

Deafness as a Difference in Human Experience: Cultural Recognition and Social Participation Support

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Éditorial • Editorial

Deafness as a Difference in Human Experience : Cultural Recognition and Social Participation Support *

As part of the real-life experience of individuals, deafness is rooted within numerous social representations and societal dynamics. Its relational attributes have historically been overshadowed by the technological aspects of hearing loss compensation. Despite the significant advancements in hearing assistive technologies over the past years, communication with the hearing society is still all too complex. Indeed, even today, many deaf children, young adults and elders experience loneliness, isolation and stigmatization. Rehabilitation efforts that focus mainly on amplifying residual hearing with aids and teaching oral language, while ignoring the adaptive potential of early sign language acquisition in deaf people and their visual apprehension of the world often result in the marginalization of one segment of the deaf community. The denial by medical and rehabilitation institutions of the deaf community's cultural attributes sometimes leads to the exclusion of signing deaf groups and to a very limited access to social participation.

As a community-shared difference, deafness becomes the ground for new identities and initiates a process of reappropriation of the corporeal difference. While struggling for sign language recognition as the foundation of their culture and fighting against social exclusion, the Deaf simultaneously seek and resist the minority position they have in society. Indeed, beyond their language, the set of characteris-

tics that defines the deaf culture provides solutions to their adjustment problems. The Deaf can seek resources within their own community to overcome the disabling situations they experience in everyday life.

To date, the social and cultural attributes of the deaf experience remains marginal to the scientific uncertainties. However, there is a growing consensus that these attributes should be the basis of a comprehensive definition that describes the individual and collective interventions to be promoted in order to enhance the social participation of the deaf and hard of hearing. The consideration of these attributes should not only result in expanding and enhancing categories, boundaries and systems of thought, but in establishing dialogue and sites of recognition. Improved understanding of the various challenges and perceptions of deafness within different intervention sites might contribute to the implementation of promotion and awareness programs on social participation that reach a greater part of the deaf population.

Based on various research themes, disciplines and methods, the articles published in the current issue address the identity claims of deaf people and their families; the conditions to the existence of a deaf culture; the challenges in relation to the quality of the current social participation of deaf individuals (access to education, healthcare, employment, etc.); as well as the ethical impacts of technological advancements in hearing loss compensation. The articles also discuss the presence of inequalities in the organizational mechanisms for deaf *schooling*. Some contributions explore how these inequalities are perceived as reflecting the social representations of deafness and deaf people, and of their place in society (Le Capitaine), and provide a more general scope on the barriers and facilitators to the social participation of deaf people in areas such as education and employment (Letscher). These thoughts then lead to further reflection on intervention models that are respectful of linguistic and cultural differences between the deaf and hearing communities by promoting healthy communication and problem solving skills (Thoth). Some au-

* In the context of this issue, the *Journal of Human Development, Disability, and Social Change* agrees with the Canadian Association of the Deaf (CAD) terminology on Deafness as it is to be found on their website (http://www.cad.ca/terminology_links.php). Authors were, however, free to use the descriptive terminology they deemed most appropriate.

thors question positive strategies associated with reducing the reproduction of social stratification, oppressions and social inequalities between the deaf and hearing communities (Horejes), such as in workplaces, and from which emerge the violence experienced by deaf people; these authors call upon a variety of strategies to deal with situations that makes them vulnerable (Dalle-Nazébi).

Another theme addressed in the current issue is the contribution of deaf healthcare professionals in considering the specific needs of signing deaf patients in care units for the Deaf. These thoughts then lead to further reflection on the knowledge, attitudes, behaviors and experiences of the deaf people living in developing countries, such as in Kenya, with regards to the spread of AIDS in the deaf population (Shackleton).

Another very important aspect addressed is the issue of clinical services delivered to hearing children and their deaf parents (Guay). Levels of social participation of the children of deaf adults (CODAs), as well as the impact of their past experiences on these levels are addressed (St-Onge). Two articles demonstrate how a deeper understanding of this issue will better equip clinicians in working with CODAs.

The social and cultural characteristics as well as the dichotomy within the social representations of deafness raise multiple questions, such as: How are differences produced? What is the view of institutions regarding these groups? How can practices considering differences be implemented in order to serve as drivers for discussion? One way to put actions forward in the field of deafness is through the collective representations towards the Deaf that these various articles highlight. They reveal our social perceptions and the impact they have on our relations to others, and to difference.

The current issue is an expression of the will to build interdisciplinary bridges and to focus on contributions rather than obstacles in order to enable the implementation of innovative and inclusive research from various perspectives (users, professionals, decision makers, etc.).

One can thus hope to achieve both best practices and profound changes in the way these are developed. The existence or the terms in which cultural and identity specificities are considered in public policy implementation is not built on a purely intellectual position. These issues also have practical consequences. These terms facilitate or impede the social participation of various populations. On one hand, they are also the keys in understanding some forms of societal partnerships, and on the other hand the characteristics of services established by interested parties. Therefore, beyond the culture shock, this new perspective on deafness allows us to explore new ways to consider our practices and assumptions. And while the articles of this issue address innovative attributes and ways for the deaf environment, they should also help clinicians and researchers from other fields to rethink their service delivery under brand new perspectives. Those are the challenges that this issue intends to address and overcome.

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