Ideological Conflict at Group Boundaries:
The Hearing Children of Deaf Adults

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1. Background

When a blind person dies, what is he buried with?
-His cane.
When a hard-of-hearing person dies, what is he buried with?
-His hearing aids.
When a deaf person dies, what is he buried with?
-His interpreter.

This joke, which I first 'heard' (in American Sign Language) at Gallaudet University in the summer of 2002, nicely illustrates the ambivalence – if not outright hostility – that Deaf[1] people can sometimes feel towards the hearing people in their community, in this case sign language interpreters. The subject of this paper is the hearing children of deaf adults, or codas[2], and it bears mentioning in light of this joke that a significant percentage of sign language interpreters have deaf parents.

Coda identity is complicated. Although codas can hear, it is not at all obvious that they should inevitably identify as hearing. Deafness is more than a mere physical state: it is also a cultural phenomenon. Some scholars have even described it as an ethnicity (e.g., Johnson & Erting 1989, Baker 1999), since it combines factors of paternity and patrimony. If deafness is indeed akin to ethnicity, then the children of culturally Deaf people might also be Deaf, even if they are able to hear.

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[1] As is customary in the literature, I use the term 'Deaf' to refer to people who identify with the Deaf community, while 'deaf' refers to those who merely do not hear.
[2] I use the term 'coda' to refer to hearing individuals with one or two deaf parents, despite the fact that they may not identify with the term. I further disambiguate 'coda' from 'CODA' – an organization of hearing people who have deaf parents.

The fact that a culture has developed around deafness has led to a clash of two perspectives, which Reagan (2002) has called the "etic and emic constructions of deafness." The etic, or medicalized construction, is the outsider (hearing person)'s perspective on deafness and focuses on the medical condition of not being able to hear. This perspective has often assumed that deafness entails "a world that is silent, tragic, and empty, devoid of the experience of the stimulating and wonderful sounds of nature" (Baker 1999, 126). From this perspective, deafness is an ailment that necessitates remediation; thus, it is associated with oralism, lip-reading, hearing aids, and cochlear implants. It bears mentioning that hearing people have long controlled deaf people's access to education, property, and rights of self-determination based on this perspective (see Lane (1984) and Baynton (1996) for more about the struggles that d/Deaf people have endured in this country, including decades of being forbidden to use signed languages in schools).

In contrast stands the emic or cultural construction of deafness. This is the insider's perspective on deafness and focuses on the specific culture of Deaf people. From this perspective, deafness is not a disability at all; rather, it is a subculture like any other. Elements of Deaf culture include a common language, a shared awareness of cultural identity and history, distinctive behavioral norms and patterns, cultural artifacts, endogamous marital patterns, and a network of voluntary, in-group social organizations (Reagan 1995, 243). It is in this context that we can distinguish *deaf* from *Deaf*: The term 'deaf' has come to refer to people who merely cannot hear, while 'Deaf' has come to refer to people who identify with the Deaf community, who know sign language, and whose primary social relations are within that community. About 90-95% of deaf people are born to hearing parents; thus, most *deaf* people become *Deaf* through a process of enculturation into the Deaf community as children or adults. This highlights the fractured nature of the transmission of cultural deafness – it is passed from generation to generation in the same family less than 10% of the time. At the same time that most deaf people are born to hearing parents, most of the children born to Deaf parents are also hearing. It is an open question how much of the Deaf culture is passed on to these hearing offspring.

Reagan (2002) claimed that Deaf identity is primarily an emic construction in conflict with a dominant etic construction of deafness. However, if cultural and not physical criteria were solely responsible for deciding who can become a member of the Deaf community, then codas should not be excluded. Indeed, as we shall see, the physical condition of deafness is an important criterion for inclusion in and exclusion from the Deaf community.

2. Polarization, the Deaf Body, and Codas

Despite the fact that there are many levels of hearing deficit, "ambiguity is rarely allowed: people are either hearing or deaf" (Preston 1994, 17). However, the reality is more complicated: some people who consider themselves Deaf might hear more than people who consider themselves hearing. In other words, Deaf and hearing identities do not always correspond to actual audiological capacity. For example, very few people who lose their hearing in old age identify with the Deaf community, while some culturally Deaf people can hear well enough to talk on the phone. However, the deaf/hearing dichotomy does not allow for in-betweens – at least not for cultural in-betweens such as codas. This polarization between deaf and hearing, rather than being somehow "natural", is historically situated and culturally constructed.

Indeed, in the 19th and early 20th centuries, deafness was not a salient part of one's identity on Martha's Vineyard (MA), according to Groce (1985). Hearing and deaf alike knew sign language, intermarriage was common, and deaf and hearing coexisted in a single community. This situation, although exceptional, highlights the constructed nature of the modern deaf/hearing dichotomy. An informant in my study, Cody[3], commented: "I didn't think that I was… I knew I could hear and they couldn't, but it wasn't like now when you hear about the hearing and deaf and these two worlds… it wasn't like that to me as a kid."

Still, there are real physical differences between deaf and hearing that we might point to as evidence of a "natural" boundary between the two. While it is true that codas can hear and their parents cannot, some studies have shown that the brain activity of codas more resembles the brain activity of deaf people than hearing people – especially with regards to peripheral visual attention (Neville 1990). Although this point should not be overstated, it nicely underscores the fact that it is not the physicality of deafness itself as much as our interpretation of that physicality that renders these categories salient. Preston (1994, 193) quotes Sahlins (1976) in suggesting that "even the physical world is shaped and interpreted by cultural context… Hearing and deafness – as criterion for membership in one of two worlds – need a context in which these conditions are evaluated and become socially meaningful."

3. Group Membership, Deaf Ideologies, and Resistance

Given a history of domination by hearing people who were mainly unsympathetic to the Deaf perspective and hostile to the use of signed languages, issues of group membership, power, and authority are central to the Deaf community. The successful rejection of the nomination of a hearing man for president of Gallaudet University in 1988 and the subsequent hiring of a Deaf man as president is symbolic of a larger movement within the Deaf community for self-determination, for the exorcism of the spirit of hearing domination. In this context we can see another way in which the position of codas within the Deaf community is complicated: they are allies, but they also represent the hearing oppressor.

What is the status of codas within the Deaf community? On the one hand, some scholars have claimed that codas are part of the Deaf community:

"The DEAF-WORLD[4] includes sympathetic hearing people such as family members who accept d/Deaf people on their own terms." (Senghas & Monaghan 2002, 80).

Other scholars have argued that codas have a separate status:

"Hearing children of ethnically Deaf parents, whose socialization into Deaf ethnic patrimony may be extensive, may never be considered as members, no matter how "Deaf" they are able to act." (Johnson & Erting 1989, 48).

And codas themselves have voiced their unease with the polarized deaf/hearing dichotomy:

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[3] All names are pseudonyms.
[4] Words in all caps indicate loans from ASL signs.

"As someone who grew up in the Deaf community and who now works as a sign language interpreter, trainer, and researcher, I resist being labeled as a Hearing person along with the Hearing majority. In the same way that deaf people are not regarded as being fully Deaf, I do not regard myself as being fully Hearing." (Napier 2002, 145).

An informant in Paul Preston's book *Mother Father Deaf* commented,

"So, my parents are deaf. And, I'm hearing. I grew up with deaf people. People looked at me and made fun of me just like they made fun of them. I always felt a part of the Deaf world…Then some deaf people would tell me I wasn't deaf, I was hearing. So I asked my father and mother and they said, Oh, you're Deaf. And some deaf people keep telling me I'm not. I don't know. Deaf, Hearing. Hearing, Deaf. This world, that world, in-between." (Preston 1994, 37).[5]

Bearing in mind the complexities of Deaf identity and the historical phenomena that have shaped American Deaf culture, I seek to address the following research questions:

- What ideologies do Deaf people hold about the status of codas within the Deaf community?
- How are boundaries between Deaf and hearing maintained? Specifically, how are codas included in and excluded from the Deaf community?
- How do codas react to or resist these ideologies?
- What is the role of language socialization and linguistic ability in these processes?

4. Coda Interviews

I interviewed four codas in the spring of 2003. They were Matt, a 21-year-old white male and college undergraduate student with two deaf parents and six hearing siblings who used ASL and English growing up; Tabitha, a 21-year-old white female and college undergraduate student with two deaf parents and two hearing siblings who used Signed English[6] and English growing up; Elizabeth, a 63-year-old white female and ASL interpreter with two deaf parents and three hearing siblings, who used ASL and English growing up; and Cody, a 22-year-old white male and college undergraduate student with two deaf parents and five hearing siblings, who used Signed English and English growing up.

Through these interviews I explored various issues surrounding coda identity and Deaf ideologies. The experiences of my subjects are not meant to be representative of the experiences of all codas; however, I do take their experiences to be reflective of real ideologies and practices in operation in the Deaf community.

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[5] I quote here (and elsewhere) informants from Paul Preston's extensive study on codas, *Mother Father Deaf*. The quotes that I use come from various informants.
[6] Signed English is English that has been visually encoded onto the hands and face. It is not a natural language of the deaf. ASL, by contrast, does not follow English structure.

Codas come to identify with the hearing world through a variety of factors, both internal and external. Some, despite "feeling Deaf" on the inside, have a sense that they do not belong in the DEAF-WORLD, and force themselves to learn hearing behavior:

(1)   Elizabeth: "I knew I was hearing, and I had to force myself to get along with hearing people, and eventually… I did succeed in that, in not feeling uncomfortable with hearing people."

Others are marginalized in the Deaf community by institutionalized practices as well as personal interactions.

(2)   Matt: "[When] I became a member of the Deaf Club… it was a big, big huge deal because hearing people weren't allowed to join the Deaf Club and all I wanted was just, you know, reduced price to get in because I was there all the time with my dad and practicing my signing, getting to know people and getting reintegrated into the community. And it was just a big deal and so the president of the Deaf Club okayed it and said it was fine because I had deaf parents and as long as he was around he would allow me to stay as a member. But along the same lines, as a member of the Deaf Club I'm not allowed to vote, I'm not allowed to run for office, I still have to pay the same dues, you know, so it's definitely sort of I still have to pay everything and I still have to do volunteer stuff and all of that but I don't get the fringe benefits that if I were deaf that I would get automatically."

(3)   Tabitha: "I've had [some Deaf people] just go off on me and tell me I don't understand… because I'm hearing. That I shouldn't be allowed to talk. It should be none of my business because as a person who's not deaf I have no idea what they feel and what they think… Some Deaf people will be like, 'No, this is our culture, you have your culture, go away.' And so as a hearing person just solely by yourself trying to get in would be hard sometimes because they really do guard it so closely with who they allow in. 'It's ours, you wouldn't know anything about it, you're hearing.'"

Even Deaf parents can sometimes set boundaries between themselves and their hearing children, either through their linguistic choices – conscious or otherwise – or by explicitly telling them they are different:

(4)   Cody: "My parents… do ASL together and I can understand and stuff but then if they're talking to me they always do it in English form and, you know, they would never sign to me in ASL without speaking, and then they would never speak and do it in ASL. They would always do it in English structure."

An informant in Preston (1994) related the following episode between Deaf parent and hearing child:

"When I turned eighteen, my father took me aside. He pointed out the window and said [signs, "The time is coming. Soon you must go. That's your world out there. The Hearing world. You belong there"]. For eighteen years I had grown up Deaf, and now all of a sudden I'm supposed to be Hearing? I looked at him and said [signs, "What do I know about the Hearing world? I hear, yes. I speak, yes. But I thought I was Deaf"].

My father smiled and said [signs, "True, you're Deaf, but you're Hearing too"]. I grew up Deaf. I guess now I'm Hearing. But some part of me still feels Deaf." (Preston 1994, 189).

If Deaf parents choose not to sign with their hearing children, then their children usually do not learn to sign well. One result of this is that these codas are linguistically marked as outsiders in a way that codas who sign well are not.

(5)   Tabitha: "You can always tell the signs between a hearing person and a deaf person. One, because a deaf person is going to sign a whole lot faster than a hearing person is because we think in English and most of us sign in ASL and there's that conversion that takes a while to get your brain to do it whereas deaf people think in ASL and will go straight on that… Hearing people tend to not focus[7] as much because we're so used to hearing things and being able to look around and do that sort of thing that we're not as intently focused as most deaf people are and our sign production isn't what theirs is… I do not produce the facial expressions that I'm supposed to. Just because, as a hearing person, you don't make really big, dramatic facial expressions, like you don't look at someone like all suspicious when you're asking them a question, you just kind of talk."

Tabitha's statement that "you can always tell the signs between a hearing person and a deaf person" demonstrates her belief that differences between deaf and hearing are fundamentally physically embodied. Although deafness is often invisible, sign language, according to Tabitha, renders it transparent. Many codas are native signers, however, and they may be able to "pass as Deaf." Indeed, codas who sign well and are able to follow Deaf interactional norms can be mistaken for Deaf:

(6)   Matt: "More often times than not, people are really shocked when they find out that I'm hearing because I don't… talk when I sign, I don't talk on my cell phone when I'm out at the Deaf Club or, you know, anywhere at a Deaf function because it's disrespectful… My ability to use the language is really the key there."

Being hearing lowers one's social status, so the disclosure of being hearing is an important ideological issue. Several scholars have commented on the issue of disclosure of one's hearing status:

"I have asked a number of deaf individuals how they feel about hearing people signing like a native user of American Sign Language. The responses are mixed. Some say that it is acceptable for hearing people to use ASL like a deaf person on one condition. The condition is that this hearing person must make sure that the deaf person knows that s/he is not deaf. Some people resent the idea of seeing hearing people signing like a native ASL user. Those who are resentful may feel sociolinguistic territorial invasion by those hearing people." (a deaf leader as quoted in Reagan 2002, 51).

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[7] [make eye contact]

"Later, when [Tom and I] became friends, he told me that he had originally thought I was Deaf and then became very angry when he found out I was hearing. He felt betrayed and made a fool of, even though he realized it had not been intentional… Since then I have always tried to indicate early on in an ASL conversation that I am hearing... I sometimes don't want to tell deaf people that I am hearing, because of the "closing" that often occurs as soon as I do so. Immediately the conversation becomes more guarded, the language more English, and I feel like an outsider." (Mudgett-DeCaro 1996, 285).

This *ideology of self-revelation* reifies the division between hearing and deaf. Importantly, it enables Deaf people to maintain authority and relegate status within their community. However, codas can show resistance to this ideology by downplaying its significance or by subverting it:

(7)   Elizabeth: "If you're in a social situation, a lot of times, they never think to ask [if I'm hearing]. They just think I'm deaf. And I never think to say, 'Well, I can hear' -- what's the point of telling them that? To me, just communicate. And if that question comes up, fine, I'll tell them I'm hearing. And they'll go, you know, 'Are your parents deaf?' And sometimes in the middle of a conversation they'll say 'Are your parents deaf?' and I say yes and they'll say 'I thought so!' It's just the signing that sort of triggers it."

(8)   Cody: "Some people, they'll definitely ask [if I'm hearing] and I tease some people sometimes depending on where I'm at, where I'll say I'm deaf just to mess with people… and they'll say "Oh bullshit" and I'll say "No, no, I am" you know, but most of them, they'll ask me, you know, "You hearing or deaf?" and I'll say I'm hearing and then they'll say "How do you know sign?" you know, or they'll just ask if your parents are deaf."

(9)   Matt: "If [my being hearing] comes up, I'm not going to try to skirt the issue by any means because it's… if you're hearing, cool, if you're not, cool… but I've never had a situation where it's like, 'I'm hearing' – 'OK, I'm going to stop talking to you.' It was never like that, I mean obviously there's some animosity towards hearing people in the Deaf community, but that doesn't reflect the entire community, you know… I think I've been kind of fortunate because of who my parents are and my ability to sign that I've been sort of embraced."

The ideologies in play here touch on issues of authenticity and what Bucholtz (2003) has called authorization and illegitimation. Authorization "concerns the claiming or imparting of a culturally recognized powerful status, while illegitimation is the denial or rejection of such a claim." (Bucholtz 2003, 408). The ability to sign natively can index being deaf, a culturally recognized powerful status. However, the ideology of self-revelation forces hearing signers to explicitly illegitimate themselves in the course of conversation, rendering visible an otherwise invisible difference between deaf and hearing.

Finally, whatever one's ability to sign may be, coda participation in the Deaf community is fundamentally legitimated by explicit stating, and thus authenticating, one's blood relations to the community:

(10)   Elizabeth: "If you say that you have deaf parents, well then [deaf people] have confidence in you, they have trust in you, they have rapport with you right away."

(11)   Tabitha: "It's really easy with my mom because I feel more comfortable interacting with the Deaf community because she is my back-up... It's actually easier to fit in because they realize I have that tie to their community, I'm not just there to, you know, view them and observe them and try to be one of them -- that I actually do deal with it. And so it's easier, um, usually if I go to a Deaf event my mom does come with me."

5. Conclusion

Codas occupy a conflicted position in the Deaf community: they are both insiders and outsiders, hearing and Deaf, and neither. While they are marginalized in the Deaf community by institutionalized practices, personal interactions, and ideologies which call their authority as members into question, they are also legitimated as participants through their linguistic and cultural knowledge as well as by authenticating their blood relations to the Deaf community.

This work raises a number of issues, some of which I have touched on only briefly. Among the questions to be explored in more depth in the future are: what is the relationship between the body and cultural practices and institutions? In what ways are ideologies about deafness and ideologies about race/ethnicity similar or different? How is the visibility of race and the relative invisibility of deafness related to the production of different ideological practices? And finally, how does the fractured nature of cultural transmission in the Deaf community affect ideologies about group membership? In other words, if a culture depends on institutions outside of the family to transmit culture, what are the implications for family members?

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