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The Importance of Learning Deaf Culture through a Black Deaf Perspective in the Field of Communication Sciences and Disorders

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The Importance of Learning Deaf Culture through a Black Deaf Perspective in the Field of
Communication Sciences and Disorders

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in
Communication Sciences and Disorders

By

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Under the mentorship of Dr. *Janet Bradshaw*

ABSTRACT

As the diversity in the demographics of clinical populations increases in the United States, clinicians must also be accountable for learning the culture of their patients. The Deaf community, specifically individuals who identify with Deaf culture and Black Deaf culture, is a multifaceted, cultural group that has been marginalized within various settings including social, political, and employment settings, including academic and clinical research. This review will examine the historical developments within Deaf History in the United States, the injustices related to Deaf culture, and more specifically Black Deaf culture, and discuss the critical need for Deaf research and tools that clinicians should use when working with Deaf individuals in educational environments and clinical care.

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Introduction

Deaf culture, similar to other cultural groups, is multifaceted, but also not very well understood by individuals who are not Deaf or have exposure to the Deaf community. Culture is a broad term that can have multiple definitions. There are some concepts in a culture that are tangible like behaviors, while core values and morals require reflecting on different aspects of the culture (Leigh, Andrews, Harris, Avila, 2018). These factors are shared between a group of people. The commonalities between the group are what the term culture represents. Deaf culture is the shared experiences between people who are Deaf (Leigh, Andrews, Harris, Avila, 2018). There is a significant difference between those who are Deaf and those who are deaf. Typically, being deaf refers to the actual medical term of having hearing loss. People who identify as Deaf, strongly associate themselves with the culture. People who immerse themselves in Deaf culture have a higher chance of being confident in who they are as a person who is Deaf and not a “deaf person” (Cawthorn, 2016).

A vital component of Deaf culture is communication; the ability to communicate is not restricted to just verbal conversation. Communication between individuals includes a variety of modalities that could be verbal and nonverbal communication skills, such as facial expressions, body language, and manual communication. There are also many dialects within signed languages. Globally, there are over 100 signed languages used by individuals who are Deaf and belong to the Deaf community (Eberhard, 2021). American Sign Language, while it is one language, consists of many different versions based on regions, or subcultures. American Sign Language was recognized as an official language in 1965 (Kelly, 2003). However, speakers of signed languages have not received the acknowledgment that sign language deserves. About

96% of people who are Deaf are born to hearing parents (Leigh, Andrews, Harris, Avila, 2018). Unfortunately, many individuals do not experience sign language and Deaf culture until they are young adults.

The purpose of this literature review is to define Deaf culture, its intersectionality with Black Deaf culture as it pertains to professionals in the field of communication science and disorders. This review will examine the historical developments within Deaf history in the United States, the injustices related to Deaf culture, and more specifically Black Deaf culture. Further, the author will discuss the critical need for Deaf research and various tools that clinicians should use when working with Deaf individuals in educational environments and clinical care.

1. What cultural factors should be included when learning about Deaf culture?
2. What cultural factors should be included when learning about Black Deaf Culture?
3. What cultural considerations should be included when working with individuals within the Deaf community, including Black Deaf culture, in the clinical setting?

Literature Review

The Importance of Deaf Culture

Merriam-Webster defines discrimination as the practice of unfairly treating a person or group of people differently from other people or groups of people. Discrimination is a broad term that can include audism, oralism, and racism. Looking throughout Deaf history, there are many examples of discrimination. This section will highlight the negative impact of various historic figures in American culture and social events of the 20th century that touched upon the Deaf community.

Discrimination of the Deaf

The Deaf community has been marginalized by the predominantly hearing society for decades. Terms like racism and sexism are common terms that are topics of discussion in the workplace and education systems. A term that is rarely used in discussions is audism, discrimination of someone based on their hearing abilities (Leigh, Andrews, Harris, Avila, 2018). One example that dates back to the 1800s is that of the Congress for Deaf Education. In 1880, this group of men gathered to discuss whether or not spoken language should be a part of Deaf education. This congress was made up of all people who were hearing except James Denison. James was the only person who was Deaf. He was advocating to include all forms of language, including sign, but was overwhelmingly voted against. It was decided that spoken language would be the main modality for education of the Deaf. James's voice as a person who was Deaf was repressed by people in the hearing community (Leigh, Andrews, Harris, Avila, 2018). Another "-ism" that is rarely discussed is oralism. This is the teaching of verbal speaking only and a disdain for sign language.

Alexander Graham Bell, the well-known historical inventor of the telephone, was also an Oralist. His wife, Mabel Hubbard, had a case of scarlet fever which caused her to go completely deaf. His mother was also hard of hearing (Klein, 2017). With Bell's close connections to the Deaf community, you would assume he was an advocate for sign language and Deaf education. However, he had strong negative feelings about any special education for the Deaf community. He believed that teaching sign language would form "a Deaf variety of the human race" (Sayers, 2020). He was firm in his belief that people who were Deaf should only learn how to speak verbally.

Another example would be the movement in 1988 titled Deaf President Now. Since its foundation in 1864, Gallaudet University, an academic institution for Deaf education, had yet to have a university president that was Deaf. The students felt like they had not had a president that could fully represent them or their culture. They began to protest when another hearing president was selected for the university. The protests continued until the recently elected president resigned. At that time, King Jordan, a deaf professor at the university, was given the role of the first deaf president (Leigh, Andrews, Harris, Avila, 2018). It should be noted that within higher education, Gallaudet University was the only university for Deaf and Hard of Hearing students in the United States for decades (Berke, 2021). There are over 25,000 universities in the world and only a few institutions for students who are deaf (*How many universities exist in the world*, 2021). Unfortunately, these injustices are not a rarity, because most people assume or consider being deaf is a disability.

Terminology of the deaf community.

Language can have an impact that can cause lasting changes in society and ideals about different communities or cultures. Developing language that is inclusive can bring awareness to the hearing community on how negative connotations can impact someone who is Deaf.

Negative/exclusive terms.

Throughout history terms such as “Deaf and Dumb” have frequently been used to describe someone who is Deaf. However, that is a term that is extremely outdated and inappropriate to the Deaf community. Being Deaf is not an indicator of an individual’s level of intelligence. Using this term, Deaf and Dumb has contributed to the marginalization of the Deaf community. This has caused people to make assumptions about people who are Deaf. This is mostly related to intelligence and the ability to carry out daily functions. The event of being Deaf does not mean there is any development or intellectual disorder. One of the most common misconceptions about people who are Deaf is that they cannot drive because they are Deaf. However, being Deaf has no effect on the ability to drive. Many people drive with noise distractions that essentially distract them from noise on the road around them. This is not considered a reason for not being able to drive (Paul, 2009).

Other terms such as hearing impaired may also be considered offensive to an individual who is Deaf. The word impaired implies that there is something broken that needs to be corrected (Leigh, Andrews, Harris, Avila, 2018). You would not use the same language when referring to someone who is overweight as “thin impaired”, or someone who is balding as “hair impaired” (Leigh, Andrews, Harris, & Avila, 2018). This is challenging because clinically, the term hearing impairment is used frequently to describe people who are Deaf. There is a wide

range of hearing levels besides that of being Deaf. An individual could have a mild or moderate level of hearing loss, but not be Deaf. A hearing impairment makes an assumption that there is some hearing ability present. Another debate is whether the American Disabilities Act, which provides support for individuals with disabilities, includes individuals within the Deaf community. Even lawmaking has perpetuated the view of many to see Deafness as a disability.

Positive/inclusive terms.

There are terms that are generally accepted by the Deaf community. The phrase “Deaf space” refers to a visual environment that accommodates the Deaf community (Leigh, Andrews, Harris, & Avila, 2018). An example of this could be ensuring that there is plenty of open space with no barriers in a room. People who are Deaf need to have a visual of another person in order to communicate. If there are multiple walls or other obstructions, a person who is Deaf will have a more difficult time participating in an objective. This is a step toward inclusivity that can be easily considered when examining a situation. People in the Deaf community do not see their deafness as a disability. Instead of seeing the absence of hearing as a disability, many see deafness as an addition of strength to visual abilities. “People of the Eye” was a term coined by George Veditz, 1912 President of the National Association of the Deaf (Leigh, Andrews, Harris, & Avila, 2018). He chose this to aid in changing the perception of loss of hearing to gain visual strength. In general, referring to deafness as a disability can be considered offensive to people in the Deaf community.

Another concept within the Deaf community is the phrase “Deaf gain” (Leigh, Andrews, Harris, & Avila, 2018). Deaf gain is considered the positives associated with being Deaf. Being Deaf provides a whole new community and culture that includes values, customs, language, and

a feeling of togetherness. This is not exclusion from a hearing society, but rather gaining a community of people who share the similarity of being Deaf. Within the Deaf community, there is the concept of multiculturalism. Being a member of the Deaf community is not a person's singular identity. Many Deaf individuals identify with many cultural groups that could include ethnicity, spirituality, gender identification, and bilingualism. Some families who are multilingual may have their own version of sign language apart from the multiple languages they speak (Leigh, Andrews, Harris, & Avila, 2018). While being Deaf can be something binding the community together, for many people, there is so much more to their identity than their hearing status.

To be more inclusive, person-first language should be implemented when interacting with members of a Deaf community. Using phrases such as “a person who is Deaf” could be considered a better option. This puts the person ahead of the description. The intentional use of inclusive language promotes a society that is more welcoming to people who are Deaf. For example, changing the wording of “failing a hearing test” to “passing a Deaf test” (Leigh, Andrews, Harris, & Avila, 2018). This can make the underlying condescension turn into a positive outlook on the excitement of being a part of the Deaf community. All individuals should intentionally use inclusive language terms so there is an awareness that can expand the Deaf space for the Deaf community.

Experiences of the Black Deaf Community

Historically, there has been biasing and limited opportunities to support members of Black Deaf communities in education. However, there were also people who were very well known for advocating for the Deaf community. The inspiration behind Gallaudet University,

Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet, was supportive of Deaf education free of audism and oralism. Despite his advocacy for the Deaf, it was transparent that he meant only White Deaf people. In his school for the Deaf, Gallaudet was opening up his services to children from lower-class families, but it seems people of color were left out of his “salvation” narrative. Members of organizations that Gallaudet was a part of, like the Connecticut Colonization Society, were on record saying things such as, “You have added little or nothing to his happiness—you have unfitted him for the society and sympathies of his degraded kindred, and yet you have not procured for him and cannot procure for him any admission into the society and sympathy of white men” (Sayers, 2020). They believed that there was nothing worse than educating someone who is African American.

Black deaf education.

The segregation of Deaf education continued well into the 1960s during the Civil Rights Movement. It was even present until close to the '80s. The last school for the Deaf to be integrated was in Louisiana in 1978 (*Black deaf culture through the lens of history*). People who identify as both Black and Deaf have addressed that they feel as if they don't fit in with either culture (Anderson & Dunn, 2016). Black American Sign Language has developed and is different from American Sign Language. Deaf clubs were a place where people who were Deaf could find belonging. Due to segregation, the Black Deaf community created their own Deaf clubs apart from the White Deaf clubs (*Black deaf culture through the lens of history*). Another aspect of the Deaf community has been hidden behind the White Deaf lens.

The history of discrimination within the Deaf community is still relevant today. In October of 2021, there was a movement in Atlanta, Georgia. The movement is surprisingly

similar to the Deaf President Now movement of 1988. A school for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing recently hired a new superintendent that is not Deaf. Not only is the superintendent hearing, but also White (Tagami, 2021). The student population is majority Black and Hispanic students. Many have expressed feelings of anger and sadness. They feel as if their leadership board cannot relate, or communicate with them. Over ten employees of the school actually resigned over this issue (Tagami, 2021). It has been stated that many people of color who are also Deaf were passed over for this job. Following the controversy of this issue, the school also removed its diversity and inclusion committee. The Deaf and Black Deaf communities are continuing to be excluded. Thirty years have passed since the last movement, and modern society is still witnessing injustices for these communities. This is why it is so important that Speech Pathologists take the time to understand the history of Deaf and Black Deaf culture. There is so much discrimination that potential clients will face. It is vital that we take the time to understand our clients and create an environment that is free of discrimination.

Black deaf research.

The exclusion of the Black Deaf community has flowed into not only education but also research. There is a limited amount of research that has been conducted on the subject of Deaf culture (Dunn and Anderson, 2020). However, the majority of research projects that are known today, are from a lens of White Deaf culture. This lack of research has had an ongoing impact on the ability to define Black Deaf culture. The information that has been recorded is mostly a result of navigational capital by Black Deaf individuals, which are specific skills that are passed down through generations (Cawthorn, 2016). This can be done through cultural storytelling that is passed down through younger generations or mentoring. It is not typically considered a type of

historical documentation from historians and/or cultural scientists (e.g., anthropologists) of the biased, past few centuries, especially when these scientists were predominately white, educated males.

However, there are some notable works that highlight important role models within the Deaf community. Dr. Andrew Foster is known as the first Black Deaf man to graduate from Gallaudet University (Dunn and Anderson, 2020). Ludwig Ahwhere Bafo, from Ghana, was the first African Deaf student to graduate from Gallaudet University shortly after Dr. Foster. There is not a large amount of available information about either of these men, but we do know they have become important figures in the history of Black Deaf students.

Another popular work brings historical people who were Deaf to light within the slave trade. M. Miles notes that there seems to be an erasure of Deaf slaves within recorded history. There are few descriptions of sign language in the 5th century (Dunn and Anderson, 2020), but it mostly refers to people who are Deaf being “entertainers” alongside people with Dwarfism. Miles also mentions that the existence of Deaf slaves is not only not recorded in Black Deaf history, but removed from Deaf history altogether.

Making Deaf Culture Inclusive in Education and Clinic

When approaching Deaf education, it is important that the learning environment is inclusive. The everyday classroom is going to be diverse culturally and have students with multiple different learning styles.

Educating deaf students.

More school environments need to recognize Deaf culture under the umbrella of multiculturalism. One way to incorporate Deaf culture into learning is through content

integration, which is using parts of a certain culture to explain the curriculum (English, 2018). An example of using content integration for Deaf culture would be teaching sign language to those who are hearing. Knowing a word in sign language could provide a student with another form of expression of a concept. This could aid in learning and retaining information. This also introduces sign as another part of the classroom culture. Giving clients multiple ways of expression like signing could be beneficial for a speech therapy session as well. This could also help in prejudice reduction (English, 2018). If the stigma around sign language is removed from the classroom, there is a greater chance that the student will experience less marginalization from their peers. The earlier this is instilled in the school environment, the better. Children are most impressionable for language acquisition and internalization of bias at an early age (English, 2018). American Sign Language is similar to learning a language like Spanish or French. There are rules and guidelines that ASL has that include all of the basic fundamentals of language such as semantics, syntax, morphology, pragmatics, and phonology.

Working with deaf clients in a clinic.

When working with clients who are Deaf, it is important to make considerations that create a Deaf space. Another concept that is included in the Deaf space are attention grabbers. If someone who is Deaf does not have a visual on you, you cannot call their name to get their attention. You may need to use something that vibrates. They can feel the vibrations and it will alert them (Kelly, 2003). Some clinics also use flashing lights as a way to get their client's attention (Kelly, 2003).

Literature that is inclusive in the therapy space is also meaningful. Providing children who are Deaf with characters that look like them, have hearing aids, or provide them with a way

to identify with the character can help to build confidence. Please see Tables 1 and 2 as these specific children's books were identified by the author due to content theme (i.e., Deaf child makes friends) and high ratings from public book reviews. This list of children's literature was listed in the article by Golos et al. (2018).

While books and representation are important, certain aspects of reading in a classroom or therapy setting can be limiting for children who are Deaf. Certain strategies can aid in creating a Deaf space for children. Instead of just reading a story aloud, a therapist can point to the print as they read. They may also sign or fingerspell words in the sign language alphabet (Golos et al., 2018). Doing this can strengthen a client's confidence and comfort in using sign language in multiple settings. There is a connection between using ASL and printed words when reading aloud. It is proven that this is beneficial for students to see both asl and printed word at the same time (Golos et al., 2018). It is critical to note that sign language and fingerspelling are two different things. Sign language is the structured language used to communicate that includes all the traits of a language. Fingerspelling is just using the sign language alphabet to spell out words one by one. Sign language would match the meaning of the text that is being reviewed.

Table 1. Elementary Books Representing Deaf Culture (adapted from Golos et al. 2018)

Grade Range	Title	Author	Scenario
Kindergarten - Third	Moses- Series	Isaac Millman	Moses is a little boy who is Deaf. The series shows him in different settings. Ex: -Moses Goes to School -Moses Goes to the Circus
Kindergarten - Third	Abby Gets a Cochlear Implant	Maureen Cassidy Riski	Gives a view of a child getting a cochlear implant, and takes you through different hearing tests and other aspects of getting an implant.
Kindergarten - Third	Prudence Parker and a Sign of Friendship	Christine Burk	Two little girls, one who is Deaf, one who is not, become friends.
Kindergarten - Third	Enrique Speaks with His Hands-	Benjamin Fudge	Enrique is Deaf and learns to communicate with family through Deaf friendships.
Kindergarten - Third	Dad and Me in the Morning	Patricia Lakin	A boy who is Deaf and his dad show their relationship/ways they communicate.
Kindergarten - Third	The Spelling Window	Dawn L. Watkins	A story about a little boy who is Deaf and a little girl who is not and their developing friendship

Table 2. Intermediate Books Representing Deaf Culture (Adapted from Golos et al., 2018)

Grade Range	Title	Author	Scenario
Fourth - Sixth	A Place for Grace	Jean Davies Okimoto	Grace, a dog befriends Charlie who is Deaf.
Fourth - Sixth	Secret Signs along the Underground Railroad	Anita Riggio	A little boy, using sign language, aids in the freedom of slaves through the underground railroad.
Fourth - Sixth	The Printer	Myron Uhlberg	A man who is Deaf works in a printing company and is largely ignored by his coworkers. When a fire breaks out, he is the only one who can save them, and with the loud machines, they cannot hear.

Discussion

When learning about Deaf culture, it is important to note the lack of research displayed pertaining to Deaf culture, terminology, and considerations for education. Lack of research parallels the discrimination of people who are Deaf throughout history. Deaf culture has been a way for people to develop a shared identity and community. When there is a representation of someone who is similar to you, it is more likely to have a positive connotation within your own culture (Cawthorn, 2016). This highlights the need for multicultural research in both Deaf and Black Deaf cultures to facilitate cultural awareness.

The lack of research on Black Deaf Culture also shows the discrimination of the Black Deaf community throughout history. The development of Black ASL as a result of this discrimination should also be noted. The many variations of sign language are all valid and a part of multiculturalism. Using these different forms of ASL could contribute to an inclusive environment. Creating a space that is inclusive to people from different cultural backgrounds can be conveyed in many different ways. Deaf space can include focusing on visual aspects of learning. These notations should be incorporated into speech-language therapy settings to improve the overall functions of communication.

Limitations

The author's goal in this research was to gain a more thorough understanding and appreciation of Deaf culture. There is very little research that has been conducted by Deaf educators, especially Black Deaf educators. This affected the range of research that was studied. It should also be noted that the author of this thesis is a white, hearing, female. Further, there is a

limited number of children's books representing Deaf culture that can be used for education and clinical tools.

Future Directions

In the future, there is a strong need for research specific to Black Deaf culture and multiculturalism within Deaf culture. Speech-Language Pathologists need to be surveyed on their base knowledge of Deaf culture. Based on the results of this study, there is sure to be a lack of knowledge. Incorporating aspects of Deaf culture and Black Deaf culture into the learning process of speech-language pathologists will ensure that Deaf space and culture are incorporated into the clinical setting.

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