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A Qualitative Study of Differences Among Hearing Parents in Positive Experiences Raising a Deaf Child: An Emergent Model Informed by Positive Psychology

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Cover Page Footnote

We wish to extend our sincere gratitude to the families involved in this study.

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Abstract

The current qualitative study explored the positive, internal, and growth-enhancing experiences hearing parents derived from raising a child who is deaf or hard of hearing. Based on characteristics of parents' *process* and *outcomes* of the parenting experiences, three distinct parent patterns were identified. *Reflective Positive Parents* reflected deeply about their experiences, quickly and easily identified positive experiences, and were open to making adjustments to meet their child's needs. *Engaged Parents* contemplated their experiences, yet decisions about how to best support their children in many remained unresolved; this group identified both positive and negative aspects of parenting and attempted to align their decisions with both the needs of the child and the recommendations of professionals. The third group, *Compliant Parents*, described positive experiences yet struggled to provide examples; data from observations were typically not consistent with their description. These parents typically followed the advice of professionals and showed less reflection about the decisions they had made. In the current project, employing a positive psychology lens led to a new and potentially beneficial way of thinking of differences among parents. These differences focus on pathways to personal growth and happiness, pathways that may well lead people to flourish.

Keywords: Positive Psychology, Parenting, Disabilities, Deaf, Hard of Hearing, Qualitative research, Conceptual Model

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There is general agreement on the importance of parents and the significant influence they can have on their children's development. It is also widely accepted that parenting can be stressful and challenging, as well as supremely rewarding. Yet, there is little research on actually being a parent that explores how parents move beyond challenges to identify positive and growth-enhancing experiences or navigate parent-child interactions. Furthermore, parents of children with disabilities are rarely, if ever, asked whether or how they may have developed a positive outlook on their experiences, nor asked to describe their journey of acceptance of their child. In particular, few published works describe how parents of children with disabilities — including children who are deaf or hard of hearing — identify, discuss, and describe positive aspects of raising their child.

Parenting and Positive Psychology

Positive psychology encourages researchers to look beyond weaknesses and deficits, shifting focus to identifying areas of strength and growth (Carr, 2011; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). As a field of study, positive psychology explores positive aspects of subjective experiences, individual traits, and positive institutions (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2014). Moving away from studies of psychopathology and mental illness, positive psychology posits that there is much to be gained from understanding positive human experiences, and reflects on topics such as adaptive mental mechanisms (Valient, 2000), human flourishing (Joseph, 2015), and flow, and the state of being deeply involved in something that taps one's abilities and interests (Rich, 2013). Positive psychologists explore what constitutes "the good life" and examine how individuals look for joy in the experience of living (Diener, 2000; Peterson, 2013). When applying this perspective to parenting, we believe it means exploring the joys, the surprises, and the growth that results from being a child's parent. It can involve asking, "What are the experiences that bring meaning and fulfillment to one's life as a parent?" Or, "What will parents, themselves, describe as positive in the parenting experience and in what ways?"

Research that captures a parent's experience through their own words is difficult to find. When searching the literature using "positive" and "parenting" in the search engines, one finds mostly programs that emphasize positive parent training. These include programs such as the Triple-P Positive Parenting (Sander, 1999), which encourages parents to avoid using harsh, random, or inappropriate discipline, or the "Family Centered Positive Psychology" (FCPP), a "...framework for working with children and families that promotes strengths and capacity building within individuals and systems..." (Sheridan et al., 2004, p. 7; Sheridan & Burt, 2009). Positive parenting has also been defined by scholars as having and expressing warmth toward the child and employing appropriate discipline (Chronis et al., 2007; Eisenberg et al., 2005). None of these approaches look specifically at positive attitudes or beliefs described by the parents themselves.

Coulson et al. (2012) attempted to capture parental experiences by exploring the intrinsic attitudes towards being a parent that manifested in their participants. They termed this a "calling," and developed a scale to assess this construct, which they defined as, "a strongly held belief that one is destined to fulfill a specific life role, regardless of sacrifice, that will make a

meaningful contribution to the greater good” (p. 84). *Parental-calling* related positively with seeing parenting as important and as a pleasure, and negatively with perceiving parenting as a burden.

Positive Aspects of Parenting Children with Disabilities

Early work in examining the experiences of families with disabilities focused on studying *coping* of families, later moving to the examination of *adjustment* (Baker et al., 2002; Li & Moore, 1998; Turnbull et al., 1993). Numerous studies explored parental stress (e.g., Hastings, 2002; Saloviita et al., 2003). Some studies described the positive impact of raising a child with a disability (e.g., Tugade et al., 2004) as recognizing the benefits in the experience of raising a child with a disability, being able to experience similar joys as parents raising children without disabilities, experiencing an absence of depression, and not endorsing high levels of stress (Blacher et al., 2013). Studies of families with children with intellectual and developmental disabilities have emphasized resilience (Gerstein et al., 2009; Hastings et al., 2002; Hastings & Taunt, 2002). Other studies have explored parental sense of competence, arguing that one’s sense of competence in parenting a child with special needs can reduce the impact of other burdens (Gilmore & Cuskelly, 2012). Researchers are learning that feelings regarding parenting can be complex, with positive and negative emotions and attitudes experienced at the same time or in rapid succession (Trute et al., 2007; Young & Tattersall, 2007). Some families report transformative, positive experiences as a result of raising a child with a disability (Scorgie & Sobsey, 2000). Few studies exploring the experiences of parenting children with disabilities, however, have included children who are deaf or hard of hearing.

Positive Aspects of Parenting Children Who Are Deaf or Hard of Hearing

The application of positive psychology to studies involving children who are deaf or hard of hearing (hereafter collectively referred to as “deaf children”) or their families has been limited; numerous studies examining parenting of deaf children have focused on parenting stress (e.g., Jean et al., 2018; Park & Yoon, 2018; Sarant & Garrard, 2014; Sipal & Savin, 2013; Zaidman-Zait et al., 2016). Some studies have focused on more positive topics, such as resilience, although these, too, were rather negative in their framing of the situation, describing the heightened stress and difficult adjustment of parents of deaf children (Alhert & Greef, 2012). Alternatively, some studies on resilience explored the child’s experience rather than that of the parents (e.g., Butler et al., 2018; Moore & Mertens, 2015; Zand & Pierce, 2011). One study that did include deaf children in the United States explored “healthy families,” described as having, “... good communication, clear roles, intimacy, and ability to cope with and adjust to daily life demands” (Luckner & Velaski, 2004, p. 333). Those healthy families also described themselves as highly proactive. Parents were both hopeful and fearful about their situations simultaneously. Although conducted in the context of understanding parental stress, Jean and colleagues (Jean et al., 2018) did identify maternal coherence — which they defined as the interaction between stressors that a mother faces and her process of adjusting to those stressors — as an important factor that could influence parents’ experiences in raising a child who is deaf or hard of hearing.

Because of the dearth of research on families with deaf children that asked parents to describe their experiences and provided them an opportunity to discuss positive aspects, we conducted a

series of qualitative interviews (Szarkowski & Brice, 2004) with hearing parents of deaf children. When asked about parenting, hearing parents of deaf or hard of hearing children reported numerous positive aspects. These included *knowing the child*, feeling that they really knew their child better because they were deaf and feeling thankful for that opportunity; experiencing more deeply the *everyday positives*; *taking greater involvement* with their children than they would have had if their child had been born hearing; experiencing a *rush*, or *high* from childrearing; *taking less for granted*; *letting go*; and expressing amazement at the complex *process of learning* that took place in their children. Many parents described *advocating* for their child as rewarding; and finding that challenging times, such as dealing with the new diagnosis of deafness in one's child, led to *personal growth*.

Purpose of the Current Study

During the initial phase of this study, we examined the narratives of hearing parents of deaf children as they described what it was like for them, extracting themes as described above (Szarkowski & Brice, 2004). While engaged in that analysis, however, we noticed that parents differed markedly in how they described their experiences. This observation stayed with us and informed some of our interactions with families of deaf children in our work (Szarkowski & Brice, 2016). Over time, we contemplated the meaning of the different parent patterns and decided to revisit the data, utilizing a different lens for analysis.

Other fields of study, most notably the field of parent-child attachment research, have employed Grice's maxims of conversation (1975, 1989) to analyze interviews. The Adult Attachment Interview (George et al., 1984; Hesse, 2016) is the prime example of this approach. In this semi-structured interview designed to assess the attachment security of adults (analogous to the Strange Situation Procedure [Ainsworth et al., 1978] used with children), people are asked to talk about their relationship with their parents both when they were children and in the present. When evaluating those narratives, it is much less important what the interviewee says about their parents and critical to look at whether Grice's maxims of consistency between words and evidence is present in the narrative (i.e., individuals who describe their families as always supportive would be expected to be able to readily generate examples of times/situations when this took place). Given the success of that approach to evaluating interview data, we aimed to utilize this examination of coherence and apply Grice's maxims to delve deeper and explore the consistencies with which parents described their experiences, how they interacted with their deaf or hard of hearing child, and how they reflected on their parenting. We were interested in better understanding differences among parents in their descriptions of positive experiences, how they came to view their experiences in a positive light, and the extent to which they described their parenting experiences impacting their lives.

For the present analysis, using Grice's principles and a qualitative approach (Corbin & Strauss, 2015), we identified differences among parents in their positive views and explored what contributed to those perspectives. Examination of the data guided us in uncovering potential paths to development of a positive outlook. This led to the building of a conceptual model of patterns of parenting that has potential implications for understanding and supporting a multitude of families.

Methods

Qualitative Investigation, Positive Psychology Lens

This project was informed by the belief that parents of deaf children *do* have positive experiences, despite the overwhelming extent of the literature that highlights the challenges. It was conceptualized using a framework of Positive Psychology with its emphasis on strengths, resilience, and overcoming challenges. We asked parents to appraise their experiences in ways that encouraged them to consider the positive. Qualitative methods were utilized including semi-structured qualitative interviews, observations of family interactions, and the review of journaling documents created by parents, in order to examine *whether* and *how* hearing parents of deaf and hard of hearing children experience positives in their parenting. This study was approved by Gallaudet University's Internal Review Board for the protection of human participants.

This study was conducted by two psychologists, both hearing and fluent in American Sign Language (ASL), who have worked with individuals who are deaf for a number of years. The first author conducted the interviews and observations; both authors contributed to the research planning and design, as well as the analysis and conceptualization.

Participants

Stratified purposeful sampling (Patton, 2005; Suri, 2011) was used in the present study. The researchers aimed to obtain a diverse set of participants, with variety in the preferred mode of communication within the family (seven families described commonly using more than one modality), as well as the children's age and their use of hearing assistive technologies. Participants differed in their life experiences, academic achievements, and economic standing. Diversity in the realms that were deemed relevant to the present study were achieved, although, admittedly, as a whole this group of participants was more advantaged in terms of education and resources than the general United States population. Participants resided in a large urban area and were recruited from two schools for deaf children (one a signing program, the other an oral program), two childcare settings, and two public school systems that each had programs to support deaf and hard of hearing students. Flyers with information about the study were shared with key contacts at each location who agreed to distribute them to families. Each program or school also shared information about study recruitment in a newsletter that went to parents.

A minimum of six interviews is generally recommended for qualitative interviews in order to obtain enough data for meta-themes to emerge; at around 10-12 interviews, data begins to reach a saturation point (Guest et al., 2006). In the present study, 11 parent/child dyads were included. In some cases, two parents from the same family participated to ensure that fathers' perspectives were also captured; if two parents were included in the study, they were interviewed separately. Thus, 11 hearing parents described their experiences in raising 8 children who were deaf.

We sought to understand similarities in the experiences of parenting children with reduced hearing, rather than to document differences between parents or families based on levels of

hearing, decisions about whether to utilize hearing assistive technologies, or choices regarding communication modality.

Table 1.
Demographic information on parents

Parent	Ethnicity	Parent Age	Child Age	Educ. Level	Communication	Hearing Assist. Tech	SES
Mother	C	50	12	BA	Oral/ASL	HA	M/U
Father	C	50	12	MS	Oral/ Signed English	HA	M/U
Mother	J	40	1	PhD	ASL/Cue	HA	M
Father	J	40	1	PhD	ASL	HA	M
Mother	H	20	5	HS	Oral	CI	U
Mother	C	40	6	Some college	ASL/ T.C./Cue	None	M/U
Mother	C	30	3	HS	Oral	CI	M
Mother	I	20	2	Some college	ASL & Oral	CI	L
Mother	C	40	12	BA	ASL/Sign ed English	HA	L
Father	J	40	12	HS	ASL/Sign ed English	HA	L
Mother	J	40	14	BA	Oral	CI	M/U

Key for Table 1

Self-Reported Ethnicity: C = Caucasian, J= Jewish, H= Hispanic, I = Italian

Parent Age: Age Range by decade

Child Age: Child Age in years

Education Completed: HS = High school diploma; BA = Bachelor’s degree; MS = Master’s degree; PhD = Doctoral degree

Communication: Oral = Spoken English; ASL = American Sign Language; T.C. = Total Communication; Cue = Cued Speech

Hearing Assistive Technologies: HA = Hearing aids; CI = Cochlear Implant

Socio-Economic Standing (self-reported): L = Lower income; M = Middle income; U = Upper income

Procedures

Interview

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with parents, utilizing a list of a dozen questions that were used to guide the conversation. The questions were informed by the investigators’ knowledge of psychology in general, as well as positive psychology, qualitative research

methods, and parent-child attachment. Through these interviews, hearing parents of deaf and hard of hearing children responded well to the positively-framed questions. Collectively, they described the questions as refreshing, a shift from the questions about “*what is hard*” that they were typically asked by the professionals and were instead asked to describe “*what is right*” about their parenting experiences.

Observations

The researcher observed parent/child dyads engaging in a naturalistic activity for 60-90 minutes. Parent/child dyads were observed on two occasions doing different activities (with one exception where the family moved away prior to the second observation). Nine observations took place in the family’s home, one in a park and another in the family’s backyard. With families in which both a mother and a father participated in an interview, two observations were held: one with the child interacting with each parent. As parents were asked to report the positive aspects of parenting, it was important to the researchers that the parent-child interactions be observed to provide further evidence of the dynamics that the parents reported in the interviews.

Journal Responses

Parents were asked to journal their thoughts between the time of the interview and the initial observation with the family. Ten engaged in journaling in some manner; the remaining parent indicated that time constraints made journaling too difficult. The parents’ journal responses largely focused on thoughts about the interview. All 10 parents commented on the positive impact that participation in the study had on them. They stated that involvement in the study encouraged them to think in terms of the positives they did experience in raising their deaf or hard of hearing child during, but also well after the interview took place. Consistent with findings of research on written emotional disclosure among parents of children with various physical or medical challenges (Jones et al., 2016; Riddle, Smith, & Jones, 2016) participants in the present study who wrote about their parenting experiences described increases in positive outlook and decreased stress as it related to caregiving during the time that they engaged in journaling.

Integrity Measures

Interviews were audio-recorded and full transcripts were generated. These, along with parents’ journal responses, were entered into Atlas.ti[®], a qualitative data management system used to assist with tracking thematic codes. The steps involved in coding included: familiarizing oneself with the data and generating codes, followed by searching for, reviewing, defining, and naming emergent themes (consistent with recommendations offered by Vaismoradi et al., 2013). We neither participated in nor interrupted the parent/child interaction; observations were conducted with the researcher in the role of complete observer (as described in Gold’s Typology of Observer Roles, 1958; Baker, 2006). An interactional diagram was generated for each observation, showing the layout of the space. This allowed the researcher to compare notes of the interactions that took place between participants. Further, field notes were compiled during the observations, noting the date, time, location, and context of the observation. The format of the field notes was informed by Patton (2005). The researcher documented: the physical setting, the

social interactions that took place, and the consistency noted between the interviews (which took place first) and the observations.

Data Analysis

Data analysis for the present study involved comparisons within individual participants (examining consistency and relative ease of responses) and comparisons between participants, looking for emergent themes or patterns that could inform the development of a conceptualization of how hearing parents perceive of their experience.

A number of steps were taken to enhance the credibility of this research, consistent with recommendations by Mertens (2015) and Elo and Kyngås (2008). These included: member checks (providing the opportunity for parents to make corrections or to clarify any of the comments that they made during the interview), peer debriefer (engaging with a professional with expertise in qualitative methods who — blind to the names and details of the participants — served as a “sounding board” to the researchers), progressive subjectivity (recording thoughts and reactions following each of the interviews), and triangulation (examining consistency across the data for each participant, i.e., each parent’s interview, observation, and journal entries).

Results

Three Parenting Patterns

In closely examining the interview transcripts, the journal entries, and the observation notes, three separate and distinct groups of parents emerged, with different patterns in their narratives and parenting approaches. The three groups differed in their reported experiences in raising a deaf child, the degree to which their statements during the interview were consistent with their interactions with their child, and the type of information that was shared in their journals. It is important to note that parents within each parent pattern experienced both positives and negatives. The frequency and intensity of these experiences, as well as the ratio of positive and negative experiences held by the parents were influential in determining how positively parents described the experience of parenting a child who was deaf or hard of hearing. We labeled the three groups that emerged: 1) Reflective Positive Parents, 2) Engaged Parents, and 3) Compliant Parents. Of the 11 parent participants, four were categorized as Reflective Positive Parents, four aligned with the description of Engaged Parents, and three were considered as Compliant Parents.

A number of characteristics of the interviews differentiated these parents. Some of these characteristics described aspects of the *process* of parenting. Other characteristics described the *outcome* of the parenting experience.

Table 2

Parent Patterns that emerged in the present study, informed by process and outcome characteristics.

Process Characteristics	Reflective Positive Parents	Engaged Parents	Compliant Parents
Consistency	Exhibited a high degree of consistency and congruency in their reports of their parenting experiences	Exhibited a fair amount of consistency in their reports and the observations.	Exhibited inconsistency in their reports of their parenting experience
Ease of Identification	Easily identified positives in raising a deaf child	Identified numerous positives in raising a deaf child, yet noted many negatives as well	Identified fewer positives; struggled or took longer to generate positive examples. Had difficulty thinking of positive examples and/or tended to require extended time to generate responses.
Reflectivity	Exhibited a high level of reflectivity about parenting experiences	Recognized a need to reflect and learn from experiences; tended to express hopefulness that they would be able to change the life circumstances that were negatively impacting them	Exhibited limited ability or tendency to reflect on events/experiences
Flexibility	Demonstrated high levels of flexibility in their decision-making based on the needs of the child	Exhibited a relatively high level of flexibility, yet also expressed worry, guilt, and frustration with the choices they had made for their children	Showed reduced flexibility in their approach to decision-making. Followed the advice of professionals rather than making decisions based on the "fit" of the decisions with their child's needs
Outcome Characteristics			
Change in Perspective	Readily noted changes in their parenting perspectives and in themselves as individuals.	Identified some ways they had changed perspectives, as well as ways they hoped to improve, "still needed work."	Did not discuss changes in parenting perspectives or growth; tended to be focused on day-to-day activities or tasks.
Personal Growth	Reported high levels of personal growth as a result of raising a deaf child. Showed	Reported experiencing personal growth, yet also identified areas that remained difficult.	Reported little or no experiences with personal growth related to raising a deaf child.

	an eagerness to discuss their growth and the challenges that they felt they had overcome.	Frequently used terminology that reflected a sense of recognition of “being in the process” of learning to better deal or cope with their circumstances.	Described their experiences “following the advice of professionals” and described themselves as implementing programming and plans.
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Process Characteristics

In examining the data from the parents interviewed, we discerned four different commonalities relating to the process of parenting a child who is deaf. These were characteristics within the data that involved “*how*” parents described their perspectives on the positive aspects of parenting rather than on the content of what they shared. They included how consistent parents were in their reporting across data types, as well as how easily they replied to the interview questions. Additionally, there were differences in the parents’ ability to reflect on their lives, and how flexible they seemed in adapting to their families’ needs.

Consistency of Reporting. If parents reported having many positive experiences with their deaf child every day, it was expected that they would be able to give clear and believable examples. If the parents were unable to do so, this disconnect between their words and their actions was noted and considered in the context of the other data collected from that participant. The process of looking for consistency between words and actions or between descriptions and evidence is consistent with Grice’s maxims (1975; 1989) and with research using the Adult Attachment Interview (AAI) (George et al., 1984; Hesse, 2016). With the AAI, those unable to provide examples of instances when the parents acted in ways described are less believable. This pattern of response suggests a lack of reflection upon or awareness of their experiences, resulting in a narrative that feels less true to the real experience.

Ease of response. Another factor in conceptualizing parental differences was the relative ease with which the parents were able to identify positive aspects of their experience. All of the participants were able to give some examples of positives experiences related to parenting their child; some were able to generate a long list, while others named just a few characteristics or experiences that made parenting positive for them. Thus, being able to generate such a list was one aspect of determining the ease with which parents could identify the “positives.” Parents were not timed in their responses; yet, qualitatively, differences were apparent in the extent to which parents could readily provide examples of positives in their parenting experiences. Naturally, this discrepancy could be attributed to other factors such as verbal fluency, memory, ease and comfort with the researcher, or the situational characteristics. However, the degree of difference in response time was so marked that it was believed to be related to the parents’ perceptions about the positive aspects of raising a deaf child.

Ability to Reflect. Some parents may be naturally inclined to reflect on their lives and discuss or process those reflections with their partners. That sort of reflection, called the *reflective function* (Allen & Fonagy, 2006; Fonagy et al., 2002), may contribute to the ability of some parents to put their lives in perspective, focus on their own and their children’s growth, and

see themselves in a different light. The parents in this study differed substantially regarding their ability and willingness to reflect. Some parents thought deeply about their parenting role and the decisions they had to make as parents of a child with reduced hearing. Others were contemplative, yet showed less confidence in their ability to make decisions for the child. Still other parents demonstrated much less obvious reflection and seemed to acquiesce to professionals' or educators' suggestions, examining their experiences less deeply. Parents who described the process of reflecting on their experiences seem to report higher levels of personal growth.

Flexibility. Parental psychological flexibility is described as making appropriate choices even when those choices are accompanied by difficult or painful thoughts, emotions and sensations (Burke & Moore, 2015). Parental psychological flexibility may play a role in predicting child outcomes. Yet, rather than highlighting how parental flexibility enhances positive outcomes, research on flexibility has largely focused on reducing children's negative outcomes. For example, Brassell and colleagues (2016) found that parents who were rated higher in parental psychological flexibility had children who rated lower on internalizing and externalizing problem behaviors. There may be benefit, however, not only to the child whose parent exhibits psychological flexibility, but to the parent as well. In the present study, parents who were more flexible in their parenting approaches, exhibited a greater ability to adjust and alter how they parented or the resources they sought in relation to the needs that arose in their children.

Outcome Characteristics

In the analysis of the data, two things stood out in terms of the “*what*” of the experience of parenting a deaf or hard of hearing child. Respondents described how the presence of the child in the family impacted or influenced the parents themselves. These involved parents' changing perspectives about their role as parents, and the personal growth reported by parents as a result of raising their children.

Change in Perspective. An outcome of being flexible and reflecting on one's own experiences as a parent can be recognizing when one's view, outlook, or *perspective* changes. Changing views, for example, could be noted in how parents perceived their role, or in what they valued as a parent or within their family. Parents in our study varied in how much they acknowledged changing their perspectives. Some readily pointed out the ways in which they viewed things differently than they had formerly, while others made no mention of it whatsoever.

Personal Growth. The final characteristic that differentiated parents was recognition and description of ways that they had grown as individuals and as parents as a result of parenting a child who was deaf or hard of hearing. Some parents were eager to explain the struggles they had experienced, what they had learned from those struggles, how they had overcome them, and how, as a result, they had grown as people. Other parents rarely or never mentioned their own development or progress. They described following advice and doing what professionals recommended, but did not comment on their own learning.

Manifestation of Parental Patterns

A number of topics were commonly raised in the narratives of the parents through the semi-structured interviews. We have selected one example — how hearing parents of deaf and hard of hearing children made decisions about selecting which communication method(s) to use — to illustrate the differences in parenting patterns in both the process by which parents made decisions and the outcomes of their decision-making. Importantly, among the three parenting patterns, differences were noted not in the methods that they chose to facilitate communication; to be clear, no particular communication option was linked to a specific pattern of parenting. Rather, parents across the three groups differed in 1) the degree to which they felt comfortable with their decisions regarding communication options; 2) took ownership of their decisions; and 3) demonstrated flexibility in adjusting their decisions to fit the needs of their individual child.

Reflective Positive Parents reported greater flexibility in re-considering their decisions based on what they believed their children needed as a result of pondering their options, attuning to their children's abilities, monitoring their children's progress, and adjusting their approaches to fit the needs of the children and their families. For instance, one parent stated,

I wanted to raise him to use ASL. I thought that was the right thing to do...what the Deaf community would want. But he was always looking at our lips, trying to figure out what we were saying. Now, we use Total Communication with him. I was against that when I first learned about Deaf culture, but I think he was trying to tell us what he needed from us in order to understand. Now, his signing is better and he understands us better than before.

Another parent discussed her decision to give her child a cochlear implant:

We wanted to do what was best for him, and we thought that allowing him to hear some would be easier than never hearing at all. But when we decided, we also faced the fact that he may decide that he doesn't want an implant later in life. We don't want to deny him an identity, only make his life easier. We have continued to take ASL and teach him signs, because that may be the method that he chooses later in life. We are prepared for that, whatever is best for him is fine.

Engaged Parents questioned the choices they made for their children and displayed embarrassment or guilt about not meeting their children's needs. Often, they chose communication and education methods based on professionals' opinions, yet they occasionally doubted their decisions. One stated:

I picked mainstreaming because I thought it would be best for her education. I read books and talked to special ed [education] teachers, and it seemed like the best option. Now, though, I see that she doesn't have many friends at school and I feel bad that I forced her into this. But I think it is too late now; she doesn't fit in with deaf kids either because she has never known any.

In contrast to the approach taken by *Reflective Positive Parents*, who generally acknowledged flexibility in their approach to communication opportunities, *Engaged Parents* seemed to commit to one communication option and stick with it despite reported uncertainty about if this was the appropriate approach. They exhibited a mixture of reflectively considering their choices and feeling somewhat stymied by the choices that they had made.

Compliant Parents were less likely to take into account their children's reaction to communication than were parents in the other two groups. These parents tended to follow the advice of the professionals they encountered and were less likely to notice or comment on the fit of these methods with their child. These parents were committed to 'staying the course' with the method(s) they had chosen. *Compliant Parents* seemed to have spent less time thinking about the options or consequences, or assessing how satisfied they were with their children's progress or the choices that they made. It was as if decisions made were final, and no longer open for discussion.

The most consistently and convincingly positive of the parents deeply and consciously examined their life experiences as parents and were able (often with support of family, friends, and professionals) to draw energy and positivity from their life circumstances. The parents who were least convincing in their portrayal of positive perceptions of their children showed a desire to appear positive about their lives and their deaf children, but demonstrated a limited examination of the choices they had made, the quality of their family life, and their ability to have an impact on their lives and their children. Yet still another group of parents reflected on their experiences and identified positive aspects, although they were highly aware of the more difficult aspects of the experience; these parents were thoughtful about their role as parents, yet were not always empowered to make desired changes.

It is important to note that all parents in the present study wanted to do what was best for their children and hoped to make decisions that would benefit the children and the family. The distinctions described here with respect to parent patterns are not intended to reflect judgment about how much parents love their child. Rather, the patterns that emerged are believed to be useful in conceptualizing how parents may approach their parenting experience.

Additional Influences

There are a number of contributing factors that are not accounted for in the model; in this section we recognize and identify some of these. This conceptualization, while not intended to be a comprehensive understanding/identification of all of the factors that influence parents, can be useful and can inform how professionals approach families.

A combination of parent characteristics and situational factors seem to play a significant role in determining whether parents reported a positive or negative parenting experience. The absence or presence of external support has been well-documented in the deaf-related literature as a contributing factor in how well parents cope with the identification of reduced hearing (Åsberg et al., 2008; Lederberg & Golbach, 2002; Meadow-Orlans, 1994; Meadow-Orlans & Sass-Lehrer, 1995). Parents in the *Reflective Positive Parents* category readily attributed their enjoyment of their deaf children to the support they had received, the characteristics of their children, and

access to resources. They discussed their trajectory of growth and the development of a positive perspective in terms of the situational factors previously outlined as well as personal characteristics that they believed assisted them in developing the attributes associated with this category. One parent stated, “I had a lot of support, and I don’t know what I would have done without that support. But I want to give myself credit, too. I have always been able to face challenges head on, and when I decided to view this as a challenge instead of an unfair tragedy, I could deal with it much better.”

Some people are naturally more optimistic and hopeful than others. For example, one parent in the *Compliant Parent* category stated, “I tend to be a pessimist, and I know that. When life hands you lemons, you are supposed to make lemonade; I tend to complain that the lemon juice is too tart.” Additionally, it is likely that characteristics such as overall intellectual ability, educational experiences and background, economic standing, and personal experiences with one’s own parents contribute here. Parent characteristics, while not the whole story regarding how they parent a child with reduced hearing, certainly can be an influential factor.

Numerous child characteristics, too, including the child’s developmental stage at any given time, will influence one’s perspective on the experience of being a parent. One mother stated, “I used to praise the experience of having a deaf child. Now that my daughter is a teenager, I am not singing any praises any more. I don’t know if it is her, or the deafness, but it seems the combination of having a deaf teenager is not very fun right now.” Beyond the changing demands of different developmental times, other child characteristics, such as challenges with social-emotional functioning (Hintermair, 2016), difficulties with pragmatics (Goberis et al., 2012), or language abilities may play a role (Quittner et al., 2010). For example, Quittner and colleagues showed that language and related behavior difficulties lead to a more stressful parenting experience, which could in turn affect the appraisal of that experience. It should be noted that many of the developmental challenges posed as children grow relate to every parent, not only those whose children are deaf or hard of hearing.

Strengths of This Conceptualization

The proposed conceptualization of positive experiences as a parent differs in important ways from past models of parenting. We would argue that this goes beyond satisfaction as a parent, which has been studied, because it focuses on how parents come to grow as they raise their children, even children typically seen as having more challenges. Secondly, it captured parents’ own words and actions, and allowed for deep examination of what their beliefs about the abilities their deaf children and the internal models that they held of their children and themselves. This model also integrated the importance of a reflective function, which is not part of parenting competence nor parental discipline models. The combination of emphasizing positive growth and the coherence of internal models of experience is unique.

Having used qualitative methods approaches to arrive at this conceptualization of parent patterns, the groundwork for further investigation has been laid. We recognize that these findings are only a beginning in changing the paradigm from appreciating parents’ stresses and problems to learning what leads families to flourish. While it is important to understand how parents cope with situations that the literature has shown to be challenging — such as parenting a child with a

disability — it is more important to appreciate what leads them to perceive their experience in more positive ways. What allows them to enjoy their lives and helps them to thrive in their caregiving roles? Aligning with the tenets of positive psychology, we believe that regardless of one's circumstances, there is benefit to better understanding how it can be possible to flourish.

Limitations

The use of qualitative methodology provides for a richness and depth of analysis that has significant benefits (Mertens, 2015). Yet, such an approach does limit the ability to generalize the findings, assess cultural and group differences, or to draw conclusions (Trafimow, 2014). Thus, we cannot propose a definitive description of hearing parents' experiences; instead, we offer a conceptual model (Green, 2014) for considering how parents of deaf children might approach their parenting experiences. The model needs to be tested to determine whether it can be of benefit to parents and professionals working with families of children who are deaf.

Decisions were made with the study design and incorporation of qualitative approaches that affect our interpretations. The interview intentionally emphasized positivity, which also influenced what the parents might report. Those who could identify positive aspects of their parenting experience were likely to volunteer to participate, resulting in a self-selected sample. Further, participants were asked to engage in lengthy interviews and observations, further potentially limiting the participant pool. Given the nature of this study, parents who were naturally more inclined toward personal development or exploring positive experiences were more highly motivated to participate.

Although participants met with the researcher over the course of several weeks or months, between the initial interview and completion of the observations, the data gathered here still represents only a snapshot in the life of each family. Parents discussed changes that they had experienced in their thinking regarding their parenting experiences, yet the researchers did not actually track changes in parents' appraisals over time. Thus, the stability of these patterns cannot be determined from the limited data.

Future Directions

Parent-child dyads in the present study were diverse in their approaches to communication, in the child's hearing status and use of hearing assistive technology, and in age (which naturally influenced the length of time the parents had been raising their children). In the future, it would be helpful to examine the fit of this conceptual model with parents of children who are the same age to explore whether or to what extent length of time as a parent might influence positive experiences in parenting deaf children. Additionally, the sample was limited in terms of ethnic/racial diversity; participants did not reflect demographics found in the wider population in the United States. A potential next step is to call for conducting a similar study, perhaps with parents and families from different backgrounds and geographic locations, to see better whether the proposed categorization of parenting patterns could be applicable across a diverse group. Future studies could also explore further the roles of culture, socio-economic background, and family constellation on these patterns.

It could also be useful to examine the influence of parent patterns on families. A number of important questions arise from these analyses, including investigating whether parents who are reflective and positive are able to better manage their children's lives. Do children whose parents maintain a reflective and positive attitude also feel more positively about their own lives? Are they, too, more reflective and perhaps more attuned to such things as theory of mind? Is communication, regardless of assistive technology or choice of communication options, better among positive than less positive families? Do children with *Reflective Positive Parents* demonstrate better quality of life and overall mental health?

One might question whether parents “switch” patterns. *Reflective Positive Parents* were able to give examples of how they had “moved up” as they adjusted to the identification of the child's hearing status and altered some of their expectations. Responses from *Engaged Parents* suggested that, on the whole, they may be generally positive yet struggle with particular stressors that made them less positive for a given time. Further investigation into the development and stability of these patterns over the time spent raising a child seems warranted.

In addition to the life circumstances that contribute to the promotion or inhibition of positive parenting experiences, parents possess a variety of personalities, temperaments, and attitudes. These characteristics are influential as well, particularly in determining where a parent might “start out” in raising a deaf child. A parent who is generally positive and optimistic might be more likely to start out in the *Engaged Parents* or *Reflective Positive Parents* category than in the *Compliant Parents* category, for example. Research looking into the relation between individual characteristics such as personality or attachment style and parenting patterns is needed.

In order for a conceptual model to prove useful, it should be tested. Using this model as a framework, researchers could explore the extent to which the *Parental Patterns* conceptualization captures the experiences of other parents. The current sample of parents had children who were deaf or hard of hearing. Exploring the application of the *Parent Patterns* model with different groups of parents of deaf children (e.g., Deaf parents of deaf children, parents of children who are deaf and have additional disabilities) could also yield valuable information. It is our view that the patterns uncovered here will apply to parents of children with disabilities in general and may be seen in parents with typically developing children as well.

If the *Parental Patterns* conceptual model does hold across different sets of parents, it may be useful to develop a scoring system that would allow for categorization into the parental pattern that best fits a particular parent. That could be an important next step in assessing the application of this model. Understanding which Parental Pattern captures a parent's perspective could provide useful information to the families themselves, as well as potentially inform professional working with those families about differing strategies to work and engage with the parents “from where they are.”

Exploring the healthy and positive dimensions of life, even when the lived experience appears challenging, opens a door into a new perspective. Being grounded in positive psychology, whether as scholars, clinicians, or instructors, can promote hopefulness, optimism, and an appreciation of experiences through the work that we do. Using a Positive Psychology frame

changes the questions professionals ask of people Szarkowski & Brice, 2018). In the current project, employing a positive psychology lens led to a new and potentially beneficial way of thinking of differences among parents. These differences focus not on levels of maladjustment or struggle, but on pathways to personal growth and happiness, pathways that may well lead people to flourish.

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