**The Social Construction of Deafness and Hearing Impairment**

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**Introduction**

Deafness is an “audiological condition” which refers to the loss of 70 decibels or greater in the ear with the least hearing impairment, categorized as severe to profound hearing loss (Woodcock 2007: 360). It is estimated that about 5% of the national population has hearing loss that affects communication to the extent that some kind of help can be recommended (Woodcock 2007: 360). It is important to note that “Deaf” signifies a cultural and social identity, whereas “deaf” describes a physical condition (Senghas 2002: 71).

The World Health Organization (2011) defines disability as an umbrella term, describing impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions. An impairment is defined as a “problem in body function or structure,” an activity limitation as a “difficulty encountered by an individual in executing a task or action, and a participation restriction as a “problem experienced by an individual in involvement in life situations” (WHO 2011). Disability is shown as not only a physical condition of a person, but how their bodily features interact with features of the societies in which they live (WHO 2011). Deafness is a disability that causes impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions in people’s societies and everyday lives.

Deafness is a unique form of disability because of its status as a minority group with a distinct language, culture, and social organization (Lane 1995: 201). This paper will explore the sociological construction of Deafness through research on the history of social reactions to deafness, deafness and eugenics in Nazi Germany, the history of institutions, accommodations, and educational opportunities for the deaf, the current social status of deaf people in the United States, and the deaf community, culture, and identity.

**Literature Review**

Before looking at the current situation of deaf people, it is important to explore the history of social reactions to deafness. Historically, deafness was seen as deficiency or defectiveness and sign language was seen as “primitive” (Baynton 1993: 96). In general with most disabilities, people were afraid of human diversity and wanted to limit or eradicate it especially through social institutions (Lane 1984: 12). Instead of appreciating deafness and deaf culture as something unique and different, the larger hearing society tried to force deaf people to assimilate to their way of life (Lane 1984: 15). An example of this was the movement in the late 19th century to prohibit sign language in schools (Baynton 1993: 93). “Oralists” insisted that classes could only be conducted through spoken English, instead of the sign language, which almost all deaf people used to communicate (Baynton 1993: 93). This was imposed on deaf people by hearing society and eventually failed because “oral communication was too impractical for many deaf people, and sign language too cherished by the deaf community” (Baynton 1993: 94).

Another very important aspect in deaf history is the persecution of deaf people in Nazi Germany. In the 1930s and 40s, there was little evidence on the hereditary nature of deafness, however Nazi race hygienists distorted the information to fit their goal of a perfect society (Biesold 1999: 28). Hitler created a law called the “Law for Prevention of Offspring with Hereditary Diseases” in July of 1933, making it acceptable to forcibly sterilize people with certain disabilities, one of which was deafness (Biesold 1999: 34). Many records were destroyed and many deaf people who were sterilized and survived kept it a secret because of threats by the Nazi party and their categorization as inferior, worthless, and isolated (Biesold 1999: 37). Educators in schools, institutions, and asylums supported eugenic action against the deaf and were trained in courses on eugenics, the theory of hereditary and racial hygiene, hereditary diseases, etc. (Biesold 1999: 44). The law was expanded to permit forced abortions of deaf people and eventually the killings of deaf people took place in Nazi Germany (Biesold 1999: 84). The deaf were considered “ineducable” and therefore worthless; they were killed along with those considered having feeblemindedness, schizophrenia, manic-depressive psychosis, epilepsy, Huntington’s chorea, blindness, severe physical deformity, and severe alcoholism (Biesold 1999: 35).

The history of institutions, education, and accommodations for the deaf is also very important in seeing how deafness and society interact. Gallaudet University was the first and still the only university in the world for higher education that has all classes, programs, and services designed to accommodate the deaf (Gallaudet University 2011). Laurent Clerc, the leader of the French and then American deaf community, helped found the first American school for the deaf with Thomas Gallaudet (Lane 1984: 186). The school was first an Asylum for the Education and Instruction of the Deaf and Dumb in Hartford, Connecticut (Lane 1984: 186). Before Gallaudet went to Europe and brought these ideas back, there was a long history of the networking of deaf people, such as the first formal gathering at a banquet in Paris in 1834 and the first international gathering in Paris in 1889 (Senghas 2002: 80). In early institutions, deaf people were defined primarily by their handicap which led them to form a common bond and group identity, cutting across social class, religion, etc. (Winzer 1993: 132). In 1950, almost 85% of deaf children attended special schools for the deaf; by 1988 the number dropped to 40% and by 2002 only 27% did (Padden 2005: 12).

In our current society, some aspects of deafness and the treatment of deaf people have changed and some have stayed the same. It is more recognized now that deaf people do not have an inferior, underdeveloped language and interaction; their language and culture is rich and complex (Nash 1981: 11). Deafness as a cultural and social identity has developed much more and is even sometimes considered the “new ethnicity” (Senghas 2002: 72). 90% of deaf children today are born into hearing families and different strategies are used such as “home sign”, changing the old dichotomy of either learning orally or using only American Sign Language (Senghas 2002: 75). Still however, the experience of deaf people is not understood by the dominant hearing society. The deaf and hard-of-hearing form a significant minority group in the general population worldwide but there is still very little representation of this in academia (Woodcock 2007: 360). Also, general history and general education texts almost never discuss deaf people, their group identity, and their struggle for civil rights (List 1993: 115).

Current deaf culture, deaf communities, and deaf identities are important because they show not only how society views them but also how they view themselves. Over time, deaf people who have chosen to be submersed in deaf culture have formed cohesive groups with the shared language of American Sign Language, institutionalization, shared experiences, alienation, and occupational categories (Winzer 1993: 132). Deaf communities do not usually have specific locations but rather are symbolic communities and networks (Nash 1981: 99). The “sociocultural model of deafness,” rather than the medical model, views deafness as a part of human variation and embraces sign language and the unique aspects of deaf culture (Senghas 2002: 78). Some deaf communities are considered “isolating communities” or “separatist” because they maintain distance between themselves and the dominant mainstream society (Senghas 2002: 79). Many deaf culturalists claim “society should not focus on research to cure deafness… but should accept Deaf people as composing a cultural minority and respect their right to live as Deaf persons” (Tucker 1997: 25).

**The History of Social Reactions to Deafness**

Throughout much of history, disability in general has been seen in a negative way by society. This is because the disabled have been seen as dependent on others or not functional for society, instead of being seen as productive members who can help as well as educate others. Deafness especially has been seen as foreign or different because of its unique culture separate from the mainstream hearing world. Deaf people, unlike people with other disabilities, have a unique manual language: Sign Language. In history, sign language was seen as “primitive,” inferior, and fit for “savages” (Baynton 1993: 96). This could be because people did not understand it or because in general, people are afraid of human diversity and look to social institutions to eradicate it (Lane 1884: 12). Many deaf people were sent to live in institutions and asylums with other deaf people and away from the hearing society.

Another problem deaf people have faced throughout history has been their dependence on hearing people who do not understand their deaf experience (Erting 1985: 227). This starts at birth for deaf children who are born to hearing parents and continues through their education, professional life, and beyond. In the late 19th century, there was a movement to prohibit sign language in schools (Baynton 1993: 93). For many deaf students, this was their native language being taken away by hearing educators and professionals who believed they could learn orally if they tried. It eventually failed, because people with severe hearing loss could only communicate this way and showed the importance of sign language for deaf students. According to Günther List, a German scholar on deaf history, “The social problem of deafness-and with it also in large part the historical fate of deaf people- is treated, is decided, is even ‘produced’ in a framework constructed by the hearing majority” (1993: 115). Because of this, deaf people throughout history have struggled for rights and the ability to make their own decisions as a cultural minority.

Another aspect that is important to mention is the absence of deaf history in our society. General history and general education texts almost never discuss deaf people. They are a unique culture that has fought for its own civil rights and individual group identity, which is very underrepresented. Germany is a developed, industrialized country that shows the most suppression of deaf history and the most support for oralism (List 1993: 116). This could be related to the fact that deaf people made up a large part of the many disabled individuals persecuted in Nazi Germany.

**Deafness and Eugenics in Nazi Germany**

The persecution of deaf people in Nazi Germany is also an important part of deaf history. Disabled people, along with Jewish people and other minorities, were systematically sterilized and killed during Hitler’s regime. Nazi race hygienists distorted the little evidence there was about the frequency of hereditary deafness, and how it applied to particular individuals, to fit their ideology and their eugenic goals (Biesold 1999:28). Many scientists, physicians, and professionals believed they could create a more superior race by breeding those who were fit and preventing the breeding of those they saw as unfit. On July 14, 1933, Hitler’s “Law for the Prevention of Offspring with Hereditary Diseases” was passed, making it legal to sterilize people with congenital feeblemindedness, schizophrenia, manic-depressive psychosis, epilepsy, Huntington’s chorea, blindness, deafness, severe physical deformity, and severe alcoholism (Biesold 1999: 35). They believed that deafness was hereditary even though today we know that heredity is only responsible for approximately one third of all childhood deafness (Scheetz 2004: 15).

Many records from this time have been destroyed and many deaf people kept sterilizations a secret, or only revealed the truth later in life. This could be because they were categorized as inferior, worthless and were isolated from each other (Biesold 1999: 37). A questionnaire study of 1,215 forcibly sterilized deaf people revealed that the youngest of the group was 9 years old and the oldest was 50. Victims named 104 institutions for deaf students as their home school and the largest numbers attended at Soest and the City of Berlin. They were turned in by local health authorities, members of the Nazi party, or by their schools (Biesold 1999: 40-41). Most educators in Germany’s special schools for the deaf actively supported racial hygiene measures against the deaf. They took training courses on eugenics, theories of heredity and race hygiene, and hereditary diseases (Biesold 1999: 44). This betrayed the trust of their pupils and led them to turn in their students to the local authorities in charge of sterilization.

Force was used if deaf individuals resisted sterilization. One student who was 14 years old, “on his third attempt to escape from the school, he was apprehended by the police, put in handcuffs, beaten, and delivered to the hospital” (Biesold 1999: 46). The people who were supposed to be helping and educating them reported deaf children who were at institutions or asylums to authorities. This continued when the law was expanded to forced abortions of deaf people (Biesold 1999: 84) and later Hitler implemented the extermination of deaf people. Through the T4, 14f13, and wild euthanasia programs, deaf people along with other disabled people were systematically killed (Biesold 1999:160-165). Letters were sent to their families with fake causes of death and signed with fake names to cover up the killings. Even today when we look at Holocaust studies, there is little information or representation of the disabled, especially the deaf, who were killed during Hitler’s regime.

**The History of Institutions, Accommodations, and Educational Opportunities for the Deaf**

Looking at institutions, accommodations, and educational opportunities for the deaf throughout history is important in seeing how deafness and society interact. Gallaudet University was the first, and still the only university in the world, for higher education that has all classes, programs, and services designed specifically to accommodate deaf and hearing-impaired students (Gallaudet 2011). It is seen as the premier institution for deaf education and even has a school president who is deaf. This was not always the case though; there was a “Deaf President Now Movement” at the university challenging historical deaf dependency on hearing people and demanding a deaf president (List 1993: 115). This made the university completely independent and their students able to succeed academically and professionally on an equal playing field.

Laurent Clerc was the leader of the French then the American deaf community and helped to found the first American school for the deaf with Thomas Gallaudet. They established the Hartford Asylum for the Education and Institution of the Deaf and Dumb, which was later named the American School for the Deaf (Lane 1984: 186). They brought ideas back to America from Europe on the schooling and institutionalization of deaf people. There was always a long history of deaf people networking, especially in Europe, with the first formal gathering in Paris in 1834 and the first international gathering, also in Paris, in 1889 (Senghas 2002: 80). Today those networks are even stronger and bring deaf people together in unique and very tightly bonded communities.

From 1817 when the first American school for the deaf was founded until the 1860s, nearly all educators considered sign language very valuable and indispensable (Baynton 1993: 93). In the late 19th century, there was a movement to prohibit sign language in schools and a struggle, which is still relevant today, between manualists and oralists (Baynton 1993: 93). In 1900, 40% of American deaf students were in classrooms where sign language was banned and over half were taught orally for at least part of the day. By the end of World War I, nearly 80% were taught entirely without sign language (Baynton 1993: 94). This was detrimental to the education of deaf children, especially those with profound hearing loss, and took away a large part of deaf culture and connection with each other. However, “oral communication was too impractical for many deaf people, and sign language too cherished by the deaf community” (Baynton 1993: 94) and in the 1970s sign language started coming back into the classroom. The older schools and institutions were very strict and had a rigid structure. In 1950, almost 85% of deaf children attended schools for the deaf (Padden 2005: 12). Most of them lived, ate, slept, and learned at these institutions or asylums, which gave them a sense of community and long lasting friendship, but was also very controlling of their lives.

**Current Social Status of Deaf People in the United States**

Today, the status of deaf people as a whole has improved a great amount but is still not fully equal and accepted. It is now recognized by most people that the deaf do not have a simplified, underdeveloped language but that sign language is rich and complex (Nash 1981: 11). The development of deaf culture and deaf communities has shown that “Not content to remain passive and isolated within the structures of an alien society, the deaf population developed its own system to counter the environment” (Winzer 1993: 129). This means that people who identify as Deaf (not just deaf) who have a communication barrier between them and the larger hearing society have established a separate place for themselves. Many Deaf people prefer this because of the difficulties they face in the hearing world. Deafness has also been compared to or considered a new “ethnicity” because of its unique language, culture, and the way it interacts with mainstream society (Erting 1985: 225).

Even though deaf people have established themselves as a unique cultural group that can function outside of the hearing world, there are many instances when deaf people have to interact with and depend on those who are not deaf, in spheres of education, religion, employment, getting goods and services, etc. (Erting 1985: 227-230). There is still a power differential and deaf people, like others with disabilities, are still seen as abnormal. The passing of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) was an improvement, requiring public and private sectors to make accommodations for people with hearing impairment and making it illegal to discriminate against them (Tucker 1997:25). Some of the main obstacles deaf people face in society are the telephone system, hindering communication, television, which is an important source of news and cultural information, and public communication. New accommodations to help overcome these obstacles are TTYs, which are telephone devices that deaf people can type on and an operator can read what the say to a hearing person, closed captioning on televisions, which shows everything people on TV are saying with words at the bottom of the screen, and interpreters, who listen to hearing people and then relay the message to deaf people using sign language (Tucker 1997: 29-30).

**The Deaf Community, Culture, and Identity**

Before exploring the deaf community, culture, and identity it is important to distinguish “Deaf,” which is a cultural identity from “deaf,” which is the physical condition (Nash 1981: 71). People with more severe hearing loss or who have more deaf people in their family tend to identify with the Deaf community and culture, whereas people who lose their hearing later in life might consider themselves deaf but not Deaf (Nash 1981: 71). There is not a simple dichotomy of Deaf vs. deaf though; there are many categories such as hard-of-hearing people or hearing offspring of deaf parents (Nash 1981: 73).

The new “sociocultural model of deafness” views it as a part of human variation, embraces sign language, the story telling, greetings, world play, etc. that is unique to deaf culture (Senghas 2002: 78). This goes against the “medical model of deafness” which sees the loss of hearing as deficit needing medical procedures to “fix” it, such as cochlear implants and other new technologies (Senghas 2002: 78). Deaf culturists maintain that society should not focus on research to cure deafness but should accept Deaf people as a cultural minority like any other and respect their right to live as Deaf persons (Tucker 1997: 25). Along with the different levels of deaf identity, there is a wide spectrum of views deaf people have about deaf culture and the extent to which they support medical interventions.

The “Deaf World” refers to the deaf community and its own separate language, culture, and social organization (Lane 1995: 310). Deaf people’s connection with hearing people affects how immersed they are in the deaf world (Lane 1995: 310). People who are very immersed in the deaf world have “isolating communities” where they maintain separate places, or patterns of social interaction, away from the mainstream society. (Senghas 2002: 79). They are considered “separatist” because they actively work to establish or maintain social and/or physical isolation (Senghas 2002: 79). Being outside of hearing society shapes the identity and opportunities of deaf people. It makes sense that they would come together and form a community of their own if they are already isolated from the larger hearing society. Within the deaf culture there is unique folklore, history, song, poetry, art, and jokes, similar to any other culture (Scheetz 2004: 19). This is why the view of deafness has changed over time and become less of a disability and more of a culture or ethnicity.

**Summary and Conclusion**

In conclusion, the social construction of deafness can be understood through looking at the history of social reactions to deafness, deafness and eugenics in Nazi Germany, the history of institutions, accommodations, and educational opportunities for the deaf, the current social status of the deaf in the United States, and the deaf community, culture and identity. In history deafness has been seen, like other disabilities, as a problem that needs fixing or as something not functional for society. Deafness has transformed into a unique form of disability because of its own culture, language, and social organization.

Deafness is a condition that causes impairments, activity limitations, and participation restrictions in society. However, I argue that it can also be empowering and play an important role in society as a cultural minority. Deaf people face many obstacles living in the hearing world and have faced much persecution and oppression in the past. As a whole, they have overcome many obstacles to become a strongly bonded community. Society has played a large role in trying to impose their views on deaf people and define them as a disabled group but I believe that deaf people have accomplished a lot and established themselves as unique individuals who can play an important role in societies throughout the world.

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