The African American Experience Within the Deaf Community

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Within the Deaf community there are many different backgrounds of Deaf people. Some families have generations of Deafness. A single Deaf person could be the only Deaf person in their family. There are many Deaf people who have more than just an American identity, such as Mexican, Asian, African American/Black, and so on. There are Deaf people who immigrated and are now learning American Sign Language (ASL) from using their own native sign language. While there are many different subcultures of Deaf culture this paper will address the exploration of one that has had to overcome many obstacles, and not just the oppression of their Deafness. This subculture is Black Deaf people. It is difficult to clearly define African American versus Black. In many instances people of African ancestry have come to embrace the term African American, while many people choose to use “Black” to refer to Americans of slave ancestry and do not have close ties to Africa, and refer to African Americans as the Africans who have immigrated to the United States. The term Black also encompasses the many mixed/biracial people with slave ancestry (Smith, 2010). So, for the purposes of this paper, “African American/Black” will be the term of reference. There are many questions surrounding this subculture, such as: Who do African American/Black Deaf people identify with more? Is there a different ASL for African American/Black Deaf people? What makes it different? How has racism affected the Deaf African American/Black experience? How is the education of African American/Black Deaf students different than their White counterparts and why is it different? Is there a separate African American/Black Deaf culture? The author will explore these questions and many others of the African American/Black experience.
There are many different ethnicities and cultures within the United States. Just like the American community the Deaf community also has many different ethnicities, with a unifying identity bring them together. The Deaf community has a very strong sense of Deaf pride. They are proud of their Deafness and closely identify with it, but for one of the groups within the Deaf community, there is one that does not feel their Deafness is their main identity. By a huge margin 87 percent of African American/Black Deaf people polled identified with their Black culture first because that is what society first visualizes, and their Deafness is an invisible identifying factor (Mindess, 2006). Because African American/Black Deaf people more closely identify with their ethnic culture, they share the same values and social behaviors as their African American/Black hearing counterparts.

Within the African American/Black culture there is a strong sense of community and family. The culture has strong collectivist values, as in working for the good of the community and showing concerns for others, as well as individualist values seen in the expression of personal style and creativity (Mindess, 2006). The culture is God-centered/Church-centered. Historically the church has been the communities support in religion, social aspects, and politics. They have been the cornerstone of support in education, mutual aid societies, and social services (Anderson, Lloyd, Williams, Samuels, Newman, & Aramburo, 2000). The African American/Black culture highly values family, to include extended family, not just the immediate members. The community itself tends to work as a family and lends support as an extended family. In Unspeakable: The Story of Junius Wilson—an autobiographical account of a Deaf Black man wrongfully institutionalized in Jim Crow South Carolina—we see the workings of
the “extended family” community with his neighbor and close family friend, Annie Smith, taking on the responsibility of taking him to the residential North Carolina school for the Colored Blind and Deaf in Raleigh. Since Junius had no clear way to communicate Annie Smith accompanied him on the train ride, filled out his admittance paperwork, and because his parents could not read or write she listed herself as the emergency contact (Burch & Joyner, 2007). This is not uncommon for the time period, and in more modern times we do see examples of other members of the community taking on such familial responsibilities—however we see it more in a mentorship relationship.

With African American/Black Deaf people identifying more closely with their ethnic identity, we can see that they have their own separate ASL known as Black ASL. Mainly used in the South, it came about because of the segregation laws in the schools in the South (Lane, Hoffmeister, & Bahan, 1996). North Carolina was the first state to establish a school for African American/Black Deaf and blind children in the South (Burch & Joyner, 2007). From the early 1800s Deaf residential schools were the birthplace of Deaf culture. In the 1900s, because the White residential schools had many Deaf adults to help share in their ASL by the 1910s children at the Raleigh school were no longer exposed to signing African American/Black adults. They were having to teach their hearing teachers sign language, and in doing so created their own dialect known as “Black Signs”. While in White residential schools throughout the U.S. ASL differed regionally, Black Signs could vary dramatically between different states’ segregated schools. As interpreters in the South have noted, without prior exposure to “Raleigh Signs”—the name given the sign language developed by students at the North Carolina School for the Colored Blind and Deaf in Raleigh—or
other Black Signs dialects, it is virtually impossible to understand the language, even if one is fluent in ASL. (Burch & Joyner, 2007).

The progressions of Black ASL was then reinforced by the fact that outside of the schools, on the job sites, African American/Black Deaf people tended to socialize mainly with other Blacks, hearing and Deaf alike. From the time when African America/Black schools for Deaf children were established in 1856 to the time when schools were desegregated in the late 1970s, African American/Black Deaf adults and children did not interact with their White counterparts on regular bases (Braga & Talbot, 2009). The differences are “attitude.” By “attitude” we mean the body language and the expressive facial expressions in both Deaf and hearing African American/Black conversations. Black ASL has been compared to African American Vernacular English (AAE) of hearing people, also known as “Ebonics”.

One of the main factors that makes African American/Black Deaf people identify more with their ethnicity than their Deafness is the shared struggle with racism. When Gallaudet student Wendy Armstrong went home during winter break to Kansas she borrowed her brother’s car. When she went to his job at city hall to return his car she was talking with her cousin by the elevators when a man hit her on the arm. She turned to face a detective. He had been calling her and she told him she was Deaf. She got onto the elevator thinking the conversation was over when several police officers pulled her out and handcuffed her. She was taken into interrogation and she informed them she was a student home on winter break. They told her since she was from out of state she would have to pay a $300 fine or spend time in jail. She did not have the money and was thrown into jail. Later her mother, who also worked at
city hall, called the chief of police. The police later realized that they had mistaken Wendy and her cousin for murder suspects (Anderson & Miller, 2004/2005). This is not an uncommon experience for members of the African American/Black community. Although it tends to harden many people it did not have a negative effect on Wendy Armstrong and she is now the first Deaf person to work as a special police officer at Gallaudet University (Anderson & Miller, 2004/2005). When the National Association for the Deaf (NAD) was created in 1850 (known then as the New England Association of the Deaf, later changed to NAD in 1889) it did not allow African American/Blacks until 1965. We also see the discrimination in the academic sector. In 1951, nearly a century after Gallaudet University opened its doors, the school’s first African American/Black student, Andrew Foster, was admitted (Lane, Hoffmeister, & Bahan, 1996).

In regards to the academic success of African American/Black Deaf students, the findings seem to lean both ways. According to C. Jean Mosley Hall, research has shown that Deaf students achieve less academically than their hearing counterparts, and African American/Black Deaf students achieve less than the White Deaf students. African American hearing children are provided a caring environment by their parents and guardians. They experience supportive values such as: open ongoing communication, spirituality training, higher expectations, discipline and structure, positive and intimate relationships, as well as positive racial and cultural socialization. These parents and guardians highly value a good education and put the time and effort into helping their children with their studies, and engage with the teachers and
schools as well. This investment is in hopes that their children will go on to college, and they encourage and talk to them about their future (Hall, 1998). The success of the African American/Black Deaf student is subject to the support system they have backing them up. African American parents of Deaf and hard of hearing children provide the same protective factors as those who have hearing children, and in addition, they accept their children’s differences and emphasize their strengths.

Historically there haven’t been many expectations for the success of Deaf education, African American/Black education, and especially African American/Black Deaf education. In 1918 Gustavus Ernest Lineberry became the new superintendent of the North Carolina residential school. He was a product of the racial thinking of that time period and he believed “that blacks should be kept in their places and that vocational training took priority over developing academic excellence” (Burch & Joyner, 2007). As mentioned before, Gallaudet University did not accept African American/Black Deaf people until almost a hundred years after it was founded, making higher education out of the question for African American/Black students (Braga & Talbot, 2009). No matter what a student’s intelligence African American/Black Deaf students were placed in vocational training instead of academic courses. The African American/Black church has traditionally played a major role in the college education of African American/Black students. Although many hearing parents took their Deaf or hard of hearing children to church with them, they could not benefit from the service because African American/Black churches did not have interpreters until about 15 years ago. With the increase of interpreters in the African American/Black churches, more and more Deaf and hard of hearing people are taking a more active role,
including leadership roles. Providing these interpreters has increased the opportunities for African American/Black Deaf children, youth, and adults. This is important because, as stated earlier, the church is a major component of African American/Black culture and community. African American/Black churches have been the primary institutions in the community that have provided spiritual growth and have taken a leadership role in enhancing educational opportunities, self-esteem, self-efficacy, and cultural enrichment (Williamson, 2007).

All these factors help in the success of the African American/Black Deaf and hearing Student. Dr. Glenn Anderson, who faced racism at the first University he attended out of high school, Northern Illinois University, transferred to Gallaudet University. He then went on to earn his PhD from New York University and is the first African American/Black Deaf person to serve as chair of Gallaudet’s Board of Trustees. He was also appointed to serve on the National Council on Disability, an independent federal agency that advises the President and Congress on issues affecting Americans with disabilities (Anderson & Miller, 2004/2005). And there are many African American/Black Deaf people who have gone on to achieve Masters and PhDs, and teach at universities across the nation.

So is there an African American/Black Deaf culture separate from Deaf culture? Yes. We see that the factors that make a separate African American/Black culture are the same factors that are the foundation of a separate African American/Black Deaf culture. We can see that through double oppression African American/Black Deaf people are a double minority (Lane, Hoffmeister, & Bahan, 1996). To be a double minority means that one has to suffer through a double oppression. As far back into
history that we can study Deaf people have been oppressed because of their
Deafness. They have suffered through eugenics, Oralism, and hearing-mindedness.
Likewise History is riddled with racial/color oppression. They have suffered through
slavery, segregation, and passive racism in the 21st Century still. African
American/Black Deaf people have a foot in both of these worlds of oppression. This is
something that many hearing African American/Black people will never have to
overcome and it’s what make them a double minority. As more research is done we
see that African American/Black culture has much more than just Black ASL that sets
it apart from Deaf culture.

In conclusion, we see that African American/Black Deaf people have had to
endure many more obstacles than their White counterparts. But those obstacles have
fostered the differences that have prompted many scholars to study and delve deep
into the questions that many hearing and Deaf people want to know about Deaf
Culture. We see that African American/Black Deaf people more closely identify with
their ethnic background; that there is a cultural variation of ASL known as Black ASL,
or Black Signs; that racism has had a profound effect on the Deaf African
American/Black experience; and the differences in performance expectations in the
education of African American/Black Deaf students. This all leads to the result that
there is separate African American/Black Deaf culture.
Works Cited


