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I Saw the Signs: The Role of American Sign Language in Preventing Violence against deaf Youth

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Abstract

The American Deaf community, comprised of approximately 500,000 people, has developed into a sociolinguistic, cultural community with American Sign Language (ASL) at its center. ASL is the autonomous language of Deaf individuals in America complete with its own grammar, orthography, syntax, and morphology. ASL is capable of conveying complex emotions and abstract ideas. However, most deaf children remain unable to express their innermost feelings because they live in homes with hearing parents who do not speak their language. For many deaf children, this is their first experience with isolation, but it is one they will grow familiar with as they advance from elementary school to high school. With years of isolation as a foundation, many deaf children are more susceptible to dangerous figures such as human traffickers and domestic abusers who target already isolated children and isolate them further, physically and psychologically. In various survivor accounts of human trafficking and domestic violence, isolation was central to them all. But, in the hands of a hearing parent, ASL is the best weapon against isolation because it closes the language gap that initially caused that isolation. With isolation eradicated from the lives of American deaf children, and therefore one risk factor removed, deaf children are one step closer to living safer lives free of sexual violence.

Keywords: deaf, isolation, domestic violence, human trafficking, ASL

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in Preventing Violence against deaf Youth

Introduction

Language is the conduit of emotion. Shared language paves the way to human connection, and this is a beautiful thing when two people speak the same language. When they do not, it can be frustrating to watch each person struggle to convey even just a short message which is still not understood by the other. This is the unfortunate reality for deaf children in America. They use American sign language while the rest of the country, for most including their parents, speaks English. Ninety percent of deaf children are born to hearing parents, and research revealed that only about 20% know sign language (Lane, 2005; Meyers & Bartee, 1992). Because they do not share a language with anyone around them, parents, friends, or schoolmates, they are often disconnected and isolated. Their isolation does more than put them at a social disadvantage; it also makes them more susceptible to dangerous people like human traffickers and domestic abusers who specifically target isolated children like them. The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) reported that "[c]hildren with disabilities are nearly three times more likely to be subjected to sexual violence than children without disabilities," and deaf children are among the list of those most vulnerable to all forms of violence (UNFPA, 2018, p. 7). Traffickers and domestic abusers speak the language of many deaf children, not ASL, but the language of isolation. They know just what to say to make these children fall in love with them or befriend them or whatever else they want. Moreover, deaf children are highly vulnerable because even if it is not ideal, they will grab whatever scrap of connection is available because human beings need human connection to survive.

Defining and Distinguishing between deaf, Deaf, and Hard of Hearing

Over the centuries, the terminology used to refer to deaf individuals has continued to evolve and develop to more accurately reflect the growing Deaf community. Because these terms were born out of the mindset of their time, the historical development of these terms from the Middle Ages to the present day reflects changes in Western and subsequently, American society's view of its deaf population. In the Middle Ages, deaf individuals were labeled "deaf and dumb," which predominantly stemmed from Platonic and Aristotelian influences of earlier centuries. Plato and Aristotle both believed that deaf individuals lacked intelligence due to lack of speech (Nomeland & Nomeland, 2011; "Community and culture," n.d.). In the following centuries, the term "dumb" became synonymous with mute. In his famous 528 A.D. Code, Emperor Justinian classified deaf people into five major categories. His separation of the terms "deaf," "dumb," and the combined term "deaf and dumb" reveals the evolution of the governmental and public understanding of these terms (Nomeland & Nomeland, 2011). This evolving understanding influenced the new term "deaf-mute" in the 18th and 19th centuries ("Community and culture," n.d.), which developed in America into the seemingly more politically correct term "hearing-impaired" in the 20th and 21st centuries. With the intention of removing offensive language to refer to disabled individuals, terms like "visually-impaired" and "mobility-impaired" arose in political circles, and with those terms came "hearing-impaired." The problem with the term "hearing-impaired" is that a large portion of deaf individuals have chosen to identify themselves by a culture instead of a disability, which is a unique trait of this particular group. For the first time in American history, deaf people have decided how the rest of the country should refer to them, and hearing Americans are adjusting accordingly. These new distinctions between culture and disability have impacted various aspects of American life,

including American legislation and many fields of research. The current terms in circulation, "deaf" and "hard of hearing" reflect a changing perspective on deafness. Currently, there are generally two perspectives held on deaf people worldwide: the pathological and the cultural.

The pathological view of deafness, which focuses on the medical inability of the deaf person to hear, was the dominant view in America until the mid-twentieth century. From an audiological point of view, the key difference between a person who is hard of hearing and a deaf individual is that the deaf individual experiences hearing loss at a higher degree. A person who is considered hard-of-hearing has hearing loss ranging from 41 to 70 decibels (dB) (Adams & Rohring, 2004; "Hearing loss and deafness," 2017). Adams and Rohring (2004) explain that a person who is hard of hearing has the "capability of hearing speech or of doing so when assisted with hearing aids" (p. 13). Conversely, a person is considered deaf if he or she experiences hearing loss of 71 dB or more (Adams & Rohring, 2004; "Hearing loss and deafness," 2017). According to medical professionals, a deaf person can also be defined as someone who shows "a complete inability to hear the spoken language" (Adams & Rohring, 2004, p. 13). Proponents of the pathological view tend to de-emphasize the use of any sign language while championing speech and lip-reading based on a hearing dominant view of competency in spoken language. They believe that orality is "the only means for cognitive development in the child" (Munoz-Baell & Ruiz, 2000, p. 40).

The biggest issue with a strictly medical, quantitative view is that it often paints hearing loss and deafness as a disability needing correction, which dramatically affects how medical professionals, audiologists, and researchers relate to people with hearing loss and deafness. Traditional interpretations of deaf people as "pathological" or "fundamentally deficient" were expounded by many as the cause of their inability to relate within social and cultural

environments (Woodward & Allen, 1993, p. 113). Many researchers have concluded that deaf people are, in actuality, "disabled more by their transactions with the hearing world than by the pathology of their hearing impairment" (Munoz-Baell & Ruiz, 2000, p. 40). The cultural view developed in response to the pathological view as a celebratory approach to deafness and the unique experiences it provides for an entire community.

Champions of the cultural view refer to the Deaf community using the capital D and use the term Deaf to refer to those belonging to a certain socio-linguistic community with sign language at its core (Padden & Humphries, 1988; Adams & Rohring, 2004). Dr. William Stokoe's *Dictionary of American Sign Language*, published in 1965, is the earliest known notion of a Deaf community and culture (Nomeland & Nomeland, 2011). The terminology for the cultural view of deafness was birthed in a 1972 conference directed by linguistic and university Deaf studies professor Dr. James Woodward. Those who identify as culturally Deaf do not deny the audiological fact of their hearing loss—one has to be deaf to be Deaf; they merely refuse to be classified by the only thing they cannot do. Inclusion in the Deaf community supersedes hearing loss and requires a desire to identify with the Deaf community and participate in community events (Adams & Rohring, 2004). While being deaf is a necessary criterion for consideration in the Deaf community, it is not the only criteria. Because most deaf children are not born into the Deaf community, they must show a desire to participate by identifying themselves with key aspects of Deaf culture rather than assimilating into the hearing world (Adams & Rohring, 2004). Many deaf people hold a negative view of hearing people and their world because of the oppression that the deaf minority has and continues to face at the hands of the hearing majority. This unfavorable view makes it difficult for a deaf person to exist fully in both worlds and has pushed deaf people to be even closer and more selective about who can be

part of their community. One deaf student with a cochlear implant shared how he was pushed to the outer circle of the Deaf community at Gallaudet because he was “not deaf enough” (Stanfield, J, personal communication, January 30, 2020). For many deaf people, they only interact with hearing people when they have to. They are isolated together. While procuring definitive numbers is difficult, the Deaf community in the United States consists of approximately 500,000 people who identify ASL as their first language (Anderson & Pezzarossi, 2014).

America’s first Deaf community was on a small, isolated island off the coast of Massachusetts called Martha’s Vineyard. The arrival of a deaf man named Jonathan Lambert and his two deaf children in 1694 marked the beginning of this community on the island (Nomeland & Nomeland, 2011). An 1880 census revealed that the percentage of deaf individuals on the western part of the island known as Chilmark was greater than the percentage on the mainland the island was greater on the western part of the island than the percentage on the mainland. At one point in the island’s history, “more than one-quarter of Chilmark’s residents were deaf,” and this prevalence of deaf individuals impacted the hearing society’s view of them (Nomeland & Nomeland, 2011, p. 28). The people on the island observed the difference in their deaf neighbors, but they never viewed it as a disability. Signing, specifically Chilmark Sign Language, was adopted on the island by both hearing and deaf people and created a strong Deaf community that was supported by its surrounding community. Authors Bahan and Nash posit that geography, attitude, and access helped to sustain the Deaf community at Martha’s Vineyard:

> Geography was the main factor; the island was isolated and insular, which helped contain the community. Attitude was the second factor; the hearing residents looked at deaf people as perfectly normal, and they would spontaneously sign when a deaf person came

into the scene. Finally, access was the third factor. The deaf person had full communication accessibility in the community. (as cited in Nomeland & Nomeland, 2011, p. 28)

The remarkable Deaf community at Martha's Vineyard has been a subject of study and inspiration in the following centuries. Except for Martha's Vineyard, no formal Deaf community existed in the United States before 1817 (Nomeland & Nomeland, 2011). The advent of residential schools for deaf children, where deaf students received instruction and resided, contributed significantly to the growth of a collective Deaf community and individual Deaf communities in America.

Between 1817-1980 almost every state in the United States had at least one residential deaf school (Padden & Humphries, 1988). Since most states only had one, deaf children came from all over the state to attend these schools. The schools were set up as boarding schools, so deaf children usually only went home during weekends, holidays, and summer break. These schools immersed deaf children into a culture they had never experienced because they came from mainly hearing households. Despite most classroom teaching at that time focusing on oralism and English rather than ASL, ASL remained at the center of social events outside of class. By spending time together in their dorms, deaf children would learn "not only sign language but the content of the culture. In this way, the [residential] schools [became] hubs of the communities that surround them, preserving for the next generation the culture of earlier generations" (Padden & Humphries, 1988, p. 5). The peer support and the abundance of deaf role models in these schools had overwhelmingly positive effects on the self-esteem and self-image of deaf and hard of hearing children (Adams & Rohring, 2004). After interacting with ASL and deaf culture, many children were reluctant to leave school and go back home, especially when

family members at home did not sign (Adams & Rohring, 2004). After graduation, these deaf students migrated to large cities where they connected with the local Deaf community populated mostly by students of their former residential school (Nomeland & Nomeland, 2011). *New York Times* journalist Andrew Solomon noticed in his interviews that many deaf people identified themselves based on their residential school. He writes, "it's usually told after [their] name but before [their] job. 'Lexington' and 'Gallaudet' were among the first signs I learned" (Solomon, 1994, para. 19). In these cities, they established Deaf clubs and met and held events in various parts of the city. Although the invention of new technology and the increased enrollment of deaf children into public schools with interpreters caused a decline of Deaf clubs, new trends appeared due to new technology like teletypewriters (TTY) that made communication much easier. The deaf youth of the 21st century are finding innovative ways to contribute to an ever-changing, growing Deaf community and make Deaf culture their own.

The Deaf community, like any other culture, has a set of behaviors that are unique to them. Because theirs is a visually based culture, the focus is on visual aspects. It is hardly coincidental that the differentiating nomenclature between the pathological and cultural view of deafness—d/D—is only visually identifiable. Great value is placed on the eyes and hands because they are the source of connection and communication. It is very offensive to even jokingly toss an item that may hit a deaf person in his or her eye. Accidents that limit a deaf person's ability to use his or her hands are considered devastating because they also limit the deaf person's ability to express him or herself in the way and at the speed that is most comfortable. In terms of behavior, it is important to avoid "visual-noises," which are things that can interfere with visual signs such as bright light, gum chewing, smoking (Nomeland & Nomeland, 2011). Deaf cultural behavior includes special "attention-getting techniques [tapping,

waving], back-channeling [providing feedback during the conversation], and eye contact while communicating," and regional Deaf communities have adapted and added to these general cultural behaviors (Adams & Rohring, 2004, p. 12; Humphrey & Alcorn, 2007). The American Deaf community is a collectivist society living within a predominantly individualist American culture. Therefore, many of their cultural practices, like their general disregard for clock-time in favor of personal connection, reflect those of collectivist societies outside of the United States such as Hispanic and African societies (Humphrey & Alcorn, 2007). The Deaf community is incredibly diverse because it includes various ethnicities and races whom all consider ASL to be their first language. Oscar Cohen, former superintendent of an American deaf school, wisely explained that "Deafness make[s] one no less a member of a racial, linguistic, or ethnic group" (Nomeland & Nomeland, 2011, p. 99). America's Deaf community beautifully reflects the diversity abounding in all fifty states of America.

A defining characteristic of the American Deaf community is their use and respect for ASL. In his keynote address (1991), Harvey Corson boldly stated: "The center has shifted—from disability to ability, from handicap to culture, from silent individuals to a vibrant community, from primitive gestures to American Sign Language" (as cited in Nomeland & Nomeland, 2011, p. 91). Language is the linchpin of any culture, and Deaf culture is no different.

American Sign Language

Although it is difficult to trace the exact dates and origins of ASL, researchers assert that French Sign Language (LSF) combined with other signs helped to create the first set of American Sign Language signs ("American Sign Language," 2019). American Thomas H. Gallaudet and deaf Frenchman Laurent Clerc—who apprenticed under successful French deaf educators such as Abbé Sicard, Abbé Charles-Michel de l'Éppée, and Jean Massieu—are

credited with teaching and developing ASL in America further. American Sign Language (ASL) is a complete, natural language expressed with hand and facial movements that has similar linguistic properties as other spoken languages but differs from English grammatically (“American Sign Language,” 2019). A natural language is a language that was developed for communication between people rather than an artificial language that has been created for computers (“Natural language,” n.d.).

Some people wrongly assume that sign language is just a verbatim translation of the spoken language. Signed English, often confused with ASL, is the exact verbatim signing of English words. Signed English is derivative, while ASL is an original language of its own that is unique to the American Deaf community. ASL is autonomous and complete with its own means of expression, grammar, orthography, syntax, and morphology (Adams & Rohring, 2004). Linguistics have observed that the individual signs in ASL are structured grammatical units, fingerspelling is used for names and other proper nouns, and the sentence structure is so unique that “ASL resembles not English but languages unrelated to English, such as the Mayan language, Tzotzil, which permit only dative structures” (Padden & Humphries, 1988, p. 8). All of these unique characteristics, coupled with ASL’s ability to convey abstract ideas, combat the notion of ASL as a system of simple gestures.

Thomas H. Gallaudet’s successful use of ASL in educational settings further proved the capability of ASL as a system of communication dynamically equivalent to English. Thomas H. Gallaudet founded America’s first successful deaf school in Hartford, Connecticut, in 1817 and served as principal until 1830. After Gallaudet’s retirement, Laurent Clerc continued to teach at the school and train many teachers in sign language. With this increased growth in uniform signing and educators with the training to teach, many more deaf schools of varying academic

levels were founded around the United States. In 1864, President Lincoln signed a bill to fund the establishment of a deaf college in America. Edward M. Gallaudet, the son of Thomas H. Gallaudet, was named president of the college that would later be named Gallaudet University (after his father). Gallaudet University, the first liberal arts college for deaf people in the world, would be instrumental in securing more rights for deaf Americans in subsequent years. It was due largely to the work of linguistic and Gallaudet professor William Stokoe that ASL was finally recognized as an official language in America in 1965. Since then, ASL has continued to undergo changes like any other language, and those changes have kept ASL alive and relevant in the 21st century. ASL unlocked an entire world of communication for Thomas H. Gallaudet's first class, and it has continued to do so for deaf children living in America's hearing world where communication is the biggest challenge.

Isolation

For many deaf children, isolation begins at home. Research shows that approximately 90% of all deaf children are born to hearing parents (Humphrey & Alcorn, 2007). So, most deaf children do not share the same language as their parents, and one group will have to learn the other's language (Lane, 2005; Meyers & Bartee, 1992). Unfortunately, the deaf child is often tasked with developing his or her oral skills, to the detriment of signing, and practicing speechreading (lip-reading). In 1975, roughly 88% of hearing parents of deaf children did not know sign language, and by 2001 that percentage was down by about 18%, which means that most parents of deaf children have no effective system in place to communicate with their deaf child (Meyers & Bartee, 1992). Although many homes may develop home signs and gesture systems, they do not possess the same complexity as ASL to convey deeper ideas and feelings. Language is a powerful tool of expression. With just words, human beings can convey their

feelings to another person and cause feelings to develop in the receiver of the message. The absence of language and effective communication places a strain on the emotional relationship between deaf children and hearing parents. Dr. Kenneth Altshuler explains the important connection between communication and bonding:

> From the view point of emotional development, language is necessary for other ends [because of] its role in the communication of emotion…implicitly, when such communication is interfered with, the bond between parent and child is altered, and along with it the quality of closeness and the clarity of identification of feelings. (Altshuler, 1974, p. 368)

After a few years of experiencing isolation at home, many deaf children start school already familiar with this feeling.

The isolation of deaf children is most evident and easily identifiable with the start of school. The issue of isolation became more significant and apparent with the introduction of mainstreaming and inclusion into the education of deaf children. In the early 1970s, eighty percent of deaf children were still educated at special schools like residential schools in their state (Nowell & Innes, 1997). The passage of Public Law 94-142, The Education of All Handicapped Children Act, which incorporated terms from the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), called for “all children to be educated as appropriate in the ‘least restrictive environment’ (LRE), which meant to the greatest extent possible with their ‘non-handicapped’ peers” (Nowell & Innes, 1997, para. 2; “Thirty-five years of progress,” 2010). Mainstreaming and inclusion were different applications of these laws. With mainstreaming, the deaf student is placed in the general classroom for periods of the day, so the student splits his or her day between the main classroom and the special education classroom, which may include

other students or just one-on-one instruction (Morin, n.d.). The intention of LRE is to include students with special education needs in the general classroom as often as possible (Morin, n.d.). Inclusion is an extension of mainstreaming because the student is included in the general classroom for the entirety of the day and included in the school's extracurricular activities as well (Morin, n.d.). The interpreter will be present with the deaf student throughout the day. Under IDEA, "special classes, separate schools or removal from the general education class should only happen when [a] child's learning or thinking difference… is so severe that supplementary aids and services can't provide him with an appropriate education" (Morin, n.d., para. 2). By 1995, over 60% of deaf students were educated in their district's public schools (Nowell & Innes, 1997). Although the academics of deaf children would improve in this new system, many people did not foresee the negative impact it would have on language and culture. When analyzed from a strictly social perspective, many deaf students reported struggling with marginalization, isolation, alienation, and rejection in their public schools, especially deaf adolescents. Often, the deaf student is the only deaf person in her public school. In residential schools, the birthplace of Deaf culture, deaf students related to everyone around them, peers, and teachers, in the language they were most comfortable, ASL. The environment required no adjustment because it was predisposed for usage by deaf individuals. In the residential schools, the deaf student never had to worry about sticking out because of his or her deafness. Most researchers agree that the communication barrier is directly related to the isolation deaf students feel in public schools. In public schools, deaf students struggle to communicate with their peers and their teachers, and as a result, many students resort to alternative methods of communication (i.e., writing, texting), none of which are their own language (Angelides & Aravi, 2006; Brice & Strauss, 2016).

One research group (Brice & Strauss, 2016) coined the phrase “dinner table syndrome” (p. 68) to explain what happens when a deaf student watches his hearing peers converse at the table but is unable to decipher what is being said. In one study, the deaf student voiced his personal embarrassment about the sound of his voice. The study interviewed other deaf students, and they echoed a similar sentiment:

> When I was in mainstream high schools, I did not want to participate because I felt bad that I was different...I spoke weirdly and I wanted to be alone...Nobody made fun of me; I simply wanted to have the company of other deaf and hard of hearing children. (as cited in Angelides & Aravi, 2006, p. 483)

These cases of self-isolation because of perceived and apparent differences also contributed to the larger feelings of isolation. Reports show that teachers struggled to adapt their classrooms to accommodate these students, so many of the deaf students chose not to participate in-class activities. This constant seclusion, physical and social, negatively influenced the identity and self-esteem of many deaf students in public schools (Angelides & Aravi, 2006; Brice & Strauss, 2016). These issues become magnified when compounded with the complexities of adolescence.

The transition period from child to teenager can already be a difficult time in the life of a developing youth because of bodily changes as well as changes in social interaction with peers, those of the opposite gender, and parents. Psychologists have termed this phase in life as the one where children begin exploring and experimenting to discover themselves and their role in the “real” world. All of these changes may cause added sensitivity and self-consciousness because of comparison between themselves and others, which “[makes] them particularly susceptible to social and cultural pressures” (Brice & Strauss, 2016, p. 67). School placement and friendship

groups have a significant impact on the identity formation of most adolescents, deaf, or hearing. The inability to place oneself within these pre-existing social groups limits any after school interaction, which is where friendships are strengthened and deepened. Sometimes, continued dependence on their parents—unlike most of their peers who are becoming more and more detached with the introduction of driver's licenses, first jobs, and romantic relationships—also contributes negatively because of the deaf adolescent's struggle for autonomy that comes at this stage of development (Charlson & Gold & Strong, 1992).

One contributing factor that is often overlooked is the effect of the images the media conveys about a typical American high school student. The popular television shows and movies that most teens watch are filled with tropes of the "attractive jock," and the "popular cheerleader." Failure to line up with these unrealistic depictions may also be a source of discouragement for deaf adolescents. At this stage in their life, they "are neither children nor adults and… their lack of a well-defined identity can lead to a sense of detachment from social institutions" (Charlson & Gold & Strong, 1992, p. 262). Deaf adolescents especially have the challenge of locating themselves within two worlds, sometimes more if they come from other minority and ethnic groups. Since roughly 90% of all deaf children are born to hearing parents, they undergo an added identity complication that their parents do not understand (Humphrey & Alcorn, 2007). Anyone of these circumstances alone can contribute to the isolation of the deaf adolescent, socially, physically, or both, and many deaf adolescents face a few at a time. This isolation can ultimately cause them to forego trying to discover his giftings and talents and may even lead to pessimism and passivity, which will keep them from ever discovering and developing a healthy sense of self.

Some researchers have even conducted studies that reveal the isolation of deaf young adults in the workplace. Often times, facial expressions and non-verbal communication were bilaterally misunderstood between hearing and deaf co-workers. Deaf employees were usually excluded from "water-cooler gossip" and other opportunities for interaction, which sometimes gave others the impression that they had no desire to bond (Steinberg & Sullivan & Montoya, 1999). Based on this impression, deaf employees were not invited to after-work events or to fun lunchtime gatherings that all the other workers shared. This isolation affected the emotional health of the deaf employee and negatively impacted his or her work life because of missed opportunities to make connections, network, and solicit more work opportunities. So ultimately, isolation always yields negative results, from childhood to adulthood. Continued isolation, especially at the adolescent age, can be dangerous for a deaf teenager.

Domestic Violence and Human Trafficking

Isolation is a shared tactic of domestic abusers and human traffickers. Isolation is one way for the perpetrator to maintain absolute power over the victim and keep the victim from interacting with people or resources that might help him or her. Human traffickers prey on those who are isolated and isolate them further by transporting them to unfamiliar locations. Psychological isolation is the gateway they use to enact physical isolation. UNICEF USA developed an extensive definition for human trafficking using an "A-M-P Model":

> [Human trafficking is] the act of recruiting, transporting, transferring, harboring or receiving a person through the means of threat or use of force, coercion, abduction, fraud, deception, abuse of power or vulnerability, or giving payments or benefits to a person in control of another individual for the purpose of exploitation, including sexual exploitation. (Cody, 2017, para. 2)

Human trafficking is the fastest-growing criminal activity in the world. The rise of technology and dating sites or other virtual realities have inadvertently contributed to the success of human trafficking. Before 2004, 38% of survivors reported being advertised to online, but that number has steadily increased to 75% in the past decade ("Relying on survivors," n.d.). Anti-sex trafficking technology company THORN reported that "more than 150,000 new escort ads [are] posted online every day" ("Relying on survivors," n.d., para. 7). Isolated adolescents can find people and develop relationships virtually.

While this is true of all teenagers, deaf adolescents are more likely to rely on social media for connection because they are so isolated and disconnected from their parents and peers. In a 2014 study at the National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID) conducted on "Facebooking among deaf college students," one researcher reported that Deaf college students spent an average of 101 minutes per day on Facebook (Cuculick, 2014). The researcher compared this report with a 2011 report (Tower & Lego Muñoz) of hearing students that revealed that the hearing college students spent an average of only 10-60 minutes per day on the social media site (Cuculick, 2014). These reports were consistent with the hypothesis that deaf youth typically spend more time and rely more heavily on social media to communicate and connect. The Vermont Department for Children and Families Family Services Division compiled a presentation that identified key characteristics of children at risk of recruitment such as: "Unsupervised internet use or obsessive use of social media…desire to develop romantic relationships, insecurity, feeling misunderstood, anxiety, depression, loneliness, lack of belonging…feeling that parents or caregivers don't care or aren't present" ("Child and youth sex trafficking," n.d.). Many deaf youths meet the criteria on this list. In the United States Department of State Trafficking in Persons 2019 Report, they maintained that populations of

persons with disabilities were still more vulnerable to human trafficking; however, this report contains new insight ("Trafficking in Persons Report," 2019). According to the US Department of State, "[A]dvocates reported a growing trend of traffickers targeting victims with disabilities and increase in the use of online social media platforms to recruit and advertise victims of human trafficking" ("Trafficking in Persons Report," 2019, p. 492).

Various online sites parade themselves as virtual chats or virtual gaming, and that is a prime place for traffickers to start the grooming process, and the deaf youth will become comfortable with them through messaging. The deaf youth may even begin sharing deep secrets because she feels that she has finally found someone who will listen to her, and the two will begin to develop an intimate and isolated relationship. The University of Toledo conducted research and compiled a list of phrases that traffickers typically look for online such as: "Nobody gets me," "My life sucks," "My parents don't trust me," or "I need to get out of here" (University of Toledo, 2018, para. 11). Once they find these phrases, traffickers have rehearsed strategic responses in place, including: "I understand you," "I love you," "I'll make your life better," and "I'll protect you" (University of Toledo, 2018, para. 11). From that point, the trafficker, via chat, can convince the deaf youth to meet up with him or her in person, and the in-person meeting is the opportunity for the child to be taken. Even if the child refuses to meet with the trafficker, many online-dating sites have location trackers embedded within them, which traffickers use to their advantage. These traffickers are called "Romeo pimps" or "loverboys," and they serve as one of many types of traffickers with an arsenal of rehearsed strategic responses.

Human trafficking is a new field of modern-day slavery with all legislation and research pertaining to it emerging in the 21st century. Two high-profile human trafficking cases in the US brought the scope of the situation to full light. The first case was in 1995, and the second case in

1997 whereupon the New York City Police Department (NYPD) discovered sixty-two deaf-mute Mexican nationals who were forced into human trafficking (Hendrix, 2010). The main recruiter was deaf herself, and she recruited victims from isolated deaf and hard of hearing communities in Mexico (Bales & Lize, 2005). She dressed fashionably and flaunted herself as a rich woman who could promise them a better life in America (Bales & Lize, 2005). Many deaf Mexicans followed her and trusted her promise to make them successful (Bales & Lize, 2005). In America, the heads of the trafficking ring "forced [them] to peddle trinkets in the New York City subways for twelve to eighteen hours per day, seven days per week, with two days off every other month" (Hendrix, 2010, p. 183-84). The workers were not allowed to keep any of the money, and even though they turned over all of their earnings, they still endured physical and sexual abuse (Hendrix, 2010). In an interview, Daniel Molerio, assistant district director for the Immigration and Naturalization Service in New York, stated that "[t]he biggest factor that kept them there was their disability, which kept them dependent on the smugglers, and isolated them terribly…That was their key vulnerability, and the smugglers exploited it tremendously" (Sontag, 1997, para. 13). Three years after this case, President Clinton signed the Trafficking Victims Protection Act, and the US has been legislatively combatting this global issue ever since. Since statistics in this field are difficult to gather, great importance is placed on the stories of victims and survivors of human trafficking. For deaf women, this can be especially difficult because language barriers might keep them from reporting.

Nevertheless, in the available stories of deaf survivors and victims of human trafficking, isolation continues to be a common thread in them all. A young orphan deaf and mute girl named Safiya was trafficked at age ten by a man and his wife (Ryan, 2013). Without parents or language to connect her with people around her, Safiya was the picture of isolated and the

perfect target for this couple. They forced her to work around their home, where she was slapped and raped often (Ryan, 2013). The man taught her just enough sign language for her to confirm her name for the disability benefits (which he kept), but certainly not enough for her to communicate to anyone what was being done to her (Ryan, 2013). Safiya endured this abuse for ten years until a police raid of the house and the cellar, where she slept, freed her (Ryan, 2013). Initially, she could not even describe what had happened to her because she had no language (Ryan, 2013). She spent the months following learning sign language to sign against her abusers in court (Ryan, 2013). When asked about her current life in court, Safiya signed, “Love going out for walk in the fresh air. Love going to the fair and enjoy lots of different things. Also enjoy going to the college by myself on the bus” (as cited in Ryan, 2013, para. 30). Being able to communicate her experience in her own words was the final key in unlocking Safiya’s freedom.

Another deaf woman shares her story of being forced into prostitution by her boyfriend, Aaron Bruins, after one month of dating (Prendergast, 2018). Bruins was a “Romeo pimp,” who trafficked her from Houston, TX, where they met to Dallas, TX, away from her home and family (Prendergast, 2018). The woman shared that Bruins strangled and slapped her when he was angry and threatened to hurt her family if she ever left him (Prendergast, 2018). After enduring his abuse and unwillingly selling herself for almost four months, she was able to make contact with the police through text messaging (Prendergast, 2018). The text exchanges between her and Bruin were enough evidence to arrest him for compelling prostitution (Prendergast, 2018). Despite enduring a difficult situation of trafficking, this woman found an opportunity to escape much sooner than most women who are victims of trafficking or domestic violence, deaf and hearing. For many deaf women, the path to escape is very difficult because of isolation which is then compounded with their inability to hear and often times, speak.

Although both hearing and deaf women endure sexual violence, deaf and hearing women do not have the same tools of escape available to them. In one study of human trafficking survivors, the hearing women described how they were hidden indoors for extended periods of time, completely cut off from the outside world. One woman reported that she did not even know where she lived. She explained that she knew the general city, but she could not describe what the outside of the home looked like (Baldwin, & Fehrenbacher, & Eisenman, 2015). Many of the women echoed that they were constantly surveilled like prisoners. If a hearing woman who is trafficked manages to venture into the city alongside her trafficker, she may be able to communicate somehow that she is in trouble, but this is much harder for deaf women, especially those who do not speak. Furthermore, if a hearing woman somehow garners access to a phone while she is out, she can easily call for help, but a deaf woman has many factors to consider. Because she may not be able to talk on the phone, she might not be able to call for help. If she is able to contact the police or another group, they may show up and not be able to communicate with her, which puts the trafficker back in authority. Even if deaf women are psychologically able and ready to escape, they have a wide array of added obstructions to consider beforehand. The sickening irony of isolation as a tactic is that fear of isolation also doubles as a reason why many deaf women endure these abusive relationships. Many women, to cope, convince themselves that these men love them. Researchers discovered that the highest percentage of female victims were in the 18-20 age group, and the predominant means of control by traffickers was psychological abuse and restriction of movement ("Counter trafficking data collaborative," n.d.). 33% of all identified children entered into the trafficking process between the ages of 15 and 17 ("Counter trafficking data collaborative," n.d.), and most were trafficked by someone they knew, not a stranger. On average, child trafficking victims were enslaved for a little over

two years ("Counter trafficking data collaborative," n.d.). Often times, human traffickers traffic women into domestically violent environments.

Domestic abusers tend to focus more on psychological isolation, while traffickers focus on both psychological and physical isolation. So, the pre-existing isolation of deaf children, adolescents, and adults makes them especially vulnerable to these dangerous situations. The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) Global Study on Young Persons with Disabilities discovered a heightened risk of abuse for children with disabilities:

> Children with disabilities are nearly three times more likely to be subjected to sexual violence than children without disabilities...Children who are deaf, blind, or autistic have psychosocial and intellectual disabilities; or have multiple impairments are most vulnerable to all forms of violence. (UNFPA, 2018, p. 7)

Research shows that 50% of deaf children have been sexually abused and are 25% more likely to experience neglect and abuse—physical and sexual—than hearing children (Sullivan & Vernon & Scanlan, 1987; Sexual violence in Deaf community, 2011). In a study comparing two groups of children, disabled and nondisabled, researchers discovered that generally, children with disabilities were "2.2 times more likely to be victims of sexual abuse than were nondisabled children…children with a communication disorder (hearing impaired…speech/language disorder…) were significantly more likely to be sexually abused than were their nondisabled peers" (Hester, 2002, p. 11). The biggest issue of violence against deaf individuals currently is domestic violence. Because the causes of domestic violence are complex and nuanced, several risk factors may contribute to the increase of domestic violence against deaf individuals such as poverty, limited education, gender, or dependence that stems from medical issues, drug use, or

disability. The United States Department of Justice defined domestic violence to further clarify what it is and how to identify it:

> Domestic violence [is] a pattern of abusive behavior in any relationship that is used by one partner to gain or maintain power and control over another intimate partner...can be physical, sexual, emotional, economic, or psychological actions or threats of actions that influence another person. This includes any behaviors that intimidate, manipulate, humiliate, isolate, frighten, terrorize, coerce, threaten, blame, hurt, injure, or wound someone. (Cody, 2017, para. 2)

Eyewitness accounts and research both affirm the use of isolation as a powerful tactic. Intimate partner violence (IPV) is the most common form of domestic violence against deaf individuals, mostly deaf women. According to the Abused Deaf Women's Advocacy Services (ADWAS), "roughly 25% of all Deaf women in the United States are victims of intimate partner violence" (Anderson & Leigh, 2011, p. 822). This statistic may also include adolescent women who are victims of teen dating violence, although the research on the subject is very limited.

Intimate partner violence occurs in predominantly two instances: Deaf-Deaf and Deaf-Hearing. In Deaf-Hearing relationships, isolation is most evident in the hearing partner creating an environment that makes the deaf partner overly dependent upon him. He can position himself as the unofficial interpreter of his deaf partner and therefore control everything she tries to communicate to the outer world. He can use his "hearing privilege" to oppress her by misinforming her about important phone calls, leave her out of social interactions with hearing people, manipulate law enforcement that are called to the house, and isolate her from the Deaf community and Deaf culture (Anderson & Pezzarossi, 2014). Deaf-Deaf IPV is more researched and complex because of how many abusers use the seclusion of the Deaf community from

hearing society as another tool to continue isolation. One Deaf woman, Cherrie Watson, chronicles her experience of IPV, which resonated with other first-hand experiences and existing IPV research: “I thought I was lucky because he wanted me and loved me. Most guys I had dated were hearing; he was the first Deaf person that I dated. The communication was smooth and easier than dating a hearing guy” (Watson, 2014, p. 82). The ease of familiarity can be blinding. Cherrie continued to stay with her husband, even when she had discovered his abusive tendencies because, without a college degree or job, she was dependent on him to provide financially for her and their daughter (Watson, 2014). Even when she did get a job, he handled all of the finances, so she never saw any paychecks (Watson, 2014). He reminded Cherrie often of his well-respected position in the Deaf community, which kept her from speaking publicly about her struggles at home. She feared that others would not believe her or that she would ruin her reputation in their close-knit community. So, she stayed. For twenty years, she endured psychological abuse manifested as isolation, which inevitably lead to emotional and physical abuse because she thought it was her only option. Psychological abuse opens the door for emotional abuse, physical abuse, and many other forms of abuse.

Two deaf women shared their experiences of domestic violence with the DeafHope organization, and both stories are centered around how alone they felt throughout. One deaf woman shared that she had many near-death experiences because of the domestic violence of her hearing husband. She explained that she tried calling the police several times, but her husband blocked her from the phone and took it away. She said, “Many times he prevented me from calling because he wanted to keep it a secret” (“DeafHope-Deaf Survivor’s Story,” 2010, 2:36). One day, her neighbor even called the police after they heard some alarming noises, and when the police arrived, her husband did almost all of the talking. “They [the police] didn’t talk to me

much," she said, "they did nothing to help" ("DeafHope-Deaf Survivor's Story," 2010, 2:48). As soon as the police left, he started beating her up again, and this time the neighbors ignored the sounds. Even in a neighborhood full of people who cared enough about her to call the police on her behalf, this woman was helpless. Ultimately, to protect her children, she put them into foster care because she did not have a safe place to take them. "Where am I supposed to go?" she said, "shelters are not accessible. There was nothing. I was stuck" ("DeafHope-Deaf Survivor's Story," 2010, 3:16). The especially tragic part of her story is that she was never able to get her children back from foster care, and they forgot how to sign and struggled to communicate with her. They have since reconnected through Facebook, but she will never be able to get those lost years back. This woman eventually found DeafHope, and they provided her with support services, court interpreters, and the community that understood the needs of deaf victims of domestic violence. The healing process began with the introduction of community and the elimination of isolation.

Veronica Harmon shares her survivor story of being raped and almost killed by her ex-husband, which she never expected (Harmon, 2014). She said, "When I married him, he seemed like a good man" (Harmon, 2014, 0:20). She was completely alone during the abuse and afterward because her abuser isolated her from others around her: "I had no support, no services…no interpreter...I was on my own trying to figure out what to do…I felt alone…I did it without support from my family or friends. I did it all by *myself* [emphasis added]" (Harmon, 2014, 0:45). Ultimately, Veronica's ex-husband got away with rape because Veronica did not have the law enforcement or legal support to make her case. This is the isolation that Veronica experiences from society as a deaf woman.

Research shows that victims of domestic violence are more likely to become victims of other forms of violence that utilize similar tactics, such as human trafficking. Although human trafficking, specifically sex exploitation, and domestic violence are different forms of sexual violence predominantly against women, the traffickers and domestic abusers share tactics and traits that provide intersectionality between human trafficking and domestic violence.

Some consider cochlear implants (CI) as a solution to many of the social and communication issues that deaf individuals face in childhood and adulthood. Since the implant will help them to hear and speak and therefore interact with hearing people, they reason that the isolation caused by communication gaps and stigma around deafness will vanish. Many hearing parents, with the encouragement of doctors and audiologists, give their deaf children cochlear implants (CI). As a result, CI has become increasingly popular among deaf American youth. Most CI deaf children never learn sign language and grow up speaking. Despite one's opinion on CI, the fact still remains that CI only helps the deaf individuals hear. It does not make them hearing. Yes, it might help them operate in the hearing world more smoothly than those without implants, but it is important to remember that they are still deaf. When a CI is removed, the implantee is completely deaf. Even with the CI, the deaf person cannot hear to the same degree of sharpness as a hearing person. Cochlear implants run on batteries that need to be charged, they need constant monthly maintenance, and they do not work when wet. On the relational side, many cochlear implantees still struggle with feelings of isolation because they have one foot in each world, which sometimes translates to having no feet in either. Since neither deaf nor hearing, people can relate to their unique experience, they still harbor feelings of being misunderstood and alone in their struggles. So, the deaf person with the cochlear implant is still just as vulnerable to domestic violence and human trafficking, potentially even more so if she did

not learn any ASL because she does not have the skills to survive without hearing. Hearing parents who never learn to sign or keep their deaf child from learning to sign because of the child's CI may ultimately be putting the child in greater danger.

Veronica ended her story with a warning to deaf women everywhere: "If you are in a bad relationship, please tell someone…find someone to confide in" (Harmon, 2014, 2:23). The heart of the issue of isolation is that none of these women had someone to confide in. From their early childhoods, many would not have created the unbreakable bond of mother and daughter, and many more relationship-building opportunities would be lost because of the language barrier. The breaking point in Cherrie's story and many other deaf women is their inability to communicate their struggles with anyone. Many deaf women cannot report their abuse to law enforcement agencies because often feelings of shame or lack of resources prevent an official interpreter from being present, so the abuser may end up interpreting, which means the truth will never reach the police (Watson, 2014). Abusers, whether deaf or hearing, strive to isolate their women from a supportive Deaf community or convince them that sharing their experience may negatively impact their position in their local Deaf community, so then they are tasked with making a very difficult decision of choosing between their freedom and happiness and the Deaf community that has become closer than their biological family.

The Role of ASL

The greatest reason why isolation persists is a lack of family engagement. From a young age, deaf children become familiar with isolation because of an inability to communicate with their parents effectively. So, without meaningful communication, many deaf children suffer in silence. They are doubly isolated—isolated at home and at school. So, although the percentage has decreased in recent years, and more parents are learning sign language for their children, the

percentage is still very high. Most hearing parents cannot truly communicate with their own child, which causes isolation. Since isolation starts in the home, all solutions must begin there as well. ASL is the key to bridging the communication gap that leads to isolation.

Personal interviews and studies revealed various reasons why hearing parents do not learn sign language. Some were still in denial about their child's deafness or were seeking ways to "fix" the child with new technology such as CI and make her "normal" (hearing) (Bartee & Meyers, 1992). Other reasons include parents communicating well enough without sign language, and the challenge of learning a unique language well enough to keep up with the child's growing vocabulary. One aspect that seems to have been overlooked by researchers is the isolation of hearing parents of deaf children. Many hearing parents do not have enough information about raising a deaf child, so they are bound by whatever technique the audiologist and doctors suggest, whether it works best for the child or not. Many hearing parents with deaf children lack the support they need to navigate their child's deafness, so parents and subsequently children become frustrated. One must be careful not to make the assumption that hearing parents are indifferent about their deaf children simply because they do not sign.

Knowledge is power, which is why early intervention programs for parents of deaf children have proven successful over recent years. One group of researchers specifically used an early intervention approach that used deaf teachers and consultants to teach families while the children were still young and formed parent support groups through schools that had deaf students (Bartee & Meyers, 1992). Additionally, communicating deafness using different rhetoric may also help new parents consider the socio-cultural aspect of deafness, which few parents are knowledgeable about, instead of focusing solely on the hearing loss ("Early exposure to sign language," 2015). This change in perspective may also encourage parents to connect their

deaf child with the local Deaf community, which would ultimately bolster the child's self-esteem and help with identity formation in later years. Deaf children need to be encouraged to explore their Deafhood. Providing parents with support and a myriad of helpful resources is the first step in combating isolation. Additionally, educating both deaf and hearing parents on the signs of isolation and any form of abuse would prove to be vitally beneficial as well because then parents can be equipped to take pre-emptive measures.

Recent research supports deaf children learning and using ASL during their formative linguistic years. There are many benefits for the child academically and socially. ASL is ideally visually structured for most deaf children to easily absorb, and many models reveal that deaf children grasp English better with ASL as the foundation. To avoid "linguistic neglect" where the deaf child lags behind in language, experts conclude that "providing a sign language as early as possible is the more reliable way to ensure a deaf child's language development" (Padden & Humphries, 1988). When parents wait too long with language acquisition, which is often the case with hearing parents of deaf children, the results are detrimental in various areas: "When [deaf] children don't get adequate exposure to language, their brains don't develop properly. They become socially and emotionally isolated. And they become vulnerable to other kinds of abuse as well" ("Sign Language Is Best," 2017). In studies conducted of deaf children with deaf parents, the children tended to be better adjusted than those with hearing parents. Altshuler reports that those children "have a higher educational level, better command of language, and higher reading scores in finger spelling and vocabulary" because their parents accept their diagnosis much earlier and using sign language around the infant (Altshuler, 1974, p. 373). These deaf children usually learn English "with the same transfer of knowledge (with the framework already present) a child whose parents speak a foreign language learns a second

language when exposed outside the home" (Altshuler, 1974, p. 374). Ultimately, deaf children who have ASL as their base will far better academically and socially than those who do not.

Although deaf parents may be better equipped to employ these practices early in their child's life, everything they do is teachable and can also be implemented by hearing parents in their homes. One study conducted on how successful Deaf teenagers from both residential and mainstream schools cope with isolation discovered the significant benefits of parental involvement and support in the lives of Deaf youth:

> [T]he students had very positive self-images and good attitudes toward being deaf. Parental acceptance helped a lot, and where communication with parents was impoverished, most students compensated by…[becoming] very independent and [having] little contact with home. [T]he most consistent message to hearing parents is the importance of good communication. Many of our students wished their parents had better sign language skills. (Charlson & Strong & Gold, 1992, p. 269)

Parents teaching sign language to their deaf children, by using sign language in daily communication, is the ideal method because then the child also naturally learns how to interact with hearing people socially. With the parent using the deaf child's language, the parent-child relationship can be strengthened as the child develops. The parents can begin to find deaf playmates for their young deaf child, which will only help with developing confidence and strong social skills. Most importantly, the deaf child has a direct line to her parents to share deep feelings, so if she ever experiences isolation or marginalization at school, she can find comfort in knowing that her parents will understand her when he shares her hurt with them.

Hearing parents can then become trailblazers for inclusion initiatives at school that do not require their child to participate on the fringes of the hearing world like many deaf children in

mainstream public schools do today. They can take extra steps to ensure that teachers are better informed about the social isolation deaf children now face because of the move from residential to mainstream schools, and they can work together to develop preventative programs that will combat isolation and champion inclusion. Extinguishing isolation is a group effort. While the support and direct communication make a huge difference, to achieve the best possible result, deaf children especially as they transition to adolescence, also need the support of peers and teachers, especially those at mainstream schools. This means also providing peers and teachers with the resources that can help them identify isolation and any signs of abuse. In the case where a deaf child is experiencing abuse at home, it is the people outside of the home who will be tasked with the rescue. If the deaf child is connected enough to a few peers at school and a few teachers, then she may feel bold enough to speak to someone about what she is experiencing at home. This facilitation of communication will look different across the country and from county to county, but the goal remains the same: to create school programs that can provide strong peer support for deaf children, which will supplement the parental support. One author expressed that communication "is seen as the main reason for these two different worlds. If the communication barrier did not exist between Deaf and hearing people, a true sharing of culture and life experiences could occur; a true bicultural celebration could be achieved" (Adams & Rohring, 2004, p. 74).

Ultimately, the deaf child will find someone to communicate with, but it might not always be the best or safest person. This realization, coupled with the awareness of the ability of ASL to bridge such a gaping communication barrier, will hopefully lead every hearing parent to strive to communicate with his or her child consistently meaningfully. With meaningful communication and education on the possibility of isolation, parents can be prepared to see the

signs of isolation or abuse and combat it immediately. They can be the first people their children confide in. One mother shared that a change in her daughter's interaction toward her—more secretive and less open than usual—led her to just quickly check her daughter's phone. Mrs. Jenkins was horrified by the messages she saw on the screen, and it was not until months later that they all discovered that the boy her daughter was messaging with was actually a scout for a group of human traffickers in the area. Even though Mrs. Jenkins and her daughter are hearing, Mrs. Jenkins would never have felt that urge if she had not connected to her daughter through consistent communication with her. For hearing parents of deaf children, ASL is the connector, the communication bridge that leads to deep, true connection.

Conclusion

Recent law enforcement documents that profile domestic abusers and human traffickers highlight an overlap in the tactics both groups use, specifically the tactic of isolation. Isolation is a very powerful tactic that is especially dangerous for deaf youth because many already experience isolation as a result of the language barrier between hearing people and deaf people. However, American Sign Language can play a crucial role in preventing and combatting isolation by closing the communication gap that isolation develops from. ASL is most effective when it is used by parents and peers, those closest to the deaf child. Research supports that deaf children with fewer communication difficulties with parents and peers experience less isolation (Charlson, E., Strong, M., Gold, R., 1992). Decreasing isolation in deaf youth also decreases the susceptibility of the deaf child to sexual violence because she no longer fits what the trafficker or abuser is targeting. As Veronica shared in her story, deaf children need people to confide in. Parents who know ASL are equipped and ready to listen, to comfort, but also to detect any signs that signify potential danger. ASL brings the other signs to light.

Limitations

This exploration has various strengths; however, in the spirit of academic integrity, the limitations must also be addressed. The lack of recent research on deaf individuals in America contributed to the difficulty of procuring more current statistics on issues within the Deaf community. The number of deaf individuals who identify with the Deaf community is also difficult to estimate because it is a cultural question. Furthermore, because of developing research on human trafficking and domestic violence, and the uniqueness of survivor testimonies, there is currently no research to support whether traffickers and abusers use a specific tactic or set of tactics to target deaf individuals specifically.

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