

The Culture of a Silent Minority

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Recommended Citation

Lee, Amanda E.. "The Culture of a Silent Minority." *The Review: A Journal of Undergraduate Student Research* 17 (2016): -. Web. [date of access]. <<http://fisherpub.sjfc.edu/ur/vol17/iss1/4>>.

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The Culture of a Silent Minority

Abstract

This paper explores cultural aspects of hearing loss from the author's viewpoint as the child of a mother with significant hearing loss. Personal examples are shared, making the frustration of this disability real, both for the deaf person and for their family members.

The terms "big D" and "small d" in deaf culture are presented and defined. The use of American Sign Language (ASL) as the primary language by "Deaf" people is one factor that distinguishes them from "deaf" people. The philosophy and culture of each group are also explored. Historically, the often used "deaf and dumb" phrase is presented and shown by examples to inflict great personal damage.

Finally, the effect of cochlear implants on the "Deaf" and "deaf" communities is explored. Given all the cultural aspects inherent in each population, and all the technical and individual complexities, it is not a simple decision for anyone to make. Regardless of what they decide to do, "this silent minority is not deaf and broken, but rather deaf and strong."

The Culture of a Silent Minority

Amanda Lee

It is understood in life that sometimes things simply stop working. Your car stops working on the day you need to be at work early, your computer stops working the night before a final paper is due, and arguably my mother's ears have stopped working too, well partially. Over the years, I have become accustomed to my mother's degenerative nerve deafness. The closed captions that cover half of the TV screen no longer bother me, and I've learned to eat around her bulky caption call phone and monitor that rest on the dinner table right in front of my seat. I have assimilated into the deaf culture, embraced their connection between deafness and a profound sense of identity, and also shared in their fascination with Big D and small d deaf culture. Unlike others, I have not turned a blind eye in recognizing that this community forms its own distinct silent minority. But my understanding alone cannot span great lengths to influence others. The misunderstanding of deaf culture by the hearing community is prevalent and has impacted my mother. While waiting in the airport for her flight, she spoke with the employee working the gate, telling him that she was hearing impaired and would need to be personally notified of any changes to the flight. Later she noticed that many passengers had flocked to the front desk by the gate where they formed a frantic cluster. The flight was canceled. The worst part, the man she asked for assistance failed to get her. The employee made a passenger in a wheelchair with a visible disability a priority

over my mother, giving him a flight arrangement before the other passengers. To my mother, this hammered home the idea that those with an invisible impairment are up against this double edged sword. Concerns regarding the growing cultural divide, the lack of understanding of deaf culture, and the controversy over cochlear implants have fallen on "deaf" ears. Their ears have simply stopped working too.

Society has long nurtured the idea of the hearing impaired as "deaf and dumb," which has only further widened the cultural gap, leading to distrust of the hearing community in the hearts of the deaf. Originally "deaf and dumb" meant deaf, indicating that someone is unable to hear, and dumb, that someone is unable to speak. However, over the years the term has evolved to now mean "deaf and stupid." Sign language interpreter, Joyceann Fileccia, recalled an experience interpreting for a deaf patient in the emergency room where a doctor put this attitude on blast. Fileccia said, "While simultaneously using American Sign Language and voice, I introduced myself to the patient and physician as the ASL interpreter. The doctor turned to me and asked, 'What? Is he stupid or something that he can't read, understand, and sign the form without an interpreter present?'"¹ The accumulation of ignorance and chatter within the hearing community strengthens this community's attack on deafness and reinforces the lurking social stigma which

¹ Fileccia, Joyceann, "Sensitive Care for the Deaf: A Cultural Challenge," *Creative Nursing* (2011): 174-179. Accessed April 6, 2014. doi: 1078-4535.

leads me and others to seek solace in the quiet places.

Society's connection between deafness and assumed stupidity was prominent back when my grandfather was growing up. As an adolescent with profound hearing loss, my grandfather received messages that he was "deaf and dumb," and little by little he began to share in society's understanding of "deaf and dumb" as "deaf and stupid." He believed he was too stupid for school and dropped out of the education system before even graduating eighth grade. *New York Times* recently released an article revealing the poor treatment of two "deaf and dumb" passengers that had flown with American Airlines. The airline was negligent and lost their luggage during the flight. When the airlines finally retrieved the luggage and delivered the bags, they had forgotten to throw away the note that said "Text 'deaf and dumb.'" ² Nancy Creighton, a coordinator for the National Association of the Deaf, regards this three-letter phrase as, "The granddaddy of all negative labels pinned on the deaf and hard of hearing." ³ This reinforces the idea that without social reform, the deaf community will have to coexist with three demeaning words, "deaf and stupid." Never could I have imagined that these words could be as sharp as the blade of this double edged sword.

"When talking to hearing persons about deaf culture and their strong sense of identity, the single biggest barrier to their understanding the hostility of many deaf persons towards

² "American Airlines Apologizes for Calling Couple 'Deaf and Dumb,'" Huffington Post, accessed April 6, 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/03/28/american-airlines-deaf-dumb_n_5050729.html.

³ "What is Wrong with the Use of the Terms: 'Deaf-Mute', 'Deaf and Dumb', or 'Hearing-impaired?'" National Association for the Deaf, accessed May 2,

the hearing community is their inability to comprehend that deafness could be perceived as anything other than a tragic loss and a disability." ⁴ Deaf people fight to admonish the idea that they need to be "fixed," and challenge the societal view of "normal." Deaf individuals in the community do not see themselves as disabled and love the silent world they live in. Feelings of pride and defined sense of self, commonly called "deaf power," lie at the heart of this culture. Their affiliation with their condition as a means of identity impacts their fascination with Big D and small d deafness. Big D deaf carries immense importance and is singlehandedly what defines deaf culture. These Deaf individuals describe themselves as culturally deaf, attend designated schools for the deaf, and use American Sign Language as their primary language. Small d deaf works in complete opposition of Big D deaf. Small d deaf is a term most generally used to define deafness in purely a medical sense. Those that are deaf do not share in the culture of the Deaf, and create an identity for themselves within the hearing community. Typically those that are deaf attended mainstream schooling and have no knowledge of sign language.

This growing controversy over the adoption and acceptance of cochlear implants parallels society's ignorance towards deaf culture. When cochlear implants first became available to the deaf, the hearing community was surprised by the deaf community's outrage in "curing" their

2014, <http://www.eamo.org/SNA/deaf%20PC%20terminology.pdf>.

⁴ Robert Sparrow, "Defending Deaf Culture: The Case of Cochlear Implants," *The Journal of Political Philosophy* (2005): 135-152. Accessed April 7, 2014, doi: 10.1111/j.1467-9760.2005.00217.x.

condition. Strong opponents went as far to compare it to genocide.⁵ “The striking anecdotal evidence of the strength of the Deaf individuals’ attachment to their condition- or as they would have it, their culture- is recounted in several articles about the cochlear implant controversy.”⁶ The hearing community’s push on cochlear implants is an attempt to create a reflection of their own hearing, as well as to reinforce the notion that deafness is a nothing short of a disability and a tragic loss of one of the few human senses. However, the hearing community falls short in recognizing that cochlear implants threaten to spell the end of their unique culture. This movement to integrate cochlear implants represents a direct attack on deaf culture by ensuring that spoken language is used in place of the signed language of the deaf. ”Success in this project adversely affects the interests of individual members of Deaf culture by reducing the size of the community with whom they can communicate in their first language.”⁷

While there is direct opposition to cochlear implants, there are those that perceive cochlear implants as a way to permeate barriers of deafness in a predominantly hearing society. Cochlear implant supporters argue that attaining a common spoken language through cochlear implants would be influential in decreasing the prevailing cultural gap. Within the community there are those who believe that deafness leaves

them at a disadvantage. “Most of us would love to be able to pick up the telephone and make a call without having to scramble to find an interpreter and without having to make the call with a third person privy to every word. We'd like to be able to hear our children and grandchildren laugh and cry; to listen to the radio when we are driving; to be able to use the drive-up window at McDonald's; to hear the announcements at the airport; to be able to get any job without considering how our deafness will interfere with the job duties. We'd particularly like to hear our own voices and be able to control the tone and pitch and loudness of our voices. Why would any human being want to deny such pleasures to herself or her children?”⁸ The argument in favor of cochlear implants is strengthened by Dr. Howard Francis’s well-tested survey that measured the impact of deafness on an individual’s quality of life. “When a hearing loss is profound, it carries substantial, measurable effects on multiple domains that are important to quality of life. My colleague, Dr. Howard Francis used a well-tested survey of the things that people consider crucial to the quality of their life. The survey results revealed that impaired communication with others made people vulnerable to low mood and depression, and to some effects on thinking ability. These factors contribute to a significant reduction in the quality of life experienced by those with hearing loss.”⁹

⁵ Robert Sparrow, “Defending Deaf Culture: The Case of Cochlear Implants,” *The Journal of Political Philosophy* (2005): 135-152. Accessed April 7, 2014, doi: 10.1111/j.1467-9760.2005.00217.x.

⁶ Robert Sparrow, “Defending Deaf Culture: The Case of Cochlear Implants,” *The Journal of Political Philosophy* (2005): 135-152. Accessed April 7, 2014, doi: 10.1111/j.1467-9760.2005.00217.x.

⁷ Donald F. Moores, “The Law of Unexpected Consequences,” *American Annals of the Deaf* (2002): 84-87. Accessed March 6, 2014, doi: 0002-726X.

⁸ Tucker, Bonnie Poitras. “Deaf Culture, Cochlear Implants, and Elective Disability.” Hasting’s Center Report, 1998. eDiscover (AAT 1126100).

⁹ John K. Niparko and Courtney Carver, “Successful Aging and Our Hearing,” Hearing Loss Association of America, accessed April 10, 2014, <http://www.hearingloss.org/content/cochlear-implants>.

The complexities surrounding the decision to risk one's deaf identity and break the sound barrier with cochlear implants will never be cut and dry. Factors such as the age the hearing loss occurred, one's sense of deaf identity, connection with the deaf community, and most importantly distinction of oneself as Big D deaf or small d deaf, all come together to influence the decision to remain deaf or receive a cochlear implant. Despite my deep understanding of deaf culture, my stance on this controversy is that it is an individualized decision. It is apparent that cochlear implants are here to stay and undoubtedly so is the controversy. Those willing to fight to preserve deaf culture will always regard cochlear implants as "Sound with fury."¹⁰

In life, things do stop working and break, but choose your words wisely when referring to the deaf. This silent minority is not deaf and broken, but rather deaf and strong. My mother sums up hearing loss best, "Those with hearing loss will listen intensely, but they hear the most with their hearts."

¹⁰ Cochlear Implants: Sound and Fury" pbs.org, accessed April 10, 2014,

<http://www.pbs.org/wnet/soundandfury/cochlear/debate.html>.