TERRITORIAL CONCEPTS AMONG TAMPA'S DEAF COMMUNITY

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The deaf population of the United States has historically been viewed as a collection of handicapped individuals isolated from society and unable to cope because of an inability to hear. Deafness itself has traditionally been defined in pathological terms relating to degree of hearing loss. While hearing is indeed important in defining who is and who is not deaf, mere decibels of hearing loss do not provide an adequate measure of the impact of deafness on an individual. The present study suggests that deafness may be better understood when defined in cultural and social terms rather than pathological. The deaf are viewed as a native, but alien, minority culture, living within the matrix of the hearing society. The deaf community of Tampa has been studied as representative of this native but alien cultural group.

Unlike other minorities, there are no reliable figures regarding the size of the adult deaf population. The U.S. Bureau of the Census has not attempted to enumerate the deaf population since 1930. Even if the deaf were included in the census, there remains the problem of differentiating between pathological and cultural deafness. It is the culturally deaf, those who identify with deaf society and accept and live by the rules of that society, who are of interest here. These individuals rely upon American Sign Language (ASL) as their primary means of communication. They tend to avoid contact with hearing society, and they use English only as a second language and only when compelled by economic pressures such as employment or making major purchases.

The Deaf Community of Tampa

Estimates provided by the Tampa Deaf Service Center suggest that the deaf cultural group in its service area, the city of Tampa and Hillsborough County, includes some 6000 individuals. The total number of hearing impaired residing in the area may be as high as 40,000 (Turner 1985). It was a sample from this community which comprised the population for the present study.

Some 300 individuals were contacted during the course of this study, all identified with the deaf community. This is not a study in medical geography, and the subject is approached from a cultural rather than audiological perspective, so no data were generated regarding the actual degree of hearing loss among those contacted. Identification with the deaf community was the only criterion employed to define deafness.

Not all deaf residents of Tampa identify with the deaf community, nor are those with normal hearing necessarily excluded. Individuals whose hearing is lost later in life, especially after becoming an adult, tend to remain part of the hearing world. Those individuals comprise the majority of hearing impaired nationally (Schein and Delk 1974). It is assumed that Tampa follows the national trend. In general, the earlier deafness is acquired, the more likely one is to identify with the deaf community. This suggests that in order for one to gain membership in the community, a process of acculturation must take place. Among hearing individuals, acculturation takes place primarily in the home. Children tend to learn by following the example of adults in the family. For the majority of deaf children this is impossible. Only about 7 percent of deaf children are born to deaf parents (Schein and Delk 1974). The vast majority of the deaf learn deaf social behavior and cultural traditions from sources

outside the home. The residential school, not the family, is the institution through which most of deaf had been acculturated.

The Residential School

As shown in Figure 1, the residential school for the deaf, with its dormitory setting, brought together deaf children from both hearing and deaf households. Because children from deaf households tend to be better adjusted, and linguistically more competent, they quickly become leaders, both academically and socially (Furth 1966). Deaf children go through the school as a unit. Deaf children of deaf parents become leaders of the cohort group. When the group graduates, all become adult members of the deaf community.

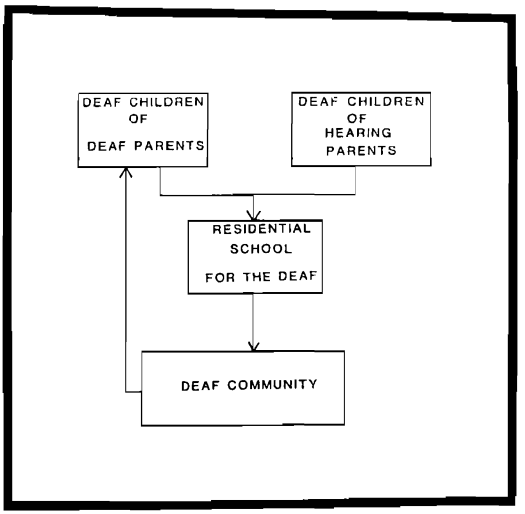

Fig. 1. The Role of the Residential School in the Acculturation of Deaf Children

The shared experience of the residential school is one facet of deaf life which separates the deaf from the hearing world. Relationships and social hierarchies developed at the school tend to be carried into adult life. Student leaders become adult leaders. Deaf cultural traditions continue through the activities and environment of the residential school. For the deaf, the residential school is not only an educational institution, but among the deaf adults contacted during the course of this study, it is regarded as the primary socializing force in deaf culture. At the deaf residential school deaf children learn how to become deaf adults, how to behave in deaf society, and to distrust the hearing. These lessons are taught not by the faculty of the school but by the children of deaf parents, the native deaf. It must be remembered that the majority of deaf children had never seen another deaf person prior to entering the residential school. Deaf households, by definition, contain deaf adults. Children from those households learn naturally the lessons of deaf culture by observing the behavior of deaf adults. Deaf lore is brought into the residential school by those children.

American Sign Language (ASL)

Perhaps the most important skill taught at the residential school is communication. It is at the school that children from hearing households learn the language of the deaf, ASL. ASL was not formally taught at most schools. Its use was banned at some institutions. Yet the language flourished. Again, children from deaf households, where the language is used as the primary means

of communication, bring ASL into the school setting along with other elements of deaf culture and rules of social behavior. Children of deaf parents acquire ASL naturally, they learn from their parents just as hearing children learn a spoken language (Klima and Bellugi 1979). ASL becomes the linguistic bond which unites the deaf community. So important is ASL in the school setting that at least one expert in deaf education has stated that there never has been a totally oral education for the deaf (Fant 1977). A common language then becomes the second element of deaf culture. The institutional experience being the first.

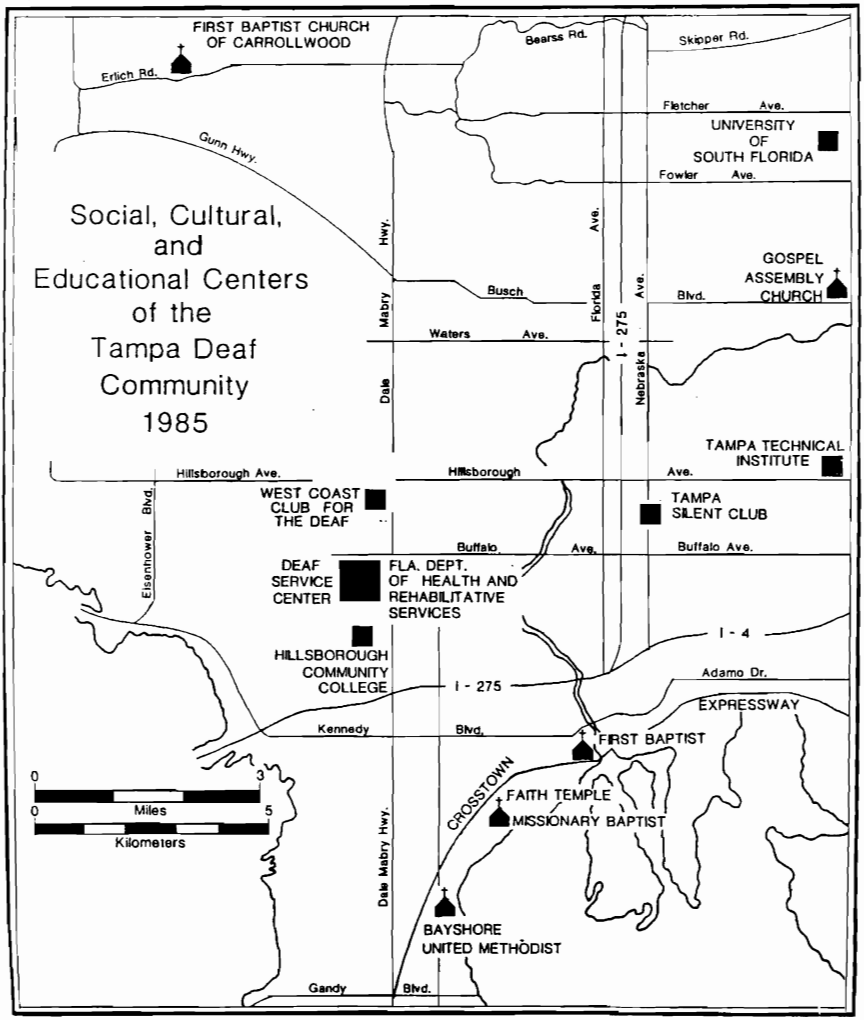

Fig. 2

ASL is the most important element of the deaf cultural landscape. Just as language unifies other cultures, ASL unifies the deaf. The deaf community is a community of signers. In the case of ASL, the role of language in the culture may be even more profound than it is for many hearing societies.

Territory of the Deaf

Absence of Deaf Neighborhoods

The deaf, unlike many minorities, have no territory over which they have jurisdiction or even limited control. Deaf culture exists within the matrix of the much larger and powerful hearing society. Attempts to discover some geographical area which could be defined as a deaf ghetto or neighborhood in Tampa were fruitless. As illustrated by Figure. 2, deaf institutions are distributed through the region in much the same manner as is typical for hearing institutions. Access to major transport routes, availability, and property costs appear to be the criteria considered in locating deaf social and cultural institutions. Among other data culled from the Tampa Deaf Service Center, a sample of 600 postal Zip Codes revealed that the deaf do not tend to live near each other. The only salient fact the Zip Code analysis revealed is that the deaf tend to live in lower and middle income areas, which could have been anticipated since generally the deaf earn significantly less than their hearing counterparts.

ASL as Territory

Lacking any definable space over which they exert a modicum of control, the deaf tend to regard their language in much the same manner that other societies regard territory. The deaf protect ASL from outside (hearing) influences and, through a variety of subtle measures, limit the degree to which hearing individuals can enter the deaf world through ASL. As indicated in Figure 3, ASL forms the core of deaf culture and society. The deaf community itself surrounds ASL and acts as a barrier to all who attempt to enter this realm (Nash and Nash 1981). A buffer zone has also been established between the deaf and hearing, Pidgin Signed English (PSE). Like all pidgin languages, PSE contains elements of several linguistic traditions. In this case, PSE contains elements of English and ASL. While PSE may be used to facilitate communication between peoples of different linguistic traditions (hearing and deaf), it also serves to protect the minority language, ASL. PSE also removes the necessity of communicating in English, a language which most deaf know, but with which few are comfortable, especially when gestures are used to represent English words and signs are placed in English syntax. PSE represents the periphery of the deaf cultural realm.

It must be remembered in all discussions of ASL that the language is neither derived from, nor closely related to English. Lacking a phonetic base, ASL is highly ideographic. Switching from ASL to a signed form of English is similar to attempting to write using a phonetic alphabet and ideographs interchangeably. It can be done, but it is difficult. The deaf do it constantly.

Another aspect of ASL as a form of territory has to do with the manner in which the deaf increase volume in conversation. When a deaf person wants to dominate a conversation the amount of space used in signing becomes larger. One's ability to control signing space is related to the ability to control a conversation. In situations where a hearing person might shout, a deaf person

merely co-opts the space that another might use to converse, effectively limiting the second individual's ability to communicate. When signs are small, the deaf are whispering. This also occurs when two or more deaf turn their backs to a larger group in order to insure privacy. Territory which cannot be spatially defined is not common, but the concept is important in explaining the persistence of many minority cultures. European Jews substituted Torah for physical territory during the Middle Ages (Maier 1975). This enabled Jewish culture and tradition to survive during the centuries following the diaspora. It also meant that when the Jews did return to their homeland, Jewish culture could trace an unbroken history to Biblical times. That culture was preserved in Israel, which was found wherever Jews congregated to read Torah. Torah represented the idea of a Jewish state or territory which provided for the continuity of Jewish culture.

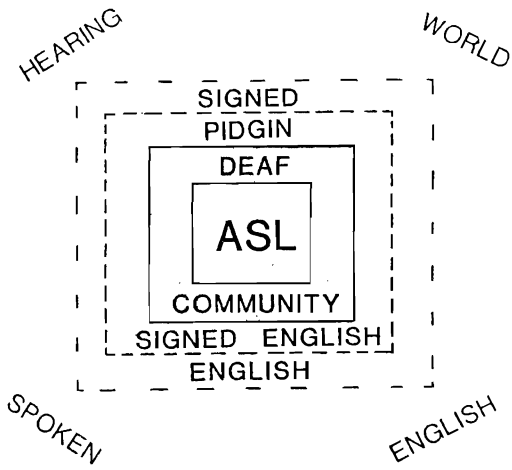

Fig. 3. The Position of American Sign Language (ASL) in the Deaf Community in Relation to Manual and Spoken English.

In much the same manner, ASL provides for the continuity of deaf culture. Wherever deaf congregate and communicate in ASL, this place becomes the deaf culture realm.

The use of two languages, ASL and some form of English illustrates another attribute of deaf culture, diglottism. Diglottism is common among the deaf (Stokoe 1970). It has also been noted among other minority cultures. Among the Christian minority in Baghdad two languages are commonly used. The Christian's own language is used when interacting within the group, while the majority language is used when dealing with outsiders. This holds true even if the outsider is fluent in the minority language (Jackson 1985). The deaf community of Tampa behaves in much the same manner. With few exceptions, noted later, even if a hearing person is well known to the deaf individual, and the hearing person is fluent in ASL, the deaf tend to respond in either formal signed English or PSE. This should not be interpreted as an act of ill will or an insult to the hearing person. Rather it is perhaps a simple protective reflex.

Deaf perceptions of the environment also differ profoundly from those of the hearing. The most obvious perceptual difference is the perception of sound. Sound in the deaf world represents physical force, not a means of communication or of pleasure as when one listens to music or the sounds of nature. Noise, which most hearing people perceive as unwanted sound, is viewed as a series of jumbled, incoherent movements or a garish clash of color (Wright 1970). In the deaf world, sound is movement. That which does not move is silent. As indicated earlier, volume is a function of space. The more of one's visual field a movement occupies, the louder it is.

Deaf Society and Hearing Society

Deaf material culture differs only slightly from that of the dominant society. Obviously expensive stereo equipment has a low priority, but apart from a few electronic devices, the deaf and hearing buy similar things. Important devices for the deaf include a closed caption translator for television, and a printing device for the telephone called a telephone device for the deaf (TDD, or among older deaf, TTY for teletypewriter). Bells and buzzers commonly associated with telephones, doors, and alarm clocks are replaced by flashing lights.

Deaf social behavior also differs from that of the hearing. The majority of social activities are well organized, placed under the auspices of a particular group. This may be a legacy of the residential school experience, or it may be that the deaf want assurance that a large number of people are in attendance at any function. The result is that the deaf usually gather in large groups several times a week under various pretexts. During the winter of 1985-86, the Tampa Deaf Service Center sponsored a bowling league. The league did not attract enough bowlers to support an eight-team format, and several of the teams that did play were short at least one bowler. However, on league bowling nights, approximately fifty deaf non-bowlers attended, not as spectators but to socialize among themselves. Bowling night became a regular event and provided a place where all knew that a number of deaf would be gathered.

Deaf society is not closed to those with normal hearing. Many prominent individuals in the community have no hearing loss. Many can function in the hearing world through the use of hearing aids. In both cases, the individuals involved have undergone a long period of acculturation and socialization. Of those individuals with normal hearing, children of deaf parents tend to be most readily accepted by the deaf community. This is not unexpected. Those hearing children are acculturated from birth. They learned to behave as deaf, and they learned the language and the lore of the community from their parents and other deaf adults.

Hearing siblings of deaf may also be accepted by the community. In this case, the hearing person has lived with a deaf sibling or siblings and may have acquired the language and lore through years of close association. Patterns of social behavior may have been acquired along with the other attributes of non-material culture from siblings.

Other individuals often accepted into the community include especially highly regarded interpreters and religious leaders. The former because of their close association with the deaf, and the latter because they tend to be trusted and are believed to be altruistic. A somewhat smaller but still significant group includes hearing spouses of deaf individuals. Such spouses would have some facility in ASL or other form of manual communication or, one might assume, the marriage would not have taken place.

Regrettably, very few hearing parents of deaf children gain acceptance to the deaf community (Nash and Nash 1981). Having little or no understanding of deafness, hearing parents tend to view the phenomenon as a handicap to be overcome (Spradley and Spradley 1978). Deaf children can seldom follow in the footsteps of hearing parents. Training, education, and acculturation of the deaf child generally occurs outside the home. Because hearing society is decidedly monoglot, many hearing parents never attempt to learn ASL. Rather, they likely may expect the child to learn lip-reading ("Corey" 1984). Yet the deaf are no better and perhaps worse than hearing people at lip-reading (Siple 1978). For all these reasons, the hearing parent often feels pushed aside -- barred, as it were, from the territory of the deaf.

In Tampa, and probably American society generally, the deaf constitute a definable linguistic minority, sharing many aspects of culture and behavior with the dominant hearing society but differing in other areas. Unlike many of America's hearing linguistic minorities, the deaf form no spatially defined residential communities, no neighborhoods, no ghettos. Rather, their language, ASL, is their territory. This territory is exclusive since hearing persons are reluctantly admitted, and it is transportable, receiving definition whenever the deaf community gather and communicate among themselves.

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