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## ***Spirituality, Religion, and Mental Health Among Deaf and Hard of Hearing People: A Review of the Literature***

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### Abstract

Spirituality is increasingly being used in both assessment and intervention strategies. Available peer-reviewed literature and recent published dissertations are reviewed related to spirituality and religion among deaf and hard of hearing people. Knowledge is integrated in the context of mental health practitioners who work with deaf and hard of hearing people. Several themes including disability meanings, communication, family dynamics, and macro accessibility and representation are identified as topics to be applied to current mental health practice and future mental health research related to spirituality among deaf and hard of hearing people.

*Keywords: deaf, spirituality, religion, mental health, spiritual development*

The interest in and application of spiritual assessment strategies by mental health practitioners has increased in recent years due to an evolving biopsychosocial and spiritual approach to therapy. Additionally, there has been an increasing amount of empirical evidence that supports the belief that spirituality has a positive impact on health care outcomes (Hodge, 2006, 2011; Johnstone, 2007), as well as an increase in the interest and understanding of the impact of spirituality and religion specifically on the lives of people living with disabilities (McColl et al., 2000a, 2000b; Selway, 1998). However, many therapists have minimal training on working with spiritual issues in general (Hodge, 2006; Sheridan, 2009) and the literature specific to addressing spirituality with deaf and hard of hearing people is limited. Hodge (2011) developed guidelines for mental health practitioners in using spiritual interventions and calls for increased attention to client preference, evaluation of relevant research, clinical expertise, and cultural competency. This current article is written with the mental health practitioner in mind who is interested in increasing their cultural competency related to spirituality with deaf and hard of hearing people. Current literature available on deaf spirituality is

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reviewed and knowledge application themes are extrapolated for use in both practice and research settings.

## **Environmental Factors Influencing Spiritual Development**

Faith develops at the intersection of many factors including family, representations of self in religious hierarchy, friends and peers, learned ideology through written and spoken doctrine, interactions with spiritual leaders for guidance, personal experiences, and the way a religious doctrine views and supports aspects of an individual's self (Fowler, 1981). Family impacts faith development with regard to weekly or daily ritual, faith focus at home, and connections of faith and children's moral behavior and development. Representations of self in the church system are important related to feelings of empowerment and equality (Morris, 2008). In other words, seeing people like you, reflections of yourself, as spiritual leaders and lay ministers, can influence a person's spiritual development. Friends and peers can influence spiritual development, and interactions with spiritual leaders for guidance can also be impactful. Learned ideology often comes from either reading written doctrine or meeting with others in formal or informal religious study. Personal experiences as varied as a momentary epiphany, a spiritual awakening, or a traumatic experience can also mold one's spiritual schema. Finally, how a religious doctrine views and supports an aspect of the self (such as gender, disability, and race) can impact the connectedness, application, and identification of a person with a religious doctrine (Anandarajah, 2001; Borum, 2011; Parks, 2011). All of the above variables can interactively impact each individual differently. Understanding the current knowledge base along with factors that impact spiritual development in deaf and hard of hearing people is critical to culturally sensitive spiritually-based assessment and intervention.

## **Deaf Culture, Language, and Spirituality**

A discussion of the spiritual practices and beliefs of deaf and hard of hearing individuals must begin with a basic understanding of what being deaf means and how it relates to important domains such as family, culture, communication, and religion. Deafness is often defined narrowly as the complete and total loss of one's ability to hear. While this definition is not inaccurate, it is incomplete and misleading. Like many disabilities, hearing loss is only part of the equation and only a percentage of persons identified as deaf are profoundly deaf. Hearing loss is a highly stratified disability in which persons may be born without the physical capacity to perceive sound or

may have lost the ability to perceive sound at specific frequencies or decibels. An accurate definition of deafness includes not only the loss (to any degree) of one's sense of hearing, but social, cultural, and linguistic factors that result in personal identification within a strata of deafness that is highly complex and sophisticated. While the term "hard of hearing" is culturally accepted by many within the deaf community, the term "hearing impaired" is considered demeaning by most deaf persons as it suggests that individuals whose hearing is compromised are somehow inferior to hearing people (Ladd, 2003; Lane, Hoffmeister, & Bahan, 1996). With this expanded understanding of deafness in mind, for the purposes of this article, the term "deaf" will be used to describe individuals with any degree of hearing loss and will be inclusive of both those who identify as deaf and those who identify as hard of hearing.

Within the United States and Canada, the common language used by deaf and hard of hearing persons is American Sign Language (ASL). The significance of ASL within the deaf community cannot be overemphasized. Prior to the development of ASL, deaf and hard of hearing people in the U.S. and Canada were forced to read lips and speak in order to communicate with hearing people. Historical accounts of deaf people describe being physically punished for attempting to use their hands in communication out of support for the oral approach to communication. As ASL spread to become a viable language choice among deaf people, a deaf culture rich with artistic and linguistic images began to develop concurrently. ASL is not a communication mode but rather a separate and distinct language, which is an important fact when considering interpreting needs for spiritual and religious issues for deaf and hard of hearing people (Ladd, 2003; Lane et al., 1996). This historical summary is necessary in order to place the development of a deaf approach to spiritual development into proper context. In other words, it is not enough to consider the issue of access to communication alone when exploring how deaf people develop a spiritual identity. Researchers must also consider the impact that other factors such as interpersonal relationships, cultural and linguistic metaphorical images of deafness, and leadership roles have on the deaf individual's spiritual development.

In addition to understanding deaf culture and communication, it is also important for the reader to understand what is meant by the terms religion and spirituality. These terms are defined conceptually and operationally in different ways in the research literature reviewed in this article. However, for the purposes of grounding the reader with a basic understanding of the terms, religion is often defined related to an individual's relationship with a

specific social institution that advocates adherence to specific beliefs, rules, rituals, covenants, and personal activities related to the institution (Koenig & Cohen, 2002; Thoresen & Harris, 2002). Spirituality, however, can be defined as a broader term that may or may not be related to a religion, focusing on an individual's increasing sense of a universal connectedness, a greater sense of unity over diversity, relating to a transcendent experience and a search for meaning of life purpose (Cook, 2004; Johnstone, 2007).

Although there is some literature available on the topics of deaf spiritual development and deaf spiritual access, much of the literature focuses on general disabilities in relation to spirituality and focuses on illness-related disabilities and spirituality. Deafness is by most legal definitions a disability, and can be superficially examined as a disability that involves the loss of one's ability to perceive sound. However, deafness is much more multi-faceted and complex. Indeed, unless there are other physical or mental challenges present, the similarities between deaf people and other physical disabled groups are limited. Both groups are often isolated from mainstream society, both groups often have accessibility challenges accessing spiritual resources, and questions can arise in both groups as to possible spiritual meaning behind their deafness or disability.

Along with these similarities, there are significant differences. Hearing people have direct access to a myriad of spiritual messages in sacred texts and music and have the ability to attend to a variety of different faith meetings and organized religious meetings without the need of interpreting. Deaf people, due primarily to barriers in communication, are often unable to easily have such diverse exposures to spiritual interactions (Weir, 1996). As stated earlier, a comprehensive look at the factors that contribute to spiritual development among deaf and hard of hearing individuals must consider other factors that go beyond communication. What are the factors that influence faith development and faith choices among deaf people?

## **Deaf Spirituality and Accessibility**

Wayne Morris' book, *Theology without Words: Theology in the Deaf Community* (2008), is a rich, extensive analysis of theological themes and issues in Christianity related to deaf people and community in the United Kingdom. Morris' research focused on three main themes: deaf theology in the Bible, liturgical and worship practices of the deaf, and the deaf image of God. When examining the Bible, Morris points to several metaphors that

focus on the Judeo-Christian God's verbal communication with people, the fact that deafness is a malady that God can heal to make someone "normal", and the observation that the text is written in an antiquated style that is often difficult for deaf people to easily read and apply in their lives. Because of the Judeo-Christian focus on the English written word, Morris asserts that in order to make narratives more engaging to the deaf, narratives should be turned back into the oral tradition or incorporate the use of signing and/or drama.

Morris (2008) also points to a significant distinction between a church that signs and a "deaf church." The former only translates sermons into some form of sign language, while the latter should embrace and enhance not only the communication issues but also cultural and community needs in the congregation and in the hierarchy of the church. Providing deaf role models in the church hierarchy, reexamining church doctrine in relation to the disability perspective (medical model) of deafness, and addressing how deaf people listen to the word of God, talk to God, and assign attributes to God are important aspects of a deaf church that would not necessarily be present in a church that has interpreted services only. McClain (2009) in a Master's thesis, conducted qualitative interviews with 10 deaf and hard of hearing people who self-identified as Christian. Church attendance was identified as a vital social and networking opportunity if the person attended a deaf church or if there were sufficient deaf members in a mostly hearing congregation. However, if there were few deaf members in a hearing church, participants expressed feelings of isolation at church.

Addressing Christian faith and deaf culture, Broesterhuizen (2005) supports the idea that written and verbal language, culture and traditions of the Church, and the Church view of deafness are all barriers to deaf people feeling engaged and supported. However, Boesterhuizen notes that many countries are ahead of the United States in breaking down that barrier. Keys to removing the barriers are: to put more deaf people in central church roles (both clergy and lay roles), developing sign language for sacred terms that can be understood by all deaf people, and valuing sign language as a language and not just a communication mode. In this manner, faith communities are able to celebrate deafness as a culture in a way that is open and affirming to deaf congregants.

## **Meaning and Metaphor Regarding Deafness in Religious Texts**

Faith communities that lack a sophisticated understanding of the deaf experience are likely to overlook metaphors and messages written in sacred texts. As deafness is frequently viewed in a negative light in sacred texts, this may have some impact on religious institutions openness to deaf congregants. Throughout the Bible, deafness is a malady that is in need of curing and a person who “turns a deaf ear” is someone who is stubborn and refuses to hear wise words. Boesterhuizen (2005) points to a Gospel story in which Jesus heals a deaf man. Although through a metaphorical lens this story can be interpreted morally as the importance of extending charity to those less fortunate, Boesterhuizen (2005) poses the idea that the literal meaning could be interpreted as “deafness is a less complete, deviant, and unredeemed form of humanity which awaits healing and salvation” (p. 306). To help control for written language misunderstandings, countries such as the United States and Sweden are making progress in translating the Christian Bible into sign language that not only focuses on the literal translation but also on the figurative translation. The additional figurative translation reinforces Biblical signs with additional symbolism and meaning. In this manner, key figures, events, and places in the Bible are given signs that not only reflect meaning and purpose, but allow for quicker translations (Boesterhuizen, 2005).

Several themes emerge from Morris’ (2005) and Broesterhuizen’s (2005) research and practice with deaf individuals and communities. First it is important to assess the client’s mental image of God and the client’s own self-assessment related to positive and negative views of being deaf. Second, if the client attends religious services, it is important to assess congregational make-up, support, the goodness-of-fit between the client and the communication methods and religious explanatory methods of the place of worship. Third, available literature and sermons available in ASL are an additional resource for clients that would help deaf congregants feel more included and welcome.

### **Spirituality and Self**

There are several factors that could impact a deaf person’s spiritual decision-making and self-image that do not necessarily happen in the hearing world. In the hearing world, deaf people are often characterized as “disabled”. Through a religious lens, the “disabled” are often characterized as a dependent, “special population” who need “help” (Morris, 2008; Schumm & Stoltzfus, 2011). This message can foster a “less than” self-image and also

foster a dependent, external locus of control. Secondly, deafness is often seen as one of the following: a test from God; a punishment from God (although often it can be viewed that it is the parent who is being punished); or a gift from God (Koused & Schumm, 2005). Each of these perspectives can impact aspects of self-identity and the relationship to spirituality and religion in vastly different ways.

Boswell, Hamer, Knight, Glacoff, & McChesney (2007) conducted qualitative interviews with 13 adults with physical disabilities in order to gain knowledge related to the interaction of spirituality and disability in their lives. Results indicated that life issues and challenges that arose from having a disability evoked questioning of traditional ideas related to God, meaning, and the purpose of life within the participants. Boswell et al. (2007) identified five emerging themes: purpose, connections, awareness, creativity, and acceptance. Participants' spirituality helped them frame and understand their purposes in life, helped them form social connections, and gave a framework for self-awareness of strengths and blessings. Their spirituality also helped to foster their own creativity and their acceptance of positive and negative aspects of their disabilities.

The literature suggests that spiritual or religious beliefs can also impact an individual's education and rehabilitation (Idler, 1995; Riley et al., 1998). Fitchett, Rybarczyk, DeMarco, & Nicholas (1999), in a review of the literature and longitudinal study, identified the following four major spiritual preoccupations and practices that impact education and rehabilitation among people with disabilities: active prayer, feelings of estrangement from God, belief that their disability was a punishment from God, and spiritual practices being used as a coping mechanism to mediate the impact of the individual's disability. Ross (1995) suggests that the isolation that often accompanies a person with a disability can make the quest for spiritual answers more difficult. This would be especially relevant for the communication isolation felt by many deaf people, who can physically access spiritual resources but are isolated from their quest by communication and information barriers. Miller (1985) compared levels of loneliness and spiritual well-being in chronically ill adults and healthy adults. The chronically ill adults had significantly higher spiritual well-being scores than the healthy adults. However, in both groups, there was a significant inverse relationship between loneliness and spirituality. Mental health practitioners seek to explore their clients' feelings of loneliness and isolation, active prayer, and perceptions of the spiritual significance of their deafness on their spiritual well-being.



## **Spiritual Development in Childhood**

Spirituality has been documented as an important dimension of childhood development (Jackson, 2011). Spirituality can impact values, morals, socioemotional development, experiential education, health and wellness, and perspectives on community service in the development of children (Bosacki & Ota, 2000). An additional factor related to spiritual development of the deaf child is inclusion or exclusion in the family system. Many hearing parents of deaf children never learn sign language, making interpersonal communication limited and lacking the sophistication necessary to discuss religious or spiritual issues. Sometimes, the lack of parental adjustment to the needs of their deaf child is rooted in the desire to minimize or deny that their child is deaf and all of the ramifications of that fact (Palfrey, Walker, Butler, & Singer, 1989), which can lead to deaf children being isolated from the family's church experience (Morris, 2008). If the communication and emotional needs of a child are unmet, then religious and spiritual experiences as well as teachings can be negatively perceived or incorrectly understood.

Some theories of faith development parallel the relationship of children to their parents (especially with their father) as a foundation for a relationship with God (Fowler, 1981, 1989; Vergote et al., 1969). Whether or not they are exposed to the concept of God, by the age of six many children begin the construction of a mental representation of God or a "god image". Construction of a god image does not necessarily constitute belief in god. A major influence on children's god image is the parent-child relationship where the child often gives attributes of their parent to their god image (Fowler, 1981, 1989). In an older, but well documented and referenced study, Vergote et al. (1969) investigated the relationship between images of parents and of God. They found that god images of the participants were more paternal than maternal, however the data suggested that as individuals mature, their god image tends to become more maternal. Related to faith development, areas of clinical importance for assessment and future research include the parent's acceptance and support of their deaf child.

## **The Impact of Having a Deaf Child on Parents' Spirituality**

During crisis times, such as when a deaf child is born unexpectedly to hearing parents, there is a discernible grief period when parents are looking for answers to existential questions regarding the purpose their child's disability might serve (Borum, 2010; Jackson, 2011). Crews (1986) asserts

that in these moments when an individual is in a state of emotional collapse, they turn to the Transcendent for answers. If during the critical first years of a deaf child's life, the mother is unable to be present due to grief, and the religious messages available to her related to deafness are negative or paternalistic, it can have devastating effects on the spiritual development of all members of the family.

Dehkordi, Kakojoibari, Mohtashami, & Yektakhah (2011) studied 120 mothers of children with various disabilities along with a control group of parents of nondisabled children. They found that the stress levels specifically of mothers of deaf children were significantly higher than all other (disabled and nondisabled) groups' scores on subscales for intra-family stress, work and financial stress, and family care stress. They found the mother assumed much of the emotional stress and worry related to the challenges of raising a deaf child with regard to social and educational problems. Spiritual guidance during this time can guide the parent's perspective and treatment of their deaf child based on a specific moral framework.

Studies have shown that religion and religious-affiliated organizations also can be important sources of emotional support for families of children with disabilities (Poston & Turnbull, 2004), especially within Latino families of young children with disabilities (Skinner & Bailey, 2001). Results among specifically hearing families with deaf children, however, show varied importance of religious support. In a qualitative study of 14 African American parents raising deaf children, Borum (2010) found the use of spirituality as a tremendous source of support and hope. However, in a mixed method study of 456 parents of deaf children, parents ranked religious affiliated groups the least important in terms of support across children's age groups (Jackson, 2011). The four highest important support systems were: professionals, other parents of deaf children, family support organizations, and extended family. Because of the disagreement over the importance of spiritual support for parents of deaf children, this is another important area for future research.

## **Spirituality and Communication**

How a family or a deaf individual chooses an organized religion may also depend on communication access and the availability of interpreters (McClain, 2009). How prevalent is it that a family with a deaf child will switch churches (or switch faiths) in order for communication accessibility

for their child? How prevalent is it that a deaf individual will switch churches or faiths in order to have productive two-way communication?

Communication necessary for spiritual development can be broken down into many levels, but the major levels are written communication, spoken presentations (sermons), two-way expressed communication and fellowship within a congregation, and two-way communication with spiritual leaders for counsel and guidance (Morris, 2008). At all of these levels there are pitfalls that can occur between hearing people and deaf people in a spiritual or religious setting. Foster (1998) conducted an ethnographic study on social engagement and constraints between deaf and hearing people. Although not specific to spirituality, the study's individual, open-ended method of inquiry included perspectives from deaf and hearing people from a wide range of communication events and age levels. In interviews, positive communication interaction examples were few, and most participants (both deaf and hearing) spoke about negative communication related to signed, spoken, and written communications. The author labeled these events "spoiled communication." In addition, many Deaf adults spoke of past teasing and ridicule as they grew up by hearing people which they say negatively influenced their present day communication and perception. Of note, the author emphasized that informal communication is at high risk for "spoiled communication" because the communication "occur spontaneously and in settings which are difficult to control" (p. 123). The research study raises additional concerns that go beyond adequate interpreting to the sociological essence of the dyadic experience between deaf and hearing people, compounded by the spiritual/religious environment and the power structure between the church and the individual.

Hearing people, who have the luxury of at least being able to sound out words and hear them in everyday conversation, usually require guidance (i.e., bible study) in order to understand written doctrine in a meaningful way. Antiquated written religious doctrine has been cited as a barrier to religious education for deaf people (Morris, 2008).

Interpreter quality can also be an issue. A high percentage of accessible churches do not use licensed interpreters. Sometimes a "volunteer" who wants to "help the deaf" will learn basic sign language and then attempt to interpret spiritual lectures that have a rich depth of meaning but are signed at a basic level (Broesterhuizen, 2005; Morris, 2008). If a deaf member of a church would like spiritual counsel or guidance, there are some

important questions to explore before moving forward: Is the spiritual leader knowledgeable about cultural and non-disability perspectives on deafness? Are there registered interpreters who are held to a strict confidentiality code of ethics available for the spiritual counseling session? Are “volunteers” brought in to interpret? If “volunteers” are used, how does that impact the deaf persons ability and desire to fully share what they would like to share with the spiritual leader and the quality of that interaction?

Communication, especially between hearing members/leaders in the church and the deaf member is a complex topic that should be addressed in both assessment and intervention with deaf clients. Key assessment questions include: How do churches ensure communication access between deaf members and other members of the congregation? How are deaf members seen by a) the spiritual leaders, b) church doctrine, and c) members of the congregation? Are deaf members encouraged to participate on church committees? From a macro perspective, are deaf members encouraged to pursue positions within the religious organization? (Hunt, 1996).

## **Disability and Religion**

Selway and Ashman (1998) conducted a comprehensive literature review of general disability and religion. A key finding was that 80% of the world's population adheres to a major or minor religious tradition (Bernstein et al., 1995). Many individuals and governments direct monies to support people with disabilities and their families through faith based organizations providing secular support in a religious context. In reviewing the available literature, Selway and Ashman (1998) express concerns whether churches, synagogues, and mosques foster positive or patronizing attitudes towards people with disabilities, and whether they can adequately support the spiritual, physical, and practical needs of people with disabilities. They also share the concern that there are negative messages towards people with disabilities across world religions. For example, Hindu religious texts and stories often have disabled people portrayed as attendants to royalty, inherently defective, and creatures to be feared. Often deaf people are said to have become disabled as a punishment for past misdeeds. Haj (1970) found that the Quran commands people to give special consideration to the blind, lame, and ill and calls upon their civic and social responsibility to care for them.

Additionally, Selway and Ashman (1998) examined reasons why there is little research in the area of disability and spirituality. They suggest that researchers are possibly reluctant because it is such a subjective phenomenon dealing with beliefs, values, and spirituality. Also, some researchers themselves may be uncomfortable researching disability because of the sensitive and political nature of categorizing and investigating such issues. Selway and Ashman (1998) found that the majority of literature available in 1998 focused on Christianity and disability, and encouraged more research on other world religions such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, indigenous religions and New Age religions. They also point to the untapped potential wisdom that can add to the religions of the world by including people with disabilities both in religious hierarchy and in research on religion and spiritual development.

## **Discussion**

In examining the current literature on spirituality among deaf people, several themes emerge as topics for mental health practitioners to consider during assessment and intervention work and for mental health researchers to consider for future studies. Major themes identified related to deaf and hard of hearing people, include access and barriers to spiritual and religious information, self-identity through a religious/spiritual lens, negative or a paternalistic/malady view of deafness in religious doctrine, and parent-child object relations. These identified areas can influence deaf individuals at the individual, family, and macro levels. At the micro level, the literature identifies isolation, loneliness, self-esteem, sense of purpose, connectedness, awareness, creativity, and positive self-identity all as factors that can be impacted by spiritual and religious variables. At the family level, the literature points especially to families made up of hearing parents and a deaf child/children related to maternal grief and stress, relationship and acceptance/nurturance issues between both parents and the deaf child, and the messages that parents receive from spiritual and religious doctrine and from faith-based social service agencies. At the macro level, the literature documents a lack of cultural sensitivity in the written doctrine of many world religions, a lack of total access and cultural competence in serving deaf members in relation to communication in religious institutions, and a lack of representation of deaf and hard of hearing people as both lay and formal religious leaders. When working with deaf and hard of hearing clients, mental health practitioners should consider including the above variables during assessment and intervention.

The research related to how spiritual and religious variables impact deaf people is limited. Much of the literature has focused on “general disability”, which has limited external validity when applied only to deaf people. The literature to date specific to deaf people has concentrated almost entirely on Christian religions. There is virtually no research available on the role of major and minor non-Christian world religions. Although there have been some small-scaled investigations on African American and Hispanic groups, in-depth, large scale investigations addressing minority and multi-cultural deaf experiences related to spirituality and religion are nonexistent. The current literature has potential building blocks for a specific faith development model for deaf people but no specific faith development research has been done to date. The available literature points to several spiritual and religious issues that could play an interactive role related to marriage and partner relationships, family dynamics, and both child and adult psychosocial development that have yet to be formally studied. Finally, on a macro level, there is a lack of national studies on statistical representation of deaf and hard of hearing members as congregation and/or as lay or religious leaders. Additionally, studies on communication barriers to access, and analyses of formal and informal paternalistic messages from faith based agencies are lacking. The identified possible research areas could be included as additional variables in larger studies or as the main topic of research. More studies that focus on spiritual and religious variables that utilize descriptive qualitative methods and quantitative analytic methods are needed to inform and guide mental health professionals in working with deaf and hard of hearing people.

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