



MOTHER FATHER DEAF: THE HERITAGE OF DIFFERENCE

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Abstract—Almost 90% of the children born to life-long profoundly deaf parents are hearing. Within this extraordinary family setting, hearing children of deaf parents are exposed to and interact with two differing cultural, social and linguistic systems: that of their deaf parents and the Deaf community, and that of hearing peers and adults. The present paper focuses on cultural identity and affiliation of hearing children of deaf parents—a population whose lives incorporate the paradox of being culturally 'Deaf' and yet functionally hearing. Data reported here are primarily based on interviews and life histories with 150 adult hearing children of deaf parents throughout the United States. The informants in this study provide an opportunity to explore the parameters and norms of Deaf culture as it contrasts and conflicts with those of Hearing culture.

Key words—cultural identity, deafness, stigma, disability

INTRODUCTION

When I turned 18, my father took me aside. He pointed out the window and said [Here, the informant stopped speaking and began using sign language "*The time is coming. Soon you must go. That's your world out there. The Hearing world. You belong there.*"] For 18 years I had grown up Deaf, and now all of a sudden I'm supposed to be hearing? I looked at him and said, [signs, "*What do I know about the Hearing world? I hear, yes. I speak, yes. But I thought I was Deaf.*"] My father smiled and [signs "*True, you're Deaf, but you're hearing too.*"] I grew up Deaf. I guess now I'm hearing. But some part of me still feels Deaf [1].

This informant's dilemma captures the sense of liminality and paradox frequently expressed among many adult hearing children of deaf parents interviewed for this study. Marks of difference frequently polarize human communities into two groups, each clinging to separate practical and symbolic histories. Male-Female. Gay-Straight. Able-bodied-Disabled. Deaf-Hearing. Each side of the equation contributes definitions, boundaries and meanings for themselves and their counterparts. Both perspectives provide not only an understanding of each experience, but an exploration of more broadly-based social and cultural factors which are shared as well as those which maintain the polarization. Between apparently mutually exclusive categories, there are frequent overlaps—resulting in ambiguities, paradoxes and re-alignments. How is it that black can be white, that hearing can be deaf, or that different can be the same?

Robert Murphy emphasized that particular conditions identified as disabilities are categorized and interpreted within a context. "Disability," he said, "is defined by society and given meaning by culture; it is a social malady" [2]. Deafness is a particular

human condition understood by outsiders as a profoundly devastating disability, by insiders as an incidental feature and a cultural norm. This paper explores the alignment and cultural identity of a population who are both outsiders and insiders: hearing children of deaf parents. A common identifier for hearing children of deaf parents within the Deaf community is "mother father deaf" [3]. This phrase recognizes hearing children's unique link to an often separate and impenetrable land. Because identity within Deaf communities is highly dichotomized—one is either Deaf or Hearing—hearing children of deaf parents are enigmatic with regard to their cultural affiliation. They represent a realm of ambiguity obscured by rigid categorization; their lives incorporate two often conflicting systems of meaning. And, within these polarized worlds, they sort out their own cultural identity [4].

In addition to his theoretical contributions on disability, Robert Murphy shared an intensely personal perspective. In *The Body Silent*, Murphy used his own deteriorating physical condition to explore the social, cultural and human dimensions of disability. I applaud his willingness to risk the discomfort and the confusion of examining what is most immediate and most private. Although I have normal hearing, both of my parents are profoundly deaf. My family history has given me access to populations that most researchers have been unable to study—because of concerns with family privacy and because of a lack of proficiency in sign language. A number of adult hearing children have refused to participate in research not conducted by one of their own. While I have not overtly included my own family history in this paper, my insider status remains an inextricable

part of how this study unfolded and is to be understood.

Although research on this population exists, the focus has often been on language development among young and adolescent hearing children of deaf parents [5–7]. A few psychological profiles have been written on adult hearing children, but their applicability to a broader population is suspect because of inherent sampling biases: single case studies of adults who were undergoing psychotherapy [8–11]. The few large-scale studies of adult hearing children have relied heavily on mailed questionnaires and populations derived from professional sign language interpreters [12, 13]. To date, there has been no study which includes a broad cross-section of adult hearing children of deaf parents, and which gives primacy to how these men and women interpret their unique family and cultural experiences.

THE SAMPLE POPULATION

The data reported here resulted from a four year ethnographic study of adult hearing children of deaf parents in the United States. As part of my fieldwork, I travelled to 24 states to interview and collect life histories from 150 women and men. The youngest informant had just turned 18, the oldest would celebrate an 80th birthday a few months after our interview. Almost all informants had normal hearing; three persons had developed mild hearing losses as adults. 141 of the 150 informants were raised by two deaf parents; the remaining nine had one deaf and one hearing parent. My interviews with these men and women lasted from just under an hour to seven hours, averaging a little over two hours per interview. I met with 18 informants more than once. With three exceptions, all interviews were tape-recorded. All interview transcripts and fieldnotes were coded and analyzed for their content. Interview data were supplemented with participant observation at local, regional and national meetings of Children of Deaf Adults (CODA)—a ten year old organization with over 800 members, all hearing adults with at least one deaf parent. Forty-three of the 150 informants had been or were presently participants in this organization.

The sample adult population reflects two differing demographic standards. Overall, the sample follows current U.S. census demographics for adults in terms of gender, age and race: a roughly equal number of men and women; a gradient from young to old, with the majority between 25 and 55; and a majority of European whites with decreasing numbers of African-Americans, Hispanics, Asians and Native Americans. This approach, however, represents the demographics of the Hearing world. Although deafness usually occurs without regard to any particular demographic variable, by the time deaf persons become adults and have families, their demographics have undergone considerable delineation. This is

particularly true when considering the Deaf community or culture. In certain features, the sample population reflects the cultural and economic impact of deafness on the parents: a majority of informant's parents were educated in residential schools for the deaf (81.6%) and married another deaf person (94.0%); and a majority of informants' family of origin were described as poor, working class or lower-middle class.

Despite efforts to maintain a broad cross-section of the sample population, informants were highly represented in two areas: a majority (85.3%) considered themselves middle class, and many men and women (43.3%) were employed full- or part-time with deaf children or adults [14]. Since there is no demographic information on the entire population of adult hearing children of deaf parents, it is impossible to establish whether either of these two features are characteristic of this population as a whole.

For purposes of this paper, only those informants with two life-long deaf parents are considered (137 out of 150). Not included are the nine informants with one deaf parent and one hearing parent, and four informants who had at least one parent who became deaf as an adult. Although most of the childhood experiences and adult perceptions of these 13 informants were comparable to those reported by informants with two life-long deaf parents, their inclusion in this paper would have required lengthy explanations or disclaimers. Finally, because the Deaf community is small and highly interactive, identifying characteristics of informants will be minimized in order to maintain confidentiality.

DEAF PARENTS: CULTURE AND COMMUNITY

The condition of deafness creates a community with a separate language and a distinct culture [15]. Although the majority of deaf children have hearing parents, and although the careers and residences of life-long deaf adults disperse them throughout the larger hearing society, most life-long deaf adults socialize exclusively with other deaf people. As children, deaf people develop close and lasting friendships with their deaf school peers—from whom they learn a sense of shared identity, a cultural heritage and a means of communication. As adults, they participate in a wide variety of exclusively deaf social organizations ranging from sports to religious groups. Schein and Delk [16] estimate that deaf people have an 85–95% endogamous marriage rate.

An increasing number of writers have distinguished between the clinical condition of deafness and those deaf people who form a cultural community. Most culturally Deaf people have moderate to profound hearing losses since birth or childhood. Yet, hearing loss itself is not a sufficient criterion to be considered culturally Deaf. Being culturally Deaf is interdependent on the individual's identification with the group

and the group's evaluation and acceptance of the individual. This assessment is largely based on a sense of cultural familiarity: a breadth of life experiences associated with being deaf; routinely participating in social interactions with other deaf people; and sharing similar social behaviors, historical traditions and a common destiny [17]. American Sign Language (ASL) is regarded by many as an integral feature of Deaf culture. Yet, not all culturally Deaf persons are fluent in ASL—including a small minority who often oppose the use of any sign language. Unlike most definitions of Deaf culture, the one proposed here includes deaf persons who are oral—that is, deaf people who do not use sign language as their primary form of communication. This inclusion is based on informant interviews in which a sense of cultural Deafness and community underlies non-signing as well as signing deaf parents.

Within the general population, there is a continuum of acute hearing to profound deafness. Yet, within the Deaf community ambiguity is rarely allowed: people are either hearing or deaf. This dichotomization is both reaction and assertion. Deaf individuals seek out other deaf people in response to their sense of alienation from hearing people, as well as finding positive value in the affiliation with other deaf people [18]. The polarization between the Deaf and the Hearing cultures is frequently enhanced by two significantly different communication systems: English and American Sign Language. While characteristics ascribed to either deaf or hearing people are not consistent, what has endured is the dichotomization—there is a Deaf world, and there is a Hearing world. As adults, most culturally deaf people maintain a highly homogenous world—until the birth of their hearing child.

HEARING CHILDREN OF DEAF PARENTS

Almost 90% of children born to two deaf parents are hearing [19]. Hearing children of deaf parents are socialized in what Goffman [20] has described as “an alien environment”; that is, unlike children of ethnic or racial minorities, hearing children do not overtly share their parents' condition. Although their families reflect the values and the world view of a distinct and often disparaged cultural minority, hearing children themselves are ostensibly members of the Hearing cultural majority.

As young children, however, most informants reported little sense of their parents' deafness as remarkable, or that they were somehow different from their parents. Typically, most informants asserted their family's normalcy:

We were a family. My Mom, my Dad, and me. There was nothing strange about it.

These perceptions follow expected developmental patterns in which young children remain strongly identified with their parents [21]. Additionally,

because most deaf parents socialized with other deaf people (or hearing people who could communicate with them), there were few opportunities for overt distinctions between being hearing or deaf:

It took me a long time to realize my parents were abnormal, I mean we hearing people were normal. Deaf people were abnormal. Took me a long time to realize that. [“How did that happen?”] I guess when I started going to school. We lived across the street from mother's best friend. She was deaf also. Everybody in their family could sign, okay. And her [here the informant signed ‘mother’ and ‘father’] and all their friends signed. So it was just normal. But once I got into school and started meeting other kids, going over to their house, I'm like, everybody talks here! I didn't need to sign to them. So, it was like, out of the norm.

One woman who was the only hearing child among deaf parents, grandparents and siblings told me: “I was surrounded by deafness . . . It was all I knew.”

Although most informants were always known to be hearing, in some instances, informants were initially assumed to be deaf. This was especially true if there were several generations of deaf people within the family. Two informants recalled that it was not until school-age that they were discovered to be hearing. One woman explained that it was not that she could not hear; the act of hearing simply had little significance:

Sure, I remember hearing things. I guess I always heard things. But I didn't know that I was supposed to let anybody know. I mean, why should I? We could see what was going on around us. If I heard it too, well, I guess that was just extra . . . Or maybe it just wasn't important.

As Murphy has emphasized with other human conditions, deafness and hearing—as marks of difference and as criteria for membership in one of two worlds—need a context in which these conditions are evaluated and become socially meaningful.

Both family and outsiders contributed to the construction of a polarized world. Hearing and deafness—each expanded from a strictly functional condition into one of considerable social importance. The following description exemplifies how categories were constructed by deaf parents:

In my family, every day there was a debate or a refinement or a comment about the implications of deafness. Everybody was identified either as deaf or hearing. Every issue, every piece of communication was, Deaf do this. Hearing do that. Deaf way, Hearing way. Deaf world, Hearing world.

Informants reported that their parents attributed a number of characteristics to hearing people:

My father always distrusted hearing people. Still does. He would say to me, “Oh, that guy's going to raise the price because we're deaf, he thinks we're dumb—he's going to take advantage of us.”

Although all such attributions were not consistent, the two characteristics most frequently mentioned by informants were: “hearing people can't always be trusted,” and “hearing people know everything.” Deaf parents' generalizations, stereotypes and

assumptions about hearing people contrasted with depictions of other deaf people which—whether positive or negative—generally included much more detailed physical, behavioral and personal characteristics.

Complementing the family's evaluation of hearing people were public reactions to deaf people. These confirmed a sense of separateness and difference. The first day of school was often remembered as a time of realization:

My first day of school my mother came with me. I don't remember really thinking about my parents being different before then. When I got to the schoolyard I just remember seeing all these mothers who were making these strange movements with their mouths [mimics exaggerated mouth movements.] And when my mother signed to me, everyone stared at her. And then at me. I didn't understand what I was doing there. These people aren't like us. I don't belong here!

Public identification with their deaf family was frequently negative. Goffman described the tendency for stigma to spread from the stigmatized individual to family and friends as 'courtesy stigma'—that is, stigma by association [20, pp. 30–31]. Most informants described not merely a sense of courtesy stigma, they were sometimes mistakenly thought to be functionally deaf. This public perception occurred even among informants who did not use sign language:

How many times were we sitting with our families and everybody thinks we're deaf. And we can hear what the hearing people are saying. All those laughs they're making. They're saying deaf people're dumb or creepy or they're thieves. They think you're deaf too, but you can hear this. So, what are you supposed to do?

While providing an obvious resource for their family's communication system, these children's hearing and speaking abilities also distinguished them from their parents. As children, informants' communication responsibilities ranged from occasional phone calls, to some oral or sign interpreting, to considerable interpreting for parents and sometimes family friends. Yet, by using spoken words, informants identified themselves as hearing—simultaneously underscoring their parents' difference from other people and their own difference from their parents. These family roles and responsibilities also separated them from hearing peers with hearing parents. Although the degree of interaction with other hearing children varied, almost all informants felt some degree of difference from their peers. Informants frequently described themselves as "special," "burdened," "more responsible," "more mature," "different" than other hearing children.

Identity issues extended into the larger Deaf community as well. As children, most informants recalled frequent participation in the Deaf community. Hearing children of deaf parents have been described as the only full-fledged hearing members of the Deaf community [22, 23]. Yet, here too, membership was

problematic. Entree into this community was highly dependent on deaf family members. Also, hearing children's interaction with other deaf adults was often limited by the child's language abilities: nearly one-third of the sample population did not consider themselves fluent or did not use ASL as children—even if this was the primary language used by their parents. Finally, hearing children in the Deaf community were distinguished by their very presence; deaf children were often absent. Many deaf children were away from their home communities while attending residential schools for the deaf; others were kept away by hearing parents who perceived the Deaf community as socially deviant—endorsing an unacceptable means of communication (sign language) and reinforcing separation from the Hearing world.

DISCUSSION

Amidst conflicting interpretations by the Hearing world and the Deaf world, informants discussed sorting out their own affiliation and identity. One informant remembered this scene when he was about 12 years old:

My mother was going on and on about how she could never trust hearing people. And I looked at her and said, "Well what about me? I'm hearing." And she looked at me and said, "No, I didn't mean you. You're different."

Another woman echoed this sense of disorientation, of separateness from both the Hearing and the Deaf:

When I was a little girl, I remember walking into the room and seeing my father signing into the air. He was talking to God. I couldn't understand what was going on, so I asked my mother what he was doing, who he was signing to. My mother looked at me and [fingerspells 'h-e-a-r-i-n-g' across her forehead. "You're hearing, you don't understand."] I had always felt different from other kids because of my parents. Now I realized I was even different from them.

For many informants, the paradox of their ambiguous identity continued into adulthood. Despite appearing to matriculate within the Hearing world, a number of men and women suggested they were not always comfortable with hearing people, nor did they necessarily identify themselves as a Hearing person. The Hearing world's prevailing moral evaluation of deafness and negative responses to deaf people augmented informants' desire not to identify with those who stigmatized and oppressed. One woman was unforgiving in her condemnation of hearing people:

My parents have gotten ripped off by hearing people. And have gotten shit on by hearing people and treated like shit. My Dad's lost jobs, you know. I can't believe the cruelty from hearing people, you know, people he works with. And they laugh at him, and they don't even do it behind his back.

Public perception of most informants was problematic because their Deaf heritage was invisible to most;

their familial link to a separate culture and identity was not readily apparent. Yet, most informants continued to acknowledge and assert their cultural ties to the Deaf world. One informant declared:

Deafness is our lifeline. You know, when you're born, they cut the umbilical cord and you're a separate person. Well, with deafness you can never cut the umbilical cord. Those of us who were raised in it, we can never leave it behind.

Goffman referred to those who shared the same stigma as "the Own"; those who were normal but familiar and sympathetic to the stigmatized were called "the Wise" [20, p. 28]. Hearing children of deaf parents' ensconced role as both the Own and the Wise has become increasingly problematic in the context of recent social changes and in terms of their own adult development. First, paralleling many other minority groups, deaf people have become adamant in their demands for self-recognition and autonomy: Deaf for deaf. The recent Deaf rights movement re-aligns the messenger with the message: to speak for the Deaf, you must be deaf. Power struggles, exemplified by the rejection of a hearing person named as President of Gallaudet University (the world's only university primarily for deaf students) and the eventual installation of a deaf president dramatize this concern. Although overt confrontation was rare, informants frequently described a sense of personal conflict:

If it's between me and a deaf person for a job, then it should go to the deaf person. But, you know, I feel like I know every bit as much about the Deaf world as they do. A lot of deaf people grew up in the Hearing world, they think Hearing, they act hearing. I'm more Deaf than a lot of them are!

A few women and men were more adamant in their claim to their Deaf cultural heritage:

["Do you feel that you're being pushed out of Deaf culture?"] Ten years ago I think that deaf people tried to push me out . . . But I got to the point where I started saying, Wait a minute! You can't get rid of your kids, and you can't get rid of people that are part of Deaf culture. We are as much a part of Deaf culture. We're not a hearing person coming in and telling you what to do. We're your kids! We grew up in the same household. You cannot deny me that.

Secondly, the current popularity of adult children groups [24] as well as the particularly American predilection for introspection and childhood re-assessment resurrected many informants' long unsettled issues of identity. As adults, many women and men described searching for appropriate analogies and interpretations of their family experiences. These adult self-explorations reflected a continued sense of conflicted identity and oppositional categories:

I think my parents didn't understand a hearing child. They had my deaf sister, and my sister did things as they expected. And they knew the people she was doing things with. And they were part of her world, or she was part of their world—however you want to look at it. I wasn't. I never was

going to be. I wasn't deaf. I had a whole different world that I dealt with. They didn't understand that world other than through me. And so I became the symbol for this whole other world which they didn't understand. And they didn't understand me. I was a problem. I kept trying to solve the problem that I never understood. I kept trying and trying, but I never could solve it. So one day I asked my mother, "Was I really a problem?" My mother sat for a while and she said, "You know what the problem was?" I said, "No." And she said, "The problem was you could hear."

Within their families, hearing children often provided a crucial link between the Deaf and Hearing worlds. As adults, however, their role and their identity shifted into realms of greater uncertainty. Informants frequently described a sense of duality which separated them from hearing people as well as from deaf people. Although public identification as deaf or hearing could often be adapted to fit differing circumstances, informants' internalized sense of themselves was less dependent on external cues. For many of these men and women, hearing *and* deaf—both sides of the equation—have been internalized . . . as well as the invisible chasm which connects and yet separates the two:

I always felt like I didn't belong either place. I didn't belong with the deaf 100 per cent and I didn't belong with the hearing. I didn't feel comfortable with hearing. I felt more comfortable with deaf, but I knew I wasn't deaf. I feel like I'm somewhere in-between.

Acknowledging their particular sense of liminality, however, potentially intensified the separation between informants and their Deaf heritage. Several men and women questioned how to assert their own identity without further stigmatizing or alienating their parents:

Who am I gonna tell this to? Nobody's gonna understand, or they'll get the wrong idea.

Family allegiance was not the only concern. For hearing children within the Deaf community, identity and membership—like all other deaf people—depend not only on self-identification. Status is contingent on the Deaf community's sense of them as culturally familiar. Because hearing children already occupy a paradoxical position within this culture, the risks of alienation are all the more perilous:

It's not my parents I worry about. They're both gone now. But it's the connection to other Deaf people. That's still important to me . . . It's like what I felt right after Mom died. There were all these deaf people at the funeral. And they were telling me stories about my Mom. And then this woman I didn't know asked me if I was Deaf [signs, "You're Deaf, aren't you?"] These are my people, they know me, they know my Deaf part. To risk losing that would be to risk losing myself.

Whether in one-on-one interviews or in regional meetings of adult hearing children, informants' pre-occupation with their deaf parents underscores their mutual cultural heritage—a heritage emphatically linked through their parents. Although many of the issues and struggles of hearing children of deaf parents parallel children of other ethnic and racial

groups, there is one important difference. Within the Deaf community, the critical measure of cultural identity is neither degree of language proficiency nor shade of skin color nor knowledge of customs. It ultimately depends neither on declarations of allegiance nor degree of interaction. Above all, to be Deaf is to *not* be Hearing [25]. This exclusivity underscores why the emphasis on parental linkage so crucial. Because hearing children share neither their parents' functional hearing loss nor, in many cases, their parents' language, the primary source of cultural identity and community entree is their connection with their parents. Only by association do hearing children have access to this exclusive identity and this community: 'mother father deaf.'

CONCLUSION

The informants in this study are a dialectic between two competing world views. Among characteristics and values frequently dichotomized as either Deaf or Hearing, hearing children of deaf parents have inherited dual, often polarized interpretations of the meaning of deafness. From hearing people, they understand deafness as brokenness, as stigma, as disability. From their parents, they experience deafness as viable, as normal, as a cultural community. These conflicting perspectives underscore a central tenet of Robert Murphy's philosophy and theory: the response and the meanings of human conditions are ultimately dependent on their social context.

The myriad relationships between people with disabilities and those others around them embody a search which has remained fundamental and yet elusive within anthropology: understanding 'the other.' Can a better understanding of this distant other ultimately provide a better understanding of ourselves? Hearing children of deaf parents move the schism between those who are different and those who are not to their ultimate setting. Here, the confrontation and the dialogue is not between health professional and patient, between husband and wife, or even between parent and child. Here, the drama of belonging and of being different unfolds within oneself. It is a reminder that we must understand not merely the contents and meanings of each side of the equation. We must understand that the dichotomy itself is a social creation. As Robert Murphy eloquently recognized, this so-different so-distant other has included ourselves as well.

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