Hearing Status and Cultural Identity: Sources of Diversity

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An infant is born and is almost immediately given to the mother, who tries to communicate. The nurse and doctor may talk to the baby. Perhaps father and grandparents make reassuring noises. The family welcomes its newest member through verbal or nonverbal expressions of love. The baby says nothing, of course, but is not expected to. A simple of cry of life is all that is needed. As time goes on the child will learn the language needed to communicate. It is, after all, one's natural birthright.

In most cases, it is presumed that the baby can hear and will learn to speak. Speaking and listening are generally taken- for-granted assumptions around the world. Language is what makes culture possible and culture is what makes us human. It is usually expected that speaking and listening in our native language will allow us to learn what we need to know in order to participate in world around us. It is what makes us normal. But what if this child cannot hear? What if this new member of the family is not the same as the rest? Being unable to hear when everyone else can might well be a fundamental, undesired, differentness that makes one an outsider from the beginning.

Of course the above situation would not be a problem if the child was not expected to hear. A deaf child born into a deaf family lives within the warm cultural embrace of a traditional deaf community and so would not have an undesired identity at birth. The family might, in fact, be relieved to have a child to raise in a normal manner using sign language. Being just like themselves, this deaf child would not grow up to be a hearing person who would leave this cultural environment to go off to work and live with other hearing people.

These two scenarios of the same event, the birth of a deaf child, point to an important social fact that is often overlooked. That is: the implications of an individual's hearing status are dependent upon the expectations of the others with whom he or she must interact.

Like parents almost everywhere, the people in our first story were expecting to have a child much the same as themselves and to raise this child in much the same manner as they were raised. They were probably quite shocked when they learned that this was not the case. Suddenly, their taken-for-granted assumptions about how things would go, and how this child of theirs would be socialized, were thrown into doubt. Perhaps they were angry and asked, "Why did this have to happen to us?" Perhaps they were fearful and asked, "How will others react? Will this baby ever be able to live a normal life?" But, no matter how the parents reacted, an important social fact remains: A deaf person is not a hearing person, and deafness will be a master status overshadowing whatever else the child may grow up to be.

In the case of the deaf parents with a deaf baby, the child has a hearing status just like theirs. But this would be an unusual case, because approximately 90% of the children born to deaf parents are hearing (Schein, 1989). So, in the majority of deaf families, the child would be expected have a hearing status unlike the parents.

Status refers to one's position or social location. All things being equal, a child will have the same initial social status as the parents. However, in the scenarios presented here, we have examples in which the parent and child are different. Each family is raising a child with a hearing status unlike themselves. Each child will grow up with a social status or locus in the social structure

different than his or her parents, regardless of what they might individually or collectively desire.

Who am I? Where do I belong? Answers to these questions point to the cultural identity of an individual. In the case of the deaf child growing up in a hearing family the master status of hearing separates them. In the case of the hearing child growing up in a deaf family, the master status of hearing also separates them. Even if sign language is adopted as the primary means of communication, the issue of speaking and listening will separate them. The deaf person with "good speech skills" or the hearing person with "native signing skills" is nonetheless never really hearing or deaf. In the hearing community, the taken for granted assumption is that all members will speak and listen. If one cannot do this or fails to 'pass,' then one does not really belong. Among the deaf, the assumption is that members are not hearing. Possessing characteristics of a hearing person, such as speaking or using the telephone, renders one suspect in the eyes of deaf community. (For interested readers or those who may find themselves in these situations, further elaboration can be found in Padden and Humphries (1988) and Preston (1994).)

This master status of hearing or deafness is central to the cultural identity of a person born deaf or hearing. As long as the individual places him or herself within the corresponding group, the taken-for-granted assumptions of membership are met. However, persons with the skills to interact with individuals of the other social category must be prepared to be identified as marginal, not "really" belonging to either group. (For elaboration on marginality, see Emerton, 1996).

The hearing child born into a hearing family or the deaf child born in a deaf family grows up with family members who socialize him or her into the cultural norms and values of their respective group. Along the way, he or she acquires their cultural identity as a member of the group. However, the hearing child of deaf parents grows up knowing culture of the deaf community but has to learn the ways of the hearing from the larger hearing community in school, from peers, and from the media. As an adult, this person may enjoy a close and special relationship with the deaf community but will always be viewed as a hearing person.

The deaf child of hearing parents may have a more difficult time acquiring a clear cultural identity. Unlike deaf parents, most hearing parents do not expect a deaf child and are often unaware of the nature of the deaf community. They may try to overcome the "problems of deafness" providing the child with speech lessons and auditory training. But even if these efforts to enable their child to pass unnoticed in everyday (hearing) society are successful, sooner or later the individual's hearing status will be revealed. The cultural identity problem for the deaf person growing up in a world populated largely by hearing people is to make a connection with a social environment where deafness is the expected hearing status. "Enlightened" hearing parents of deaf children often seek out deaf adults, deaf organizations, and/or deaf camping experiences for their children in order to provide this kind of socialization, while other parents in this situation may try to protect their children from these influences. It is not uncommon for deaf children raised in the latter social context to wait until their college years or after they have entered the working world to learn that there is a culture where deafness is expected.

Suppose a person is born hearing and grows up with the values and norms of speaking and listening. What happens to such a person when their hearing status is changed by accident or disease as an adult? Such a person is suddenly cut off from the group in which he or she has established a cultural identity. He or she may try to avoid breaking the norms of speaking and listening by technological means such as hearing aids or cochlear implants—hidden so as not to be a symbol of non-hearing status. This will only be successful to a limited degree.

When unsuccessful, cultural identity is disrupted and the individual may feel like an outcast. Faced with this, such a person may think that the deaf community will be the answer for their need to belong. This too is often unsuccessful, for the deaf community will tend to see this individual as

a hearing person who cannot hear. Audiologically such people may be comparable, but their cultural experiences are vastly different. Failing at these efforts, some people may withdraw from any avoidable contact with others where their hearing loss will be revealed. Or, more positively, they may seek the company of others with similar experiences and hearing status in an organization such as SHHH (Self-Help for Hard of Hearing).

The point of all this is, once again, that the implications of an individual's hearing status are dependent upon the expectations of others with whom he or she must interact. Whether or not one can hear is a physiological fact. Whether being able or unable to hear is a disability or handicap will depend upon the social expectations of the group. If being able to speak and listen are fundamental requirements of the social setting, then not being able to do so will set one apart as a person who does not really belong to the group. If growing up deaf is a fundamental cultural expectation of the group, then hearing (or growing up hearing) may disqualify the individual for group membership.

Much has been written about both the pathology of deafness (e.g. Vernon and Andrews, 1990) and about the oppression of the deaf people at the hands of hearing people (e.g. Lane, 1992). Each approach has reflected cultural biases of the various authors. Each approach suffers from limitations imposed by seeking to place blame on individuals of one group or the other. Cultural biases stemming from ethnocentric assumptions that only one way of communicating is the correct way are sources for both diversity and division. But we are discussing two or three social categories of people who are divided by hearing status but intergenerationally connected. If there is a desire to bring these groups together or to remove stigma related to hearing status, then resolution needs to be sought in the social expectations of these groups and in the society at large. This a place where future research in disability studies could be quite useful.

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