Deaf people in a hearing world: A qualitative study of cultural identity issues

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DEAF PEOPLE IN A HEARING WORLD:
A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF CULTURAL IDENTITY ISSUES

BY

BRIANNA J. DAISY
B.A., University of New Hampshire, 2006

THESIS

Submitted to the University of New Hampshire
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Master of Arts

in

Counseling

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my brother, Michael, who is the inspiration for my research. He is the sole reason I became involved with the Deaf community and I cannot thank him enough for introducing me to a world I may never have known existed.

This thesis is also lovingly dedicated to the memory of James M. McGonagle II. There are no words to describe the way he touched my heart and continues to inspire me day after day.
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A special thanks goes out to the participants of this study, who were willing to share private details of their lives with me. I learned a lot from each of them and truly commend them for being so honest and open.

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ABSTRACT

DEAF PEOPLE IN A HEARING WORLD:

A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF CULTURAL IDENTITY ISSUES

by

Brianna J. Daisy

University of New Hampshire, May, 2008

The primary goal of this study was to determine the potential factors that influence the process of cultural identity development for deaf people in a predominantly hearing world. This qualitative study utilized a phenomenological research design in an effort to capture the essence of the experience of growing up deaf and the meaning each participant made of his experiences as they related to his life. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with five male participants ranging in age from mid-20s to mid-30s. The interviews were transcribed and thoroughly analyzed to pull out common themes and ideas, leading to the conclusion that the main factors that affect cultural identity in deaf individuals are: family (with a heavy emphasis on the parents), deaf peers, educational settings from childhood through college, and perceived societal feedback.
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Cultural identity is something that is inherent in every individual. Its importance is often demonstrated in the choices we all make concerning how we choose to live our lives, who we choose to socialize with, our moral values, and our general way of being. For many, cultural identity is not so much a choice as something we are born into—our race, our religion, our socioeconomic status, our sexuality, our gender, our heritage, etc. However, for some individuals, this is a choice they must make. When a minority member is living in a society that is run by the dominant culture, he/she must decide which culture will govern his/her life.

For many years, deaf people have struggled to find their place in a hearing world. Because hearing loss is not a physical characteristic that sets them apart (such as skin color), deaf people cannot easily be discerned from the hearing majority. Deaf people can choose to assimilate and try to blend in with the hearing society, or they can choose to identify themselves with the Deaf culture. Many people are unaware of the differences that exist between the hearing and Deaf cultures, but they exist nonetheless. Some characteristics of Deaf culture include, but are not limited to:

• celebration of important events in Deaf history (the birthday of central figures, the founding of a deaf university, Deaf Awareness Week)
• dressing in dark colors to make the hands more easily visible while signing
• distinct social customs, such as maintaining eye contact and good visibility
learning values and traditions from peers at schools for the deaf

• dramatic storytelling and ‘Deaf’ humor, poetry, legends, etc.

• distinct language (American Sign Language) with its own syntax and kinesics

• separate social institutions and schools

(Moore & Levitan, 2003)

These differences often force a deaf individual to choose between Deaf culture and the hearing culture that surrounds them. The struggle between wanting to fit in and wanting to identify as a Deaf individual causes significant problems for some. This will be explored further in Chapter II.

Rationale

Deafness is an affliction that affects nearly 11,000,000 people in the United States (Mitchell, 2006). This large population is divided into those who have a hearing loss and are legally deaf (with a little ‘d’) and those who identify themselves with the Deaf culture (big ‘D’). The individuals who identify themselves as Deaf typically accept their hearing loss and do not see it as a handicap. They seek social interactions with other Deaf people, and primarily use American Sign Language as their means of communication (Andrews, Leigh, & Weiner, 2003). Out of the 11,000,000 deaf people mentioned above, the number of people who identify with the Deaf culture in the United States is currently estimated at around 1,000,000 (Mitchell, 2006).

There is a marked difference between the total population of deaf individuals and the number of these people who identify themselves as Deaf. This large gap can be accounted for in a number of ways. For starters, some people see deafness as a handicap, which immediately places a stigma on those who ‘suffer’ from this disability. This may
turn some deaf people away from the Deaf community because they do not want to be associated with people that society views in a negative way. Instead, they attempt to hide their deafness so they can try to blend into the hearing world around them.

Some deaf people are also born into families that refuse to accept them as they are. Many parents blame themselves for their children’s hearing loss and struggle to rid their children of this problem (Moore & Levitan, 2003). One way that parents do this is to mainstream their children and try to force them to learn to speak. Moore and Levitan (2003) suggest that while this may be fulfilling the needs of the parents, deaf children who are placed in this type of situation are not getting their needs met. Many tend to feel isolated because they have no way to communicate with their peers or with their families. They are stuck in a silent world that does not always treat them kindly.

Other parents may decide to have their children receive Cochlear implants, which help deaf people hear. Cochlear implants are sometimes viewed as a threat to Deaf culture because they help deaf individuals gain back their hearing, which allows those individuals to become members of the hearing community (Cherney, 1999). While Cochlear implants do work in many cases, there are also times when the implants can cause an infection and need to be removed. The individuals who go through this experience often have trouble understanding why they used to be able to hear and now cannot. This controversy will be examined further in Chapter II.

**Purpose of the Study**

The goal of this study is to create more awareness of deaf identity issues, which could in turn lead to social change. The information processed in this study will contribute to the growing body of research that addresses identity development and the
struggles that deaf individuals experience while forming an identity in a world that is dominated by hearing people. This study seeks to identify the factors that influence identity development in deaf people. It asks whether the family is the main influence, or if peers and social stigmas play a larger role in forming a cultural identity. While many studies focus on the controversies and issues surrounding Deaf identity and Deaf culture, very few studies look specifically at the factors that affect the formation and development of individual identities. This study will likely highlight the need for further research to be done on this topic. Identification of the factors that contribute to identity formation can potentially improve educational efforts for parents and relatives of deaf children.

Implications

As previously mentioned, one of the main goals of this study is to create social awareness of deaf identity issues. Identification with or rejection of Deaf culture is not something that has been studied much in depth, but it is something that could potentially affect us all. If more people become aware of the challenges and issues surrounding deafness and Deaf culture, we can begin to create social change that will benefit everyone in the long run.

This study will also bring to light the need for a multicultural approach when entering a therapeutic relationship with any deaf person, whether they identify as Deaf or not. Deaf people undergo the same struggles and adversity that any minority group faces when their values and traditions (as listed previously) clash with those of the mainstream culture. In this case, deaf people are struggling to find themselves in a predominantly hearing world. If we can create a safe, trusting environment that allows deaf people to experience the same benefits of counseling that other minority members experience, we
will be making a positive change. This project has the potential to contribute to a growing focus on culturally sensitive approaches within the mental health field.

Implications for this study also include educational benefits. Deaf awareness can be addressed in a more personal manner that allows educators and students to fully understand the internal struggles they face on a daily basis. This type of education can also be used to inform parents of deaf children who may not be willing to accept their children's deafness as just a hearing loss and not a curse. All of these implications can help make a positive impact on the Deaf community.

**Hypotheses**

Because this study is qualitative and understanding of this topic will be ongoing and changing, there will be no stated hypotheses to be explored throughout the course of this research project (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2009). Instead, the data will be coded and analyzed, which will allow the researcher to look back over the information and draw conclusions at the end of the study.

**Limitations**

There are a few limitations that may hinder the progress and/or the outcome of this study. The main limitations to this study include the following:

- There is a lack of research on this particular topic.
- Due to the fact that this study relies on self-report measures, there is a possibility that participants may not be entirely honest or have the ability to self-reflect.
- Because identity is subjective, it will be difficult to conduct broad research that studies how individuals choose to identify themselves.
• Because participants are being recruited through word-of-mouth and personal connections, there is a possibility that participants may withhold personal information that could prove to be useful in this study.

Definition of Terms

**Deaf Culture:** “. . .a social, communal, and creative force of, by, and for Deaf people based on American Sign Language (ASL). It encompasses communication, social protocol, art, entertainment, recreation (e.g., sports, travel, and Deaf clubs), and worship. It’s also an attitude, and, as such, can be a weapon of prejudice—‘You’re not one of us; you don’t belong’” (Moore & Levitan, 2003, p. 325). It is important to note that this term is used with a sense of pride.

**American Sign Language (ASL):** “. . .a distinct and complete language and the native language of Deaf Americans” (Lucy, Glass, & Elliott, 1995, p. 179). ASL is “an independent language. . .with its own grammar and syntax, idioms and metaphors, jokes and poems. It has no written form, and can only be mastered through extensive contact with fluent ASL users” (Porter, 1999, p. 165). It is important to note that ASL is a strictly visual/manual language, and its users generally write in their native spoken language (usually English), but the sentence structure and word formation for both languages differ dramatically.

**deaf:** This term, used with a lower case d, refers simply to the “audiological condition of not hearing” (Valios, 2002, p. 34). “The deaf population can be subdivided into a wide range of groups, distinguished in part of degree of hearing loss, but also by language preference, educational experience, and relative integration into either the Deaf-World or the hearing world” (Reagan, 2002, p. 42).
**Deaf:** This term is used to describe one segment of the individuals who have a hearing impairment. People who identify themselves as *Deaf* with a capital D “form a close-knit national community, use American Sign Language as their primary means of communication, and identify and organize as a unique cultural entity. Most have severe to profound hearing loss” (Vernon, 2006, p. 816).

**Deafness:** This term usually refers to the level or degree of hearing loss in an individual. It is also used as a blanket term to refer to the physical condition of not being able to hear.

**Culturally Hearing:** “This refers to the dominant ‘hearing’ understanding of deafness as a medical pathology or disability. People with this orientation take the hearing world as their reference point for normality and health, and the Deaf world for abnormality, disability and deviance” (Glickman & Carey, 1993, p. 276).

**Culturally Marginal:** “This orientation is typical of people who experience themselves as fitting between the Deaf and hearing worlds, comfortable in neither” (Glickman & Carey, 1993, p. 276).

**Immersion:** “It is relevant to the period when Deaf people immerse themselves in the Deaf world. Aspects of this identity include a positive and uncritical identification with Deaf people, the belief that only Deaf people should serve or guide other Deaf people, and anger and resentment toward hearing people. . .Here, ASL may be viewed as superior to English, hearing people are commonly viewed as oppressive and perhaps malevolent, and Deaf people are discouraged from acting in ‘hearing-identified’ ways, such as by using their voices, wearing hearing aids or signing in English word order” (Glickman & Carey, 1993, p. 277).
**Bicultural:** “Deaf people who have achieved some feeling of comfort in both Deaf and hearing settings and some skill in negotiating these cultural differences. . .They value their ‘Deaf pride,’ embrace Deaf culture and the Deaf community but also value and feel comfortable with those hearing people who are seen as supportive” (Glickman & Carey, 1993, p. 277).

**Etic view:** “. . .is premised on the idea that deaf people are not only different from hearing people, but that they are, at least in a physiological sense, inferior to hearing people in that hearing people can hear whereas deaf people cannot” (Reagan, 2002, p. 45).

**Emic view:** This view is “grounded in the experiences and history of the Deaf-World” and stresses “the sociocultural and linguistic aspects of deafness” (Reagan, 2002, p. 48). Basically, this view sees Deaf people as a minority community, not as a disability group.
CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This chapter discusses current and past literature that is relevant to the topic of this thesis. A review of the literature illuminates the need for more research to be done concerning Deaf identity and Deaf culture in relation to the majority culture (in this case, the Hearing world). Most of the articles discussed in this chapter address these topics, along with other topics pertaining to the Deaf community. It is important to keep in mind that the literature cited in this chapter does not reflect the feelings of the entire Deaf community, rather more of the individuals who authored each piece.

This chapter is broken down into several sections that attempt to explore the major themes and issues pertaining to Deaf individuals. The first section focuses on deafness as a physical trait (what it means to be deaf). It includes discussion of levels of hearing loss, as well as some common ‘remedies’ to help improve an individual’s ability to hear (hearing aids, Cochlear implants, etc). The second section highlights some controversies and problems that often plague deaf individuals. The third section covers the debate between deafness as a disability versus deafness as a minority culture. The fourth section examines the differences between being ‘big-D’ Deaf and ‘little d’ deaf. The fifth and final section discusses the internal struggle of deaf individuals and how this relates to their ultimate decision between Deaf identity and assimilation to the hearing world. Each section is supported by literature that is relevant to that specific topic.
Deafness as a Physical Trait

For the purposes of this thesis, it needs to be made clear that when individuals are discussed in terms of their individual ‘deafness’, the implication is that these people were either born with a profound hearing loss or acquired this loss sometime during their early childhood. Although many people lose their hearing later in life, it is important to note that hearing loss is a natural part of the human aging process and that “both prevalence and severity of hearing loss increase dramatically with age” (Luey et al., 1995, p. 177). The term ‘deaf’, as it appears in this section and in many of the articles about this particular subject, literally refers to the “an audiological condition or absence of hearing” (Luey et al., 1995, p. 178).

When discussing deafness as a physical trait, it is important to understand deafness as a genetic phenomenon. At least 90% of all deaf children are born to hearing parents (Levy, 2002). Similarly, 90% of the deaf marry other deaf people and 90% of all deaf parents give birth to hearing children (Filer & Filer, 2000). Extensive research in the field has found that there are about 11,000,000 people in the United States who are profoundly deaf or hard-of-hearing (Vernon, 2006), which makes this a subject worth studying.

For many years, deafness has been described as a condition that limits a major life function and lessens the capabilities of deaf individuals (Breivik, 2005b). According to experts who have studied this phenomenon, our society often views deafness through a pathological or medical lens; basically, deafness is seen as “a medical condition, characterized by an auditory deficit” (Reagan, 2002, p. 45). Once this stance is adopted, there is only one viable option: to remedy the condition, using medical interventions.
However, as highlighted in the literature, this view does not take into account the difficulties deaf individuals may encounter in their daily lives, which will be explored in the next section.

One of the major recurring themes in the current literature on audiological deafness is the unique differences in levels and severity between individuals. Luey, Glass, and Elliott (1995) state that, “hearing can be limited in any degree and in any combination of pitches (frequencies)” (p. 178). There are also differences in the volumes and clarity perceived by each individual. Because the degrees of hearing loss vary so much, there is not one specific way for professionals to ‘fix’ this condition.

As the literature states, deaf individuals are presented with a variety of options to help them overcome or adapt to their hearing deficit. Some deaf people benefit from the use of hearing aids, which amplify sounds in the environment. Hearing aids do have drawbacks; they do not improve clarity and some individuals experience noises that come from inside the ear, often referred to as “tinnitus” (Luey et al., 1995). Some individuals resort to lip-reading (also known as speech-reading) when they are surrounded by hearing people. According to one source, even the best lipreaders are left at a huge disadvantage, as they can only truly understand a mere 20% of what is verbalized (Seamans, 1996). Another source states that in addition to its low accuracy rate, speechreading is “difficult and taxing” and that it is often hit or miss—some people can do it and others cannot (Luey et al., 1995). A third option, and by far the most controversial, is the cochlear implant. As Robert Sparrow (2005) explains, the cochlear implant is a “technology which attempts to ‘cure’ deafness by bypassing the outer ear through electrical stimulation of the auditory nerve” (p. 135). However, this technology is not guaranteed
to work on all deaf individuals. For the approximate one-fifth of implant recipients who experience success with the cochlear implant, the sound they hear is comparable to an out-of-tune radio or the voice of Donald Duck (Cherney, 1999).

A careful review of the literature reveals that the most widely accepted and well-known form of communication among deaf individuals is American Sign Language (ASL). Recently, it has come to be recognized as an independent language that contains many of the characteristics and properties necessary to define a language (Porter, 1999). ASL is the only form of communication that gives deaf individuals the opportunity to express themselves in a way that is completely natural and comfortable for their language capabilities. As Porter (1999) points out, ASL is strictly a communicative language, with no written form existing. ASL users must also use and understand written English if they wish to read, write, and learn in the hearing-literate world. It has been found that many non-deaf people tend to mistakenly assume that ASL is simply made up of gestures that represent English words and phrases (Porter, 1999). Essentially, deaf individuals who communicate via American Sign Language are forced to learn two separate languages that stem from the same linguistic roots.

Common Controversies and Problems

As mentioned in the previous section, deaf individuals experience a variety of problems in their daily lives. Luey, Glass, and Elliott (1995) have found that “people with hearing loss are subject not only to the particular difficulties that their disability might create, but also to any social or psychological problems that might require social work intervention” (p. 177). One of the major troubles highlighted in the literature is the communication difficulties between deaf people and the rest of the (hearing) population.
According to a few different researchers, gaps in communication often create disastrous situations for deaf individuals, especially in the medical field. A recent study cited by Vernon (2006) found that misdiagnosis is quite common, as very few diagnosticians are able to communicate with their patients using ASL. In an article about sign language interpretation in psychotherapy, Anne Porter, M.D. (1999) elaborates on this problem, referring to the case of one young patient who was provided an interpreter by the hospital:

In this, perhaps his darkest moment, this young man was expected to confide his deepest fears and hopes; cherished and shameful secrets; private experiences of past and present; to me, a stranger, through the eyes and ears, the hands and voice, of another stranger, the government-employed interpreter (p. 164).

This experience is not unique. It is something that happens everyday to deaf individuals who are expected to communicate everything through an interpreter, or if one is not available, by writing down everything they wish to convey. For some deaf people who are not taught using written or proper English, this task is similar, as Porter (1999) puts it, to expecting them to speak. Due to the poor communication and interactions between patients and clinicians, the likely prescribed treatment—even when completely inappropriate—is “medication and placement in a residential facility” (Sinnott & Jones, 2005, p. 271).

One study found that on top of these problems, some health care professionals also experience problems with trust and feelings of helplessness when there is an interpreter present (Willcox, 2006). This study also found that confidentiality becomes a huge issue, not only with the presence of an interpreter, but also because the deaf community is so small and contained. Willcox (2006) states that “members of the Deaf
community have very intertwined lives and clients fear that everyone in the community will know they have problems” (p. 17).

Another study, which focused on the issues that arise in therapy with deaf individuals, found that deaf people often come into therapy presenting problems that are similar to “the effects of oppression that mirror difficulties of other minorities” (Williams & Abeles, 2004, p. 643). These two researchers found that the deaf community has a greater incidence of many of the common difficulties that plague hearing people. Deaf people experience higher rates of substance abuse, isolation, unemployment, and “distrust of members of the mainstream society” (Williams & Abeles, 2004, p. 643). According to Williams and Abeles (2004), deaf individuals tend to feel isolated not only from the community, but also from parents and family members that may not be fluent in ASL. This study focused on the differences between Deaf cultural norms and those norms that are widely accepted by the mainstream society as well. These differences, which will be discussed in detail in the next section, also contribute to the difficulties that may arise within the therapeutic setting.

Congruent with the study discussed above, Rex and Peggy Filer (2000) established that communication difficulties are not confined to interactions with members outside of the deaf individual’s nuclear family. These difficulties exist for both the deaf individuals and the hearing individuals that make up the core of the family. The research done by Rex and Peggy Filer (2000) found that most deaf children learn ASL while attending residential schools, which means that hearing parents of these children usually do not understand sign language. This creates a communication barrier between hearing parents and deaf children, unless the parents actively seek and participate in sign
language classes or instruction. The issue of communication doubles for hearing children of deaf parents, who are often used as interpreters. According to the Filers' research, these children not only serve as interpreters, but they are also expected to “explain the hearing culture to their parents”, often in situations that are inappropriate for their age and/or emotional maturity (Filer & Filer, 2000, p. 39).

The main controversy that appears in almost every article about deaf studies is the use of cochlear implants. Despite the fact that “there is no clear evidence that the procedure is more effective than the present generation of powerful hearing aids” (Moores, 2005, p. 327), there are strong supporters for each side of this issue and both sides are extremely vocal with their opinions. To put it simply, “The use of cochlear implants, especially for prelingually deafened children, has aroused heated debate” (Tucker, 1998, p. 6). Review of the current literature has revealed a recurring theme that is often at the center of the cochlear implant debate: the hearing view versus the deaf view.

Many researchers, including Bonnie Tucker, have found that Deaf individuals (note the capital D) are adamantly opposed to the cochlear implant, which is a surgically implanted device. “Members and proponents of Deaf culture vigorously oppose implants both as a seriously invasive treatment of dubious efficacy and as a threat to Deaf culture” (Tucker, 1998, p. 6). Tucker (1998) goes on to explain that, “Because cochlear implants have the potential to ameliorate or eliminate ramifications of deafness, they are opposed by Deaf culturists, who view efforts to ‘cure’ deafness or ameliorate its effects as an immoral means of killing Deaf culture” (p. 6). Deaf individuals who strongly identify with the Deaf culture and Deaf way of life take pride in their unique deafness and do not
view it as a negative aspect of their lives. They see cochlear implantation as a means of cultural genocide.

Another article, written by Robert Sparrow (2005), explores this ongoing debate. Sparrow delves into the debate as it stems from the argument between deafness as a disability and deafness as a minority culture, which will be covered in the next section. He has found that those who favor cochlear implants (usually hearing people), also view deafness as a disability. He writes, “When talking to hearing persons about the cochlear implant, the single biggest barrier to their understanding the hostility of many Deaf persons towards it is an inability to comprehend that deafness could be perceived as anything other than a tragic loss and a disability” (Sparrow, 2005, p. 136). His findings also support the flip side of that coin—people who oppose implantation believe there exists a Deaf culture which needs to be preserved. Sparrow argues that those who follow the medical model of deafness and see it as a disability are primarily those who do not know what it means to be deaf—they have no firsthand experience. He supports the idea that only a deaf individual can truly know if it is possible to lead “a happy and productive life without hearing or spoken language” (Sparrow, 2005, p. 137). Those who tend to agree with Sparrow’s views have experienced deafness and do not see it as a problem to be fixed with cochlear implants.

**Disability versus Minority Culture**

One of the largest and most widely discussed controversies in this field is the ongoing debate concerning deafness being viewed as a disability or as a minority culture. However, this controversy is one of the more recent discrepancies between Deaf people and the rest of society that has yet to be settled. Patrick Seamans (1996) writes, “In
recent past decades, there has been a movement within the deaf 'community' to claim a
definition for itself as a 'separate cultural and linguistic minority group,' even though this
group previously properly recognized itself as a group of 'disabled' persons” (p. 45).
This dramatic change in thinking has created an unconquerable gap between people who
believe deafness is a disability and people who believe it constitutes its own culture. As
touched upon in the previous section, this debate claims ardent followers on each side.
Those who think deafness is a disability believe that anything and everything that can be
done, should be done to help deaf individuals 'overcome' their hearing deficits. They
also believe that deaf individuals suffer from a disability that may hinder their quality of
life and opportunities (Sparrow, 2005).

However, many deaf people take the opposite view—they do not see themselves
as disabled and they are proud to be deaf. They refuse to be labeled as disabled or even
'hearing impaired,' a term that is often used to describe deaf individuals. Many speech
and language specialists believe that “When a member of the deaf community accepts
such a label, he surrenders his own identity and accepts definition by the dominant social
group” (Brown & Gustafson, 1995, p. 47). Unbeknownst to many people who are not
familiar with deafness, a large number of deaf individuals who accept their deafness in a
positive light identify themselves with a minority ‘Deaf’ culture. According to Lennard
Davis (2007), a professor at the University of Illinois, the Deaf culture was born as deaf
people increasingly “came to be seen not just as hearing-impaired, but as a linguistic
minority, isolated from the dominant culture because that culture didn’t recognize or use
ASL” (p. B5). Davis (2007) surmises that Deaf culture may be a result of years of
discrimination against deaf individuals, much of the discrimination centering on the idea that deaf people had no language and were, therefore, dumb.

One recent article focuses on this issue from an etic/emic perspective. According to Timothy Reagan (2002), the ultimate question to ask ourselves when debating this topic is, “who defines deafness: the dominant hearing world or the Deaf-World” (p. 45). He refers to the latest research done by scholars, who have found that the term ‘disability’ is “a social construct grounded in cultural, political, ideological, and economic assumptions and biases” (Reagan, 2002, p. 45). This leads to the etic construction of deafness (also referred to as the ‘ordinary language’ view), which is the stance most often taken by our hearing society. Many professionals who work in the medical field take the etic view, as is evidenced by their natural efforts to ‘fix the problem’ (Reagan, 2002). Put simply, the etic view “…inevitably leads to efforts to try to help the deaf individual to become as similar to a hearing person as possible” (Reagan, 2002, p. 45). The major controversy with this view is that many Deaf people do not want to become more like their hearing peers.

According to Reagan’s article (2002), those who are opposed to the etic view make up the emic perspective, which is characterized by “basically the same kinds of elements that would characterize any cultural community” (p. 49). Reagan implies that those who take an emic view understand that although deaf people make up a cultural community, they are still an oppressed community. He goes on to cite some shared characteristics, which include:

• a common, shared language
• a literary and artistic tradition
• a shared awareness of Deaf cultural identity
• endogamous marital patterns
• distinctive behavioral norms and patterns
• cultural artifacts
• a shared historical knowledge and awareness
• a network of voluntary, in-group social organizations  (Reagan, 2002, p. 49)

These characteristics are often used to support the argument that a Deaf culture does, in fact, exist. People who support the emic construction of deafness believe that if these characteristics acceptably define any other minority population, then these same characteristics should be enough to define a Deaf culture as well. They live by the perspective offered by Edward Hall—a noted anthropologist—that “Culture is communication and communication is culture” (Seamans, 1996, p. 47).

A thorough review of the literature revealed that many articles are written from the emic perspective. Although these articles offer a description and highlight the main arguments of the etic view, they do not explore the thoughts and opinions of those who support this view. The main focus of many articles that discuss the disability/minority culture debate is on defending the cultural view. An article written by Susan Peters (2000), titled, Is there a Disability Culture? A Syncretisation of Three Possible World Views, leads the reader to believe that both sides of this debate may be expressed, but the article is written from a personal point of view. Peters (2000) dedicated two paragraphs to presenting the etic view, then used the remainder of the article (which is about fifteen pages) to defend her own opinion that “disability culture not only exists, but is a thriving concept and lived experience in the hearts and minds of many disabled people” (p. 584).

It appears that although this topic evokes passion in many, those who support the emic view try harder to convince others to acknowledge that a Deaf culture may exist. Supporters of the etic view of deafness are less vocal, as they may not feel compelled to convince others that they are ‘right’. While both sides present strong arguments, and the
emic perspective is more abundant in the literature, there tends to be an underlying notion that the etic perspective is more widely accepted, perhaps due to its medical influence.

**‘Big D’ Deaf and ‘Little d’ deaf**

A careful and thorough review of the literature has proven that any reader would be hard-pressed to find a single article that does not include two variations of the term ‘deaf’. Almost every article about deafness or some aspect of deafness uses this term with both a capital D and a lower-case d. As one article eloquently states, “The most well-known terminological quirk associated with Deaf studies is a distinction no one can ‘hear uttered: Deaf/deaf” (Senghas & Monaghan, 2002, p. 71). This article also utilizes the same ‘terminological quirk’ to refer to the hearing population. The authors apply the capital and lower-case representations to the word ‘hearing’ as well as to the word ‘deaf’. However, the difference between the two runs deeper than just appearances. Senghas and Monaghan (2002) define these differences: “We use deaf and hearing to denote specifically audiological traits, Deaf and Hearing to denote (or emphasize) identity or sociocultural issues, and d/Deaf and h/Hearing to denote and highlight the often inherently mixed nature of the audiological and sociocultural conditions” (p. 72).

A 2003 study done by Tracey Skelton and Gill Valentine explores the complexities of defining D/deafness. The authors write, “Many D/deaf people are not sure where they fit: In a Deaf world? In an ableist but hearing world? In a disabled but hearing world?” (Skelton & Valentine, 2003, p. 453). This dilemma is common to many young deaf people, who may be struggling to find their place in the world. Nonetheless, the decision to identify with the Deaf world is not always a personal choice. As Skelton and Valentine (2003) point out, Deaf culture can “reject people it sees as accepting the
biomedical model definition of ‘deafness,’ that is people who identify as hearing impaired” (p. 454). The distinct separation between identifying as Deaf or identifying as deaf relates back to the debate between disability and minority culture (as mentioned in the previous section) and also begins to delve into deaf identity development, which will be discussed in the next section.

Skelton and Valentine’s article highlights the importance of noticing the capitalization of the word ‘deaf’ and also noting when/in what context it is used. They warn that there are “subtle differences in the use of the dual way of writing Deaf and deaf...it is important to note that while the convention of writing ‘deaf’ with a capital or a small case ‘d’ is currently common within D/deaf studies literature it doesn’t always mean exactly the same thing” (Skelton & Valentine, 2003, p. 455). One distinction is clarified by Carol Padden, a noted figure and author of D/deaf culture literature. Padden explains that “the capitalized ‘Deaf’ is used when referring to cultural aspects, as in the culture of Deaf people. The lower case ‘deaf’...refers to non-cultural aspects such as at the audiological condition of deafness” (as quoted in Skelton & Valentine, 2003, p. 455). However, not all authors agree on these definitions. Mairian Corker, a well-known British author on D/deaf culture (also quoted in Skelton & Valentine, 2003) states:

I use the term ‘deaf’ in the broadest possible context to refer to all people for whom being deaf is an important and sometimes dominant characteristic. It may include those Deaf people who are members of the Deaf community, those who are not, and those deaf people whose relationships with both Deaf and hearing communities are not clear. The generic use of the term is not intended in any way to deny or distort the cultural conceptualisation of Deafness and Deaf people, which will be referred to in an upper case ‘D’ when it is appropriate (p. 455).

Although many of these explanations differ slightly, they all have one thing in common. The capitalized form of Deaf usually refers to a culture or a way of life,
whereas the lower-case form, deaf, refers to the audiological condition (Skelton & Valentine, 2003). However, Senghas and Monaghan (2002) point out that “Many researchers have adopted a Deaf/deaf distinction without any corresponding Hearing/hearing distinction, arguing that the latter is not a self-ascription generally used by hearing people” (p. 72). An important aspect of the Deaf/deaf distinction, as highlighted in the literature, is that D/deaf individuals, as well as professionals and researchers, are widely accepting of these terms and their working definitions.

**Deaf Identity or Assimilation into the Hearing World**

One topic that came up repeatedly in the literature was the issue of Deaf identity. A review of the literature has revealed that deaf people, as a group, vary greatly in their levels of identification with both the Deaf community and the hearing world. “A common stereotype faced by racial-cultural minorities is the belief that all individual members of a particular culture are homogeneous” (Fischer & McWhirter, 2001, p. 355). Deaf people do not escape this misconception. Although they acknowledge that the deaf population is indeed a heterogeneous group, Fisher and McWhirter (2001) state, “Little empirical research has been conducted to identify the existence of individual or within-group differences in the deaf population” (p. 355).

One article, titled, *Measuring Deaf Cultural Identities: A Preliminary Investigation*, studies deaf individuals and the levels of identification with both the Deaf community and Deaf culture (Glickman & Carey, 1993). In order to conduct their research, the authors had to create a new instrument—the Deaf Identity Development Scale (referred to in this article as DIDS). The DIDS is a scale that was modeled after an "identity development model with four different cultural orientations with regard to the
Deaf community” (Glickman & Carey, 1993, p. 275). The authors created a 60-item test that, when calculated and assessed, will identify which of the four cultural orientations a particular person is most strongly associated with.

This scale was developed because, according to Glickman and Carey (1993), there are specific and unique “changes in consciousness and self-definition that members of oppressed groups experience as they move from oppression to liberation” (p. 276). The authors wanted to be able to measure “Deaf people’s identification with the Deaf culture” and to define which developmental cultural orientation a person is currently attached to as he/she moves through the stages of identity development (Glickman & Carey, 1993, p. 276). The DIDS is broken down into four scales: the hearing scale, the marginal scale, the immersion scale, and the bicultural scale; these scales represent the four orientations that the authors believe represent the cultural identities of all deaf individuals (Glickman & Carey, 1993).

Author George Taylor also recognizes the heterogeneity within the deaf population. In a 1999 article, Taylor writes:

The extent to which individuals will identify with their communities will vary according to their circumstances. Identities are formed, contested and negotiated as a result of a wide range of forces, and the often-defining characteristic is that of difference. For deaf people the concept of difference can be multi-layered. Their deafness can be a feature that marks them as different from other members of their local community, and, if being a deaf person is important for their sense of identity, may also be separated from other deaf people who relate more to the hearing world (p. 369).

Taylor uses this information as the basis for his research, which explores empowerment and identity. He believes that empowerment and identity are the key factors in understanding the experience of both deaf and hard of hearing people who come from minority communities (Taylor, 1999). Taylor’s view is similar to the views taken by
other researchers who are interested in learning more about Deaf cultural identity. However, he placed more emphasis on the idea that, "The importance of identity is that reality is constructed around our understanding or belief of the nature of the other person or a group of people" (Taylor, 1999, p. 377). According to Taylor, the research done for this study supports the findings of a previous study done by two British researchers. These researchers found that individual identity and finding a place in the pre-existing social structure is all part of a never-ending negotiation. Therefore, "the behavior of the individual is interpreted within the prevailing wisdom of the dominant group in society" (Taylor, 1999, p. 377). Taylor (1999) maintains that this perspective is easily related to how deaf individuals are viewed by the rest of society, as well as how they see themselves in relation to the dominant group.

**Summary**

After completing a careful review of the literature, it is clear that current research articulates but fails to resolve the main controversies that are related to this field. Although there are many articles that address the main issues presented in this thesis, each is based on the definitions and opinions of the individual, rather than of the whole. Without consistent definitions and representations of the main foci in each article, it is nearly impossible to come to any semblance of a conclusion on some of the most controversial and widely-debated arguments related to deafness. Research has shown that deafness is continually gaining attention, and as interest in this area increases, more research will emerge that may perhaps put some of these debates to rest. The information gained from this literature review will serve as the groundwork for understanding some of the challenges and struggles that the research participants might face.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

This chapter presents the research methodology and procedures used in this study. A description of the research design and process of selecting participants is provided, along with an in-depth analysis of how the data will be obtained and consequently reported. As this study is qualitative in nature, there were no stated hypotheses to test or evaluate. Instead, hypotheses were derived from the information obtained from participants of this study.

Research Design

This study utilized a qualitative research design, with the intent of using the collected data in combination with the existing literature to create a case study that focuses on five individuals with differing backgrounds. The primary goal of the study was to determine the potential factors that influence the process of forming an identity for deaf people in a predominantly hearing world. Because identity is not something that can be quantified or measured, the researcher chose to employ the phenomenological method, which not only utilizes the unique experience of the individual, but also incorporates both thoughts and feelings into the collected data (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). The participants were all deaf individuals with various degrees of hearing loss who voluntarily agreed to be part of this study. The researcher conducted one semi-structured interview with each participant. The data was transcribed and examined to find common themes or factors that may have been influential in identity development. This chapter further explores the
theoretical background of the phenomenological method, explains how participants were recruited, describes the interview procedures and details how the data was analyzed.

**Theoretical Foundation**

As mentioned in the previous section, this study was qualitative and was conducted following the loose outline of phenomenological research. The intended goal of this study (to identify the factors that influence cultural identity in deaf individuals) lent itself well to a qualitative approach. According to Sharan Merriam (2002), qualitative research is defined by the following characteristics:

- it focuses on understanding experiences from the participant’s perspective
- it assumes multiple realities that are constantly changing
- meaning is defined within a particular context
- the researcher is the main instrument used in data collection and analysis

Qualitative research has gained considerable popularity and recognition over the last forty years and is often linked to Grounded Theory as the major source of making it a feasible research option (Merriam & Associates, 2002). Although there are a number of different 'types' of qualitative research, this study utilized phenomenology as its primary method.

Due to its roots in both philosophy and psychology, phenomenology is often credited with underpinning all qualitative research. However, the phenomenological approach’s main focus is on the essence of the experience and the meaning each individual makes of every experience as it relates to his/her life. Merriam (2002) states, “Although all qualitative research is phenomenological in the sense that there is a focus on people’s experience, a phenomenological study seeks to understand the *essence* or
structure of a phenomenon. This approach rejects the notion of a dichotomy between subject and object. . .The person and his or her world are interrelated and interdependent” (p. 93). Typically, this type of research aims at understanding common experiences, common transitions, or experiences that may be important/typical to a specific group of people (Merriam & Associates, 2002). In using a phenomenological approach, the researcher tried to gain a better understanding of a particular experience through the perspective of the participant.

**Sampling**

The population recruited for this study consisted of deaf individuals who were either a) born with a profound hearing loss, or b) lost their hearing in early childhood (pre-lingual). All five participants were male (to account for possible gender limitations) and fell between the ages of 25 and 33. Participants were not included or excluded based on degree of hearing loss, as the researcher sought participants with different backgrounds and experiences.

Potential participants were recruited using a snowball/network strategy. This sampling strategy was chosen in large part for convenience. The snowball strategy takes advantage of the fact that the deaf community is very small, and most deaf people in a given area know the other deaf people in that area. This is congruent with the idea presented by Speziale and Carpenter (2003) that people who share a common experience—in this case, being deaf—often establish informal social networks.

The researcher recruited participants through a family member who is hard-of-hearing and thus has an extensive network of deaf friends. Because the researcher has frequent contact with this population, participants were first recruited casually, informed
about the study, and then a signed informed consent was obtained. Each participant was then contacted by the researcher to set up an interview time and location. This initial contact with the participants allowed the researcher to introduce the study and to answer any questions/concerns the participants might have had regarding their participation in the study.

**Interview Procedures**

Data for this research project was collected using semi-structured interviews (see Appendix A). The interview questions were designed to gather personal information from the participants about their childhoods and the important experiences that shaped their identity development (as they relate to the issue of deafness). The interview also targeted specific areas, such as familial/parental and social influence in the identity development process. Each interview was video-recorded, then transcribed by the researcher for data analysis. Because American Sign Language is the participants’ primary communication method, audio recording was not appropriate with this population.

All interviews were conducted by the researcher. They were conducted in either the homes of each participant or at a neutral place of their choosing. The only criteria were that the location offered some privacy and was conducive to video-recording. Because each participant is known personally by the researcher, the researcher also offered to conduct the interviews at her home, if the participants could not find an adequate location. Each interview lasted approximately 60-90 minutes (depending on how in-depth the participants chose to go in answering the provided questions), plus any time spent preparing for the interview and answering questions.
Before the interview began, the participant was briefly introduced to the project by the researcher. This introduction involved a short overview of the research project and explanation of the requirements for participation. The participant was told that his involvement in this project may help to further research concerning deafness and deaf identity development. Once it was made clear that the participant understood the focus of the research project, he was required to read and sign the informed consent sheet before the interview began (see Appendix B). Each participant was offered the choice of having an interpreter present, if he so wished. The researcher re-iterated the fact that all information is confidential and will be reported anonymously.

The researcher conducting the interview began video-recording at the start of the interview and stopped taping once the interview was over. Each participant was informed that he had the ability to stop the interview at any time if he did not wish to continue. The main function of the interviewer was to facilitate a description of the participant’s past experiences without leading the discussion.

The researcher began by collecting some basic demographic information, including age, educational background, family structure, age of hearing loss, and degree of hearing loss. The interviewer then opened up the rest of the interview by asking the participant to describe his experience of growing up deaf. Each question was written in a way that sparked informal dialogue and descriptions of the participant’s lived experience. Clarifying questions, such as, “How did you feel you were accepted in your family?” were used to gather more information or guide the interview as the researcher saw fit (see Appendix A). At the end of the interview, the researcher distributed a debriefing letter (see Appendix C) and addressed any questions or concerns that may have come up during
the interview process. The debriefing sheet thanked participants for their involvement and provided them with any additional contact information they may need.

The video tapes and transcripts for each interview were stored in a secure location and were not accessed by anyone other than the researcher and the faculty advisor. All tapes were destroyed and discarded at the conclusion of this study.

**Data Analysis**

The primary goal of data analysis for this research project was to identify recurring themes that might have emerged and could potentially be used to help explain the process of identity development in deaf individuals. In accordance with the identifying principles of qualitative research and phenomenology, the main focus was on capturing the essence of each participant’s experiences and consequently reporting the data in as much detail as possible. Vaughn Worthen, an associate clinical professor at Brigham Young University, sums up the process of qualitative data analysis in the following way:

You do not have an established significance level to tell you when you have found something meaningful. You look for meaning in the data and for its repetition and redundancy across cases. You see whether there are patterns to the data, and whether you can match the data with the emerging meaning and take the meaning and impose it back on the data to see whether it holds up. In phenomenological analysis you do not necessarily rely on the consensus of others who are looking at the same data, because you acknowledge that each might bring a legitimate but different perspective to the data (as cited in Merriam & Associates, 2002, p. 140).

The researcher carefully and thoroughly reviewed each interview transcript in an effort to pull out any major themes or specific factors that play a role in identity formation. The transcripts were reviewed several times to ensure that all relevant or important themes were captured and all possible implications were explored. After
analyzing each interview individually, the researcher analyzed the transcripts as a group to discern any commonalities and discrepancies between each participant's experience and the influential factors defined as important in identity development. This procedure allowed any sub-themes to emerge regarding the experience of growing up deaf in a hearing world. The researcher then used the first-hand reports from the participants to create formal descriptions for the identified themes, which allowed for a deeper understanding of common factors that influence deaf identity development.
CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

As noted in previous chapters, the main focus of this study was to identify the factors that influence identity development in deaf individuals. In reading the results of this study, it is important to keep in mind that identity development is a progression that every individual experiences, and that this research project chose to focus on this process as it is experienced by a minority population (deaf individuals) living in a world dominated and run by the majority population (hearing people). It is also important to understand what exactly identity is. According to Leary and Tangney (2003),

Identity may be contrasted with the notion of self. In psychology, a psychological identity relates to self-image (a person's mental model of him or herself), self-esteem, and individuation. An important part of identity in psychology is gender identity, as this dictates to a significant degree how an individual views him or herself both as a person and in relation to other people. In cognitive psychology, the term "identity" refers to the capacity for self-reflection and the awareness of self (p. 3).

These views will help guide the reader through this chapter and its ensuing discussion of the factors that help shape and transform one's identity. Because identity development is not a tangent process, the researcher will focus on specific factors that were identified by the participants of the study as having played an influential role in this process.

Upon analyzing the obtained data, the researcher was able to identify four specific factors that were reported as being influential in identity development for the deaf participants. These influencers were broken down into separate categories and will be reported in this chapter as ‘themes’. Each theme has its own heading, with underlying
sub-themes included under each, and each section will address the different aspects of that particular influential factor. There was a clear hierarchy of how heavily influential each factor was to the participants, thus they will be reported in the following order of importance (sub-themes are included under each heading):

- FAMILY
  - Parents
  - Siblings
  - Extended Family

- DEAF PEERS
  - Playmates
  - Teammates
  - Schoolmates

- EDUCATIONAL SETTING
  - Early Schooling
  - High School
  - College and Beyond

- SOCIETAL FEEDBACK
  - Work Setting
  - Social Setting
  - Deaf Gatherings

Each theme will be described and discussed in detail, with supporting quotations from the participants included. The selected themes accurately describe the overall experience of growing up deaf in a hearing world and struggling to form an identity (as reported by the participants). It is the hope of the researcher that the following narrative will help the reader understand the meaning each participant made of his own experiences and how that meaning may have influenced his identity development.

It is important to note that the participants’ real names may have been replaced with pseudonyms to protect their identities. It may also be worth noting the differences between the use of Deaf/deaf in the reported narratives, as the researcher copied the style
Family

The first major theme that emerged was the concept of family. When asked to describe their experience of growing up deaf, all five of the participants began to talk about their families and the kind of support they received at home. It immediately became apparent that each of the participants depended on their families to help them cope with issues relating to deafness, and that having a supportive family was crucial to developing a positive identity. It appears that all participants felt a positive connection with their families, regardless of whether their families were hearing or deaf, or whether or not they could sign.

David, who lost his hearing when he was 14 months old (due to spinal meningitis), grew up in a hearing family and has a deaf wife whose family is not only hearing, but also speaks Portuguese. He talked about the challenges of being the only deaf one in his family, saying,

I have a family and most of them are hearing and do not sign. Some used gestures, or I would get used to reading their lips or style of communication by growing up with them. My wife’s family is Portuguese and most of them speak Portuguese. We communicate by gesturing, so it’s cool. It is always a challenge, not only with my family, but with hearing peers.

Despite the challenges of not always being able to communicate easily (about which he talked at length), when asked to talk about his experience of growing up deaf, David immediately stated,
Growing up with my family and hearing peers, I did not think about my deafness or how people would treat me. I was young and did not care what people thought. I just enjoyed life and went with the flow. What helped was the strong support of my parents and relatives. They would explain about my deafness and educate others on how to communicate with me.

It was obvious by the way that David talked about his family that the benefits far outweighed the challenges and that he relied heavily on them to help him cope in the hearing world. Even though the challenges of the hearing world were present in his home life, David and his family found a way to communicate with each other and to make it work. This positive experience influenced not only how David views himself as a deaf individual, but also how he fits in with his hearing peers. In response to how he sees himself as a member of the hearing world, he replied, “I am one of them, even though I don’t see it... I learned to show a lot of patience by working with them and having several options to communicate with them, such as exchanging notes, e-mails, or using Video Relay Services.”

Donald was born deaf and is also the only deaf member of his family. He had an experience very similar to David’s, in terms of family. Donald started off the interview by stating, “I was lucky to have such a supportive family—both immediate and extended—who never viewed my Deafness as something that could hold me back.”

Kevin had an experience unlike that of the other participants. He grew up in an entirely deaf family. He reported that experience in the following way,

Being the only deaf student in my schools presented its own set of challenges throughout the grade levels. However, what was most helpful growing up deaf was that my entire family was also deaf. That meant that I could come home and share my experiences with my family and they would know what I was going through. There was no concept of language barriers or feeling “different” in my family unit while growing up.
The previous testimonies offer some proof that differences between family members was never an issue—the family was consistently considered a source of strength and support. Many of the stories related in later sections also involve the family and different ways that families showed support and encouragement. The general term ‘family’ will now be broken down into three different categories: parents, siblings, and extended family. Each of these sub-themes emerged in different contexts as the participants talked about their experiences of growing up deaf. It is interesting to note that while the participants all talked at length about their real, true families, each one also mentioned having a strong, special bond with their deaf peers—in their eyes, their deaf friends are considered ‘family’. This idea will be addressed further in the next section.

Parents

All five participants reported that their parents were not only one of the most influential factors in relation to how they viewed deafness, but also the biggest support system they had during childhood. While not all parents learn sign language when they discover they have a deaf child, most find a way to communicate with their child, as made evident in some of David’s comments above. Whether they sign, gesture, write notes, or read lips, it is always important for parents and children to have the ability to communicate.

Like hearing children, deaf children need their parents for many things, including love and support. One of the common experiences reported by the participants was the extra hardships of being deaf both at school and with peers; they needed extra support and understanding from their parents when they got home. Donald credits his parents with being his support system during childhood. He stated, “They have been my biggest
support team from day one until now. It’s always reassuring knowing that no matter what you do, you have a place to go back to.”

For Michael, who became hard of hearing at a very young age due to spinal meningitis, the support he got at home was vital. His parents and siblings are able to communicate using sign language, but he still had trouble understanding things being said in group settings. Although he experienced some difficulty with communication around extended family and at family gatherings, he credits his parents with always being supportive and encouraging:

My family was the biggest support system I had during my childhood. My mom kept stressing to me that being deaf meant I just couldn’t hear and that I could still do everything else. Sure, I might have to work a little bit harder to be able to do some of the stuff that a hearing person could do with ease, but I could still do it.

For many, it seems that this sense of encouragement was important. Not one of the participants that were interviewed saw their deafness as a negative thing. To them, it simply means that they cannot hear, and many even reported it as a positive experience, as being deaf has opened many doors for them and has given them the opportunity to meet people who are now like family (again, see the next section). It seems that the encouragement and unconditional positive regard that these individuals received at home played a large role in their optimistic outlook on being deaf.

Tony’s experience of being severely hard of hearing was similar to Michael’s. He is unable to hear without his hearing aids, but even when wearing them, group settings can be challenging. He grew up in a very large family (he has nine siblings, one of whom is also deaf), with parents who encouraged him a great deal and never treated him differently than they treated his siblings. They involved him in important decisions that would affect him, which gave him a sense of pride in who he is.
When asked to describe his experience of growing up deaf, Tony talked about the support he got from his parents, “I had a good experience growing up as a deaf person. My family was always helpful with my reading and speech growing up. . . I never felt I was on the outside with my family. They always involved me and I’ve never felt that I was different than them.” Later in the interview, Tony also stated, “My parents have been very influential in my life. They have never held me back and always kept pushing me into doing things and being involved.”

Kevin echoed this sentiment, saying, “Having such a strong support system at home made some of the challenges I faced in the hearing world less daunting than they seemed to be. My parents always encouraged us to accept our deafness, but not to let it limit us in any way.”

**Siblings**

One of the interesting components in family dynamics is the relationship between siblings and also how the parents treat each of their children. For some, sibling relationships are more important than for others. Some of the participants barely mentioned their siblings during the interview, while others talked about their shared experiences. Kevin, who has two deaf siblings, reported his childhood experiences of being deaf as, “Fun. . .we were all deaf, so there was no difference among us”. For his family, deafness was something that bonded them together and ensured equal treatment. When asked about how he and his family view deafness, he simply stated, “It’s a part of who we are.”

Tony had a similar reaction when asked about his childhood, “My childhood was great. I’ve never felt that I was treated differently than my brothers or sisters.” This sense
of equality seems to have contributed to his positive view of deafness. Although his siblings do not know how to sign and cannot easily communicate with his friends, Tony did not see this as detrimental to their relationships with him. “My family doesn’t know sign language, so it’s a barrier for them to talk to my deaf friends who rely on sign language. My family didn’t really have to learn sign language because I can speak, hear, and read lips well.”

Michael, who is the only deaf member of his family, also reported having a positive experience with his family, including his siblings. “My parents and sisters have a good understanding of deafness. They took some sign language classes so they can talk with me and my friends and have a better understanding of what deafness is like.”

Extended Family

One of the other topics that emerged in relation to family was the concept of the extended family and the role they played in each participant’s experience of being deaf. There were mixed reactions about how the participant’s perceived or interacted with their extended family. Some had highly positive experiences, while others felt disconnected because of the communication gap.

David actually wrote about his extended family while answering his demographic questions. When asked to describe his family structure, David responded by writing,

Everyone in my family is hearing except my great uncle and 2nd cousin. I believe, even though no one knew for sure, that my uncle lost his hearing when he was young but he wouldn’t admit it until he was older. His granddaughter is deaf. I believe we have some deafness in our family history. However, I was not born deaf. What is interesting was I did not know that I have a deaf cousin until 10 years ago. No one said anything. They said I did not ask, but I shot back, telling them no one told me. Everyone knows I am deaf but said nothing about my 2nd cousin until years later.
It is clear from David’s writing that he felt left out or shut off from his extended family. It seems that he felt his family should have let him know that he had a deaf cousin (someone he could communicate easily with), but that the family neglected to tell him and then made it his responsibility, saying that he should have asked about it. Interestingly, David later cited his relatives as a source of support, so it seems that perhaps the positives outweigh the negatives. Michael shared similar frustrations:

I am hard of hearing, so there are times when I have a hard time pronouncing words, which can be frustrating. It is even more frustrating when people give up after I ask them to repeat what they are saying. When I am around hearing people, I am always the last one to know what is going on because someone will have to explain to me what was said. This is never fun.

However, like David, when asked about his family, Michael stated, “I felt accepted in my family. Sure, the communication wasn’t always easy with the extended family members, but I still felt accepted and part of the family.” Donald, on the other hand, had quite a different experience with his extended family:

My family was very supportive of me every step of the way, from my parents to my sister to my cousins, aunts, uncles and grandparents. They always made the effort to ensure that I had access to equal communication, whether it meant hiring an interpreter for temple, weddings...or making sure I was comfortable with knowing what was going on. And if I did not, I always felt comfortable asking what was going on.

Donald always felt that his extended family was very supportive of him and invested in his deafness. His above statement conveys that he felt like he had his family on his team, fighting for him to be included in everything. When asked later in the interview about how his family views deafness, Donald commented, “I think I’m lucky to say that my parents and my family don’t view deafness as a limitation, and don’t let me view it that way. Life is full of various challenges for everyone; it just happens that my challenge is to figure out how to be successful being Deaf in a hearing society.”
Deaf Peers

The second theme that emerged after careful analysis of the interview transcripts was the connection each participant had with his peers (both deaf and hearing). However, all five participants reported the positive influence of their deaf peers as being important to their own views of deafness. Also, as was touched upon in the previous section, each participant talked about the idea of their deaf peers being considered ‘family’ or ‘like family’. This is not surprising, considering how small the deaf community actually is, and the common experiences shared between its members. As David, who attended Clarke School for the Deaf in Northampton, MA for a number of years, put it,

We grew up together for many years and still consider each other as family. After we left Clarke to move on our own ways (we all live in different cities and states), we kept in touch with each other and supported each other through the good and bad times. They helped me become independent but at same time, I still have some strong bonds with those whom I consider as family or dear friends.

When asked who was his biggest support system was during his childhood, Michael named his family as being extremely supportive, but also added, “My friends, who you could say are like family to me, contributed too.”

The overall theme of peers can be broken down into three clear categories: playmates (including current friends), teammates, and schoolmates. Each of these sub-themes will be addressed using narratives that focus on both positive and negative experiences with both hearing and deaf peers. For experiences that may not fit neatly into one of these three categories, the researcher placed them where they fit best or made the most sense. It is important to pay special attention to the use of past and current tenses, as some of the experiences are still accurate to the participants’ lives today.
Playmates

The sub-theme of ‘playmates’ is placed first in this section as many of the experiences described under this heading are current ones that the participants still feel very strongly about. As with other minority groups, and as mentioned in the previous chapter, many deaf individuals gravitate toward other deaf people and find themselves seeking close bonds with their deaf peers because they share common experiences and face similar discrimination/hardships in their daily lives. This bond seems to be a contributing factor in the idea of friends being family, as described above.

For David, interacting with his hearing peers has always been and continues to be a significant challenge. When asked to describe how he sees himself as a member of the hearing world, David stated,

Again, the most critical part for me is patience. Many of my hearing peers are trying their best or do not understand, so I have to work with them. I hate it when they apologize and walk away. Sometimes I can just let it go, but other times I use the opportunity to let them know not to apologize and that there are ways we can communicate. Of course, there are other times when I would say “F**k it, I don’t have time for this,” and move on to focus on something else.

David demonstrated a lot of frustration and other strong emotions whenever he talked about communication difficulties with hearing people. Other participants shared similar emotions/frustrations when discussing the challenge of interacting with the hearing world. While describing his experiences with peers and in social situations, Donald said,

Through middle school, my deafness was rarely, if ever, a factor. I was able to interact with my friends with minimal effort, maybe not realizing I was Deaf. As I got older, and the interactions were in more of a group setting, that’s where it became difficult. I could easily follow along in one-on-one situations, but in a group situation, I often feel lost in the conversation. And as you get older, it’s not so much about playing, but more about communicating...and I got to the point where I did not even want to bother with trying to understand what was going on in a group of hearing individuals, so I gradually shifted to mainly associating myself with my Deaf peers.
Kevin has also chosen to associate mainly with deaf individuals due to the challenges that come along with trying to fit in seamlessly with hearing peers. When asked how he sees himself as a member of the hearing world, Kevin reported an experience very similar to David’s (written above):

I have some friends who are hearing that I see on occasion, but the majority of my social life is with my deaf friends. I view the hearing world as a world that I participate in fluidly and it’s a world that I’m comfortable being in. However, it is also a world that is very challenging and that has presented some difficulties in terms of living in.

Michael echoed this sentiment, focusing on the commonality of the hardships that deaf people often encounter. He cites the special bond that develops among members of the deaf community and the comfort that they feel around each other as a reason they do not gravitate toward their hearing peers. In the following narrative, it is easy to understand why deaf people tend to ‘stick together’ or seek each other out as friends:

My deaf peers are like family to me, and they would say the same. Being able to communicate with ease makes a huge difference. Going through the same hardships bring us closer together. We have a better understanding of each other and share a lot in common. We feel comfortable around each other, whereas being around hearing people...it can be difficult at times.

The responses shared in this section show a clear positive connection between the participants and their deaf peers. For the most part, when forming friendships, the participants reported becoming friends with other deaf individuals because they feel comfortable around them and are able to communicate with ease. These results are not surprising, as most people would probably look for the same qualities in potential friends/playmates. It is worth noting that even though it easier for these participants to get along with deaf friends, they all reported having hearing friends as well. No one ended friendships because one person is hearing while the other is deaf.
Teammates

Many of the participants talked at length about playing sports when they were younger, and some cited this as a good way to bond with their peers. For the most part, sports was an area that could level the playing field between the participants and their hearing teammates. However, at least one participant reported this experience as a negative one that turned him off from trying to be involved with his hearing peers.

David had a tough time trying to get involved with the sports teams at his school. When he first became involved with sports, he saw basketball as an opportunity to connect with his peers and to be a part of a team. He said, “I was the only deaf at a day camp, as well as at basketball camps, but I did not let this “only deaf in the blah blah blah” affect me. Basketball helped because all of the players came to camps to learn new drills and techniques to improve our performances.” David felt this experience at camp put him on the same level as his teammates because they were all there for the same reason: to learn how to be better players.

However, David’s positive attitude toward team sports started to diminish as he got older. He felt discriminated against and looked down upon because he could not hear. While describing his experience of growing up deaf, David told the following story:

Then came another issue, but in football. I asked to play offensive linemen to help the team because the best lineman got hurt and was out for the season. The back-up lineman was ineffective, so the coaches kept rotating the players. I offered to play because I played well during a scrimmage as a lineman. The assistant coach yelled, “How can you hear?” I yelled back, “By looking at the ball!” He punished me by making me run 10 laps. When I was done, I got furious and told the head coach I was punished because the assistant coach would not let me play offensive lineman. His reply was, “Well, we will see” and kept ongoing with excuses. I decided not to continue to play for the team.
Fortunately, David did not let his past experiences guide his future. He took the anger he had toward his hearing coaches and used it to become involved in many sports organizations and committees. Not only was he the assistant coach for Varsity Boys Basketball Team at The Learning Center for Deaf Children (TLC) in Framingham, MA, (a position he held for nine years) and the head coach for the Worcester Deaf Ladies Basketball Team, but he also implemented and coached a Deaf Adult Basketball team and a Deaf Flag Football team. David joined the TLC Annual Golf Outing committee and the committee for Disabilities in Sports (specializing in Deaf Sports) at the Center for the Study of Sports in Society, became a member of a Sports Interest Group for the Association on Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD), and is currently the co-chairperson for the Massachusetts State Association of the Deaf (MSAD) Golf Outing. David used his negative experiences with sports to encourage other deaf people to not be afraid to get involved and to create a welcome environment for deaf athletes.

Although Tony reports having a positive experience in terms of sports (he is an avid hockey player and fan), he did still encounter some challenges and discrimination along the way. While discussing his involvement with the Deaf community, Tony reflected back upon his journey to get where he is today (in terms of sports and hockey). He now sees the positive that came out of his negative experiences:

I see myself as a person who deaf people look up to because of my involvement in hockey. I played at a Division I hockey college (Northeastern University). I have also played hockey in 4 winter Deaflympics. I’ve played in Finland, Switzerland, Sweden, and Salt Lake City, Utah. I feel that I’m a good role model for young deaf kids. I am proof that they can achieve their goals if they set their hearts and minds to it. I had to prove a lot of people wrong and show that I could play at a Division I college. They didn’t think I could play because of my deafness. Even my high school hockey coach thought I should try out at a Division III college. But I went to the try out as a ‘walk-on’ and made the team my freshman year at Northeastern.
Tony’s experiences with hockey had a deep impact on his life. When asked who/what has been the most influential in relation to how he views deafness, Tony began talking about his parents, but ended up talking more about his time spent playing hockey:

They also sent me to the American Hearing Impaired Hockey Association (AHIHA) in Chicago, IL. It is run by Stan Mikita, who is a former Chicago Blackhawk player. He started a Deaf hockey school, where I could skate with other players who were deaf like me. Players from all over the United States would come for one week in June. I have made a lot of friends over the years skating at AHIHA, and it was nice knowing that there were other deaf skaters out there...because I’ve never skated with a deaf player at home.

By including this experience as one of the most influential in how he views deafness, Tony made it clear that positive experiences with other deaf athletes were rare and special to him. He had the opportunity to be around hockey players that were the same as him and did not look at him as an outsider or treat him differently. This kind of positive experience seems to be one that sticks with all of the participants for a very long time and helps shape their views on being deaf.

Kevin reported that being a good athlete helped him in terms of being accepted by his peers. Although he was the only deaf student in his school, he said, “For the most part, I was readily accepted by my peers. One thing that helped was that I was a good athlete growing up, so that evened the playing field a little bit.” For Kevin, being good at sports put him on the same level as his peers and helped him get along. Later in the interview, he stated, “When I was mainstreamed, most of my peers were athletes/teammates and we had the common bond of sports.”

Donald also used sports as a springboard to get along with his peers. He said, “I was always involved in the local sporting leagues (soccer, baseball, and basketball), and my deafness was never an issue. I got along great with my teammates and oftentimes
would hang out with them during my free time growing up.” Donald was able to connect with his peers during time spent on the playing field, which he then used off the field as well. He credits his parents with helping these positive experiences happen:

The other factor was that my parents were very involved with my athletic endeavors. My mother coached my youth soccer team, while my dad was always my coach for basketball and baseball. So having them as my coach allowed me to always know what was going on, and help ensured equal communication. And I believe this played a big factor in my peers/teammates realizing what they needed to do to communicate with me.

Schoolmates

Schoolmates also emerged as an important sub-theme (in terms of hearing and deaf peers). Although the participants could not control if their schoolmates were deaf or hearing, or whether or not they felt accepted, it became clear that the educational setting played a large role in how each of the participants experienced being deaf during childhood, through to adulthood. The educational setting will be explored in-depth in the next section, but experiences with schoolmates will be addressed under this heading.

At the Clarke School for the Deaf, David was able to really come into his own as a deaf individual. He had limited communication with his family, but learned a lot from his deaf classmates, with many of whom he ended up forming lifelong bonds. He talked very highly of these deaf peers, stating, “While attending Clarke School, all the deaf students interacted well since we understood each other and had our own sign language to enhance our communication. My friends at Clarke and I had, and still have, a very strong bond and still keep in touch with each other as if we are family.”

David felt connected to his deaf schoolmates because they shared a common understanding of deafness and had many of the same interests, which later translated into
his views on Deaf culture. As stated in a previous section, David was quick to name his deaf peers from Clarke as being the most influential to his views on deafness. This is not an uncommon experience among deaf individuals—many of the participants cited their deaf schoolmates as the most important resource for learning about Deaf culture and in having a positive view of being deaf. In a sense, their culture is something that is learned and shared at school.

Kevin noted that being mainstreamed was sometimes difficult and that while he was usually accepted, he was not always able to feel at ease around his hearing classmates. He stated, “Being the only deaf student in my schools presented its own set of challenges throughout the grade levels.” He also touched upon the difficulties with classmates due to his inability to hear and how these challenges evolved throughout his schooling years, “As one grows up with a disability, each age group’s social characteristics come with different challenges. Being deaf during puberty was very different from being deaf during my college years.”

Michael also experienced some unique challenges when it came to getting along with and becoming friends with his schoolmates. He did not live close to his school, so he ended up having deaf friends that all lived in different towns. He said, “My friends were all over the place, so hanging out wasn’t an easy thing to do.” He did not often go over one of his friend’s houses to play after school—most plans had to be made on the weekends and often involved sleepovers to ease the burden of having to travel long distances twice in the same day. As he got older and went to a public high school that had a great deaf program, he noted that he often still socialized with his deaf peers because it was easier than trying to use his interpreter to talk to his hearing classmates.
Educational Setting

As expected, all five participants had stories to tell or experiences to share about where they went to school and the people they interacted with while at school (both teachers and students). Because Deaf Culture and deaf customs are often picked up from deaf peers, it is no surprise that the participants reported highly positive experiences when talking about going to school at either a) a school for the deaf or b) at a school with a well-known deaf program, where they are not the only deaf individuals in the classroom. In fact, some of the participants went to the same schools and continue to be close friends years after graduating.

David’s situation was quite different than the other four participants. While reading the narratives provided under each of the following sub-headings, it may be helpful to keep in mind both his previous school placements (geographically) and previous experiences with being placed in schools for the deaf. David grew up right outside of Philadelphia, PA and attended two different deaf elementary schools in nearby towns. From there, he ended up coming to Massachusetts to attend the Clarke School for the Deaf, residing in the dorms for ten years. He went back to Pennsylvania to attend Strath Haven High School in Wallingford, a public high school that is known locally for its high-quality assistance for hearing-impaired and handy-capable students. After graduating from high school, David moved back to Massachusetts to attend Northeastern University (to earn a B.S.) and Springfield College for his graduate program, earning an M.S. degree. The change in geographic location and deaf/hearing environments played a key role in David’s development and views on deafness, and will be re-stated or clarified when necessary to understand a particular narrative piece.
Donald’s education followed a path similar to David’s, in that he attended both deaf and hearing schools. From the time he was old enough to start daycare through the end of sixth grade, he attended The Learning Center for Deaf Children (TLC) in Framingham, MA. He then transferred to F.A. Day Middle School in Newton, MA, followed by Newton North High School, both of which offer the EDCO Program for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (a secondary education program serving students in grades six through twelve in Newton). After high school, Donald went on to Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) in Rochester, NY to earn both his B.S. in Industrial and Systems Engineering, and an M.E. (Masters of Engineering) in Engineering Management.

Michael also attended TLC in Framingham, leaving after the end of eighth grade to start attending Newton North High School as a member of the EDCO program. He began his college career at Northeastern University, but eventually transferred to RIT, where he earned his B.S. degree in Business Management. Michael cited the need to be around more of his deaf friends/peers as the reason for his transfer during college.

Tony began school in a mainstreamed program at the Holbrook Public school, but chose to leave that system to attend the Boston School for the Deaf (BSD) as a full-time student. He eventually made the move back to mainstreaming during fifth grade, starting with two classes a day at the Randolph, MA public school (with interpreters provided by BSD). By eighth grade, he was mainstreamed full-time through the BSD support services. When BSD closed down in 1994, he transferred to Newton North High School and became involved with the EDCO program. Like Michael, Tony began taking college classes at Northeastern (he spent two years there), then transferred to RIT, where he spent one year before leaving. He has yet to earn a college degree.
Kevin did not provide as much educational background as the other four participants, but he did note that he was mainstreamed throughout the entirety of his schooling years. He went on to earn a B.A. in Justice Studies and an M.A. in Deaf Education.

Early Schooling

For the purposes of dividing the major theme (Educational Setting) into clearly defined sub-themes, both elementary and middle school experiences will be grouped under the common heading, ‘Early Schooling’. For a couple of the participants, their early schooling experiences had a major impact on how they viewed deafness in subsequent school settings and how they see themselves relating to the hearing world. Some were mainstreamed (usually with the help of a personal interpreter) while others spent the majority of their school years in deaf schools, surrounded by other deaf students, and taught by deaf teachers.

As noted above, Donald began his school career commuting from Newton, MA (his hometown) to Framingham to attend a school for the deaf. He referred to these early years a number of times during his interview, and always in a very positive manner. When asked about the most influential factors in relation to how they view deafness, most of the participants spoke of the support they received from their parents. Donald took this question in a different direction, drawing upon his experiences at TLC and how that played into his current views. He stated, “I would say my childhood shaped my views on deafness. Growing up at TLC, I was exposed to deaf teachers and other staff members who would tell stories of their childhood and other deaf stories. That made me realize how difficult it used to be for Deaf individuals, and how good I have it now.”
Donald also spoke highly of his time at The Learning Center as he described his overall experience of growing up deaf. After acknowledging the support he received from his family and how that helped him adopt a positive view of the deaf world, Donald said, “And in addition, I had the honor of growing up at The Learning Center (TLC), which instilled much of my confidence and belief and the foundation for my continued educational success.” It is clear that he credits this particular institution with helping to boost his self-esteem and acceptance of his own deafness, as well as being a catalyst for the success he achieved in later years.

David had a positive experience as well, but at the Clarke School. While talking about the positive social interactions he had with his deaf peers at this school, he commented on the attitudes of the teachers. As he put it, “Most of the teachers were excellent and used a lot of gestures and facial expressions to help us understand better.” From what David said in the interview, it seems that perhaps he learned how to communicate with his deaf peers by watching and imitating his teachers, and by interacting with his classmates in the dorm on a daily basis.

Tony also attended an elementary school for the deaf, but his experience was different in that he was very involved in his parents’ decision to send him to a deaf school over a public one. He told the following story:

One year, in either the first or second grade, my parents had me in a deaf school (at Boston School for the Deaf) for half the day and then at the Holbrook Public school for the second half of the day with no interpreter. We did this for one year. At the end of the year, my parents asked me if I could choose where to go to school full-time, where would I go? I chose Boston School for the Deaf full-time. I chose BSD because it was where I felt comfortable and because I could understand my classmates and my teacher 100 percent. When I was in the public school, I was at a total loss, just sitting at my desk not understanding what the teacher was saying during class.
Although Tony eventually became mainstreamed (starting in the fifth grade and continuing until the end of eighth grade) through a program offered at BSD, he still has fond memories of the deaf teachers he had there. He credits those teachers, as well as his family and the staff at AHIHA, as being a big part of his support system during his childhood.

One downside reported by the participants was the distance between their hometowns and the town where they went to school. Donald traveled from Newton to Framingham, Tony from Holbrook to Boston and Randolph, and Michael from Wilmington to Framingham. This commute sometimes caused problems and became a hassle. As Michael stated, “School was not close-by so that meant a longer school day, with the commute and all.” These participants did not have the luxury of going to a school that was only minutes away. David perhaps, had the farthest to travel, as he moved from Pennsylvania to Massachusetts to attend a reputable deaf school. The long distance meant that he had to become a resident and live in the dorms, something that is not uncommon at schools for the deaf across the country.

**High School**

As outlined under the major heading for this particular section, all five participants (regardless of where they went to elementary and middle school) attended public high schools, where they were mainstreamed with the help of an interpreter and offered speech services. Three of the five participants attended the same high school (Newton North), although they were all members of different graduating classes.

Michael transferred to Newton North before beginning his freshman year. He was registered in the mainstream program through the EDCO program, and had
interpreters and note-takers in each of his hearing classes. Because the EDCO program has about fifty deaf students in a school comprised of thousands, there was no guarantee that there would be other deaf students in any of Michael’s classes. Although he formed many close friendships while at Newton North, being mainstreamed wasn’t always a positive experience. He shared the following frustrations:

Having interpreters for my classes may have helped me understand what was being said, but there was always that delay during the translation. And the communication between me and the staff or students was like a game of telephone—something would usually get left out during the translation. There were times when I felt as if I wasn’t being taken seriously. It felt like people would just pretend to understand what I was saying.

David also experienced some frustrations after transferring from a deaf school to a public one and entering the mainstream program. He came up against some discrimination and other challenges, which he was not used to after spending ten years living with, interacting with, socializing with, and attending classes with other deaf students. He shared the following story:

What hit me hard and made me realize there was discrimination in the world occurred during my sophomore year of high school. I had been the MVP for the freshman basketball team, and suddenly I was cut from the JV team during my sophomore year, along with three other deaf athletes. We were shocked. The assistant coach would not give us the answer as to why we got cut. He only said, “I will explain later.” My mother got pissed and brought my trophy to the principal and Athletic Director and told them that they should not have picked me out of sympathy, but as an athlete. The coach later told the Athletic Director that I was cut because I could not shoot.

Even though David experienced some new challenges at his public high school, he tried to take it all in stride and not let the hardships overwhelm him or discourage him from pursuing his interests. He learned to accept his place in the hearing world and to use his past experiences to help shape a more positive future. After sharing the story above, he reflected back on his high school years and realized that his time spent at a
school for the deaf did not adequately prepare him to deal with the common challenges that deaf people experience outside of the deaf community (in this case, at a public, hearing school). He stated:

The only regret I had during high school was not educating the coaches or others who didn’t understand deafness. They assumed, but they assumed wrong. Some teachers were very open and would ask questions first, before class started, in order to adjust and fit for everyone. I was not prepared for high school after spending ten years at the Clarke School for the Deaf.

Although he did not go into detail about his high school experiences, Donald talked about beginning to explore his options (for after graduating from high school) while he was still in high school. His interest in the Deaf community was beginning to really blossom, and he pursued this interest by spending time with other Deaf people in various educational settings (particularly Gallaudet, a well-known deaf college). He credits his visits to Gallaudet as being one of the influential factors in relation to how he now views deafness:

I would say my many visits to Gallaudet through my high school years and beginning of college was a major influence. Gallaudet is a very strong, pro-Deaf Culture campus, and my experiences there became an important stage for me because they allowed me to understand different perspectives, especially because I spent my middle school and high school years in a mainstreamed program.

College and Beyond

Out of all five participants, David talked the most about his experiences at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. It seems that by leaving high school (where he was mainstreamed) and attending college at Northeastern, he was able to experience a new way of being his peers, both hearing and deaf. He saw college as an opportunity to explore new horizons, meet new people, and learn more about things that perhaps he was not previously able to access, in part because he had been one of the few students at his
high school to face daily struggles as a member of a minority population. In David’s eyes, becoming a college student leveled the playing field a little bit because everyone was new to the environment and they were all learning together. In his own words, David said, “The best part about college was that everyone was coming into a new world where they faced challenges, as well as rewards. We learned a lot from each other and became open-minded to new things.”

After earning his B.S. degree at Northeastern, David went on to Springfield College, where he earned an M.S. degree. He described the experience of being in a graduate program as follows:

It was a great experience because everyone was already open-minded after being in college for four years. They knew how to ask questions instead of assuming, and had already learned to treat everyone equally. The students were aggressive, asking questions or they would learn sign language so we could discuss things during group meetings in the evenings. Overall, it was a great group experience.

David made it his mission to teach others about deafness after learning that college students were interested in how to properly communicate and interact with people who might be different than them. As he said, “I taught a night course at NU (Northeastern University) for four years—Deaf People in Society—to help students gain a better understanding of the Deaf Culture.”

Michael did not elaborate on his own college experiences, but he offered the following, which touches upon an important aspect of the college experience—community. He stated,

There are some deaf people who just let their disability stop them from doing what they want to do. This could be because of their support system or lack of one. They never had anyone to push them and tell them that they can do anything but hear. Some grew up being the only deaf person in their area, which is hard. Once they go to a college where there are a lot of deaf students, they have a hard
time going back home and usually end up staying where they went to school or moving to a place where there's a big deaf community.

This experience rang true for Michael, who chose to stay in Rochester after graduating from RIT because he felt close to the friends he had made there. After talking with the participants, it seems that this idea of community and moving to a place where there is a larger deaf community could also apply to the bonds formed throughout the earlier school years as well. It does not seem like such a coincidence that the five participants all live in close proximity to each other and have ties that go way back.

**Societal Feedback**

The last common factor/theme found in each of the five interviews is the role society and societal feedback plays in identity development for deaf individuals. The participants talked about their social interactions in different settings, including work, general social settings, and deaf gatherings. For each of these three sub-themes, narratives will be included that touch upon interactions with both deaf and hearing people and the overall perceived differences (as reported by each participant) between interacting with the two groups. It may prove useful to pay particular attention to this distinction while reading through the following sections.

**Work Setting**

The work setting came up in a few of the interviews. One of the questions asked of the participants was, “Describe how you see yourself as a member of the hearing world.” Interestingly, many of the participants spoke of their membership in and connection to the hearing world in terms of working. Not one reported not being a member of the hearing world, but most of their participation with it is through the
workforce and the interactions they have on a daily basis with their co-workers. The following narratives explore this phenomenon.

As Kevin reported in an earlier section, he mainly chooses to associate with other deaf people. However, he does not always have this luxury, especially when it comes to his career. He was mainstreamed throughout his school years, so he is used to living and working in a hearing world and being around hearing people. He recognizes that even though he is deaf, he does have a place in a world that is full of people who are different than him. He acknowledges the difficulties that he and other deaf people often face in the workplace, but because he knows he has no choice but to make his way in a hearing world, he does not let the negativity affect him. Instead, he makes it his job to educate others and to work toward making a positive change. In his own words, Kevin stated:

I spent the majority of my time in the hearing world with regards to my professional life. . . I think that as I have gotten older, I have become less likely to get angry at a system that I sometimes feel is stacked against people with disabilities. Instead, I’m now more interested in working to change these biases.

Donald also openly admitted to the fact that he prefers to associate with deaf people more than with hearing people. Because the majority of his company and co-workers are not deaf and he is around them five days a week, he is able to see how involved he is in the hearing world, as well as the deaf world. However, like Kevin, he recognizes the problems he sometimes faces while interacting with the hearing world.

When asked the question stated at the beginning of this section, Donald replied:

I am definitely very involved in the hearing world when you consider that I’m the only Deaf person at my job, and much of our day-to-day activity takes place in the hearing world. I’m comfortable being who I am in the hearing world, but it does become tiring or frustrating because you are always working to understand what is going on. I need to make sure that hearing people who I interact with understand that I’m Deaf, and that I need to maintain eye contact when having a conversation. But I do see myself as a productive member of the hearing world.
The common thread throughout many of the participant’s responses is the idea of accepting oneself for what one is, whether that be big, small, dark, light, hearing, or deaf. Kevin and Donald both stressed the importance of feeling comfortable and being an advocate for themselves, as well as for other deaf people.

Michael also stressed the need to be comfortable around hearing people, but he attributed some of this comfort to the fact that he is hard of hearing, meaning he can get by without using sign language. He feels that because he is not what other deaf people consider ‘totally deaf’ (which is often an inaccurate description, as being completely and totally deaf is a very rare occurrence), he is better able to blend in with his hearing peers. When asked to describe his experiences with the hearing world, Michael said,

I feel comfortable enough to work with hearing people and that could be because I am hard of hearing. The same could be said for other hard of hearing people. The ones that are completely deaf, I just know they are a lot more comfortable being around other deaf people, meaning working with them and socializing with them. They are more involved in the deaf community. I just understand where they are coming from and how they feel. . .

Tony’s experience in the workforce has been influenced by his ability to get along in both the deaf world and the hearing world. He uses the ability to switch between worlds to his advantage, which has helped him in terms of getting along with peers and co-workers. As he said, “I feel fortunate that I can hear better and speak better than an average deaf person. It helps me communicate with the hearing world and the deaf world. So I have the benefit of being involved in both worlds.” It is obvious from this statement that Tony feels comfortable working with hearing people, something that has been repeatedly reported as important by some of the other participants. Although he feels comfortable being around hearing people, Tony also noted that he prefers being around deaf people, as the communication is often easier and he feels more relaxed.
Social Setting

Social settings have a heavy influence on how the deaf participants of this study view themselves as members of both the hearing world and the deaf world. Every individual, not just the ones included in this study, has ways of knowing the world and of perceiving how the world reacts to him. For deaf people, social settings—especially settings with mixed company (both deaf and hearing)—often present challenges that are unique to their population. As Michael stated, “Talking to a hearing person in a loud environment, like a bar, is always hard.” Being able to sign in a loud environment is an advantage, and is one of the reasons that many of the participants reported their preference of socializing with other deaf people.

Tony is one of the participants that feels more comfortable in a group of deaf people. He tends to feel more included and cites the ease of communication as a reason for feeling so comfortable. Trying to include himself in conversations with hearing people can often be frustrating, as he points out in the following narrative:

When I’m with my deaf peers, I feel that I’m very involved in the conversations. When I’m with a group of hearing people, I tend to feel left out. I try to catch the conversation and follow it. I have a tendency to say, “What did he say?” or “Huh?” and more often than not, they will fill me in. However, there are still times when they will say, “It’s not important” or “Forget about it.”

While all five participants do prefer to be surrounded by their deaf friends, as noted throughout this chapter, some of them still feel lucky to be able to switch between both worlds (hearing and deaf). This ability makes it easier for them to get along with others, and gives them a sense of ease when presented with a hearing group of people.

Kevin’s past experiences have helped him learn how to flourish in any situation, and he has spent much of his time around hearing people, as well as deaf people. This
shared sense of time has allowed him to view himself as a legitimate member of each world, despite the fact that he is an avid supporter of Deaf culture and the Deaf community. As far as social situations are concerned, Kevin said: 

I consider myself very lucky to be able to switch between both worlds very comfortably. I can sign fluently if that is the preferred mode of communication, or I can communicate orally if that’s the mode of communication. I consider myself a member of the Deaf community and I fully recognize/support Deaf culture. However, I also consider myself a member of the Hearing community.

The ability to adapt in certain social situations has served Kevin well over the years and allows him to spend time with his deaf friends in predominantly hearing establishments without being concerned about how he will be able to communicate with others. He does not have to rely on others to be a go-between for him, and is lucky to be able to enjoy the personal company of both hearing and deaf people.

Donald is also capable of fitting himself into many social situations. He will speak when he is surrounded by hearing people that do not sign, but he does prefer to spend time with his deaf friends. He finds that his time spent with deaf friends is much more relaxing because he is able to communicate in the way that he feels most comfortable. When he is trying to communicate with hearing people, he needs to work harder to be understood or to understand clearly. The following two narratives are both statements made by Donald at different times during the interview. He stated:

While I am profoundly Deaf, I do have the capability to hear when I wear my hearing aids, and I speak fluently as well. So this definitely helps me overcome more easily the challenges that other Deaf individuals who don’t speak or can’t hear might have. This was definitely something I always felt was an advantage, and I’m just lucky to be able to do so. I never felt discriminated against, and was always surrounded by people who I could trust and have to support me, so that I’ve never been frustrated to be Deaf.

While my deafness is not a limitation, it is certainly a challenge. . .I need to work very hard to be able to communicate with or understand my hearing counterparts
clearly, and this takes up a lot of energy and is sometimes more work than leisure. Whereas, when I'm with my Deaf friends, I can relax completely and converse without any effort.

Both excerpts speak to the idea of social preferences and specific challenges that Donald has to deal with when he is around a group of hearing people. However, the second one makes it clear that he, like the other participants, would almost always choose to socialize with deaf peers over hearing ones. This is not surprising, especially when thinking about typical social atmospheres that may be loud, crowded, or dark. Those three components are not conducive to deaf people forming social bonds with hearing people while out trying to have a good time.

Deaf Gatherings

The last sub-theme to emerge after a careful analysis of the transcripts was the importance of deaf gatherings, which has been a common thread throughout many of the previous narratives. All five participants made it clear that spending time with their deaf peers has been a major contributing factor to how they view deafness, and consequently, how they view themselves. The social aspect of being around deaf peers not only has boosted some of the participants’ self-esteem, but it has also taught most of them about Deaf culture and has given them a sense of identity in the deaf community.

When asked about his experiences in the deaf community and with other deaf people, David was quick to list the various activities he has been involved in over the years (that focus on being deaf and bringing deaf people together). He said, “I attend clubs to meet with Deaf people, such as the Boston Deaf Professional Happy Hour, or I go to shows to chat with other Deaf people before or after the show. I also attend athletic events, etc.”
He again went back to talking about the deaf community and how being involved with it has contributed to his overall identification with Deaf Culture. When asked to name the most influential factors that have contributed to how he views deafness, David named his friends and the ADA (Americans with Disabilities) organization, and then replied, “At last, the Deaf Community. You view deafness by being involved in the deaf community, not in the classroom. The Deaf Community is where you learn rich culture and experiences.”

In order to understand how important socializing with other deaf people is for many members of the deaf community, it may be helpful to understand what the participants mean when they talk about Deaf culture. It seems that every individual has his own definition, although the foundation is basically the same. One of the questions asked during the interview was, “What does the term ‘Deaf Culture’ mean to you?” This question was important because it gave the researcher a sense of understanding and made sure the researcher and the participant were on the same page when it came to actually using the term in conversation.

When asked to describe Deaf Culture, Tony gave a very literal definition that included some typical customs and social cues that may be different than hearing people are accustomed to. While reading the following narrative, it is important to focus on his use of pronouns when describing different communication techniques. His use of the word ‘we’ shows that Tony includes himself in this particular population and sees himself as member of this culture. He stated:

The term ‘Deaf Culture’ means to me the unique things we do to communicate with each other and the way we behave that might be different than the hearing culture. The sense of humor is different at times when something wouldn’t be as funny in a hearing culture. If we need to get one’s attention, we will wave our
hand, stomp our feet, tap the person’s shoulder, or even yell out loud. While in the hearing culture, you just simply call out the person’s name to get their attention.

Kevin also very clearly thinks of himself as a member of the Deaf Culture. Under the previous sub-heading, he stated that he is a member of the hearing world, but that he also fully supports Deaf Culture. When asked to describe Deaf Culture in his own words, Kevin gave a more general description, followed by a very descriptive list of words that he thinks characterize Deaf Culture pretty well:

I view Deaf Culture as an organic thing—it never remains the same. Rather, it is constantly evolving with time. One of the key abilities that defines longevity of a culture is the culture’s ability to change over time. That’s what Deaf Culture does: it changes over time to meet the needs of its members. Some defining are: organic, independent, proud, clannish, common characteristic of hearing loss (in varying degrees), and visual.

Donald noted a couple times during his interview that it is often easier and more relaxing to be around his deaf friends. He also stressed the importance of being understood and feeling like someone else gets what he is going through and perhaps even experiencing the same things. While discussing Deaf Culture, Donald reflected on the level of comfort he feels when he is around other deaf people:

Deaf Culture is something I identify myself with. It is definitely a big part of who I am, and when I am with people who understand Deaf Culture (communication/cultural styles/habits), I am definitely much more comfortable than when I’m with those who might not have as big of an understanding of our culture.

It is clear from Donald’s statement that he feels a sense of belonging when he is around other deaf people. After touching upon his identification with Deaf Culture, he began to talk about his involvement with the deaf community and his sense of comfort around any group of deaf people—whether he knows them or not. This is a common aspect of Deaf Culture, as many deaf gatherings are held in different communities to give
the members a chance to socialize with each other. Donald commented on his
involvement with other deaf people in his area, saying:

I definitely see myself as being involved in the Deaf community/Deaf culture.
The majority of my spare time is spent with my Deaf friends. I rarely spend
leisure time with my hearing peers. I'm not involved in the deaf community to
such lengths that I'm an activist or advocate, but I definitely feel super
comfortable in deaf gatherings (strangers or acquaintances) because of the ease of
communication.

Deaf gatherings are often a good way for deaf individuals to meet other deaf
people and to fully experience Deaf Culture, but being around deaf people who are
admitted activists can sometimes turn into a negative experience. Donald pointed out that
although he feels most comfortable being around his deaf peers and that it is usually a
positive experience, he sometimes feels a sense of rejection from both the deaf and
hearing world. He said, “I get irritated when people say I’m hearing impaired. Or when
people say I’m hard of hearing because I can speak. I identify myself as a Deaf person
first and foremost before anything else. I’m Deaf before I’m white, Jewish, a Red Sox
fan, etc…” Clearly, Donald feels very strongly about identifying himself as a member of
the Deaf community, one that sometimes does not fully accept him.

Michael shared a similar experience because he is hard of hearing. He struggled
to fit in with his ‘completely’ deaf peers, but did not feel as though he fit neatly into the
hearing world either. As he reflected back over the changes he has undergone concerning
his acceptance into the deaf world, he said:

Now, I find myself being comfortable. Back then, I wouldn’t use my voice
around deaf people because I just didn’t think it was right because they couldn’t
talk, nor could they hear. I felt that if I did, I wouldn’t be accepted as one of their
peers. As I got older, I came to realize that I could use my voice around deaf
people and that they would still accept me as one of their peers. There may be
some deaf people who don’t like it when someone can talk and hear, but that is
just some deaf people. I don’t sweat that anymore like I did back then.
During each interview, the participants were asked to reflect upon their experiences of being deaf in a hearing world and to judge whether that experience has been positive or negative. The three narratives included below are some of the powerful statements made during each interview. Tony’s statement reflects his thoughts and feelings in relation to being something of a role model for hearing people who are encouraged by the things he has accomplished—as a deaf person who has faced more obstacles than a hearing person might—to get to where he is today. Kevin’s statement is an overall reflection of how being deaf can be both a positive and negative experience. Donald’s statement accurately reflects the running thoughts that were going through his mind as he struggled to categorize being deaf as a positive or negative experience.

Tony: I see myself as an inspiration to some of the people in the hearing world. I’ve had people come up to me and say that to me...When they are going through a difficult time in their life, they think of me and of what I have to go through in my everyday life, trying to get by in a hearing world as a deaf person. It seems strange to me at times.

Kevin: I think that it is both a positive and a negative experience. There are so many unique things that come with being deaf. However, today’s society still has a long way to go before accepting people with disabilities in the mainstream environment, including the workforce. As such, being deaf can be a negative experience in a variety of ways when one is trying to navigate the hearing world.

Donald: I don’t think of it either way. I’m not rejoicing that I was born Deaf, but I’m not disappointed that I am Deaf. I am Deaf, and that’s that. If anything, it has been a positive experience because I’ve had such a wonderful life, with so many opportunities that came about because I’m Deaf. I’ve met some of my closest friends at places that we all ended up at because we were Deaf. I’ve had the opportunity to go to the Deaf Olympics, twice. I got to travel to Australia and New Zealand for six weeks after the Deaf Olympics with five of my friends. I’ve had the opportunity to go to Gallaudet and compete at the Academic Bowl, which allowed me to meet so many other Deaf peers from around the country. I got to go to a Youth Leadership Camp in Oregon, because it was a Deaf Camp. Chances are, I wouldn’t have had those experiences if I was born hearing. So now I would say it’s a super-positive thing.
CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

This chapter will present discussion of the findings that were reported in the previous chapter. This discussion will include references to current literature, in an effort to compare and contrast the results of this study to the results of other studies that have been done on similar topics. Most of these comparisons will be made in the first section, which is devoted to presenting the implications of this study. The second section will discuss the implications that this study may have on further research, and will also identify its contributions. Lastly, the third section will address the limitations of this study, and will also present recommendations for replication and other future research.

Implications of Research

The main overall finding of this study is that there are a number of factors that affect the identity development of deaf individuals who live in a hearing world. This general finding can be easily translated into a hypothesis that represents the theme of this study. This hypothesis can then be broken down into specific factors that play a role in the identity formation process. All five participants reported family, deaf peers, school setting, and society as being the most influential factors in their lives. Although each experienced these four factors to differing degrees, it was clear that all four were important to each participant in terms of identity development. Most of the experiences that were related in the previous chapter were positive, which translated to a positive self-identity in each of the five participants, who reported identifying with both worlds.
The four themes identified above—family, deaf peers, school setting, and society—have emerged both subtly and explicitly in other research. Each of these factors has been identified by other researchers and experts as being crucial to the identity development of deaf individuals. These themes have also been identified as being highly influential to deaf people in terms of a positive or negative self-image. The experiences that deaf individuals go through in childhood often affect how they view deafness for years to come.

Some of the experiences reported by the participants clash with the existing data on related topics. One example of this is the stereotype held by some that deaf people cannot be productive members of the workforce, or that they have lower-skilled, lower-paying jobs when compared to their hearing counterparts. One of the pieces that goes hand-in-hand with this is education. Many people believe that deaf education is inferior and that deaf people are incapable of acquiring the same education as hearing students.

The following excerpts touch upon both education and job placement. It is important to note that over twenty years have passed since this book was written and published, so there has undoubtedly been some progress made over the years. However, even though the excerpts are from a book that was published in 1980, they are both notions that are still prevalent in today’s society:

Like the rest of us, the prevocationally deaf generally hold jobs that reflect their education. But they face other problems in the workplace as well, and these seriously affect many careers. In the early 1970s only six in a hundred had bachelor’s degrees. Twice that many had finished at least a year of college. About a third had ended their formal education with a high school diploma, but more than half had not finished high school and over a quarter had never even reached ninth grade.

So they overwhelmingly find employment in manual trades—four fifths of deaf people as opposed to under half of the hearing. Probably half of employed deaf people work for manufacturing concerns, compared to a quarter of the hearing.
But these figures are falsely cheerful; nearly all of these deaf employees are operatives or menials, while many hearing have managerial jobs. More than half of working Americans wear white collars on the job; fewer than one deaf person in five is so lucky. And the deaf, like others of the deprived, suffer more unemployment than their hearing counterparts (Benderly, 1980, p. 10).

The background given on each participant in the previous chapter comes into complete conflict with these statements. Four out of five hold at least a bachelor’s degree; the fifth is only one year away from earning a degree. Three of those four have also earned a master’s degree, one in Engineering, which is notoriously a very difficult major. They all reported feeling comfortable at their jobs, where they often interact with hearing people. None of the participants felt deprived or held back because they are deaf. They had excellent support networks throughout their childhoods, and were always encouraged to achieve their dreams. They are now working to dispel the old notion of ‘deaf and dumb’, and it seems they are doing an excellent job.

Another theme that contradicts some of the past literature concerning deafness and deaf identity is the positive outlook each of the participants has in terms of his individual deafness and how he relates as a deaf person in the hearing world. Benderly wrote, “Ethnic identity—the recognition of oneself as a member of a particular group—costs most deaf more dearly than other people. They form it young and in opposition—indeed, even more than other minority identities, it makes sense only in opposition. To be deaf is to be not hearing; it is to be one of us and not one of them” (1980, p. 229).

This idea of complete separation and negativity around one’s deaf identity does not ring true for any of the participants. While they all have experienced negative experiences and have had to overcome challenges that are specific to their population, they still see themselves as members of the hearing world. They do not segregate
themselves and do not see the deaf population as ‘us’ and the hearing population as ‘them’. Instead, there is one population that includes people of different abilities and different communication styles, and perhaps even different cultural customs. However, there is no reason that deaf individuals cannot be part of the hearing community, as well as the deaf community. Their identity includes both the deaf and hearing worlds, enmeshed as one. Perhaps this description of deaf identities better captures the true experiences of the participants:

Deaf people, as other minority members, live on the edge of traditional society and employ peripheral vision/wisdom to function in the worlds in which they live. As such they have arrived at a highly comparative outlook on life and their self-identities, which are emerging and less then settled. They thus exemplify the late modern outlook that takes no fixed position for granted, and they engage in a pervasive self-reflection. Deaf identities are thus very much in the making and in the process of “becoming” (Breivik, 2005a, p. 18).

In this study, many of the participants talked about feeling most comfortable around their hearing peers. They credited their peers with helping them learn about being deaf and accepting their deafness. This resonates with the current research, where deaf children are often credited with being the foundation of Deaf Culture and the deaf community. This is not a new phenomenon, as it has appeared in the literature for many years. Benderly talked about this facet of Deaf Culture in her book, Dancing Without Music:

The children, rather than the adult authorities, traditionally administer the rite of passage to newcomers and welcome them into the community of their own kind. Most adults who were deaf as children can describe the same experience—the frustration, anger, and loneliness of home; arrival at school; the sudden dawning of community and relationship. Of all adult cultures in the world, this is one of the very few handed down, generation after generation, from child to child. Few suppressed bands of believers have invented, preserved, or handed on a heritage in the face of greater opposition or with more ingenuity and determination than the deaf children who taught one another sign language in secret. Most state schools eventually acquiesced, of course (1980, p. 228).
This experience was especially true for David, who left home to attend a residential school during his elementary years. He is still in touch with his classmates from that school, almost twenty years later, and now considers them as part of his family. He also credits them as being the most influential on his views of deafness. Without being around deaf peers who taught him to accept himself at such a crucial age, David's outlook may be very different than it is today.

It became clear that all five participants recognize the deaf community as its own culture and entity. They also all reported being part of it. The first-hand accounts from the participants support the notion that deafness is not a disability, and that it is indeed a culture. The idea of having a Deaf Culture gives deaf individuals a sense of belonging. Just as many minority groups identify themselves as being both American and whatever their ethnicity may be, by viewing deafness as a culture, deaf people are able to identify themselves as members of both the hearing world and the deaf community. Benderly describes this experience by saying, “Cultural groups develop strong feelings of internal solidarity and identification. . .when they come together in sufficient numbers and in conditions that emphasize both their similarities to one another and their differences from surrounding powerful others” (1980, p. 221).

In general, deaf people do not need to fit themselves into one of the groups, and contrary to what some may believe, most deaf people do not wish to be hearing. For them, having an entire community that communicates in the same way and has similar experiences gives them a sense of uniqueness from the hearing world, and a sense of oneness or sameness with their deaf peers. This quote from Owen Wrigley’s book on deaf politics tries to explain this need:
While deaf people hold experiences in common and Deaf identity is marked by the physical register of sign language, the sense of “citizenship” inheres in a process, in social relations. This citizenship is not a static commodity of deafness or of sign language as a modality: It lies in the social exchange of recognition produced through signing. It is the immersion in the exchange that produces this sense of citizenship that needs no place. The desire of the deaf for immersion in the communication grid as a means of “becoming” resonates with the postmodern experience of information more generally. This communicative “citizenry” may soon represent the only experience of community (1996, p. 104).

Overall, the important thing to focus on is the lived experience of each individual deaf person. No one will have the exact same experiences, but there is a common bond between deaf people because of the similarities that can be found in their experiences. Not all deaf people are oppressed, just as not all hearing people are oppressors. The participants in this study are proof that deafness is not often viewed as a negative condition by those who are afflicted. They are also proof that a Deaf Culture does exist, but that its members do not have to be exclusive. Each of the five participants, in the process of teasing out the factors that affected their identity development, made it clear that identity is subjective and that their identities are not set in stone, an idea echoed repeatedly in the literature, and especially in Breivik’s work.

Implications for Further Research

The careful analysis of the data collected for this study has revealed some issues that are pertinent to the deaf population. One particular issue that was highlighted by at least two of the participants is the idea of ‘not deaf enough’. Both Michael and Donald reported feelings of inadequacy in relation to complete identification with and comfort around other hearing people, especially those who may be more immersed in Deaf Culture. In an effort to help his readers better understand deaf politics, such as not being deaf enough to be accepted into the group, Breivik (2005a) writes,
Internal identification processes and ethnically oriented politics of identity force potential members to demonstrate loyalty and commitment. However, herein lay some difficulties. Mixed loyalties and late entrances tend to flourish and become ingredients of a dubious identity setup. The process of becoming culturally Deaf is thus an identity pathway that engenders ambiguity, alertness, and reflexivity. This is also so because of the continual normalizing pressure that is laid upon deaf people from a phonocentric cultural regime of power. Deaf identities are thus highly contested from both within and outside, and they vary because of the nature of different individual pathways and the relative power of competing identity discourses and master narratives. In this way, deaf people face identity obstacles similar to those faced by many other minority members (p. 13).

This may be an area that needs further research. The idea of Deaf Pride turning into Deaf Prejudice is something that has been touched upon in the research, and presented here by some of the participants. It would be worthwhile (and interesting) to create a study that focuses just on finding and defining the fine line between being proud to be deaf and rejecting others because they are hearing or not deaf enough.

This research project also highlights the difference between the experiences of deaf children and the experiences of hearing children while forming an identity. There may be a need for more support to be offered to deaf children who are attending public schools as part of their mainstreaming program. Even with interpreters, the deaf children are not having the same school experiences as the hearing children at that public school. This issue has been recognized in the past, but not much seems to have changed. In 1980, Beryl Benderly wrote about the importance of not only the academic curriculum, but also of the need to experience the social aspects that most children engage in while at school. She wrote,

For children and especially adolescents, these critics believe, the “other” curriculum of friendships, camaraderie, sports, and activities is at least as important as school work. Is a child truly in his “least restrictive environment” unless he can take full part in everything his classmates are up to, unless he can date, hold office, try out for the team, edit the paper, go to parties, hang around, be one of a “crowd”? Can a child at a severe communicative disadvantage even
begin to experience a normal, nurturing childhood among hearing youngsters? In what sense except age and physical proximity are they his "peers"? (Benderly, 1980, p. 252).

Unfortunately, this study was unable to focus on these two areas. Gaining a more comprehensive understanding of the numerous factors that may affect deaf individuals' sense of belonging and identity with the world around them would be highly beneficial to those who are involved in the education of, employment of, advocacy of, treatment of, raising of, and general lives of the deaf. While many other studies have heavily reported the mistreatment and challenges that many deaf people encounter on a daily basis, this study also reported the positive attitude that the participants still hold despite the hardships they have faced. Hopefully, this study can contribute to the growing appreciation of deaf people as they are, and can perhaps help outsiders understand the experiences of the deaf as factors that contributed to them being that way.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

While the results reported in the previous chapter are accurate descriptions of the lived experiences of the individuals and the literature supports these findings, the results may not be typical of the entire deaf community. There are a few methodological limitations that prevent this research from being anything more than what it is: the results for these five specific participants. Below are some of the limitations of this study, as well as recommendations for future research on this topic.

The interpretations of the findings of this study (described above) cannot be generalized to the entire population of deaf individuals for a number of reasons. The results are constrained by several factors. First, the size of the sample is very small. Although the small sample size was appropriate for this particular study (as it aimed to
obtain very detailed descriptions), the sample is extremely homogeneous and represents only a fraction of the deaf population. There is also a lack of racial, gender, and geographical diversity. All five participants were white males who went to school in Massachusetts and now reside in the Greater Boston area. Age is also a limiting factor, as the ages of the participants spanned an eight-year gap. Finally, generalization is also compounded by the nature of the sampling procedures used. The five participants have personal connections to the researcher, which may have positively or negatively influenced some of the responses given during the interview.

After reviewing the results of this study and acknowledging both the limitations and the implications, the researcher recommends the following changes and additions for future research:

1. Expand upon the current study, including far more participants that are both male and female, come from different parts of the country, have different ethnic backgrounds, and have a greater age range.

2. Include other family members in the research (siblings, parents) in an effort to gain a greater sense of the participant’s experiences and to achieve an exhaustive description of experiences that the participant may not recollect.

3. Tweak some of the interview questions—perhaps make them more direct. Maybe include one question that comes right out and asks the participants to define how they see themselves in terms of identity. Also, include a question that asks the participants to list the factors that they believe have been most influential in their identity development.
Overall, this study can be seen as a starting point or a stepping stone in the ongoing investigation to determine how deaf people develop their identity and what factors play the biggest role in this development. The findings of this study indicate that there are specific factors that may typically contribute, but that the factors may not be the same for everyone. Deaf people struggle to form their identities in the same way that other minorities might; they often want to ‘be’ a part of both the deaf world and the hearing world, but may not feel that they fit completely into either. This quote from one of the participants in Breivik’s study (written about in the book, *Deaf Identities in the Making: Local Lives, Transnational Connections*) captures the struggle that deaf people experience while trying to find themselves:

> It is difficult to say who I am in a clear and single statement, because I have no deaf identification and no hearing identification. But I have a little story that says something about who I am—my identity (a statement made by Klara, as cited in Breivik, 2005a, p. 78).

If nothing else, the information presented in this thesis should help prove that deaf identity is not clear-cut, black or white. For deaf people, the process of identity development is ongoing, ever-evolving, and constantly in a state of flux. The best we, as outsiders, can do in trying to understand the process is to listen to their stories and accept that we may never be able to fully appreciate the on-going internal struggle that deaf people often experience during their formative years and beyond. Instead, we may just have to accept that this struggle is deaf identity. In other words, the struggle is what we are aiming to define.
LIST OF REFERENCES
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APPENDIX A

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Demographic Questions
To be asked of all participants at the start of the interview

1. What is your age?
2. What is your race/ethnicity?
3. What town and state did you grow up in?
4. Describe your educational background, including your highest completed level.
5. Describe your family structure.
6. At what age did your hearing loss occur?
7. What is your degree of hearing loss (hard of hearing, deaf, deaf in one ear, etc.)?

Open-Ended Interview Questions
These are the five focus questions that will be asked during the interview

Describe your experience of growing up deaf.

What does the term ‘Deaf Culture’ mean to you?

Describe how you see yourself in terms of identifying with the Deaf culture and the Deaf community.

Describe how you see yourself as a member of the hearing world.

What and/or who have been (are) the most influential factors in relation to how you view deafness?

Probing Questions
These questions may be used to gather more information or guide the interview if need be

• What was your childhood like as a deaf member of your family?
• How did you feel you were accepted in your family?
• What were your experiences like with peers and in social situations?
• What are some characteristics that you think describe members of the Deaf culture?

• Do you think being deaf is a positive or a negative experience? Please describe.

• How do you think your parents and other family members view deafness?

• How do you view your own deafness? How do you view other people’s deafness?

• Has your view of yourself changed over the years? How?

• Who/what was biggest support system/network you had during your childhood?

• How did you decide what your answers to these questions would be?
You are being asked to participate in a face-to-face interview that focuses on your identity with and your participation in the Deaf community. Your participation in this study will potentially help the researcher create a better understanding of how deaf individuals develop an identity with respect to their auditory deficit. Please read the following details regarding this study carefully before signing.

- You will be asked to discuss your experience of growing up deaf in a primarily hearing community. Some of the questions will ask about personal experiences you may have had, including questions that target important events, relationships, and factors in your life as they relate to your deafness.

- You will be video-recorded throughout the entire interview.

- The results of this study will be used in a master’s level thesis for the Graduate Program in Counseling at the University of New Hampshire.

- Your responses will be kept confidential and your responses will not be linked to any identifying information. Access to the collected data will be limited to:
  1. the researcher
  2. the faculty advisor who is overseeing this research project

- Participation in this study is completely voluntary. You have the right to skip any question that you do not wish to answer and may withdraw at any time without penalty.

- It should take approximately 60-90 minutes for you to complete participation.

- If you have any questions regarding the study and/or its intended purpose, you can discuss them in confidence with the principal investigator Brianna Daisy, graduate student, (978) 204-8428 (using a relay service) or (978) 658-4524 (TTY service) or e-mail at bdaisy@cisunix.unh.edu.

- This study does ask that you address personal thoughts, feelings, and events, and should you experience any negative or stressful effects as a result of your participation in this study, please contact the principal investigator immediately to be referred to an appropriate counselor.
• If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject you may contact Julie Simpson in the UNH Office of Sponsored Research at julie.simpson@unh.edu to discuss them.

• The University of New Hampshire’s Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research has approved the use of human subjects in this study.

PLEASE CHECK THE STATEMENT THAT REFLECTS YOUR CHOICE AND SIGN YOUR NAME AT THE BOTTOM.

_____ I CONSENT / AGREE to participate in this research project.

_____ I REFUSE / DO NOT AGREE to participate in this research project.

__________________________________________  ____________________________
Signature                                      Date
Thank you for your participation in this study. The interview that took place today will be used to help the researcher define and explore some of the issues that deaf people are faced with when forming a cultural identity in a predominantly hearing world. It is the hope of the researcher that this study will help create social awareness of deaf identity issues. Identification with or rejection of Deaf culture is not something that has been studied much in depth. This project has the potential to contribute to a growing focus on deafness, issues that are specific to the deaf community, and the need for culturally sensitive approaches within the mental health field.

Cultural identity is something that is inherent in every individual. Its importance is often demonstrated in the choices we all make concerning how we choose to live our lives, who we choose to socialize with, our moral values, and our general way of being. For many, cultural identity is not so much a choice as something we are born into—our race, our religion, our socioeconomic status, our sexuality, our gender, our heritage, etc. However, for some individuals, this is a choice they must make. When a minority member is living in a society that is run by the dominant culture, he/she must decide which culture will govern his/her life. Deaf people undergo the same struggles and adversity that any minority group faces when their values and traditions clash with those of the mainstream culture.

Deafness is an affliction that affects nearly 11,000,000 people in the United States (Mitchell, 2006). As you may already know, this large population is divided into those who have a hearing loss and are legally deaf and those who identify themselves with the Deaf culture. Out of the 11,000,000 deaf people mentioned above, the number of people who identify with the Deaf culture in the United States is currently estimated at around 1,000,000 (Mitchell, 2006). This large gap can be accounted for in a number of ways. For starters, some people see deafness as a handicap, which immediately places a stigma on those who ‘suffer’ from this disability. This may turn some deaf people away from the Deaf community because they do not want to be associated with people that society views in a negative way. Some deaf people are also born into families that refuse to accept them as they are and struggle to rid their children of this problem (Moore & Levitan, 2003). One way that parents do this is to mainstream their children and try to force them to learn to speak. Other parents may decide to have their children receive Cochlear implants. Cochlear implants are sometimes viewed as a threat to Deaf culture because they help deaf individuals gain back their hearing, which allows those individuals to become members of the hearing community (Cherney, 1999).
This is a qualitative study that aims to capture the lived experiences of deaf individuals as they underwent the process of identity development. Qualitative research focuses on understanding experiences from the participant’s perspective and assumes multiple realities that are constantly changing (Merriam & Associates, 2002). This type of research also recognizes that meaning is defined within a particular context, which allows for multiple meanings to be formed. The results of this study will be based on the interviews that the researcher has with each participant. The researcher will analyze the data through a phenomenological lens, which not only utilizes the unique experience of the individual, but also incorporates both thoughts and feelings into the collected data (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). The video tapes will be transcribed, which will allow the researcher to examine them in-depth. The researcher will identify common themes and ideas that emerge in each interview, then explore them in an effort to better understand the lived experiences of each individual involved in the study.

It is important for you to know that once the video tapes have been transcribed, they will be destroyed. In addition, all identifying information will be kept confidential, and the content of the interviews will be reported anonymously. If you have any questions or concerns about any aspect of this research project or your participation in it, please contact the primary researcher: Brianna Daisy, graduate student at the University of New Hampshire, bdaisy@unh.edu.
APPENDIX D

IRB APPROVAL LETTER

University of New Hampshire
Research Conduct and Compliance Services, Office of Sponsored Research
Service Building, 51 College Road, Durham, NH 03824-3585
Fax: 503-862-3564

05 Mar 2008

Daisy, Brian
Education, Morrill Hall
102 Heritage Dr.
Tewksbury, MA 01876

IRB #: 4217
Study: Deaf People in a Hearing World: A Qualitative Study of Cultural Identity Issues
Approval Date: 05-Mar-2008

The Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects in Research (IRB) has
reviewed and approved the protocol for your study as Expedited as described in Title 45,

Approval is granted to conduct your study as described in your protocol for one
year from the approval date above. At the end of the approval period, you will be
asked to submit a report with regard to the involvement of human subjects in this study. If
your study is still active, you may request an extension of IRB approval.

Researchers who conduct studies involving human subjects have responsibilities as outlined
in the attached document, Responsibilities of Directors of Research Studies Involving
Human Subjects. (This document is also available at
http://www.unh.edu/osr/compliance/irb.html) Please read this document carefully before
commencing your work involving human subjects.

If you have questions or concerns about your study or this approval, please feel free to
contact me at 603-862-2003 or Julie.simpson@unh.edu. Please refer to the IRB # above in
all correspondence related to this study. The IRB wishes you success with your research.

For the IRB,

Julie F. Simpson
Manager

cc: File
    Hiebert, David