

Three Sides to A Story: Different Perspectives Toward the Deaf Community

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Abstract

When looking into Deafness the medical perspective and the perspective of those in the Deaf community are taken into account. However there is also a societal aspect to Deafness that should be taken into account. This study considers the aspects and perspectives of the hearing, medical, and Deaf communities that determine the views of Deaf people. The study will also compare the the Deaf community of the United States to that of Ethiopia. In conclusion, it may be shown how the different perspectives may effect the way the Deaf community is viewed.

Keywords: Communication Disorders, Deafness, medical perspective, Deaf community, societal aspect

Perspectives Towards the Deaf Community

The mainstream hearing society does not take the deaf and hard of hearing population¹ into consideration on an everyday basis. Deaf people have not been represented well. Deafness is often viewed as something that needs fixing. Science and medicine has advanced in efforts to help “cure” deafness as if it is a disease. On the other hand, those of the Deaf community who use sign language, do not use their voice and do not use any hearing assistive devices. They believe there is nothing wrong with being Deaf. With new technology and the vast emerging options, perspectives have changed and have been construed in different ways. Presently, technology has helped the Deaf and hearing communities communicate. In addition this communication has made some hearing individuals realize that there really is no difference in ability however, there is still a sort of stigma around deafness. There is a continuum of these perspectives that has branched out into the term Audism. Each view contributes to the nature of Deaf culture in fact making it very complicated. Not only will these the mindsets of the hearing society, the medical profession, and the Deaf community’s be analyzed, but so will the prospective of deafness in third world countries. Hopefully this will help raise awareness, elicit more considerate thoughts and changes on the matter.

Audism is the notion that one is superior based on one’s ability to hear and speak or behave as one who does (Bahan et al. 2008). Audism stems from unspoken, unwritten rules within society which cast aside anyone who is not “normal.” These rules were created by those

¹ deaf and hard of hearing population or simply deaf population are terms used to identify those who are deaf or hard of hearing and are considered that way by government regardless of how they identify themselves.

who do not have any visible or apparent disorders or impairments. It is a fairly new term coined by Tom Humphries in 1975, however it's ideas and actions have been around since before that time (Bahan, Bauman, & Montenegro, 2008). In the past it has been a common misperception that only deaf people have deaf babies. About 90% of deaf people have hearing parents (Neisser, 1990, pg.8). "Society is made up of hearing individuals who define how deaf people are to live, express/inhibit their capabilities, and experience their bodies" (Houser, O'Hearn, Makee, Steider, Thew, 2010, p. 490). This can be considered an act of audism, to create rules for Deaf people as if they understand what it is to be Deaf. The hearing community lumps all people in the deaf population into one category. But the hearing society fails to realize there is diversity within the deaf population as well. Hauser et al. (2010 p. 490) also breaks down audism into two parts: 1) it is the perception that Deaf bodies are lesser (as mentioned earlier) and, 2) it has the ability to turn Deaf people against themselves through internalization. Some deaf people begin to believe in the values of audism. Deaf people may experience confidence issues just as one who hears. So their values and self-esteem may be related to how they are viewed by hearing people.

Mainstreaming may have been an important improvement for Deaf children. A mainstream setting is one where children with hearing impairments and disabilities are placed in general education classrooms but still have time through the day to tend to their specific needs outside of the classroom (Martin, Clark, 2015, p.419). According to Cambra (2002, p.39), some studies show that deaf students are accepted by their hearing counterparts, all the same, other studies disagree with this. Cambra suggests that before integration or mainstreaming, hearing

students should be educated about deafness and difference. This tactic would benefit deaf students and could help in slowly diminishing audism.

Views of audism are reflected through some aspects of the medical perspectives toward the Deaf Community. The professionals working with the deaf and hard of hearing population are called audiologists. According to Martin and Clark (2003 pg. 5), “an audiologist today is defined as an individual who, ‘by virtue of academic degree, clinical training, and license to practice and/or professional credential, is uniquely qualified to provide a comprehensive array of professional services related to the assessment and habilitation/rehabilitation of persons with auditory and vestibular impairments, and to the prevention of those impairments’.” An audiologist can determine whether or not a hearing loss is present, determine degree and type of the loss, and assist with improving the hearing, if necessary and possible.

There has been a lot of progress in the field of Audiology. Over time, while there have been improvements, the Deaf community has been damaged. Before, audiology came about, the hearing society wanted to “fix” deafness. The hearing society turned to science and medicine. Experiments were conducted using electric rods and other harmful techniques. The 19th century brought about many failed surgeries leaving deaf people physically and emotionally scarred. The Eugenics Movement in the late 19th, early 20th century in search of the “pure race” attacked the Deaf community. They tried to prevent immigration of deaf people into the country and they sterilized deaf people without their consent (Bahan, Bauman, & Montenegro, 2008).

Due to education, the field of audiology is more accepted by the Deaf community. Hearing aids, cochlear implants, and other assistive listening devices are better tested and not harmful to those who use them. Interviews with Dr. Arnao and Dr. Turk (2017) reveal that

audiologists today believe Deafness is absolutely acceptable. Audiologists feel that it is all about preference. They are initially there to provide “informational counseling” giving clients the best information for them to choose which community they would like to be a part of, the Deaf community or the hearing community. In the interview with Dr. Arnao, she acknowledges this gets complicated when it comes to parents making the decision for infants and children because usually when this happens it is the hearing parent making choices for their deaf child. Many older audiologists do not know American Sign Language (ASL) because the practice originated focusing mainly on hearing and being able to speak once hearing is established. Today’s practices are not like those of the past. Nevertheless, the Deaf Community may still have a negative attitude towards the profession (S. Arnao, personal communication, September 25, 2017 & S. Turk, personal communication, September 27, 2017).

The Deaf community is just like the hearing community. It is important to mention there are hearing individuals who are part of the Deaf community. They are usually CODAs (children of the deaf); when hearing children are born to Deaf parents; those children are usually completely immersed in the Deaf community (Dannis, 1997). However, amongst the deaf in the deaf community, Ladd (1994) states “defining d/Deaf² communities is as problematic as defining any kind of community” (pg. 330). Children who are considered culturally Deaf are children who “are born to Deaf parents, grow up in a home and school environment in which they interact with Deaf adults, use sign language to communicate and get exposed to Deaf culture”. These individuals “have a stronger group identity ... and a higher self-

² Big d deaf (deaf spelled with a capital D) are those who consider themselves and do not use their voice. Little d deaf (deaf spelled with a lower case d) are those who are deaf but wear hearing assistive devices, therefore they may use their voices and blend better with hearing individuals.

esteem” (Nikolarazi & Makri, 2005, pg. 405-406). Individuals not considered culturally Deaf, probably had hearing parents, thus taking on the views of the hearing community and a lower self esteem because of how they are viewed by the hearing people around them (pg. 405-406). The Deaf community has been degraded and this is where the separation stems.

Historically, education for Deaf has lead to limits in career choice and education outcomes. Deaf schools (usually residential schools for the deaf) were very popular. They were two different types of schools for deaf children. Some schools promoted oralism (lip reading and speech) and other schools promoted manualism (sign language). The oralism schools did not allow for much academic learning because they were so focused on getting their students to speak and did not use sign language at all. Education for many Deaf individuals focused on speech and vocational training (Bahan, Bauman, & Montenegro, 2008). One can see how this might have been limiting in terms of education and careers available to the Deaf population.

Currently, there are laws in place to ensure the education of all people such as the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) that were put into effect in 1975. These laws were important for the Deaf community because they were created to allow for more opportunities for them as well as for those with other disabilities. Just like any legislation, there are advantages and disadvantages. “The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 had opened professional opportunities for Deaf adults, notably Gallaudet University³ Alumni, who were moving into white-collar, middle class jobs (Van Cleve, 2016, p. 13). On the other hand, the Education of All

³ Gallaudet University a University catering to but not limited to Deaf and hard of hearing individuals.

Handicapped Children Act and the IDEA may be the reason for the decline in residential schools for the Deaf (“Residential School,” 2009, p.3).

The IDEA specifically initiated the term least restrictive environment (LRE). The least restrictive educational environment refers to an environment consisting of peers who do not receive special assistance along side a few that do (Martin & Clark, 2015, p. 149). Some Deaf people feel that with residential schools disappearing, their Deaf children will be forced to be taught by teachers who may mean well but are not properly trained or qualified to provide education for Deaf children (“Residential Schools,” 2009, p. 4). One reason Deaf parents and Deaf students liked residential schools was because they were being taught in their language by people who understood and knew what they needed. The schools also surrounded them with peers who could relate to their difficulties.

Education of the Deaf is improving. It has been found that since mainstreaming has become more popular, “the median reading achievement of deaf 18 year old students in the US has increased only from that typical of a hearing 8 year old to a typical 9 year old (Marschark, 2009, pg. 357). People attribute this to the fact that they use sign language rather than spoken language but that is not a valid attribution. It has actually been found that those who use ASL and spoken language have better literacy skills than those just using sign or just using speech (Marschark, 2009 pg. 358). So it cannot be the ASL effecting their literacy. Hauser, O’heran, Mckee, Strider, and Thew(2010) state “over 95% of all deaf individuals are born into a family and a community that have no experience with how deaf people learn and live.” Most deaf children struggle because their [hearing] parents do not know how to communicate with them which may put some strain on the child’s language development and even their social-cognitive

development. This opposes, the notion that deaf children are less intelligent because most deaf children struggle in school because the adults raising and teaching them are not communicating effectively(Hauser, et al., 2010, pg. 487).

Over the years, the hearing society has tried to break apart the Deaf community by trying to force speech and values of audism (whether intentionally or unintentionally). The Deaf community is strong and resilient, but they are not against those who hear. However, they believe hearing people should take the time to learn the basics of Deaf Culture just as health is incorporated into curriculum, so should inclusion classes to promote sensitivity and diversity awareness (M. McLaughlin, Personal communication, October 2, 2017). Also, against popular belief, Deaf people do want hearing people to learn to sign language, it does not offend them (Quinto-Pozo, 2011, p. 139). Learning sign language can be seen as a way to show respect for Deaf culture and help bridge the gap between the Deaf community and the hearing society.

One can look at the situation of the Deaf community in America and only imagine what the Deaf community in a third world country is like. During my study abroad trip in Ethiopia, our group immersed ourselves in the Deaf community and learned that the education for deaf students practically stops after 4th grade. From 5th grade and up, students are not provided with interpreters so the deaf students have to rely on reading lips. Luckily, the KAL Center, where we volunteered, was a recreation center that had mostly Deaf counselors and counselors who know Ethiopian Sign Language (ESL). In Ethiopia, deafness is viewed as a curse, or something to be ashamed of. Yet, the students we met, did not see a problem with their Deafness at all and they were happy to share their culture with us. With Ethiopia, not being a country with vast resources and money, there is not much access to hearing aids and implants. Thus the study aboard

program was meant to empower these Deaf individuals and spread awareness. We helped students create commercials to promote Deaf awareness throughout the country. We were only able to do this because of our knowledge of deaf culture and our knowledge of the stigma placed on people who cannot hear. Without that knowledge, we would not have been able to connect with the Ethiopian Deaf community, we would not have been able to set our “privilege” aside to help, and we may have never made the decision to participate in such wonderful work.

The purpose of this thesis is to pose questions and get readers thinking about their role in the way Deaf culture is viewed. All three perspectives, the Deaf community, the medical professionals, and the hearing society do have valid points. There is nothing about the ability of hearing that makes the Deaf person inferior to those who hear. Medical professionals are there to help those who desire to hear. There are a few cases to which may attest to some audism beliefs. However, the hearing society must see the whole picture by embracing Deaf culture instead of casting it aside. Medical professionals try not to undermine the Deaf community. In addition the Deaf community can educate. The Deaf community’s issues with audiologists and the rest of society may stem from their past experience with them. They cannot be blamed for this. However, the communication amongst the three parties needs to improve and this can be achieved even with the language barrier. Lastly, it was the hope that a look into the American Deaf Community in comparison to the Ethiopian Deaf Community showed how enhanced the problems are elsewhere and that we can only help others once we make strides in our own community.

Reflection

There are a few members in my family who were born hearing and lost their hearing in their twenties. From my experience with them, I have observed the struggles those with hearing loss and deafness may face. This sparked my interest in audiology. However, my studies here at New Paltz sparked the discussion within this thesis. I chose to research the perspectives toward the Deaf community because I am a Communication Disorders major with a minor in Deaf Studies.

Discovering the term audism was an eye opener for me because audism includes all the “little” things that may contribute to discrimination towards Deaf individuals. Even things like answering for someone who may be deaf when someone asks them a question is considered audism. I noticed that growing up I used to do this for my mother who at the time was hard of hearing. I thought I was helping her but she didn't need me to answer for her. She needed the person speaking to her to repeat what they said in a more clear tone.

My goal is to be an audiologist that keeps in mind the feelings and ideas of those within the Deaf community. I want to ensure that I am never one to make them feel lesser despite by career choice my purpose as an audiologist is to help those who truly want the help. I would also like to be someone who keeps this conversation alive. I picked this topic to do just that. I did not want to tell the readers what to think, but I wanted to help facilitate their thought process so that they can come up with their own ideas on the subject. I hope that this thesis paper fulfills its purpose.

Deafness is something thing that I am passionate about, however this project brought up something else dear to me; race relations. When I was going over this project, figuring out which points I wanted to capitalize on for the presentation, I realized I related to some of the hardships Deaf people face. I am not Deaf, however I realized a lot of the discrimination deaf people face is parallel to the discrimination black people face. Deaf people are discriminated against for jobs, so are black people. Deaf people have been sterilized, so were black people. Deaf people have issues when it comes to trusting audiologists because of all the ways people have tried to “fix” them and ban sign language. Black people have issues trusting the police because the justice system seems many times not to work in their favor. These parallels made me reflect on how difference is looked at as something so horrible, when really it is beautiful. Everyone is unique in their own way and that uniqueness should be embraced.

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