

A Socio-Anthropological Perspective of American Deaf Education

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During the past decades, the deaf in the United States, as well as those in other countries, have been trying to define themselves within society. They constitute, indeed, a "different" population group, insofar as they are "disabled," and they also have their own language that they utilize for interpersonal communication. So, as a group, they are called "a group of disabled individuals," "a distinct Deaf Culture," "a linguistic minority," "a society," "a community," "a sub-culture," etc.

Then, which designation to accept, knowing that the "labeling" of a group refers to their social status, as well as to their needs for education? If this population group constitutes a "culture," they may require a "bilingual/bicultural" type of education. On the other hand, if the group is "disabled," special education may be more appropriate. It is essential to determine the true status of this population group, and whether or not the terminology refers to a completely homogeneous group (which is actually not the case) in reality. This is a necessary condition, prior to putting into position educational methods, in order for the deaf to effectively access primary, secondary and higher education.

The Situation Prior to 1973

With few exceptions, the hearing world, consciously or not, has indeed ignored the needs of the deaf, so much so that the feelings of isolation, of being separate and different, have had a great impact on the minds of deaf children. In the past, the hearing world generally felt that the deaf were "deficient," "disabled," and unable to function equally to hearing persons in society.¹

When laws were promulgated shortly after the Civil War, making education compulsory for all, one of the underlying motives was to establish English firmly as the majority language, in an attempt to unify the diverse cultures existing in the United States, and to make the country a “melting pot.” The Union therefore survived, but at the cost of a serious degradation of many cultural traditions, including that of the Native American (American Indian) sign languages, and of the gestural language of signs of the deaf (much of which was first developed in France and then exported to the United States). These languages were viewed as “foreign languages,” and it was felt that deaf persons had to be “restored” to the society of English speakers.² The educational system for the deaf focused on speech development and oral communication, and the result was generally that of failure and frustration for deaf children,³ especially since the best lipreaders can only accurately understand about 20% of what is spoken to them.

Enrolled in a local school, a deaf child could only have a negative self-image of himself, as a result of his often difficult communicative relationships with teachers, staff and other students.⁴ In most of the United States, the answer was then to place the deaf students in residential special schools where they followed a special program, but which reinforced their segregation from general society.

In the residential special school, the deaf child faced strict discipline, was limited in educational opportunities to the vocational level, and utilized American Sign Language (ASL) instead of the English language. He was encouraged to feel a sense of “belonging” to a “community,” as well as to have strong fidelity to his school, his school peers and to the gestural sign language in use at the school. In fact, people can identify the residential school attended by the ASL “accents” used by such persons. Sometimes, deaf teachers unintentionally passed on their bitterness towards the hearing world, and their own perception of their own limitations to their students including their own lack of knowledge of the English language, and, as a result, the students learned a limited, often skewed perception of the “outside” (hearing) world and of their ability to carve out a place for themselves in that world.

Thus, this pressure of belonging and complying, shared with other deaf persons, became a major theme in special education,

and formed the notion of a “deaf community,” even though 95% of deaf children are born to hearing parents, the majority of whom do not know ASL. In these residential schools, deaf children are in frequent contact with older deaf persons, who have often lived through traumatic situations with hearing people, who never learned English fluently, and who prefer to avoid the general hearing society, giving up the benefits that exchanges with this society could have brought to them. As a result, deaf children develop a “learned inferiority complex” which is reinforced by the fact that these schools have extremely poor reputations in academic education. It was shown, in a series of studies in the 1960s, that these children generally had a more negative self-concept as compared to other children.

The Situation After 1973

In 1973, the United States Congress enacted two Federal laws, the “Education of All Handicapped Children Act,” and “The Rehabilitation Act of 1973.” From then on, deaf students had the right to an “Individualized Education Plan” (IEP) to provide them with wide educational options, as well as the free provision of an English-based sign language interpreter (“Signed English” or “Total Communication” interpreter) in regular classrooms. Slowly, oralism and speech therapy became less important, while the goal for an appropriate education, based on the practice of sign language, modified to conform to the English language, and used in regular classrooms became paramount. This change in focus increased the chances of college-preparatory educational success for deaf students, who had previously feared attendance in regular classrooms.

As a result of this general evolution toward acceptance of deaf students in the United States, more hearing parents enrolled their children in general, mainstreamed, school programs. As a result, residential schools recorded a drop in enrollment, and residential programs began to be shut down in many states. But, even though deaf teachers had the right, by law, to teach hearing students by using interpreters, school districts, in practice, were still unwilling to permit them to do so. As for the deaf administrators of residen-

tial schools, they did not stand a chance of obtaining new positions in local school districts.

And, even if some of these schools would have opened their doors to deaf teachers and administrators, these teachers and administrators continued to favor the continuation of the function of the residential schools. They appealed to the loyalties of their alumni and to the "deaf community" at large, to assist them in convincing the hearing world that contacts between deaf students and deaf adults was an essential psychological requirement. Since it has been proved that deaf children born to deaf parents have higher self-esteem than those born to hearing parents, adaptation, in their minds, consisted in plunging all these children into the "deaf world" of residential schools. In addition, it was asserted that schooling with interpreters in regular schools did not meet the need for socialization of deaf students "with their own kind of people." Due to this popular and political pressure by the residential school advocates in many states of the United States, the fallacy that "deaf taught by deaf is better education" gained support, and the residential school programs were retained.

Of course, logically, it is to be realized that the only reason that deaf children of deaf parents had better self-confidence than others was that the hearing parents of deaf children formerly tended to reflect old opinions regarding the potential of their children, which encouraged them to choose an oral education. Changing the opinions of the parents, and having them learn effective methods for communication with their children, could, and did, result in better self-esteem for those deaf children. To this were added other benefits:

- (1) The children, welcomed into the "hearing world," could succeed in the world and no longer be rejected. They had effective access to, and participated in, the majority culture.
- (2) They received a general education that prepared them for postsecondary studies and were no longer restricted to the vocational programs of the traditional residential schools.
- (3) Living at home with their parents, they could make friends with local children, both deaf and hearing.
- (4) By combining hearing and deaf students, educators could innovate. For example, in Southern California, a new private

elementary school for deaf children recently opened, named "Tripod," which accepts hearing students who know gestural sign language, some of whom are the hearing children of deaf parents.

In higher education, since English-based sign language interpreters were also mandated by law, students started to enroll in often prestigious local and national universities and colleges, instead of the three traditional major "deaf programs": Gallaudet University in Washington, DC, National Technical Institute for the Deaf in Rochester, NY, and the National Center on Deafness at California State University, Northridge. Enrollment in these three programs has been decreasing.

A threat to the residential "special education of the deaf" at all levels, and to the employment of deaf teachers and administrators, was therefore perceived. In response, an idea was asserted by these deaf teachers and administrators, for the first time, that there was a "Deaf Culture" and that the only way to preserve that "culture" was to retain segregated residential schooling.

Is There a "Deaf Culture"?

In the recent past decades, there has been a movement within the deaf "community" to claim a definition for itself as a "separate cultural and linguistic minority group," even though this group previously properly recognized itself as a group of "disabled" persons. Thus, the focus has shifted from the field of sociology to that of anthropology.

Why did this change occur? The standard explanation is that the deaf community began to see itself differently because the use of the ASL gestural sign language created a "cultural system" instead of being merely an attempt to communicate English visually.

"Language is a cultural system" was stated in 1965 by Dr. William Stokoe, a professor of English literature, first known for "discovering" ASL at Gallaudet College (now Gallaudet University), then the world's only college completely accessible to the deaf. In the early 1960s, Stokoe began to apply Trager's linguistic

principles to ASL. He relied on the fact that persons who use ASL “behaved differently” than those who used Signed English or Total Communication. The “Linguistic-Ethnographic Model of Deaf Culture” was the basis for Stokoe’s research, and he expanded it into a new and distinct anthropological theory. Thus, this became the first indication of “Deaf (with a capital “D”) Culture.”

After Stokoe, the history of the “Deaf Culture” movement attracted more and more researchers, speaking about fields in which they often had no expertise, and using terminology that they do not always justify. G. Hans Furth, an empirical psychologist, stated in the Foreword to his book, *Thinking Without Language: Psychological Implications of Deafness*:

“While I conducted and described my work as an empirical psychologist concerned with the thinking of deaf people, I realize that I have ventured into areas that are the proper concern of philosophy, education, anthropology, linguistics, hearing and speech, and rehabilitation. I may appear to have delved too deeply or too superficially into areas depending on the specialized knowledge of the reader, but I have tried to say nothing that is not scientifically defensible. My concern is primarily with the vital psychological reality of human thinking. *In this pursuit I did not hesitate to break with historically conditioned scientific approaches* that provide an inadequate conceptual environment for the questions and indeed the facts of the present investigations.”⁵

Following this “breakthrough,” other researchers began to wonder whether the “thinking processes” and behaviors of deaf persons were truly different than those of hearing persons, based on the fact that the gestural “natural” language of ASL has a different grammatical and syntactical structure than English. Finally, it was observed and noted that “deaf people *do* think like hearing people.”⁶

But, the movement toward ASL, that of accepting a language that creates a separate culture, has continued until the present time, citing Stokoe’s research as the basis for such assertion. The movement became stronger with time, until today the term “Culturally Deaf” is used to designate all of those persons (including hearing persons) who depend on, or utilize, ASL for their primary communication needs, and for whom the term “Deaf” is used in a capitalized form.

Thus, the trend that actually prevails in the United States, as well as in other countries now due to American influence, is marked by

the formation of two separate groups of deaf persons: those who are simply deaf (who live in general society and use English), and those who are "Culturally Deaf" (who follow the dogma of separatism and use of ASL that is strongly supported by the professionals from residential schools and activist researchers).

The "Cultural" Impact On Education Of The Deaf

Since 1973, English-based sign language interpreters have been provided for deaf students in regular classrooms, and, in some cases, ASL interpreters have been provided. But, at the same time, the supporters of "Deaf culture" have influenced the continuation of the segregated school programs. The controversy has raged on. Should deaf children be educated within the "mainstream" cultural system, using standard grammatical English, and participating in hearing classrooms with English-based interpreters? Or should they be considered a separate "cultural" group, in which deaf teachers and administrators, and segregated school environments using only ASL, are necessary?

In 1974, Lawrence Fleischer, deaf administrator of the Deaf Studies program at California State University, Northridge, analyzed "Deaf Culture" according to the perspective of noted anthropologist Edward Hall: "Culture is communication and communication is culture." Fleischer then concluded that there were more differences than similarities between "Deaf Culture" and the general mainstream culture in America, especially considering the special needs of the deaf population for unique modes of communication and social interaction.

Following this theme, now in vogue in the deaf community, it is asserted that deafness creates a separate "culture," but that its values would be destroyed by any effort to merge deaf children into the "hearing culture." From this perspective, "appropriate education" involves living with other deaf people for communication and social purposes. If this communication and socialization cannot be achieved, if the child is not exposed to "good" language and dialogue in ASL (thus implying that the use of English is "bad"), then one can expect a linguistic, intellectual, emotional, and cul-

tural incomprehension in this child, unless it is imposed upon, to a larger or smaller degree, among the born deaf. "Most deaf children," Schein remarks, "grow up like strangers in their own households."⁷ However, this position does not now apply to hearing households deciding to learn one of the various modes of English-based sign language, or other modes of communication, such as Cued Speech, to communicate with the deaf members of their families; and this also does not apply to mainstream programs that now include English-based sign language, Cued Speech, and/or deaf teachers.

A Description of "Deaf Culture"

Carol Padden, a hearing-impaired linguist, was the first to propose the model of "Deaf Culture" in 1980, which then became the main argument in the deaf community for supporting residential, segregated education. According to Padden, the model of "Deaf Culture" is valid at the anthropological level due to four "values" that create its originality:

- a) There is a separate and distinct language, (different from spoken languages) – ASL.
- b) Spoken communication of the English language, though verbal means, is never used.
- c) The way of thinking, forms of socialization and behaviors are different from those of other cultural groups.
- d) The stories of success and failure, the "folk tales" and other traditions are very different than those of the majority culture.

However, one can restructure all of these as follows:

- 1) This separate language of ASL is a simple communication system, developed by the deaf who did not master standard English, and who needed a fast mode of communication; hence this is a type of purely gestural "short-talk."
- 2) There is no reason to use voice communication in the deaf community, since its participants cannot hear.

- 3) This “cultural group” behaves differently because of lack of information in gestural sign language as to “appropriate” behaviors. The socialization is different simply due to the fact of deliberate, forced segregation from hearing society by “Deaf Culture” advocates. And, it is definitely the knowledge level of the language, not the culture, that shapes the thinking styles of the deaf.
- 4) The individual stories of successes and failures and the “folk stories” are not the result of a cultural difference but of the exclusion of the deaf from general society, who did not therefore master the ability to access the majority communications or culture.

In 1982, at Gallaudet University, Joshua Fishman gave a lecture on the social aspects of deafness, praising the borrowing of concepts and hypotheses from the social sciences to describe the socialization of the deaf child. But, at the same time, he warned about the limitations of metaphors and the risks of mistranslation, notably regarding the notions of “culture” and “ethnic group.”

Despite this caution, Simon Carmel, a deaf anthropologist, reinforced Padden’s ethnographic model with frequent allusions to Keesing’s cultural framework: “cultures are epistemologically in the same realm as language.”⁸ Accordingly, “language was the first part of the culture to be recognized.”⁹

In actuality, language seems to be the one and only basis for considering deaf people to be a “culture,” which is not enough to prove that a culture exists, according to standard anthropological criteria. Despite this, in the early 1980s, the University of California, Berkeley, Linguistics Department created a “Deaf Community and Culture” course. Other campuses followed this example, creating new employment opportunities for deaf teachers who taught Deaf Culture and introductory ASL courses.

The “Symbolic Model of Deaf Culture” was created in 1988, with a new book published by Carol Padden and Tom Humphries, *Deaf in America: Voices from a Culture*.¹⁰ Their rationale was based on the cultural anthropological thesis developed by Clifford Geertz, in which “culture” is defined as shared symbolic codes and meaning in social life. “(Culture) denotes an historically transmitted pat-

tern of meanings embodied in symbols ... by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life."¹¹ "In contrast to the long history of writings that treat deaf people as medical cases, or as people with "disabilities" who "compensate" for their deafness by using (gestural) sign language, we want to portray the lives they live, their art and performances, their everyday talk, their shared myths, and the lessons they teach one another."¹²

Thus, from a "Deaf Culture" point of view, deafness is an affective commitment, referred to as "attitudinal deafness," which has absolutely no relationship to audiological deafness. However, anthropologists working on other cultures have not been lax in raising strong criticisms of the obvious lack of logic in this viewpoint.

In an attempt to make a theory of "Deaf Culture" more scientific, Oliver Sacks, a neurologist who does not know any form of sign language, proposed in 1989 an ethnoscientific model of "brain structure." He claimed that the use of ASL since infancy creates a different way of thinking, and, thus, a different brain structure.¹³ Although the linguists never perceived ASL as creating a different thinking pattern embedded in the brain, the "neurological" approach of Oliver Sacks has been well-publicized, thus producing more confusion instead of clarity.

The "Cognitive Anthropology" of culture, pioneered by Hall and Trager, concerns itself with relationships among language, culture and cognition. Kathee Christensen, a specialist of communication disorders, called for a new focus on Deaf Culture and cognitive development. But, according to others, "since knowledge, ideas and values will vary in different members of society, a cognitive model from psychology cannot be applied to a culture as a whole."¹⁴

In short, Padden's ethnographic model presumes that language is a model of culture, "logically" equating with the ethnoscientific and cognitive model, so that culture becomes a system of ideas or a system of knowledge and concepts. This model and the "symbolic model" are accepted by many authors interested in Deaf Culture. But these models are "illusory conceptual abstractions inferred from observations of the very real phenomena of individuals interacting with one another and with their natural environments."¹⁵

Current Issues in the Education of the Deaf

In 1990, the United States Congress enacted the Federal *Americans with Disabilities Act*, mandating that sign language interpreters be provided in all public and most private businesses, including private schools. The way is now open, more than ever, for deaf students to access the very best educational institutions in the United States, a conditional prerequisite to obtaining high-level employment based solely on merit and ability.

There is also now a nationwide “relay service,” provided free to deaf persons, along with free appropriate equipment for transmitted text (TTY/TDD in the United States, Minitel in France). Moreover, television programs are becoming accessible by a captioning system, along with a publicity campaign that highlights the potential for success of deaf persons.

This logical governmental approach properly recognizes that the “deaf community” is a “minority group of disabled persons,” which only needs facilitation of communication, and a bit more understanding, in order to become equal to hearing persons. The majority culture in America has recognized that there are deaf members who have been unreasonably excluded, and is now trying to remediate that situation.

However, so as to preserve jobs and segregated programs nationwide, the movement in favor of “Deaf Culture” disagrees with this law and the notion that the deaf can join with the majority culture. Harlan Lane, a hearing psychologist, reasserts in *The Mask of Benevolence* that the deaf community “is not disabled” and that it is similar to the black and Hispanic communities as an ethnic/linguistic minority group that has experienced discrimination.¹⁶

In addition, Lane states, in both his publications and in his lecture tours, that the deaf community would rather have land provided by the government in order to run its own segregated society. But this is an extremist position by a hearing person, which very few “Deafcentrists” really support. Almost no one in the general deaf community would consider this option, now that there is increasing access to the majority culture and its benefits – social, economic and otherwise.

The most recent confusion was caused when it was recently asserted that “Deaf Culture” is not limited only to deaf people,

but is comprised of all persons who fluently speak ASL – hearing children of deaf parents, hearing professionals who work with the deaf community, hearing ASL sign language interpreters, etc. This definitely indicates that, while there may be a linguistic “ASL culture,” the fact is that “Deaf Culture” is not exclusively composed of people who are deaf. In fact, since classes in ASL are now widely available to the general community in the United States, as part of the effort to establish recognition of ASL as a “foreign language,” it must be noted here that the majority of “Culturally Deaf” people who speak ASL have absolutely no audiological deafness or significant hearing impairment!

The “Deaf Culture” deaf participants accept the social and employment benefits of the Americans with Disabilities Act, the financial benefits of Social Security Disability programs, and Department of Rehabilitation financial and employment assistance, as a “group of disabled people,” while also asserting, at the same time, that they are “not disabled” and that they are simply members of a cultural, ethnic minority group. This “cultural group” has also recently accepted the fact that hearing people speak their cultural language of ASL, and that many of the cultural variants came from their family environments.

Conclusion

The educational question remains more confusing than ever. Special education? Bilingual/bicultural education? Multicultural education? Is it preferable to enroll deaf students in regular schools to follow a general program of studies? Or should all deaf students be placed in segregated, primarily-vocational schools run by deaf teachers and deaf administrators? Should we place students into school programs based on their use of ASL, or based on test scores that demonstrate their true ability to succeed?

According to G. Larry Stewart, a deaf psychologist, “Deaf Culture,” even yet to be satisfactorily defined, was not “discovered,” but was actually created for sociopolitical purposes linked with the deaf community and their education. “Hence it is much more reasonable and logical to take the position that deaf people do not

represent a separate culture in the deeper sense, but rather are in the main group of citizens, drawn together by their common communication needs, life experiences, and preferences."¹⁷

The Americans with Disabilities Act has a major role to play in providing the deaf community with full choice and equal participation, with a new focus on merit, ability and potential, both in the majority society and in education. Instead of a focus on differences and limitation, this is a time for a new, holistic, conceptual framework that will make it possible to readjust and reappraise formerly negative attitudes toward people with disabilities.

Notes

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6. Ibid. My italics.
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