Deafness as Culture: A Psychosocial Perspective

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to use psychosocial theories of stigma, language and prejudice to discuss the factors that contribute to the transformation of deafness from a stigma to a cultural identity. This paper is not intended to support or deny the existence and importance of a Deaf culture. Rather, it seeks to examine the question: How does deafness, which has historically been labeled as a disability, become the basis for cultural identification? The literature on deafness as disabling, versus as signifying culture, will be summarized. Psychosocial theories about the role of stigma, language and prejudice in the formation and maintenance of personal and group identity will then be explored. These theories will be applied to the controversy on deafness as culture: the role of the stigma of disability, the use of sign-language, and prejudice against non-group members in the preservation of the Deaf culture.

The Deaf Culture Debate

The question of whether or not deafness constitutes the basis of a culture is an emotionally charged debate. On the one hand, deafness has historically been viewed as a physical impairment associated with such disabilities as blindness, cognitive, and motor impairments. On the other hand, views on deafness as a culture have recently emerged that consider deafness as a trait, not as a disability.

Deafness As An Impairment

Deafness as a disability has been the underlying premise of the education and rehabilitation of the deaf for decades (Butler, Skelton & Valentine, 2001; Lane, 1997). From the perspective that deafness is an impairment, the inability to hear interferes with a person's ability to respond to environmental cues, to communicate, and to enjoy aspects of mainstream culture such as music. The "debilitating" effects of deafness can be lessened through the use of technology such as hearing aids, cochlear implants, assistive listening devices, and through the use of oralism, being able to speak and visually read others' speech (Higgins, 1990; Kronick, 1990). The individual is a member of a familial and societal heritage that does not consider the

inability to hear an integral part of its day-to-day functioning.

For example, one parent describes what motivated her to have her daughter receive a cochlear implant, a prosthetic device that is placed in the inner ear to allow some profoundly deaf persons to hear: "We do not live in a deaf community. We live in a high-rise apartment complex " (James, 1991). In fact, there are those who argue that the very concept of "culture" is amorphous, that each of us lives in a number of communities within which we must maneuver (Turner, 1994). Therefore the individual who is deaf must learn to function as a member of a family and a community, in which deafness is a pathology in order to belong and contribute to these groups (Higgins, 1990; James; Turner).

Deafness As A Culture

Particularly within the past few decades, proponents of deafness as a culture have asserted that deafness is not a pathology and therefore does not need to be "fixed" (Butler, Skelton & Valentine, 2001; Dolnick, 1993; Lane, 1992, 1997; Padden & Humphries, 1988; Wilcox 1989). Advocates of deafness as a culture distinguish culture by using the capital "D" whereas the lower case "d" signifies deafness as a pathology (Dolnick, 1993). From this perspective, an individual who cannot hear is potentially a member of a rich cultural heritage that separates the individual from any non-Deaf members of their family or community. Dolnick's article, "Deafness As Culture," presents an excellent summary of the Deaf culture debate. "Parent and child belong to different cultures, as they would in an adoption along racial lines," says Dolnick, "And deaf children acquire a sense of cultural identity from their peers rather than their parents" (p. 38).

Padden & Humphries (1988) describes culture as "a set of learned behaviors of a group of people who have their own language, values, rules for behaviors, and traditions" (p.4). They apply this definition to Deaf culture stating that Deaf people behave similarly, use the same language, and share the same beliefs. The view of deafness as culture holds that children and adults who cannot hear are isolated from the mainstream because communication with hearing individuals will always be laborious (Butler, Skelton & Valentine, 2001; Dolnick, 1993; Fletcher, 1988; Foster, 1988; Marschark, 1993; Padden & Humphries, 1988; Wilcox, 1989). For example, Foster's study examined the experiences of Deaf students in the mainstream and found that their interaction with non-Deaf students was severely curtailed due to communication barriers. The study also found that Deaf students tended for the most part to socialize with each other rather than with non-Deaf students and this was attributed to shared language and experiences.

Psychosocial Theories of Group Dynamics

In order to discuss the Deaf culture debate from a psychosocial perspective it is necessary to explore the current thought concerning in-group and out-group dynamics. The next section surveys some of the psychosocial theories that examine the role of stigma, language, and prejudice in the process of group identification.

Stigma

A person becomes stigmatized "[when they are] reduced in our minds from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one" (Goffman, 1997). Thus, a stigma is essentially an attribute that is discredited by others. Stigma appears to play a role in-group formation, particularly in minority group formation. Individuals who are stigmatized by society, for example certain racial and religious minorities, gays, women, persons with disabilities, etc., have been known to transform their stigmas into the basis for group identification (Brewer, 1991; Brewer, 1995; Coates, 1988; Crocker, 1989). One explanation for this phenomena is based on the assumption that each individual desires to have positive self-esteem (Crocker). Since the concept of stigma can be negative, because it separates the individual from the norm, an individual must re-define the stigma in order to maintain positive self-esteem. Brewer writes:

> having any salient feature that distinguishes oneself from everyone else in a social context...is at least uncomfortable and at worst devastating to self-esteem. One way to combat the non-optimality of stigmatization is to convert the stigma from a feature of personal identity to a basis of social identity. (p. 481)

An extension of this view is that people who are stigmatized, as with most people, tend to identify with similar people. It has been suggested that people do this in order to be "normal." In other words, a stigma can become the norm within the stigmatized population (Crocker, 1989).

Not all stigmatized people chose to identify themselves with other similarly stigmatized people. Some theorists propose that an important factor that contributes to whether or not people will form groups, or choose to be members of already formed groups, is whether or not membership to the majority group is feasible (Crocker & Major 1989; Wright, Taylor & Moghaddam, 1990). For example, Wright, Taylor and Moghaddam measured what motivated a person's desire to move from a low to a high status group and found that

> ...individual attempts at social mobility will be maintained as long as the advantaged group appears open and as long as entry is dependent solely on individual performance. However, when a disadvantaged-group member is prevented from gaining entry into the advantage group and perceives the system as closed, individual social mobility will be abandoned in favor of collective action. (p. 996)

In other words, when it is possible for a stigmatized individual to "pass" in the majority group, that individual will likely seek to identify with the majority group. When membership to the majority group is completely closed to the stigmatized individual, that individual is likely to join forces with other stigmatized individuals and form a new group.

Language

Theories that examine language as the basis of cohesion and separation also factor into the dynamics of group formation (Bourhis & Giles, 1979; Giles, Bourhis & Taylor, 1977). Language has been shown to be an important tool that people use to express their identity and to make judgments about other people (Bourhis and Giles, 1979). Language can also be viewed as an inseparable dimension of culture and heritage. It has even been demonstrated that people identify more with people who speak the same language than with people who share the same familial background (Giles, Bourhis, and Taylor, 1977).

Prejudice

Where stigma is a label, prejudice is an attitude (Herek & Capitanio, 1999). Devine (1995) states that prejudice "...is commonly defined as negative feeling toward persons based solely on their group membership" (p. 486). Prejudice appears to underlie the separation of individuals into "in-groups" and "out-groups" (Brewer, Manzi & Shaw 1993; Crocker, Blaine & Luhtanen 1993; Mullen, Brown & Smith, 1992), separating "us" from "them." Prejudice against a certain group by others functions as an act of cohesion among persons who belong to that group. Any traits that group members share can be perceived by people in that group as positive (Crocker, Blaine & Luhtanen, 1993).

Application of Psycho-Social Theories to Deaf Culture

Disability and Stigma

If deafness is viewed as a disability, then people who are deaf carry with them the stigma of "lacking" a typical human characteristic. As discussed earlier, a person who is stigmatized usually needs to see the stigma as positive in order to maintain high self-esteem. Therefore a person with a disability either needs to regard the disability as constituting a positive part of their identity or that the individual needs to disassociate themselves from the stigma of disability altogether (Barnes, Mercer & Shakespeare, 1999; Linton, 1998).

It has been argued that when people with disabilities identify with other people who have disabilities they do not regard themselves as stigmatized, but as members of a select group (Calta, 1988; Foster & Brown, 1988; Kronick, Kronick & Irwin, 1990; Linton, 1998; Smith, 1994). People with disabilities, like all people, want to be worthwhile members of a group, to feel that other people share their life experiences, that they have other traits other than a disability, and that traits associated with a disability are positive (Linton, 1998). From this perspective, a person who is deaf might identify with other deaf people in order to maintain a sense of self worth. A person who is deaf will likely be comfortable with peers who are deaf because within the peer group being stigmatized as "deaf" is not a determinant of one's role within the group (Foster and Brown, 1988).

In fact an important aspect of viewing deafness from the cultural model is the separation from the concept of non-normality and disability. Although proponents of Deaf culture say

that they are bound together by the experience of deafness, they also say that deafness does not signify a loss, but a distinctive perspective of the world (Dolnick, 1993; Padden & Humphries, 1988; Lane, 1992; Wilcox, 1989). One way to answer the question of how this idea emerged is to apply the psycho-social theories that propose that when stigmatized individuals cannot "pass" in the majority group, they are most likely to seek collective action. Dolnick (1993) quotes two advocates for Deaf culture who say, "The term `disabled' describes those who are blind or physically handicapped, not Deaf people" (p. 37-38). Fletcher (1988) explores her experience raising a deaf child and her feelings of discomfort when her child is wearing hearing aids: "My eyes flick from the face to the hearing aids...I recognize in myself a deep feeling of pity...The term hearing impaired carries with it the constant reminder of a fault, something wrong, broken" (p. 42-43).

One of the reasons given for this feeling of separation is that deaf people cannot be fully integrated into the mainstream (Lane, 1992; Padden & Humphries, 1988; Wilcox, 1989). This perceived closure of the hearing world to the world of the Deaf may be one reason why Deaf people have chosen to react against the values of much of the mainstream that labels deafness as disability. Padden writes (in Wilcox, 1989): "In speaking, the Deaf person feels she will always be at a disadvantage and can never become fully equal to hearing people: to communicate deeply and comfortably in their own language." She also writes: "Deaf people must live almost entirely within the world of others. This peculiar social condition leads to a longing of their own, a longing to live lives designed by themselves rather than those imposed by others." (Padden & Humphries, 1988)

Sign Language

The use of sign language as a first language has been the foundation upon which much of the pro-Deaf culture advocacy has been based. Many people who use sign language even make a distinction between the sign language used by persons who acquire the language before the age of six, those who use 'pure sign,' and persons who acquire the language after early childhood (Wilcox, 1989). Pure signers say that they can recognize the approximate age at which a person acquired sign language by the way they use facial expressions.

The use of sign language is so important to the Deaf culture that any perceived threat to the use of sign language is seen as a threat to the efficacy of Deaf culture. For example, the use of cochlear implants has been criticized by members of the Deaf culture. In 1990 the National Association of the Deaf (NAD) published a position paper implying that cochlear implants steer deaf children and their parents away from the Deaf culture altogether. Lane (1992) states that children who receive cochlear implants experience a delay in acquiring sign language skills and in developing an identity as a deaf person and that children who are raised orally experience "cultural homelessness" (p. 226-228). Carr (1993) advocates the use of cochlear implants, however, she delivers a poignant quote from an otolaryngologist who states that, "Some deaf people have accused cochlear implant surgeons of committing cultural genocide...that if you eliminate

all profound deafness at an early age, there will be no more deaf culture" (p. 65).

For those who use sign language as a first language, and who believe that they constitute a linguistic minority, sign language signifies group membership. Sign language is seen as an expression of values that are carried across generations (Dolnick, 1993; Padden & Humphries 1988; Wilcox, 1989). Therefore, sign language represents a common heritage, and thus a cultural identity: "...Many deaf people now proclaim they are a subculture like any other...a linguistic minority (speaking American Sign Language)...no more in a need for a cure for their condition than Haitians or Hispanics" (Dolnick, 1993, p. 37).

One consequence of viewing sign language as a signifier of group membership is that a person's inability to sign, or even the age of acquisition of sign language, can exclude a person from membership to the Deaf culture. Those who use sign language, especially as a first language, are viewed as members of a tightly knit in-group, or "Deaf culture," while those who are not "pure" signers are viewed as members of the out-group, or "hearing world." Even people who by medical definition are deaf are considered "hearing" by the Deaf culture if they do not communicate using pure sign. "Not all hearing impaired individuals belong to the Deaf community," writes Wilcox (1989), "...Attitudinal Deafness...appears to be the most basic factor determining membership in the Deaf community...Attitudinal Deafness is always paralleled by proper language use [ASL]" (p. 164-165). The argument from the Deaf culture perspective is that only those who acquired the use of sign language early in life and who use sign as their first language have an understanding of Deaf cultural norms (Padden & Humphries, 1988). This perception can limit access to the culture by persons who desire to enter the culture after childhood, for example people who lose their hearing in adolescence or adulthood, or who were raised with English as their first language, but who wish to learn sign language later in life.

Prejudice Against the Hearing

The insistence of some advocates of Deaf culture upon excluding anyone who is perceived as "hearing" is a central issue because it may explain why many people labeled as "hearing" object to the Deaf culture model. For example, "hearing" has a negative connotation as used by members of the Deaf culture (James & Parton, 1991). This projection of negative attributes onto anyone outside of the culture could be said to constitute prejudice. There are a number of articles written by members of the Deaf culture and members of the hearing world alike that cite examples of prejudice against deaf persons who were trained primarily in oral methods of communication (Wilcox, 1989), against deaf persons who wear cochlear implants (Mascia & Smithdas, 1994; Eggert, 1994), and against hearing professionals who work in the area of deafness (Lane, 1992).

There also appears to be prejudice against hearing society in a broad sense as well. For example, some proponents of Deaf culture suggest that Deaf people have stronger ties with the Deaf culture than they do with their families, their neighbors, their co-workers, etc. (Dolnick, 1993). There are even those who

profess that they feel parental responsibility for Deaf children, especially those that are born to hearing parents, that somehow the Deaf culture is more of a parent to a Deaf child than the child's hearing family: "[Hearing parents] have to accept that the [Deaf] child can never be one hundred percent theirs" (Dolnick, 1993, p. 51).

So why is there such a strong reaction within the Deaf community against the hearing world? Considering that deafness is regarded by society as a stigma and that people who cannot hear find it difficult to communicate and fully integrate with the mainstream, the exclusion of the "hearing" from Deaf culture increases the value of membership to the Deaf culture. Applying psycho-social theories to this phenomena, the more closed the group is to infiltration by non-group members, the higher the self-esteem of the group as a whole. To see similarities with the hearing world and lessen prejudice against hearing people would increase the permeability of the culture and weaken its distinctiveness and status. The more well-defined the lines between "out" and "in," the greater the esteem and power of the group.

One could go so far as to say that some degree of prejudice is necessary in order to establish and maintain the legitimacy of the Deaf culture. Such a statement is ironic when one considers that the idea of Deaf culture evolved in part because of the perceptions projected upon deafness by society. Past discrimination against deaf people constitutes a link between the members of Deaf culture (Padden & Humphries, 1988). This is not to say that prejudices that foster exclusion and incite conflict are just or well deserved. However, it appears that establishing an "out-group" is a natural consequence of establishing an "in-group." For instance, Padden also states that although there are many positive values that unite the Deaf community, "...Values can also be negative: Members of a cultural group may reject or be suspicious of certain attitudes and behaviors which they consider to be in conflict with their beliefs" (Padden & Humphries, 1988, p.7).

                          Summary

It is evident that the concept of Deaf culture and its antitheses can be explained in part using psycho-social theories that examine the nature of stigma, language and prejudice. Stigma, language and prejudice have contributed to the formation of the Deaf as a minority group. The disassociation from the majority group that inevitably resulted from this formation has fueled the discussion of whether or not deafness constitutes the basis for a culture. The stigma of disability can be equated with other stigmatizing labels that lead people to form groups composed of people like themselves. Such groups reflect a basic need to normalize stigma in order to maintain a high self-esteem.

In the case of Deaf culture, Deaf people seek to separate themselves from the societal concept of disability altogether thereby removing the stigmatizing label. The use of sign language also separates members of the Deaf culture from the majority group. Advocates of Deaf culture believe that sign language can be equated with other languages that are important to group identification and the preservation of heritage. The emphasis on

the importance of sign language has resulted in the failure of some Deaf people to accept persons who are not "pure" users of the language into the culture. This lack of acceptance of and the perception of "hearing" people as outsiders demonstrates how prejudice against people who are not members of the Deaf culture can increase the value of membership to the culture.

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