

“Living in Silence: A Qualitative Sociological Examination on the Deaf and Hard of Hearing”

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## **Abstract**

### **“Living in Silence: A Qualitative Sociological Examination on the Deaf and Hard of Hearing”**

The field research project was designed to examine what daily life is like for individuals who are deaf and/or hard of hearing. Ten in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with participants who either work in the field with deaf or hard of hearing individuals or are deaf and/or hard of hearing themselves. Observations were conducted during interviews in the field where individuals worked, in their homes or attended school. The research suggests that individuals who are deaf and/or hard of hearing live a life accompanied by resources and tools and have little shame in who they are. The research was designed in a way to get to know the participants and what their life is like. The research was conducted in a way that allows the reader to get to know the participants and their stories with background information through various literature reviews and a historical overview. All the names in this study have been changed to protect the participants' identities.

## “Living in Silence: A Qualitative Sociological Examination on the Deaf and Hard of Hearing”

What is it like living in a world constantly stimulated by sound when one has the inability to hear? Is it a tremendous obstacle to overcome? The purpose of this research is to gain insight into the lives of individuals who are deaf and/or hard of hearing from the perspective of individuals who have significant hearing loss and/or are Deaf. Individuals who are hearing impaired live their lives in a little researched yet fascinating sub-culture full of pride, self-awareness, and some doubt. Hearing loss varies from moderate to complete and in order to succeed these individuals must use all resources available to them to accommodate for their hearing loss. Yet, little research has been conducted on the sociological aspects of hearing impairment. The goal of this research is to highlight what it is like being an individual who is hearing impaired from a sociological standing. The main objective in this research is to gain an understanding of life from the perspective of someone who has significant hearing loss. This research was completed under a series of literature reviews and ten qualitative interviews with seven research participants who possess various links into the world of hearing impairment.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Academic Research*

The focus of research regarding life for hearing impaired individuals varies greatly. Researchers have examined defining deafness within social identities (Skelton and Valentine 2003), to controlling voice without hearing (Lane 2005), including educational analysis of deaf students (Bat-Chava 1999).

Review of these published works is imperative in order to gain a perspective on life for Deaf and/or hard of hearing individuals in society. Skelton and Valentine (2003) in their article “It feels like being deaf is ‘normal’: An Exploration into the Complexities of Defining Deafness and Young Deaf People’s Identities”, enter the complex world on what defines being deaf. Specifically, how young deaf people define themselves based on being deaf and other components of who they are. They make conclusions on how and who spells deaf with a capital or lowercase D. These identities are complex and vary from person to person. For instance, a deaf individual who is a leader in the community and an outspoken advocate for equality would consider themselves “Big D” they would use an uppercase D when writing the word deaf. Skelton and Valentine primarily base their conclusions on qualitative interviews with young deaf people varying in social backgrounds. The researchers also highlight several important factors when researching deaf individuals such as voice recording, finding trustworthy interpreters, and making eye contact.

Gaining insight into what it was like obtaining an education in school systems either in mainstream or focused schools for the Deaf is a crucial identity builder for individuals. Some

research, therefore; has pertained to the schooling and the educational building blocks for individuals who are Deaf and/or hard of hearing. Keating (2003) examines social interactions between Deaf and hearing students at a public elementary system. The study was conducted over five months in two public elementary schools in Austin, TX. Keating closely observed interactions between deaf and hearing students in the lunch room and playground settings. He noted that, many deaf children in regular school settings lack key social developmental skills due to complications in communication. Deaf students observed in the lunch room surrounded by children seemed completely isolated because deaf children communicate visually and miss out on verbal communication. However, on the playground where there is more room for bodily communication there were interactions observed between deaf and hearing children. However, most conversations were unsuccessful in those situations. Keating concluded that most deaf children in public education live isolated lives and that fact could change if there were a greater emphasis on non-verbal communication with elementary school aged children (Keating 2003).

Other research has focused on educational development primarily with language and math skills (Bat-Chava 1999). Hearing impaired students struggle with language skills, especially written English. It is important to note that being fluent in sign does not mean an individual possesses English comprehension skills for reading and writing. It is quite like learning another language to those affected. Bat-Chava examined the effects a college preparatory and readiness program designed for deaf students have on entering a post-secondary educational setting. The Stanford Achievement Test was administered before and after the program to measure the program's success. The program administers tutoring in the subjects of English and

math. The tutors in the program are hearing college students whom have experience with deaf individuals and use interpreters. The findings suggest that the program is successful with shown improvements using the SAT, and number of students who enroll and succeed in post-secondary education.

Other research has focused on the family experience for hearing impaired individuals. Broussard (2005) examines the emotional and psychological needs of families who have children with hearing loss. Emotional understanding and support is a key factor for a well-balanced family environment for children who have been diagnosed as hard of hearing and deaf. Parents in situations like this must find a way to communicate with the child, such as using American Sign Language (ASL). Parents who do not learn ASL or any other communication style with their children become severely disconnected with their child. Broussard contends that hearing impaired individuals can often feel isolated because of the two different worlds of communication within their household and therefore lose a sense of family bonding. Parents often feel an overwhelming sense of loneliness and guilt when they have a child who is deaf or has hearing loss, so Broussard suggests that the parents take advantage of counseling or psychological services and if available, join a support group for parents who have children with hearing loss. It is also important to continually monitor the child's psychological condition and family therapy sessions are strongly encouraged.

Another article pertaining to family dynamics was published by Asberg (2008). This study examines the stress parents of deaf children experience. Asberg surveyed thirty-one parents who had children at summer camp specifically designed for deaf children. All families

reported a high level of income. A 5-point Likert-type scale was used to measure stress levels with indicators on demographics, perceived and received social support as well as life satisfaction. After analyzing the data, Asberg concluded that there was no correlation between stress and the rearing of a deaf child.

In addition to studies examining family life when a member of the family is Deaf or had hearing loss, research has also been conducted on the how to best serve deaf or hard of hearing clients in mental health and counseling services. Fusick (2008) details the importance of training counselors on how to treat clients with hearing loss. Individuals with severe hearing loss can lose their sense of self worth, personal identity, or group identity, resulting in a variety of psychological problems. Furthermore, because the cost of having hearing loss alone is so great, many individuals cannot afford the added expense of treatment.

Fusick states there is a major lack of resources for counselors who have clients with hearing loss, resulting in a variety of problems such as confidentiality and embarrassment issues when forced to use an interpreter in a therapy session. Many people are not going to fully express themselves when they have to speak through an interpreter for fear of embarrassment or breach of confidentiality. Fusick concludes that there needs to be more training, resources, and workshops available for mental health counselors concerning clients with hearing loss.

Researchers have also examined reflections on the Deaf and hard of hearing as portrayed in popular culture. An article entitled, "Watching Films, Learning Language, and Experiencing Culture: An Account of Deaf Culture through History and Popular Films (Avon,

2006),” reveals that the changing perception of hearing impaired people is evident in movies featuring deaf characters and storylines. Silent films historically portrayed deaf people as “dumb” or “mentally incapable”. Mainstream films and made for TV movies reflected the belief that deafness was something to overcome. A shift in this belief can be seen in *Mr. Holland’s Opus* (1995), one of the first films that did not portray the deaf character as having to overcome a disability in order to become a general member of society. In the film, a composer and music teacher, whose entire life revolves around music, learns that his child is deaf. The film centers around the father’s struggle to accept and develop a relationship with his deaf child. Avon concluded that the shift from deaf characters being portrayed as “dumb” to being portrayed as intelligent, strong, and well respected reflects a shift toward more acceptance of deaf people in society.

### *Historical Overview*

A historical analysis as to how hearing impairment has been approached is necessary. The following information was gathered from the educational organization PBS from their website about the film *Sound and Fury* (PBS 2006). Deaf and hard of hearing individuals have a long history of oppression dating back to early 1000 B.C. Society has a way of rejecting what is not the norm and Deaf individuals were perceived as “dumb” and “incapable to learn”. This is a centuries old battle with harsh stigmas attached to it. As far back as, 1000 B.C., the Torah denied property rights to deaf individuals. Even great thinkers and philosophers denied rights for deaf individuals. The philosopher Aristotle is quoted saying, “Deaf people could not be

educated [since] without hearing, people could not learn.” Early Christians saw deafness as punishment from God. If parents had a deaf child that child was punishment for past sins, according to St. Augustine’s. In the 1500’s forms of deaf education begin to emerge. In Renaissance Europe a physician, Geronimo Cardano developed a system of symbols to teach his deaf son how to communicate. This is the first evidence of a developing sign language. The first known book of alphabetic signs was written by Juan Pablo Bonet around 1620. In 1788 a milestone in deaf culture was researched when Charles Michel De L’Eppe established a free public school for the deaf in France and with this, the French dictionary of sign is developed. which later was used for the development of American signed English and American Sign Language.

In 1817 Thomas H. Gallaudet, after being inspired from meeting De L’Eppe and his community, developed the first American school for the deaf. It was a sign-based school that prompted many others like it to emerge. In 1865, Gallaudet opened the first deaf college. “Originally known as the National College for the Deaf and Dumb, it is the only accredited facility for the deaf in the United States to offer college degrees. In the 1850’s in the U.S, it was proposed to congress by John Flourney that an entire deaf state be created. It was proposed to be set in the western territories where all deaf people could live together and have their own sense of self, community, and government that reflects their needs. This was going to a deaf utopian community where the oppressed could escape the prejudices and restrictions of the hardened hearing community.

Unfortunately, positive change is sometimes followed by an unexpected setback. This set back in American deaf history came with Alexander Graham Bell, the inventor of the telephone, who spent his life obsessed with sound and communication. Bell came from a family history rooted in deaf culture. His mother was very hard of hearing and used a “visible speech” method taught to her by Bell’s father. Later in his life, Alexander Bell opened a string of deaf schools that promoted the use of the oral method, educating deaf students using spoken language which consists of lip reading, using one’s voice to speak, and mastering breathing techniques. The use of sign language was prohibited in the oral method of teaching; signers were not allowed to sign in public and were forced to secretly communicate. Bell’s approach led to much anger and aggression in the deaf community, many call it the “Dark Ages in the deaf community.”

There were many years of banning sign and forcing young, deaf individuals to use the oral only method. It wasn’t until the 1960’s that the United States’ congress dismissed the oral only method and announced that oral deaf education was a “failure”. This helped pave the way for the modern development of communication for the deaf and hard of hearing.

## METHODS

The goal of this research was to gain perspective on what life is like for individuals who are hard of hearing or deaf. The participants for this research were acquired through a snowball sample of convenience. The research was conducted in a mid-sized southern, college town. For this study, a total of seven participants were interviewed with ten interview sessions in total.

Prior to participation in this research, all participants were required to sign an informed consent describing the goals of the research. The IFC stated that participation was completely voluntary, all data would be kept confidential, and participants could choose to withdraw anytime without penalty.

This research is focused on a sub-cultural examination of living life in their world. I met and got to know these individuals on a personal level. Their stories are simple, yet they perfectly reflect how being deaf has shaped who they are. In-depth interviews revealed their life experiences which appear to have shaped their individual personalities and attitudes. First, participants' stories are presented. All the names have been changed in order to protect and ensure confidentiality to the individuals. They are an example of the typologies that exist in the larger population. Their personalities and the stories they share are unique and individual, thus they will be presented in individual personality profiles. It is important to know them for who they are and as individuals first before themes and patterns are represented. They represent themselves and the findings can be related to the larger population. The themes, developed from the data, are discussed in the findings section.

### *The People and Their Stories*

**Ashley.** Ashley is a middle aged, elegant and intelligent person. She works in a college disabilities service office and is the sole interpreter at the university. She was inspired to interpret because she has three brothers who are deaf. The University where she works currently doesn't have any completely deaf students and only one hard of hearing student. She

believes mandatory workshops for all professors on students with disabilities should be instilled in campus policy.

**Nick.** Nick is a freshman special education major. He is from a large city and is attending school at a small southern university three hundred miles away from home. Nick has moderate hearing loss and attended high school in a mainstream school, but in specialized classrooms. He is attempting to attend classes without an interpreter for the first time. He first discovered he had hearing loss when he was seven or eight years old. He believes he lost his hearing due to chronic ear infections when he was a child. His mother first noticed his hearing loss because he always had the television volume turned up very loud. He currently wears a hearing aid.

Nick is very shy and quiet. He has little friends at school and really only hangs out with his girlfriend and her family while in the town where he attends school. He moved to where he currently lives because he wanted to start new and “not be known as the kid with the hearing problems that talks funny.”

**Regina and Don.** Regina and Don have been married for 25 years. They have two adult college aged children. In April of 2010 Don was in a major car wreck. His vehicle was smashed between two other vehicles. During the incident his head slammed against the driver’s side window. The hit temporarily damaged his cognitive functioning and permanently damaged his hearing. After they left the hospital he said he was lying on the couch watching television and all of a sudden his hearing turned into a very loud static sound that constantly rings in his ears. He and Regina are currently battling insurance companies to help pay for the hearing aids he needs. Don says, “I would almost rather be completely deaf just to turn off the static and get

some silence, I don't want to have to wear hearing aids, but I need them." Don has been diagnosed with seventy-five percent hearing loss and the insurance battle still continues.

**Theresa.** Theresa is the mother of a seventeen year old deaf daughter. Her daughter currently attends an all deaf residential school. Theresa works as a retail cashier and is in a low-income socio-economic class. Her past is a mixture of drug abuse, multiple divorces, and has suffered through physical abuse from an alcoholic ex-husband. Theresa is on the straight and narrow path now but lives a life full of guilt. She does not know the cause of her daughter's deafness and believes it might have something to do with her drug use when she did not know she was pregnant. She went through a deep depression because of this, and thought it was her fault for having a deaf child. She describes her emotions as "very devastating, the first couple of Christmas's it was horrible. I mean, I felt like my guts were ripped out, I mean, I cried and cried. If I went into a store and looked at a toy and it made sound it just killed me...everything I looked at had to do with hearing, and she would never be a part of that".

She enrolled her daughter in Early Intervention Programs. Her daughter received a cochlear implant at a very young age, but did not keep it. Theresa is the only other one in her family who knows sign language other than her child. She feels very isolated as a parent, and has had a rough life, but the last thing she wants is pity. Her daughter is flourishing at school and is highly involved in sports.

**Jean.** Jean is one of the few local interpreters in the region where this research was completed. As well as doing freelance interpreting, she works as a mental health counselor for the deaf and hard of hearing. She got her undergrad degree in interpreting at a university in

Florida and received her master's at Gallaudet University. Gallaudet is the Harvard of deaf colleges and is located in Washington D.C. While obtaining her master's she said her most prideful moment was when her peers believed she was deaf. When interpreting she feels it works best when she puts herself in the shoes of the person she is interpreting for. She says, "You keep your opinions to yourself, and say things exactly the way the person signed them with the same spirit and intent as the person meant it". She is a certified interpreter and is bound by a code of ethics under the National Association of the Deaf.

**Ronald.** Ronald is a vocational rehabilitation counselor. He has a bachelor's degree in education and a master's degree in counseling. He has taught all levels of with a focus on deaf and hard of hearing students. I conducted three interviews with him, two with the use of an interpreter and one without. Ronald uses the total communication method of communicating. He uses sign, reads lips and uses his voice. He is a very educated man with a warm and loving personality. He is dedicated to advocacy for equal rights for deaf and hard of hearing individuals. He believes educational efforts work best when trying to create change. His entire life is revolved around educating others about himself and others like him are the best way of accommodating to hearing individuals when interacting with him. His life is full of challenges but he believes, "there's going to be challenges in anything, whatever you do in life, no matter if you are deaf or not. It's all about attitude, attitude is everything in life". A quote he lives by is from Scott Hamilton: "The only disability in the world is having a bad attitude".

## FINDINGS

### *Introduction To Themes Created From the Data*

The individuals interviewed for this project have opinions, feelings, and stories that reflect and can be seen in to the larger population of the deaf and hard of hearing sub-culture. A myriad of themes were developed during the course of my research. Three main themes are those pertaining to (1) resources and accommodations, (2) communication, and (3) family issues. Subtopics include, for resources and accommodations, government programs, tools of the trade and medical advances; for communication, communication styles, using an interpreter, and miscommunication; and for family issues, raising a deaf and/or hard of hearing child and sibling relationships.

### *Resources and Accommodations*

Ask any deaf or hard of hearing individual about how they function in a hearing society and the immediate response will be that they heavily rely on resources and accommodations to function. The level of resources and accommodations vary for each individual, but all stem from the Americans with Disabilities Act. The Americans with Disabilities Act is a law under the U.S. Department of Justice that protects people with disabilities from discrimination. The ADA also provides resources deaf and hard of hearing individuals rely on. I asked my participants about their use of program resources and the technological and medical advances they have experienced in their lifetime which are presented in subcategories below.

*Government programs.* There are several governmental resources and programs available to anyone in need. Many of the participants in my study have used these programs through the ADA. A few of the programs available in the research region are Tennessee Early Intervention Systems (TEIS) and Tennessee Intervention Program Services (TIPS). "Tennessee's Early Intervention System is a voluntary educational program for families with children ages birth through two years of age with disabilities or developmental delays.

The principles of Early Intervention (EI) are:

"The primary goal of EI is to support families in promoting their child's optimal development and to facilitate the child's participation in family and community activities. The focus of EI is to encourage the active participation of families in the intervention by imbedding strategies into family routines. It is the parents who provide the real early intervention by creatively adapting their child care methods to facilitate the development of their child, while balancing the needs of the rest of the family." (TEIS 2010)

Theresa has used TEIS and TIPS to help educate herself on her daughter's condition and find programs to enroll her daughter into. TEIS is an in home educational system that begins to teach children with disabilities at a very young age. TEIS service workers came to Theresa's home to teach the entire family, especially her daughter sign language until her daughter was two years old. They also came to the home for speech therapy with her daughter twice a week. Her daughter started going to school when she was 16 months old. She attended mainstream schools with the use of an interpreter, Theresa says, "they had somebody there that could talk to her, they taught her sign language, and kept working with her speech therapist that came there [school]". Currently, her daughter attends Tennessee School for the Deaf, funded by monies from the government. There is no cost to any student that chooses to attend the

school. TSD is a residential school and the only thing parents have to pay for is a requested seventy-five dollar fund to purchase personal needs for the students such as toiletries. The school even provides transportation to the student's home towns every weekend so they can visit their parents.

The majority of the respondents (Nick, Theresa, and Ronald) have been provided with resources from government agencies such as the ones above. Ronald has been provided with numerous items from the ADA to help him accommodate his work. He has been provided with an alarm clock for deaf individuals, his TTY and video phone, as well as a cell phone. Anything he had to use for work has been provided by the ADA.

*Tools of the trade.* Technological advances have provided much needed help in accommodating with the hearing world. Ronald said, "I am very fortunate to live in this technology age...the 1950's brought about the golden age of rehabilitation when deaf people began to become trained and learn. This is really when all the technologies began to come up and lives started to improve".

Many deaf and hard of hearing people use texting and internet messenger services for communication. Ronald uses internet messenger services to communicate with his secretary at work. His secretary will message him and let him know about his appointments, etc. Theresa and her daughter and constantly texting one another while she is away at school. Nick is also dependent on texting and internet messenger services. They both agree that without those services they would be lost and struggle with communication much more than they do already.

TTY and videophones are examples of communication tools used. A TTY machine is a Teletype phone. TTY's began popping up around the 1870's and have evolved dramatically over time. At first this was a gigantic phone with a keyboard attached that had a large roll of paper attached to it to. It would send the typed data to a mainframe which would translate it into speech and the response would come printed out. As one might imagine, a simple conversation took much time. The TTY is still in use today but has almost become a technology of the past.

Videophones are used now, in replacement for the TTY. Videophones are more prevalent because they can be used in real-time. It is a telephone with a camera and a screen attached to it. The communicating parties can see each other and communicate through sign.

Deaf and hard of hearing individuals also have a variety of other interesting technologies to use. Vibrating alarm clocks are commonly used and most of the respondents in my study use them. It is an alarm clock that is attached to their bed that will essentially shake the bed when it is time to wake up. They also come with a light system that flashes. The alarm does not go off until the individual has to manually turn it off. There are also light and vibration alarm systems installed in homes in case of emergency. The system will flash lights and vibrate to let the individuals know something has gone wrong and emergency action needs to be taken.

“The way that Bell did that criticizing sign I really feel that is wrong, sign language is the way we speak. It's like telling a Spanish person they can't speak, like, telling you have to learn how to speak Spanish, but can't hear any Spanish while you learn how to speak it. I think Bell should have learned sign himself...I disagree with Bell's philosophy of speaking communication, I am glad he invented the telephone, but if he were alive today I know he would be upset, I mean look at my video phone, I can use sign all the time on that.”  
(Ronald 2010)

*Medical advances.* Just as technology has improved with time so have medical advances. Hearing Aids have changed dramatically over time. As Nick puts it, “I have to get new hearing aids every couple of years to keep up with the changing technologies, they get smaller and smaller and the hearing range gets wider and wider”. Hearing aids can be best described as a personal loud speaker in your ears. They amplify sound and allow the hard of hearing individual to hear what they would normally miss. Ronald and Nick both use hearing aids to assist them in daily life. The only complaint Nick has about his hearing aids was that when he is trying to use his phone he would get a lot of feedback. Hearing aids are something Regina and Don desperately need and have been battling insurance companies to receive.

### *Cochlear Implants*

However, hearing aids aren't all that modern medicine has come up with. Many deaf individuals rely on cochlear implants. Cochlear implants are small electronic devices that are surgically installed in the inner ear cochlea. They have external and internal hardware that picks up and filters sound through transmitters that are connected to internal receivers (cochlear). The devices started developing in 1957 and are constantly changing and improving. Cochlear implants are only used for profound cases of total deafness and severe hard of hearing individuals. It is estimated that as of April 2009, 188,000 individuals worldwide use these devices. In the United States 41,500 adults and 25,000 children have cochlear implants (cochlear). Cochlear implants seem like a cure for deafness but are just the first step in speech and language development. It's not an instant fix; it takes work and practice to develop oral communication skills. Children as young as one year can receive the device and it is

recommended to install the device at an early age so children can properly develop speech and language abilities (Cochlear 2009).

Cochlear implants may seem like a miracle device but is the topic of controversy in the deaf community. Many members of the deaf community believe the implants are allowing individuals to dismiss who they are as a deaf person and go against all the struggle and oppression deaf and hard of hearing individuals have had to historically overcome. Many view it as denying who they are and a backlash against the deaf community. The Anti-Cochlear movement is based on the school of thought that goes against creation. Those individuals believe that God makes people deaf for a reason; they are born that way and should stay that way. There are deaf communities and ways to learn how to communicate without some electronic device doing it for you. It's viewed as cheating on yourself and who you are. You were born deaf and should remain deaf.

Theresa has dealt with cochlear implants on a first hand basis. When her daughter was six she and her family decided it would be best to try to go on the cochlear route. Theresa said what inspired her to consider getting one for her daughter was when she met another family whose child had a cochlear. She said, "This little girl I knew who had her surgery [implant procedure] within a year she was talking on the phone, I mean talking on the phone! That's a huge accomplishment". Unfortunately, her daughter did not have the same success story. She said her daughter wanted it turned off and taken out because it was causing pain in her face. Theresa does not doubt that her daughter felt the pain in her face and would have to adjust to that, but she feels the real reason why her daughter wanted it removed was because the noises

and sound was too much for her daughter to handle. Which is said in a lot of cases that the sound, even the noises we take for granted all become too much and it's hard to process that sound when you are not used to it. Theresa personally feels guilty for her daughter wanting to remove the implant because during this time Theresa was going through a separation with her husband and they were, "constantly fighting, like bad fighting". She feels this is the reason her daughter chose not to hear.

Ronald has insightful feelings on the subject of cochlear implants. He and his mother were discussing the issue his mother revealed that if Ronald was born today that she indeed would have given him a cochlear. However, Ronald believes there is nothing wrong with receiving a cochlear it's just not what he would have done. He believes the choice should be left up to the individual, "I think it's a personal choice, I don't think it's the parent's choice" if the individual later in life should decide to have one it is their decision, but that decision should be made by the individual. He said his mother wouldn't have wanted him to suffer as a deaf person, Ronald replied, "I still would have been deaf, just with a cochlear that allowed me to hear, you can't take deafness away, only help it, no one has perfect hearing. He believes it should be left alone, "God made you the way you are so leave it".

This subject is best summed up by Ronald saying:

"suppose there was a magical bean an all natural magical bean you could put in your hear that would allow you to hear, I would go for that, there are things I would love to hear, see a bean is natural there wouldn't be a big surgery or anything. I would do that, and I would still be culturally deaf, I grew up deaf, I socialize with deaf people, I am involved in organizations, I am a leader in the deaf community. I would still be deaf, you can't take that away, and it's who I am. There's no such thing as perfection". (Ronald 2010)

## *Communication*

*Communication styles.* Historically there are many ways to communicate for deaf and hard of hearing individuals. There is a spectrum of sign that varies from English to ASL. The spectrum is based on total communication. Total communication is using whatever means necessary that are unique to the individual to communicate properly. Such as a mixture of sign, using voice, and body language. Ronald states, "There's a variety of ways to sign, there's a spectrum of different manual languages, I am a strong advocate for total communication, which is what is best for each individual person, unique to their own". Nick the student and Theresa's daughter both use total communication.

In the United States there are two prominent sign styles that have become reoccurring themes in this research. Signed English and American Sign Language (ASL) are widely used. Signed English is exact sign of every word communicated, Whereas, ASL is a shortened version of signed English ASL cuts out all the unnecessary and gets straight to the point. As Theresa put it "ASL is like 'me, cookie' versus saying 'mom I want a cookie'". A lot of sign teachers teach Signed English first and then when the student gets older their signing styles go to an ASL form. Signed English is taught first because it has a big part in learning correct grammar when writing and reading English. The majority of deaf and hard of hearing students struggle with the subject of English and writing in school due to their language barrier. When you think in ASL it is difficult to write and read in English.

Total communication is what works best for that select individual. Total communication is usually based on using a combination of ASL and speech. Most deaf individuals do know how to speak, but don't always use their voice for fear of being misunderstood. Total communication also involves body language, facial expressions, and imagery. Total communication is taught in many deaf schools. It gives individuals an opportunity to develop their own way of communicating versus being told how to communicate. It allows for freedom of expression and insight into personality (Berke 2010).

*Using an interpreter.* Numerous deaf and hard of hearing individuals use interpreting services. Interpreters have to be certified and bound by a code of ethics. They must be certified by Registered Interpreters to the Deaf which is associated with the National Association of the Deaf. The RID and NAD hold interpreters to a strict code of conduct and at the core of this conduct are seven tenets that every interpreter is bound by law to abide by. The tenets are stated below and can be found at RID's website (RID 2010).

“Interpreters adhere to standards of confidential communication. Interpreters possess the professional skills and knowledge required for the specific interpreting situation. Interpreters conduct themselves in a manner appropriate to the specific interpreting situation. Interpreters demonstrate respect for consumers. Interpreters demonstrate respect for colleagues, interns, and students of the profession. Interpreters maintain ethical business practices. Interpreters engage in professional development.”(RID 2010)

Two of my research participants are interpreters and two participants have used interpreting services in the past and currently use interpreters. Ashley and Jean are both freelance interpreters. Ashley also works with a university and is the resident interpreter for the

school. Ashley's interpreting is more academically based and when interpreting she uses a combination of Signed English and ASL, "because I am in education, I use ASL and then put in a little Signed English in there to make sure I get the meaning clear". Since the region where she lives and works is very small she only does freelance work about twice a year. She also does not like to work in the court system or in medical circumstances this is because when interpreting is required in those situations the interpreting fee is to be covered by the judicial or medical system that is being used. She said that quite often those systems do not want to pay for interpreting services. She said,

"in this town doctors are supposed to pay the interpreters, and they don't want to do that so they say, 'well can't you just bring a friend, or have your child interpret for you?' and it's the same in the court system, no they need a legal interpreter, when you go to court and, you get a lawyer and pay that lawyer big bucks, why would you want an interpreter [who isn't certified] that you just think might be saying the right things? You need someone who is certified and can interpret legally, so I just don't go there. It's the same with hospitals; you wouldn't want to have someone say the wrong thing to a doctor"(Ashley 2010).

Jean is also a freelance certified interpreter. She mainly works with Ronald and they have a close trusting relationship. It is important to be able to trust your interpreter. Sometimes they are an extension of the individual. Interpreters are the voices of deaf individuals who use them. They must sign and speak in the same vigor and manner the individuals are trying to relay. Jean stated, "When working in a totally professional way, you keep your opinions to yourself, and say things exactly the way the person said them, in the same spirit and intent as the person meant it". For example she shared a story about when she was interpreting for an individual in jail, she said the individual was screaming, crying, and

cursing at the police so she found herself screaming, crying, and cursing at the police.

Everything said must be interpreted, sometimes it can be scary and in the moment you don't realize what is being stated. She said, "In that jail situation, I found myself, telling the police, 'that judge is nothing but a fucking old man!' but it's my job, it's what I have to do".

Jean is often put in iffy situations, but must remain true to the individual she is working with. Jean has been in situations where more than once legal professionals have told her, don't sign this...or don't interpret that. But, she has to that is her job, "when I'm told not to sign something I do anyway, and I make sure the person I am interpreting for knows what's going on, it's ethical and it's not fair to the individual, if they were hearing, they would be able to know what was going on" she simply ignores secrecy requests.

Being deaf is simply a language minority according to Jean, as she believes they just communicate differently than hearing individuals. Deaf and hard of hearing individuals are not ashamed to use interpreters it is key to functioning. Jean states that, "it's from a place of pride amongst educated deaf people, 'it's your problem you don't speak my language, not my problem I am deaf. That's why I need interpreters because you don't speak my language, dummy' using interpreters is like if a hearing person were to visit a foreign country", it's a language issue, not intelligence.

As a researcher, my interaction with interpreters during this project was difficult due to communication flow. For my interviews with Ronald, Jean was the interpreter for two of the three interviews. Having a conversation with someone using an interpreter isn't common for most hearing people. It is important when using an interpreter that the hearing individual look

at and speak to the deaf or hard of hearing person. When I first met with Ronald, I didn't realize that I looked and spoke to the interpreter rather than him. Ronald quickly corrected me and told me it was a respect issue to look at him and not Jean. In addition, hearing people are used to instant conversation results. I would ask a question, Jean would then sign that question to Ronald, Ronald would sign the answer back to Jean, while Jean voiced the signs and she saw them. It can be best described as a two person conversation with three brains.

*Miscommunication.* Miscommunication is a situation every person experiences. However, these issues can become major very quickly for deaf and hard of hearing people. Don, who has recently been diagnosed with seventy-five percent hearing loss and who is still battling with insurance to cover hearing aids, feels like he misses almost everything. He feels he is constantly out of the loop of communication. His wife, Regina, often finds herself yelling at him just to have a normal conversation.

Isolation is a common feeling with deaf and hard of hearing populations. All of the respondents said they have gone through periods of language isolation. Nick finds it very frustrating and feels that others he is communicating with feel the same way about him. He is hard of hearing and mostly depends on his voice for communication with hearing people. He feels embarrassed to be constantly saying "what" or asking people to repeat themselves. Nick says, "they get mad at me for asking them to repeat what they said and I get mad when they don't. I hate that." He says it is especially tiring if he has been with someone all day and can feel their frustrations. He feels left out when he finds himself with a group of friends, if he misses

something and it's repeated he feels it gets worn out, "if they tell a joke, and I miss it they have to go back and say it again to repeat it. It's already worn, the joke is worn out so that's hard".

Ronald agrees with this subject. He feels isolated in large gathering where he does not know people. It's hard to jump into conversation when you can't hear anything, he said. He feels isolated in large family gatherings. Most of his family can sign and communicate with him, but he gets left out. He says, "most of them sign, but sometimes they get busy talking amongst themselves and I get left out. So I will sit there and talk to other people on my phone or find something else entertaining like watching TV." It's upsetting to him when he knows something important happened and when he asks someone what happened or what was going on he often just gets the big picture of the stories or will get told it wasn't anything to be concerned with. Sometimes it can be upsetting for Ronald being left out of the loop but he is used to it.

Many of the respondents have stated that miscommunication has gotten them into and out of trouble. Nick said when he was living with his mom he would not hear her calling him and she would get angry with him. He said but an advantage of being hearing impaired is using that as an excuse to get out of trouble. When his mother would notice his chores were being neglected he would tell his mother he didn't hear her tell him to do anything. The same goes for Theresa and her daughter. Theresa said that when her daughter was younger and didn't want to listen to Theresa her daughter would just look the other way and not make eye contact with her. She would often find herself walking around her daughter in circles in attempt to make eye contact. If her daughter could not see Theresa she would not have to respond to her or listen to her giving chores.

Ronald is no stranger to miscommunication issues. He often deals with miscommunication on a daily basis. When out in public in a retail setting he will often use pen and paper to speak with store associates. He also has a convenient application on his phone called “buzzards” that is used when trying to place orders, etc. It has different categories such as travel, restaurant, coffee, and other services. One picks a category and a subject and show the employees the phone. For example some of the cards he showed me said, “may I have a coffee with cream and sugar, where is the restroom, I would like a cheeseburger with fries, please take me to the airport”.

However, no matter how technology improves his life he still has communication issues. He used a humorous example for this. Many hearing people know basic sign, but many hearing people do not know how to use it correctly. He said this has happened to him on more than one occasion. The signs for “thank you” and “fuck off” are very similar, both starting with an outward motion from the chin. The only difference is with “thank you” you hold your hands together in the end. He says this with a laugh, “sometimes when retail workers notice I’m deaf after the interaction with them I am told to ‘go fuck off’ I know what they’re trying to say, but it is very funny.”

For Ronald his hands are his lifeline and he almost lost them. When he was eighteen years old a window fell on his arm at his hands which cut a main artery and his hand was hanging loose from his arm. This was a very emotionally traumatizing experience for Ronald. His hands are his language and his lifeline to the world without them he would be lost. “I kept telling the doctor, please save my hands! My hands are my lifeline and my language. I cherish

my hands and my eyes, it's how I get information and share with the world, and without my hands it would be rough. Really rough. I can't imagine".

### *Family Issues*

Rearing children and molding them into functioning members of society is the task every parent undertakes. Parents try to protect children from harm and teach them things that vary from brushing their teeth to how to become a good person. Having a deaf or hard of hearing child is another dimension and challenge to parenthood and other family demographics.

*Raising a deaf and/or hard of hearing child.* Theresa has a firsthand account on this matter. Theresa does not know if her child was born deaf or if a variety of instances led to her being deaf. Theresa gave birth to her daughter when she was only nineteen years old and depended on family member to help her. Her daughter showed signs of having hearing problems from birth. She noticed when her daughter was about nine months old she started to display behavior problems such as pulling her hair and throwing temper tantrums. A major thing she noticed was that her daughter had not begun to speak. She took her daughter to the doctor, but the doctor insisted nothing was wrong with her. At this time, doctors did not conduct hearing tests on infants, something that was made mandatory until a few years after

her daughter was born. She kept taking her child to the doctor but always got the same response, that nothing was wrong.

Theresa knew there was something wrong though. Because she had her daughter at such a young age she depended on family members to babysit. A regular babysitter Theresa used was her cousin. Her cousin told her that they would do some “in home” hearing tests for her daughter. These included playing the piano, blasting music, and even banging pots and pans behind the infant all with the hope for some sort of reaction, yet, in all cases there was no reaction to sound. Theresa finally convinced her doctor to do a hearing test when she was fifteen months old and was finally diagnosed as being deaf. She said, “even though I knew she was deaf I was still shocked when the doctor gave the diagnosis, I didn’t want to think anything was wrong with my child”.

Theresa expressed how she felt like her daughter was treated differently than any other child she knew. She did not want people feeling sorry for her and especially her child. She felt like her family would always try to spoil her daughter with special gifts and treats just because she was deaf. However, special gifts and treats weren’t helping. She did not want to raise her daughter to think that the world owes her something because she is deaf. She wanted her daughter to feel and act like everyone else, just a little differently.

*Sibling relationships.* All of the deaf or hard of hearing respondents grew up with siblings. When asked about sibling jealousy they all said it did exist on both sides of the spectrum. All of the respondents agreed that they were jealous of their hearing siblings and

often wondered why it was they who had hearing loss. Nick said, "I would watch my sisters talking and laughing and wonder 'why me'".

There's also another side to this jealousy. Any child with disabilities requires special attention and often times those needs are put first. Ronald says this about that subject, "I was jealous she could hear. But I think on the other side of thing especially, when we were growing up, I think she was more jealous of me because I received special attention from my parents and other family members. I also went to a special school. Family and friends would ask my parents about me more than they would her, my parents were very proficient at keeping it equal, but of course I got more attention, and I think that did make her jealous as a kid". Raising more than one child with one child requiring special needs it demands specialized parenting. It a balancing act, trying to attain to the needs of all your children while one requires extra.

#### DISCUSSION AND CONCLUDING REMARKS

*"It's this very cool sub-culture that's under the radar that most people don't pay attention to".*  
-Jean

The goal of this research was to obtain a sociological perspective on the lives of individuals who are hearing impaired. The participants in this study have a varying degree of hearing loss from moderate to complete. Now imagine for a second, what it would be like to turn off that sound and attempt to function normally in a sound induced society. Never knowing what music sounds like, never being able to hear the wind run through trees, the sound of the waves crashing against the beach, or a child's voice. Living in or near silence in

every waking moment then maybe, just maybe you will understand what it is like for these individuals who participated in the research and the cases highlighted in literature reviews.

Several topic themes with subthemes developed in the process of the research. The following themes were outlined and discussed: Resources and Accommodations; Communication, and; Family Issues. Under Resources and Accommodations theme government programs, tools of the trade, and medical advances were discussed. Under Communication, communication styles, using an interpreter, and miscommunication were discussed. The third main theme covered Family Issues which included subthemes such as raising a deaf and/or hard of hearing child and sibling relationships were covered. These themes were discussed to allow a sociologist to better understand the social world of the deaf and hearing impaired individuals.

The individual participants who were interviewed for this research can be linked to the greater population in the subculture of hearing impairment. Which thus, can be summed up in the words of George Herbert Mead's work in *Mind, Self and Society*...

"The activity or behavior of the individual as it lies within the social process. The behavior of an individual can be understood only in terms of the behavior of the whole social group of which he is a member, since his individual acts are involved in larger social acts which go beyond himself and which implicate the other members of that group"(Cosser 334).

While this research gives in in-depth examination of *Living in Silence* for deaf and hard of hearing individuals in a world centered on sound much more sociological research is needed in this field. The majority of the literature reviews examined came from a psychological perspective and little was found on sociological aspects of hearing impairment.

There are many organizations, deaf clubs, hard of hearing clubs, and equal rights advocacy groups for the deaf and hard of hearing community. It's a community filled with pride and the last thing any deaf or hard of hearing person wants is sympathy, according to participants in this study. They are who they are and there is no shame.

The Americans with Disabilities Act covers all legal issues involving equal rights for all individuals. The deaf and hard of hearing community has come a long way and has overcome many hurdles of oppression. Historically deaf and hard of hearing individuals weren't expected to succeed. Deaf and hard of hearing people can do anything anyone else can. Jean said, "I do know deaf people who have PhD's and who have overcome a lot of things, especially with big D deaf people it's not like poor me, woe is me".

Their lives center on a sense of pride. Of course, there are daily struggles one must overcome and discrimination issues pop up all the time and these issues are usually quickly resolved under the iron fist of the law. However, one thing remains the same, above all we are human and we all think and feel.

"I can do anything but hear"- Ronald

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**About.com: Deafness**

<http://deafness.about.com/health/deafness/>

General resource directory for deaf culture with sites on topics ranging from cochlear implants to deaf animals

**Alexander Graham Bell Association**

<http://www.agbell.org>

One of the oldest and most comprehensive organizations focused on pediatric hearing loss. The organization also educates the general public about technological advances for the deaf and hearing impaired and advocates legislation.

**Deafness Research Foundation**

[www.drf.org](http://www.drf.org)

National organization whose goal is the cure and prevention of all forms of hearing loss

**Gallaudet University**

[www.gallaudet.edu](http://www.gallaudet.edu)

Gallaudet is the world's only university geared specifically to the needs of the deaf. The site includes links to other deaf schools in the United States

**National Association of the Deaf**

<http://www.nad.org/>

The NAD advocates the civil rights of the deaf and hard-of-hearing in a variety of areas including education, employment, health care, social services and telecommunications

**Virtual Tour of the Ear**

<http://ctl.augie.edu/perry/ar/ar.htm>

Augustana College's general resource directory for the deaf and hearing- impaired, with links to sites dealing with everything from cochlear implants to schools for the deaf