CODA: Family, Community and Responsibility
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When one decides to look around them and appreciate the various cultures and communities that make up their world, he or she will find that the majority of these groups have one thing in common – a unique definition and illustration of family. When looking at the Deaf community, it is often seen that the idea and meaning of family is rooted in support, mutual advocacy, commitment, communication and identity. An interesting part of the Deaf community is the role of a hearing child of a Deaf parent (CODA). According to the Children Of Deaf Adults Inc. website, the CODA organization began in 1983. The organization is international, and works to create awareness and growth for hearing individuals with Deaf parents.

Someone who is unaware of dynamics to be found within any family must first look to the source for the most accurate information. The audist, hearing-centric, point-of-view would most likely assume that a family in which Deaf adults raised hearing children would be problematic. Some would possibly make erroneous statements regarding social development and future success. However, research on the subject has only found that “Deaf parents and their hearing children generally had very positive views about the parenting effectiveness in their family… In general, it does not appear that Deaf-parented families are at a greater risk for serious family dysfunction… Hearing children of Deaf
parents are quite resilient and resourceful and are not overrepresented in the populations of children with social, emotional, or educational problems” (Singleton & Tittle, 2000). Hearing children of Deaf adults have, for the most part, been seen to develop into successful, ambitious individuals.

Any family network, however, is susceptible to problems. It is admitted that, “The primary issues for Deaf parent/hearing children families center on the communication and cultural awareness within the nuclear family, with other hearing relatives, and with providers/educators that interact with the family” (Singleton & Tittle, 2000). The converging of cultural experiences between a hearing child and his or her Deaf parent – or parents – can create social friction within the family. Such friction can come about via various external forces. For example, communication disconnects within families of Deaf individuals has been found to span generations. This concept is elaborated:

Because ASL is learned in residential schools and not at home, most hearing parents of Deaf do not understand sign language. Therefore, the grandchild often is the only one in the family who is bilingual and understands the language of the grandparents and the language of the parents. The grandchildren’s bilingualism opens an avenue of communication between the hearing parents and their Deaf children that was not possible before. (Filer & Filer, 2000)

In order for a family – whether nuclear or extended – to communicate most effectively, they must have the ability to speak each other’s languages. Of course, in the case of hearing children of Deaf parents who sign, they are brought up using sign language as a means of effective, natural and intimate communication. American Sign
Language (ASL) has developed as a fully autonomous language with complex grammatical structure that is not derived from English (Lane, Hoffmeister, & Bahan, 1996). Likewise, it has been suggested that ASL must be considered the single most important element that binds the Deaf community together (Filer & Filer, 2000). Because an individual’s first interaction with community is indeed within his or her own family, the ability to facilitate communication is incredibly important.

In fact, many have found benefits to teaching ASL to young children who have not yet developed vocal language. For example, infants exposed to sign language have been seen to acquire first signs at an earlier age than what is found typical of children who use their first spoken words. With this knowledge, it is possible to assume that, “Sign training might facilitate rather than hinder the development of vocal language” (Thompson et al. 2007). These findings go further than infant experience, however. According to a study, “enriching hearing children’s kindergarten instruction with sign language increases their receptive English vocabulary to a significant degree” (Daniels, 2004). Signed language stimulates communication abilities from an early age. Thus, parents should consider incorporating ASL into their children’s lives – the Deaf and hearing alike.

An interesting aspect of Deaf culture that greatly differs from hearing “culture,” is the contrast between individualism and collectivism. These two concepts are explained: “Individualism is distinctly Western and not a necessary ingredient for a culture to function effectively… Collectivism is a moral vision that more accurately describes the Deaf community” (Filer & Filer, 2000). Individualism, which hinges on an individualistic world-view, directly opposes the collectivist nature of Deaf society. Members of the
Deaf-World express great dedication and compassion to one another – helping each other strive to celebrate and improve their identities and experiences as a community. It is explained that, “Americans in the Deaf-World do indeed feel a strong identification with that world and show great loyalty to it” (Lane, 2005). The Deaf-world creates a bridge that transcends the individualistic nature of Americans. Deaf Americans live by a different cultural philosophy than hearing Americans.

For example, “Hearing children of Deaf adults have been noted to feel that their family experiences developed and encouraged their ability to empathize with others” (Filer & Filer, 2000). Being exposed to diversity and simultaneously taking part in culturally different worlds develops and encourages a sense of open-mindedness. People who are fortunate enough to be brought up in such a way may indeed implement an attitude of acceptance towards the unknown or “different.” This is paralleled by the notion that, “Deaf Worlds are to be found around the globe, and when Deaf members from two different cultures meet, they feel a strong bond although they share no common territory and are limited in their ability to communicate with one another” (Lane, 2005).

Similarly, “A value that appears to be fundamental in the Deaf-World is allegiance to the culture, which is expressed in one’s relation to the Deaf-World” (Lane, 2005). A hearing child of Deaf adults would be assumed to have an intimate relation to the Deaf-World. In this case, such a child would therefore experience this “allegiance.” A commitment to culture can of course come in many forms, and this commitment reinforces cultural identity and world-view. Within the Deaf community, “The more Deaf people celebrate their language and culture, the more they affirm their distinct identity” (Lane, 2005). This understanding of the importance of ASL in the lives of Deaf
individuals and the insurance of Deaf culture brings to question the cultural identity of hearing children of Deaf adults.

It is important to note that there is much diversity within the Deaf community. As it is explained: “This community includes members with hearing losses at both levels of the extreme, from those who are profoundly Deaf to normally hearing children of Deaf parents, who are also viewed as part of the Deaf community” (Singleton & Tittle, 2000). Deaf identity goes beyond one’s ability or inability to hear. Although status within a minority may exist in this case, a minority within a minority does not.

The role of hearing children of Deaf adults within the Deaf community is explained, “Hearing children born to Deaf parents are considered bilingual and bicultural in that they potentially share the language and culture of their Deaf parents… Hearing children of Deaf parents are indeed a part of their culture of origin” (Singleton & Tittle, 2000). Hearing children of Deaf parents are seen as legitimate members of the Deaf culture, and therefore, are expected to advocate for the Deaf World.

Because hearing children of Deaf adults often become the communication link between their Deaf parents and the hearing world (Filer & Filer, 2000), they are in a way forced to walk the line between the hearing and Deaf worlds. These hearing children must grow up and decide how to combine his or her hearing and Deaf identities. This inevitable process is reinforced by the explanation that, “hearing children of Deaf adults often face the struggle of identity development and cultural alignment as they search for resolution between the Deaf and hearing worlds” (Singleton & Tittle, 2000).

Hearing children of Deaf adults have the unique ability to bridge the divide between the Deaf and hearing world. By intimately understanding the often-unseen
conflict between these two worlds, they have the opportunity to develop an identity that not only reflects the strength of the Deaf community, but also progresses the education of the hearing world – furthering an end to audist ignorance.

References


