



The Unspoken Truth

DEAFNESS AROUND THE WORLD

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ABSTRACT

Deafness has been a topic fairly unspoken of. The Deaf community and culture, like any other culture has unwritten and written bylaws. After personally experiencing deafness overseas, it sparked an interest to explore the Deaf culture around the globe. Looking at countries around the world from North America to South America, Central America, moving to the Caribbean, Europe, Asia, and lastly Africa, there were different things that were worth taking a deeper look at. In the course of researching, I found that deaf people throughout the world have many similarities: they are marginalized, underrepresented, and there is a common lack of resources that can help individuals who are deaf. Moving through regions, one will explore how deafness is viewed around the world, and what can be done as individuals to change the perception of deafness. The Deaf community varies from nation to nation based on the resources that are available to them. The accessibility to these resources affects education, exposure, and the awareness within the various Deaf communities.

Key Words: Communication Disorders, deaf, international, resources, Deaf community

One may be wondering, what does it mean to be deaf? Can deaf people talk? Can all deaf people see? What does a deaf person's house look like? Are deaf people able to participate in everyday life? In order to understand Deaf culture, one must understand the etiology of deafness. The ear is made out of three parts; the outer ear, which is the most visible part of the ear, the middle ear, or what is considered the ear canal, and lastly, the inner ear, home of the cochlea. There are two types of hearing loss. Conductive hearing loss affects the transmission of sound between the outer and inner ear. Sensorineural hearing loss occurs when there is damage to the inner ear [the cochlea] solely (Department of Health & Human Services, 2011).

Some causes of conductive hearing loss include wax in the ear canal, failure of the malleus, incus, and stapes passing along sound waves to the inner ear, and failure of the eardrum vibrating in response to sound waves. Some causes for sensorineural hearing loss include disease, trauma or disruption of the cochlea or the vestibular nerve. (Department of Health & Human Services, 2011). Hearing loss can range from mild to severe, meaning that a person who has a mild hearing loss can still hear some things. This is defined as hard of hearing. Hearing loss is referred to the reduced ability to hear sounds in some ways. Deafness is when a person cannot understand speech through hearing even when sounds are amplified. Profound deafness refers to the total lack of hearing (Nordqvist, 2018).

There can be temporary hearing loss due to wax build up, foreign objects within the auditory system, excess mucus in the middle ear, and ear infections. Permanent hearing loss may be caused by hereditary disorders, which means that it has been passed down through genetics; genetic mutations; prenatal exposure to disease, when the fetus was born, it was exposed to a disease; noise that damages the delicate mechanisms of the inner ear; trauma that perforates the eardrum; age can cause hearing to gradually deteriorate, affecting the clarity with which one can

hear speech (Department of Health & Human Services, 2011). Throughout the paper there is a use of lowercase 'deaf' and upper case 'Deaf'. It is important to differentiate the two. Big 'D' Deaf typically refers to deaf culture and deaf identity. Little 'd' deaf refers solely to the hearing loss and the mechanisms of being deaf. Understanding the difference between the two forms of writing the word Deaf is away that a person can assimilate to Deaf culture and heritage.

Deafness comes in many different ways, shapes, and forms. It is important to know some statistics to put information and data into perspective. The article, "Deafness and Hearing Loss", analyzes data about deafness around the world. Around 466 million people worldwide currently have a hearing loss and 34 million of those individuals are children. Hearing loss is increasing every year, and it is estimated that by 2050, over 900 million people will have a hearing loss (Vaughan, 2019).

1.1 billion young people between 12-35 years of age are at risk of hearing loss due to exposure to noise in recreational settings (Vaughan, 2019). It is imperative to protect one's auditory system, especially in this generation where mobile devices and earphones are abundant, and the younger generation play music directly into their ears.

Deafness varies in etiology. It may result from genetic causes, complications at birth, certain infectious diseases, chronic ear infections, using particular drugs, exposure to excessive noise, and lastly, aging. 60% of childhood hearing loss can be preventable (Vaughan, 2019). It is important to note that people in the Deaf community do not see deafness as a burden. Some people who are deaf may have wanted to prevent or "cure" their deafness, but most of them consider it a part of their identity and do not see it as something that needs to be cured or fixed.

There is a controversy whether deafness is considered a disability or simply another factor of a person's identity. The knowledge, habits, and approaches to life used by members of the Deaf community allow a person to live without needing to hear (Vicars, n.d.).

There are many resources offered for individuals who are deaf. These resources include from early intervention for infants and toddlers, rehabilitation, health care and mental health services, civil right laws that protect people with disabilities, education, technology, employment, support groups, services offered in American Sign Language, advocacy groups and cochlear implants, amongst others. An individual who is deaf has many options on how they can move forward in a mainstream society. These resources serve to aid individuals who are deaf in many different aspects of their lives so that they do not see deafness as something that hinders their everyday lives. Exposure to resources vary from regions around the world and there can be more done to raise awareness on Deaf culture. Cultures come in different forms and are made up of traditions and similarities that are shared within a group of people. Individuals who are deaf are fortunate to share the similar traditions, struggles, and values with one another, building community. In the recent years, there has been more awareness towards the deaf community. Parents want to send their children to schools. There have also been more schools established for the deaf by missionaries and organizations, such as Visions, the organization that we got the opportunity to travel with. Clubs for the deaf have also evolved, helping the deaf feel less isolated. Some obstacles being faced by the Deaf is the lack of basic information, the lack of formal education, hardships within communication with others, holding a meaningful job, receiving adequate healthcare, and participating in basic community activities (Deaf Education & Empowerment, n.d).

The Deaf community is typically found in the margins of the general population. There is a lack of exposure to people who are deaf and the language that comes with it. There is little to no understanding of the culture since it is not often taught in the mainstream school system.

One place where deafness is far from unusual is Rochester, N.Y. Rochester is home to the nation's largest Deaf population with about 90,000 people who are deaf or hard of hearing in the 700,000 residents of the city. The transformation of the city becoming one of the largest Deaf communities began in 1968 with the launch of the National Technical Institute for the Deaf. With the launching of this institution, controversy about Deaf culture and acceptance arose. The future of American Sign Language was in doubt and people questioned Deaf culture because of the general stigmas attached with deafness; how individuals who are deaf cannot contribute to society because of their condition. Despite these concerns, Deaf culture is currently thriving in Rochester (York, 2006). People are picking up and moving to this community in hopes of being involved in the flourishing Deaf community.

Some of the innovations that better the Deaf community in Rochester include movies that are shown offering closed-captions, nearly all high schools offer sign-language classes, and the Memorial Art Gallery of the University of Rochester employs individuals who are deaf. There has also been an influx of deaf doctors, real estate agents, insurance agents, and bank officers (York, 2006).

The large population of individuals who are deaf in Rochester make it so that deaf individuals in the community feel very comfortable because there are resources that cater to the Deaf population. Deafness is very common and highly accepted. It is not seen as rare to be deaf in this population. Deafness is not seen as unusual and people using American Sign Language are not looked at any differently.

Another location where Deafness and American Sign Language is normalized and even praised is Gallaudet University located in Washington D.C. Gallaudet is a private university for the education of deaf and hard of hearing. Gallaudet University was founded in 1864 and was named after Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet, a crucial figure in the expansion of Deaf culture and language. At the time of the school's founding, there were several schools for the deaf in Europe; there were none in America. Laurent Clerc, a French man, taught Thomas Gallaudet sign language and, in return, Thomas Gallaudet taught him English. Together, they established the American School for the Deaf in Hartford, Connecticut. Laurent Clerc was the first deaf teacher of deaf students in the United States. Edward Miner Gallaudet was the son of Thomas Gallaudet, and he led the mission to establish and run a school for the deaf in Washington D.C. In 1864, President Lincoln signed the charter for the establishment of the national college for Deaf students. Gallaudet University was named after Edward Gallaudet's father, Thomas Gallaudet. As stated in the website for Gallaudet University, "Gallaudet offers exemplary education at every level – from graduate degrees to programs for deaf and hard-of-hearing students in high school, elementary school and infancy" (Gallaudet University, n.d.).

Gallaudet University opened a new world of possibilities for individuals around the world who are a part of the Deaf and hard-of-hearing communities. This university highlights the importance of higher education for all. It also highlights the importance of inclusivity as both hearing individuals and individuals who are deaf are learning from one another and thriving in the same community. It also grants the opportunity for individuals interested in learning American Sign Language to do so and individuals are able to learn about the culture by immersing themselves in this community (Gallaudet University, n.d.).

Examining resources for people who are deaf in North America, there are some regions advancing in awareness of Deaf culture and technology for deafness to allow individuals who are deaf to receive equal opportunities to those who are hearing. While there are intentional communities for Deaf individuals and institutions of higher education serving both groups, who are deaf and hearing in the Northern United States, communities in South America may not have the same luxury.

Deaf education educating about Deafness is emerging in a great number of nations in South America while some communities in North America are now more inclusive, the continent as a whole still lacks mainstream education for individuals who are deaf. People who are deaf are often still seen as an “other”. This is more prevalent in South America, or Latin America.

In Latin America, Deaf individuals are seen as the “inverse of hearing culture” (Gloshanda, 2018). The word inverse connotes from inferiority or being less than those in the hearing culture. Individuals in Latin American countries are trying to include bilingual Deaf education throughout the continent, including how to interact with multiple cultures and individual differences within cultures (Gloshanda, 2018).

The theory of Deaf education that is trying to be installed in Latin America is referred to as interculturalism. Interculturalism provides students with the tools to preserve, develop, and express their own culture, while developing competencies for gaining access to school curriculum, which they can use to participate in a global society (Gloshanda, 2018). Cultural competence is the ability to understand, communicate with and effectively interact with people across cultures and is something that, without exposure to others, cannot be developed (Make it Our Business, 2017). It comes with practice and exposure, as one grows to understand the differences and similarities between different traditions.

Many communities in Latin Americans experience local issues related to poverty, inaccessibility to medical services and schooling, and disparities in education between major and smaller cities across cities whether deaf or not. In 1994, United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) amended an act that established that all children with disabilities have the right to be educated in a general education classroom. Deafness was included within the disabilities in the act. Latin Americans argued that interpreters are an important aspect of any dialogue regarding deaf education (Gloshanda, 2018). The act that was amended allowed for resources to be required for individuals, for example, an interpreter in a school setting because the lack of interpreters hinder communication between cultures. This is of importance because individuals from Latin America cannot get resources from other countries, such as North America, for resources due to language barriers. Therefore, even though progress is being made in laws being amended allowing for resources and education availability, there is still a lack of basic resources, such as interpreters in the mainstream classrooms in order for people who are deaf to receive the same education as hearing people.

Another controversial topic in Latin America is the use of cochlear implants. A cochlear implant is a small, electronic device that can help provide a sense of sound to a person who is profoundly deaf or severely hard of hearing. The implant is surgically placed behind the ear (National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders, n.d.). It has been mentioned that there is a decline in the use of sign language across all Latin America due to the increase in cochlear implants (De Garcia, Gerner and Karnopp, and Becker, 2016). It is easy for a community to mask their deafness with a cochlear implant. A cochlear implant, with a successful surgery and the proper post-treatment, can potentially give a person who is deaf access to sound and ultimately the opportunity to hear. Therefore, those who don't see deafness as something positive may want

to find a way to “cure” it. The acceptance and use of sign language are being hindered by the cochlear implant and it brings up the question of individuals who are deaf not accepting the fact that they are deaf who would rather find a way to get rid of their deafness.

The Deaf community in Latin America has made gains in different services that benefit the Deaf community. For example, Brazil recognized Libras, the sign language of the Brazilian deaf community. There has been an acceptance of bilingual programs for Deaf children. University teachers of the deaf and interpreter preparation programs have increased. In Chile and Argentina, educators stress the interaction between Deaf and hearing cultures. In Argentina, educators are developing a video book in Argentinian Sign Language to promote literacy as well as train teachers how to read to deaf students (De Garcia, Gerner and Karnopp, and Becker, 2016). As a collective, Latin America has shown that there is a commitment to bilingual education as educators and researchers have hosted a biennial conference since 1990. These meetings provide collaboration leading to the dispersion of ideas and promotion of discussions about bilingualism for deaf children (De Garcia, Gerner and Karnopp, and Becker, 2016).

There have been advancements in the resources available in Central America. Schools for the deaf in Central America were established by a woman by the name of Lady Templar whose husband was a distinguished diplomat and government official in Great Britain. Lady Templar started schools for the deaf in colonies of several nations. In Costa Rica, a psychologist by the name of Dr. Fernando Centeno Guell, started a large institution to serve all types of disabled children and this institution influenced other countries in Central America to provide an educational system for their own children (De Garcia, Gerner and Karnopp, and Becker, 2016). In Honduras, a woman named Dona Christina Valentine de Martinez, who is deaf, organized the first school in Honduras and was supported by the Rotary Club, which was a club in Nicaragua that

lent support to programs for the disabled. As shown, a lot of the countries in Central America aid one another in having the Deaf community thrive. It is truly breath-taking to see how each country helps one another. Gallaudet University has played a key role in supporting services around the world. Educational Resource Centers for the Deaf were established for Central America and the Caribbean in conjunction with the University of Costa Rica and the University of Puerto Rico. Programs in Spanish-speaking countries were strongly influenced by the educational philosophies adhered to in Spain, Venezuela, Argentina, and Mexico (De Garcia, Gerner and Karnopp, and Becker, 2016).

In contrast to Latin America, some regions in Asia have less resources in the Deaf community. In an article comparing everyday experiences of deaf individuals, “The life of the deaf in France, India, and the U.S.” Peterkin notes, “Deaf culture describes the social beliefs, behaviors, literature, art, values, traditions, and shared customs that unite those within the deaf and hard of hearing community” (Peterkin, 2015).

In India, Hinduism is the predominant religion. Hinduism goes by the Law Code of Manu, and here it states a person who is deaf should not be allowed to own property but is to rely on the charity of others in their daily lives. This religious guidance is the source of negative views of deaf people in India as they are seen as inferior to hearing individuals. This has made India one of the most difficult and least accommodating places in the world for those who are deaf or hard of hearing (Peterkin, 2015). There is a large population of residents in India, and because of this, sub regions form within different regions creating different dialects within cultures. Dialect differences within cultures make it difficult for individuals who are deaf to have one standard sign language system because, depending on the region, there is a different dialect.

In India, the mode of communication in the Deaf community is the oral approach. The oral approach teaches individuals who are deaf the mechanisms of speech and how to speak as the sole mode of communication. Educators spend most of their time teaching people who are deaf, to speak. As stated in the article, “leaving the education of members of the Deaf community neglected” (Peterkin, 2015). The oral approach focuses a lot on learning how to speak and this can take away from student learning more universal concepts such as reading, writing, math, and science.

Also in Asia, China, as of 2017, had a population of 1.386 billion people compared to the United States population of 325.7 million at the time. In this massive population of Chinese citizens there is 21 million people with hearing loss out of 60 million individuals with disabilities (Berke, 2018). Organizations in China that support the Deaf community include Chinese National Association of the Deaf, China Sports Association of the Deaf, and China Deaf and Blind Association, Hong Kong Society for the Deaf, and the Hong Kong Association of the Deaf. Some are more social-service oriented and some are more socially oriented. Different individuals may benefit from either type of resource depending on what they are interested in or what helps them fit in the Deaf community the most. As stated, there are a good amount services for people who are deaf in China. There is even a medical center focused on hearing loss and oral communication if that is what suits the individual best depending on their circumstance (Berke, 2018). Education for the deaf in China is growing. As of 2001, China experienced their first deaf college graduate, Zhou Tingting and she has been accepted into Gallaudet University. They have colleges and universities that focus on specific education such as computer technology or costume design (Berke, 2018).

Now taking a look at a different region in Asia, the United Arab Emirates is the richest nation in the world. According to Haza (2018), the Hear Us campaign is a campaign that raises awareness about the importance of sign language, and they wish to integrate those with hearing disabilities into society. It is stated in their published article, "... we always get these glares because we are talking with our hands" (Haza, 2018). It can become very uncomfortable having people stare at deaf individuals signing. Standardizing sign language in the entire region can bring a level of awareness and understanding to individuals who do not know the culture. Haza (2018) aims to shed light on the use of sign language in creating a dictionary for the language. The author reports, "The UAE's first sign language dictionary will soon be available across the country after it was adopted by the cabinet..." (Haza, 2018). The publication of this dictionary suggests mainstream acceptance and approval of the signed language as well. In the thriving UAE, we see a advancement in the inclusion of Deaf culture and language as they prepare to publish the first dictionary.

Looking around the world, there was a common similarity of deaf people being seen this way. In some countries, such as the United States, specifically Rochester, we were able to see advancements in their Deaf community. There were sign language classes being offer, closed-captioning being added to movie theatres, deaf doctors, deaf real estate agents, deaf insurance agents, and deaf bank officers. All a sign that deafness is understood and accepted in this region. On another note, in other parts of the world, deafness was not treated with this much acceptance, the opposite quite frankly. In South America, there is still a lack of basic resources, such as interpreters in the mainstream classrooms in order for people who are deaf to receive the same education as hearing people. There is a decline in the use of sign language across all Latin America due to the increase in cochlear implants. Another nation where there is a lack of resources and

understanding of the Deaf culture is India. In India, religion is very prominent. A person who is deaf should not be allowed to own property and there are negative views of deaf people being seen as inferior to hearing individuals and this has made India one of the most difficult and least accommodating places in the world for those who are deaf. This is the unspoken truth; the fact that there is a lack of resources and understanding of the Deaf community and culture worldwide.

Personal Reflections on Deafness

I am from the Dominican Republic and I was interested in the Deaf culture there. I have never encountered or saw a Deaf person in my country, or even someone who is Dominican and is also deaf in the United States. After doing some research into Deafness in Dominican Republic, I discovered that the first school for the Deaf was founded in 1967. Currently, there are about 30 schools for the Deaf across the country. The capital, Santo Domingo, is a major hub for Deaf activity and in this location, there are two National Deaf Associations where Dominicans who are Deaf come to socialize and support each other (People and Language Detail Report, 2008). This was magnificent to see. It is astonishing to hear that my hometown, Santo Domingo, is home to most of the individuals who are Deaf. In the future, I will like to travel to one of the National Deaf Associations to see if there is a way to give back to this community.

Dominican Republic is considered a third world nation and with that being said, individuals who live their often struggle to make a living. Living in poverty is very common and considering the limited employment opportunities for many deaf individuals throughout the world, I imagine that it may be more difficult for people who are Deaf to make a living in the country, only because they have another barrier that may hinder them. The Dominican People and Language Detail Report (2008) notes, "Often, deaf Dominicans are oppressed by the hearing community around

them and are in dire need of interpreters who can make their concerns and desires known” (People and language detail report, 2008). This saddens me because, as a country that has been oppressed and colonized for many years, it is hard to see our people oppress each other instead of lifting each other up and supporting each other. Dominican Republic has made some strides to integrate the Deaf community into society by adding Deaf schools and Deaf clubs so that people who are deaf feel more comfortable, but there is still a lack of overall acceptance of the Deaf community across the country.

I have experienced two service-learning study abroad trips that allowed me to broaden my knowledge about other cultures and communities, including Deaf communities in another part of the world. Experiencing time abroad really has made me appreciate life a lot more. Seeing how minimalistic people live around the world shows us that we have to appreciate what we have. After doing research about deafness around the world, it has become evident that every nation has different cultures around hearing hearing loss and deafness. Deaf culture in some communities thrive more than others.

Africa has always been a place of interest to me and dear to my heart, as this is where all human origins began. I always wanted to go to Africa to explore, learn, and become knowledgeable about the different communities and cultures present across the continent. I had the opportunity to study abroad in Ethiopia to further my education on people who are Deaf.

Ethiopia is located in East Africa. When visiting, I encountered some Deaf community members in the city named Addis Ababa. I enjoyed seeing mainstream schools where they had students who were Deaf as well as hearing. In these classrooms, there was a teacher and interpreter as all the student sat in one classroom and learned the same material. It seemed that the students who were Deaf were far behind those who were hearing as individuals who were because, for

example, there was a student who was Deaf in the eighth grade was 21-years-old. Individuals who were deaf also had to take additional material in a separate section with Deaf students alone. In this school for the Deaf, the study abroad students got the opportunity to work one to one with the students. We did short lessons with them. After the experience, I wanted to continue my knowledge about deafness in Ethiopia and in other countries. I would like to travel to another region in Africa and potentially compare the differences and similarities in between the Deaf cultures.

The website, “Joshua’s Project” reports, “The vast majority of Deaf Ethiopians, who live in rural areas, spend their lives-in extreme isolation” (Joshua Project, n.d). The Deaf are looked down upon by Ethiopian society and they are not seen as people who can uphold a marriage and at times, they lose their family for being seen as inferior. In contrast, when I was volunteering, I felt a great sense of Deaf community and acceptance of both the language and culture because of the schools being mainstream, and because of the advancements I was exposed to that supported deaf individuals. We were able to see business’ owned by Deaf individuals in the city, Deaf teachers, and Deaf audiologists.

Sign language was specifically brought to Ethiopia by American Missionaries which explains why there are some similarities in between American Sign and Ethiopian Sign. Ethiopian sign has been modified to fit the Ethiopian culture. In our experience in Ethiopia, we were able to see the differences in their language, Amharic, and their sign language based off of Amharic. Again, there were many similarities in the sign languages

Visions Global Empowerment works with the Deaf community focused in Ethiopia. In 2013, Visions partnered with individuals from Ethiopia who are deaf so that they can provide deaf education. In 2015, Visions partnered with the Kal Center for Special Needs and together they established the Visions Model Deafness Center in Bahir Dar. This center is the first in the country

to focus on the empowerment of the Deaf community. This center aims to empower the Deaf community by providing services in education, interpreting, job training, medical care, mentorship, and much more (Deaf Education & Empowerment, n.d). The students who studied abroad spent most of our time giving back to the Kal Center and the children attending the center.

I wrote this essay to shed light and awareness on Deafness around the world. The unspoken truth is that many countries marginalize and oppress individuals who are Deaf. There is a stigma around deaf individuals that they are not able to participate in everyday life or that they are inferior to hearing people. Although, there are some organizations that try to aid the Deaf community, there is a lot that needs to be done for a general acceptance and understanding of the culture. There needs to be more education offered teaching about Deaf culture and heritage and education about sign language. There need to be more job offerings for people with disabilities. With these small strides for change, individuals who are deaf will not be left marginalized and feeling as if they do not belong in society. It is up to us, the hearing people, to learn more and be more competent about cultures that differ from our own.

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