

The First National CODA Conference

Celebration and Exploration of Our Heritage

Co-sponsored by

CODA: Children of Deaf Adults, Inc.

Gallaudet University National Academy  
Family Life Program

California School for the Deaf  
Fremont, California, USA  
August 8-10, 1986

Keynote Address:

Deaf Parents – Hearing Children: International Perspectives  
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About James Woodward:

James Woodward is a Research Scientist in the Culture and Communication Studies Program of the Gallaudet Research Institute and in the International Center on Deafness at Gallaudet University. Until he transferred to the Gallaudet Research Institute in 1984, Dr. Woodward was Professor of Linguistics at Gallaudet. He also held visiting appointments in Linguistics Programs at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and the Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi, India. He received his Ph.D. with distinction from Georgetown University in sociolinguistics (1973), completing his dissertation on grammatical variation in American Sign Language. He has studied sign language variation in Deaf communities in the United States (Washington, D.C., Washington state, Montana, Georgia, Louisiana, and California); in France (Paris, Albi, Toulouse, and Marseilles); in the Caribbean; and in India (Delhi, Bangalore, Bombay, and Calcutta). He is the author of seven books and more than fifty articles on sign language research.

Being here today takes me back many years to 1969-70, when I first became acquainted with sign languages and Deaf cultures. At that time, when I spoke on these topics, there were often many people in the audience who knew more, intuitively, about the subject than I did, because they had grown up with the language and culture being discussed. As you know, there is not a great deal of research about hearing children of deaf parents, especially from a cross-cultural perspective. Most of the evidence we have is anecdotal, so we don't have much of a scientific basis for making concrete claims.

I could give you more anecdotal evidence. For example, I could say, "Let's see...I was in South American in 1975 and this is what I saw..." But, this would not help us very much, because we don't know whether my particular example is representative of the whole population or not.

Because of this, I would like to try and take a more theoretical approach. I want to give you some ideas based on what we know about sign languages and Deaf cultures and give you some perspectives for starting future research. I don't have the answers. I wish I did. I don't even know most of the relevant questions, but perhaps I can motivate you to become so excited about research that you may want to begin your own. I believe all of us must be involved in such research if we are to gain the knowledge we need.

Let's start off with some questions. These questions may seem trivial at first, but I think when we come back to them later, you may find that they are not so trivial after all, but that the answers depend a great deal on our underlying cultural assumptions.

First, we might well ask, "Do we need an organization like CODA?" "Why or why not?" In answering these questions, it is likely that other questions will have to be answered. "Is there something significantly different about deaf and hearing people?" "If there is a difference, is the difference due to something biological – something inherent in deafness per se – for example, a difference due to 'sensory deprivation' in the deaf individual?" "Or could these differences be related to cultural phenomena – something to do with value systems and social identity?" "How might these differences impact family members who differ in hearing status – for example, deaf children of hearing parents and hearing children of deaf parents?"

There is a very clear danger in trying to answer these questions purely from looking at the U.S. Deaf community. Unfortunately, much of our present

understanding of sign languages and deaf cultures is based almost exclusively on American Sign Language and the culture of the U.S. Deaf community. What I would like to suggest is that there is more than one predictable way that deaf and hearing people can interact linguistically and culturally.

Before examining these different interactions, it may be helpful to review some of the findings of sociolinguistic research on the U.S. Deaf community and American Sign Language. This research has rejected the old medical model of deafness, i.e., that deaf people are somehow sick and that they need to be cured. The sociolinguistic model of deafness posits that many of the differences between deaf and hearing people are due to cultural facts. Deaf people and hearing people have different social identities and different value systems. At the heart of these differences are attitudes toward deafness. Is deafness positive, neutral, or negative? I think if you talk with most hearing people, especially hearing people who are not familiar with the Deaf community, it is obvious that they view deafness as something negative. They would be quite concerned if they were to become deaf. They would not like it if their children were deaf. If they have a friend who happened to be deaf, they would probably think, “Wouldn’t it be nice if my friend were hard of hearing, so s/he could hear a little?”

Most of you are well aware that the Deaf community view of deafness differs significantly from this. Most deaf parents don’t care whether they have deaf or hearing children. For those deaf parents who do have a preference, the preference is generally for a child like themselves, a child who is deaf.

As a hearing child of deaf parents grows up, the child learns Hearing cultural values and Deaf cultural values. In certain aspects, the child is learning two contradictory value systems. This situation leads to some very interesting research questions. If two value systems are truly contradictory in certain basic values, can a person actually, equally, learn and operate with both value systems? If a person has assimilated both value systems, are these two value systems separate or are they merged into one value system? If they are merged into one value system, can this value system be considered part of a separate “third” culture? My own opinion, for what it is worth, is that I think most of these options could occur, depending on the individual situation. Some hearing children of deaf parents grow up hearing, with little or no interest in or appreciation for Deaf culture. Other hearing children of deaf

parents tend to grow up dealing with these two value systems and seem to be able to shift from one set of values to another. I would lean toward the opinion that the people who deal with both value systems most successfully have two separate value systems. I am not yet convinced that there would be many people who could completely merge such potentially contradictory ideologies into one coherent system without some significant modifications in one or both systems or without some psychological conflicts. However, only research can answer these questions.

After examining the situation in the U.S., we may want to ask about the generalizability of our findings. Are the experiences of hearing children of deaf parents essentially the same all over the world? The answer to this question is no. Providence Island, a small island off the coast of Nicaragua, gives us evidence that the interaction of deaf and hearing people can be quite different from what we are familiar with in the U.S. Providence Island has approximately 3,000 people, of whom approximately 25 could be classified as deaf from an early age. The interesting fact is that there is no Deaf community.

Deaf people on Providence Island do not associate any more with deaf people than they do with hearing people. There is no separate Deaf social identity; deaf people do not have a separate value system from hearing people. In terms of communication, there is a sign language used on the island that is not related to any other known sign or oral language. The great majority of hearing people sign. I know this to be true because I spent two to three months a year there for six years, so it was easy to observe the interaction of the people. One of the most striking things about Providence Island to a person from the United States is the generally positive attitudes toward deaf people and sign language usage. As I have pointed elsewhere (Woodward, 1982), the great majority of hearing people on Providence Island view hearing people and deaf people as equally intelligent and equally mature. In relation to Providence Island Sign Language, the majority of hearing people believe that Providence Island Sign Language has a grammar and that it is a different language from the spoken languages. The majority of hearing people also indicate that deaf people can express anything they wish in Providence Island Sign Language. When asked about methods of communication, 79% of the hearing people interviewed said that hearing people should learn to sign without voice and that deaf people did not need to learn how to speak, 9% of the people said that hearing people should learn to sign but that deaf people should also

learn to talk, 11% said that hearing people do not need to learn to sign, but that deaf people do need to learn to talk. (An additional 2% expressed no opinion.)

We may want to ask if Providence Island is a fluke or if there are other communities with similar attitudes toward deaf individuals. Research has shown that there appear to be a number of other groups that are similar to Providence Island: Martha's Vineyard in the 1800's (Groce 1980); Rennell Island in the South Pacific (Kuschel, 1974); Adamorobe village in Ghana (Frishberg, 1987); Mayan villages in Guatemala (DuBois, personal communication). In all of these places the same type of situation occurs. There are no communities of deaf individuals, but there are very strong positive attitudes on the part of the hearing population toward deaf people and signing with deaf people.

From my own observations on Providence Island, I conclude that there is one value system shared by deaf people and hearing people, whether or not the hearing people have deaf parents. From the writings about the other cultures mentioned above, I would also conclude that hearing people and deaf people in those cultures share the same value systems. Hearing children of deaf parents in these cultures do not have some of the conflicts in identity that sometimes occur among hearing children in the United States, precisely because they and their parents share the same value system as the general population.

The evidence on sign languages and deaf-hearing interaction thus indicates that there are at least two types of deaf-hearing result in two very different possible types of effects on the hearing children of deaf parents.

In one situation a large proportion of the hearing population has negative attitudes toward deaf people. These negative attitudes coupled with the need of deaf people to find positive interaction, result in the formation of a Deaf community. The Deaf community differs linguistically and culturally from the majority Hearing community. These differences are often preserved and encouraged by strict sets of social interaction rules, such as diglossia (see Woodward, 1982), which discourages the use of deaf signing with most hearing outsiders. Where there are differences in cultures, there are possibilities of cultural conflicts. In such societies, it would seem likely that hearing children of deaf parents would be faced with these conflicts and have to deal with them successfully or suffer possible psychological conflicts

within themselves concerning their own social identity and values. This would not always be an easy task, especially without the support of others who have gone through similar situations. Perhaps this is why we are here today.

In contrast to the above situation, there is the other type of society we have mentioned, where there are positive attitudes toward deaf people, where the majority of hearing people sign, where there is no separate Deaf community, where deaf people and their hearing and deaf children share the same values and social identity as others in the society. In such societies, there are no formal mechanisms for separation like diglossia because there is no social separation.

Attitudes are very closely related to the types of communities in which people live. In looking at populations where there is no Deaf community, one finds that they generally tend to be small communities with strong family ties within the community. The people tend to have marriages that interrelate families, so that most families are very closely connected with each other and everyone knows who is related to whom. Most people therefore tend to have strict social obligations to one another and every person has a very specific social role within the community. This type of social structure tends to occur primarily in non-urbanized societies where there is very little job specialization and there is very little cash economy. In other words, people tend to barter for goods or services. Societies such as this allow deaf individuals to compete on an equal level with hearing people, i.e., to make the same amount of money, to have the same types of jobs, and to interact with hearing people on the same social basis as everyone else in the society. This situation was exemplified by Providence Island at least until 1982. On my last visit to Providence Island in 1982, the island was clearly switching to a cash economy. It would be interesting to return in a few years and see if the change in economy is having any effect on the attitudes toward deafness. I believe there will be some change in attitudes because up to 1982, deaf people could get exactly the same jobs and same pay as hearing people. It was clear that deaf people could do anything that hearing people could do. However, in 1982, there were some new jobs for which deaf people were not being considered.

Traditionally, the fact that deaf people could do the same work as hearing people, including such supervisory jobs as being the captain of a boat, allowed hearing people to view deaf people in a positive light, which in turn

had a very positive effect on hearing children of deaf parents on Providence Island. There was nothing right or wrong with having deaf parents. The fact that someone's parents were deaf was simply a true statement without values attached.

On the other hand, once job specialization develops, deaf and hearing people often start getting different kinds of jobs. Since certain types of jobs pay more than others, it is easy to see how class stratification can develop and influence deaf people who do not tend to get certain high-paying jobs because not all hearing people are fluent signers. Basically what happens is people start becoming different from each other and society starts putting values on these differences, saying that some differences are better than others. One way a person is rewarded for "positive" differences is through the amount of money he or she is paid. Job specialization, urbanization, and the loosening of family ties often go hand in hand. With the loosening of social obligations that normally tie everyone together, it is easier for people to become more independent and self-centered, and there is less pressure to accept other people who are different because other people are now seen as competition rather than someone with whom you have mutual social obligations.

Having seen two very different types of cultures and their effects on deaf-hearing interaction, we can return to some of our original questions with a new perspective. "Do we need an organization like CODA?" "Why or Why not?" "Is there something significantly different about deaf and hearing people?" "If there is a difference, is the difference due to something biological – something inherent in deafness per se, for example, a difference due to 'sensory deprivation' in the deaf individual?" "Or could these differences be related to cultural phenomena – something to do with value systems and social identity?" "How might these differences impact family members who differ in hearing status, for example, deaf children of hearing parents and hearing children of deaf parents?" It is clear that our answers will differ depending on whether we are from the United States or Providence Island? There is much we could learn from societies such as Providence Island.

As I said earlier, "I don't even know all of the relevant questions." I do think we have a place to start, however. I think you will agree that we cannot answer the questions we need to answer with our own anecdotes. We need more systematic research on deaf-hearing interaction and how this may

affect hearing children of deaf parents. We desperately need more cross-cultural perspective on this research.

Carrying out such research requires the cooperation of a wide variety of people – anthropologists, sociologists, linguists – and the people who already have the intuitive knowledge, most of you in the audience – hearing children of deaf parents. In classic cultural research, the perspectives of participant and observer are needed. Because you have played both roles in both communities at certain times in your life, you (with the proper academic training) are some of the best qualified people to research the topics that you are most interested in – hearing children of deaf parents and your relationship to Deaf culture and Hearing culture. But you must get the necessary anthropological and linguistic training or work closely with those people who have this training and have worked with deaf people.

This conference has convinced me of the need to focus some of my own research on the topic of hearing children of deaf parents. I will be starting some work in Africa in October 1987, to examine sign languages of deaf people in several West African nations to expand our knowledge of universal and unique characteristics of sign languages. I now also intend to examine deaf-hearing cultural interaction and its possible effects on hearing children of deaf parents. I hope we all have interesting new research findings to share with each other at the next CODA conference.

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