclusions answer with caution the question asked and include only the necessary psychological elements. Transmission to a third party requires the consent of the person concerned or that he or she be informed beforehand."

¹⁷ According to Article 22 of the *Code français de Déontologie des psychologues*: "In case the psychologist is prevented or is thinking of stopping practice, he or she must take appropriate measures to ensure the continuity of the professional action, with the consent of the persons concerned."

¹⁸ Article 16 of the *Code français de Déontologie des psychologues*: "The psychologist gives clear and understandable conclusions to the persons concerned." Article 17: "When the conclusions of a psychologist are transmitted to a third party, the conclusions answer with caution the question asked and include only the necessary psychological elements. Transmission to a third party requires the consent of the person concerned or that he or she be informed beforehand." Article 20: "The documents provided by a psychologist are dated, bear his or her name, his or her ADELI number, and identify his or her function, business address, the object of his or her writing and a signature. Only the psychologist author of these documents is entitled to modify, execute or cancel them. The psychologist refuses that such reports be transmitted without his or her explicit agreement and guarantees the confidentiality of the postal or electronic mail."

the person concerned informed. Each record or report is addressed only to the intended person(s) and cannot be reused for other purposes.

C – Education and Research

The specialized education of a psychologist working in the field of visual impairment is not limited only to the initial training. It must remain open to specializations related to his or her field of practice and regular continuing education.

Thus ensuring his or her further education, the psychologist promotes the circulation of information to team members concerning developments in human sciences and in the field of visual disability. The psychologist may also develop relationships with universities and other research institutions by encouraging, advising and participating in work related to visual disabilities,¹⁹ especially in the production of new knowledge. He or she can be requested to organize seminars, conferences or write publications.

Providing possibilities for internships may also be a vector of educational development.

He or she participates as much as possible in group study and elaboration concerning his or her own practice (supervision).

The psychologist may be called on to participate in training sessions to sensitize the personnel toward visually-impaired persons, both inside and outside the institution, and share with fellow psychologist his or her knowledge, learning and experience.

D – Supervision of students

The psychologist also has responsibility for welcoming and training psychology students. The psychologist therefore should be given enough time for this task.

He or she also participates as much as possible in the training of students from other disciplines by providing a specific approach as a specialized psychologist.

E – Fields and various sectors of practice

- In prevention, early intervention and parental guidance
- In the education and schooling for youths through support structures for ordinary institutions and specialized education
- In school and professional orientation
- In functional and rehabilitation readjustment
- In professional rehabilitation, structures to help in the search for employment or maintaining the professional situation by ergonomic and functional adaptations
- In different structures with specialized adaptations for work
- In the various support services
- In lodging structures
- In hospital services including ophthalmology services and genetic consulting
- In research concerning visual impairment.

IV CONCLUSIONS

This text provides the necessary recommendations for the psychologist's professional practice when working with visually-impaired persons, and is intended:

- To provide a framework that respects a professional ethic
- To permit the conceiving and writing out a job descriptions
- To be used in opposition to cases of recommendations for professional practices.

¹⁹ Extract from Article 9 of the *Code français de Déontologie des psychologues*: "Before any intervention, the psychologist guarantees the free and informed consent of those who consult or participate in an evaluation, research or expertise".