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Dynamics of a Bicultural Identity

Introduction

Because I am a hearing outsider, I think it best for me to begin with a little biography and what my intent is with this presentation. I am, what I affectionately like to call, a HOHA, hearing of hearing adults. However, I do have many friends and associates who are Codas, both Deaf and hearing. My academic interests are focused on American Deaf culture, and I have a particular interest in intercultural communication and understanding. So my interests, both personal and professional, have many points of articulations with Codas, biculturality, Deaf and hearing dynamics, etc.

Aside from numerous conversations I have had with individual Deaf parents of hearing children and with hearing Codas, my first encounter with hearing children of Deaf parents en masse came in 1980 at the NAD's NCPTSLI Institute at the University of Tennessee, where I was privileged to be invited to teach. This being a program for the training of sign language instructors, there happened to be a half dozen or so hearing children of Deaf parents in the class of thirty. The remainder of the class who were hearing from hearing families (HOHAs) – a few of which had Deaf spouses.

In one class we were discussing the various groups and types of Deaf people there might be in the Deaf community. I happened to refer to hearing children of Deaf parents as a group that we know little about and which could use some attention in the research community. This most innocuous aside sparked the formation of an instant CODA group right before my eyes. As I recall, there were five or six Codas, who became like magnets to each other. Have you ever watched magnets and when they get close to each other they sort of vibrate with nervous excitement, stick fast to each other and are then difficult to pull apart? Well, that is what happened. To that day they had each thought of themselves as the only one with the experience. By simply referring to them and identifying them as a group, it was like opening a floodgate. They met often and on my departure expressed heartfelt thanks for opening a new door in their lives. Although I felt I did nothing to deserve their kindness, it was a profound experience and a powerful illustration of what can happen once something has an identity. Needless to say, I am excited to be here today.

What I hope to do is to open a discussion about bicultural identity and specifically what this might mean for Codas. I intend to offer some theoretical framework that may help in your further explorations on the subject. Above all, I hope to assist in defining and maintaining a safe environment from which to proceed with this exploration. I will be using an anthropological perspective which as the objective of understanding – truth – looking at the “what is.”

When I use the term “Deaf America”, I am referring to members of a linguistic minority group, which is based in American Sign Language. This is related more to the limits of a cultural inquiry needing to focus on the linguistic group than to a willful exclusion of the oral deaf community or the hard of hearing community who might be more based in English. However, I believe the theoretical principles of culture, biculturality, identity, etc. in many cases are applicable to those of you whose experience has been in relation to those groups.

There are a few other parameters that I would like to establish before going on. We want to acknowledge that all Deaf families are not alike. There are differences in onset of deafness in parents; languages and modes used in the home – Sim Com, ASL, voice with hearing children, sign with Deaf children. There are differences in the Deaf adult’s attitude toward deafness – positive identity to denial; differences in educational background –

residential school, oral programs exclusively, day programs, public school mainstreamed, etc. There are differences in socioeconomic status; cultural background of family; urban and rural settings; and attitudes toward the hearing world. So, too, are there differences in individual Coda – siblings, birth order, sex, etc.

Further, we want to acknowledge that not all Coda experience is the same in a more historical sense. Coda growing up in the 20's, 30's, and 40's will have had a different experience than those who are children of the 60's and 70's.

But despite all of these differences, I believe we can talk in some broad generalities of the common threads that bind the Coda experience. What makes a Coda unique? Different from her/his hearing contemporaries?

The image I have when talking with hearing children of Deaf adults is like the “man on the flying trapeze.” He is swinging back and forth between the two platforms, but never landing. The crowd below experiences watching one individual. The individual experiences the back and forth in mid air and is only “solid” when s/he has firmly landed square on one of the platforms. It seems the Coda is looking for identity in much the same way. Back and forth gaining a little insight at each pass but not ever entirely solid on either platform of hearing or Deaf. It seems that the choice is one of Deaf or hearing, when in fact, it is probably neither.

To get to the dynamics of a bicultural identity, I would like to proceed with an examination of the concepts of culture, culturally determined behaviors, biculturality and identity.

What is Culture?

There are two very broad major functions of “culture” ...it is the mechanism by which we maintain life and guarantee the perpetuation of the species. Humans are particularly helpless creatures at birth – and as such need institutions that provide for care and sustenance of the individual –physically and spiritually. Squirrels have information necessary for survival and how to go about getting it. Culture is a culmination of habits, customs, ideas, religions, social systems, i.e., kinship patterns and group dynamics. It is laws – formal and informal, material culture, i.e., faxes and TTYs, political and economic systems, rules of behavior – what is right and what is wrong, what

is real and what is not. Culture is transmitted in large measure by language in a social context. Language and culture are inseparable. More often than not the language is the chief identifying characteristic of the cultural group.

Culture is acquire – we are not born with it. Because it is humankind’s adaptive mechanism to the environment – whatever group and whatever environments – by definition no one culture is better than any other. All are equal. This is the essence of the concept of cultural relativism – and its practice is simply that judgment on behavior within a culture must be reserved until one understands the worldview of that culture in its own terms.

Culturally Determined Behaviors and Values

To illustrate – a look at some cross cultural comparisons of specific culturally determined behaviors and values can be helpful. It is when we come in contact with people with different cultural values or behaviors than ours that we can see definition of cultural differences. Contact situations often produce discomfort and it is usually a cultural difference that is producing this feeling. The process is often very subtle. You don’t know exactly what’s wrong, but you feel very uneasy.

A common uncomfortable situation for people in this culture is found in the elevator. We don’t tend to consciously think that our cultural definition of personal space is being violated and that we simply do not stand that close to someone we do not know. However, the elevator forces us into this situation. To make eye contact with a fellow elevator rider or begin personal conversation with someone you are standing in such close proximity is more intimacy than you generally intend with a stranger. To keep ones eyes on the safe and neutral changing floor numbers and to keep conversation limited to general discussions of things such as the weather are coping mechanisms for dealing with this breach of culturally determined use of personal space.

Personal space is defined differently by each culture. For example, Southern Mediterranean peoples tend to have a smaller sphere of personal space, whereas, the British tend to have a larger sphere. So putting individuals together from these two cultural backgrounds will result in each being uncomfortable with the other. The Southern Mediterranean will be “too

close or too familiar” for the Englishman and conversely the Englishman will be “too distant or aloof” for the Italian.

Values are another area of great cultural conflict. For example, the view of man and nature. In American culture we tend to want to control nature. We dam rivers, tunnel mountains, and seed clouds for rain. Perhaps the epitome of this tendency is air conditioning. A culture whose value of man and nature is one of respectful coexistence may have difficulty in understanding us. For example, in Korea you may find people who simply do not travel to a particular city during the rainy season because the river is impassable or may travel around mountains instead of boring through them. We may view this as “backward”. While they may be viewing us as “disrespectful”. “We” think we are right and “they” are wrong. Of course, the “we” point of view applies to each cultural group. So we can see where we can have some clear lines of disagreement between groups. But what about the individual who happens to be a member of more than one cultural group? By definition we can see the potential for being in conflict with oneself.

Biculturalism

Bi-culturalism is an incredibly complex subject. It is more than the state of having two languages – it is the coexistence of two distinctly different cultures and their attendant value systems, behaviors, worldview, etc. Further, there may be a preponderance toward one of the cultures over the other, i.e., one may be more Deaf than hearing, or more hearing than Deaf, or may be balanced between the two. People are not very tidy creatures to study. Bicultural individuals are not all participating equally in the two systems, sometimes they are culturally code-switching depending on context, sometimes one of the cultures is an oppressed minority within the other culture...the potential dynamics are virtually endless. But it does exist. Perhaps one way of examining it is by looking at both cultures and some potential points of conflict or dissonance.

Biculturalism rarely exists where the two cultures are so distinctly separate that they are dealt with separately. It might be a bit so for the Coda as the channel of language is so separate. However, Deaf Americans also have many of the same values of the larger society.

Like others of the world, the culture of Deaf people has its language, learned behaviors and shared experience, attitudes and values as well as material

culture that is specific to Deaf people. The culture is transmitted through ASL and is largely centered in residential schools, Deaf families, social clubs, organizations and urban clusters of Deaf populations.

To compare some culturally determined behaviors, attitudes and values we might look at things such as the definition of “deaf”. Generally, the hearing world defines “deaf” as an inability to hear, whereas, the Deaf community tends more to use the term to denote membership in the cultural group.

Greeting and leave taking behaviors may be quite different between Deaf and hearing worlds. There is the “Deaf hug” usually reserved for the “in-group”, with a handshake reserved for the “out-group”. Depending on other sub-culture membership greeting and leave taking behaviors in the hearing world vary, however, they do not include the specific “Deaf hug”.

In the Deaf world there may be a cultural tendency to be more tactile than the larger hearing society. Again, of course, there is variation within sub-groups, however, in general American culture tends to shy away from touching behaviors. Introductions in the Deaf world tend to be more biographical than in hearing society and the kinds and priority of information included a bit different. Where the hearing world is likely to give name then occupation, the Deaf introduction is more likely to include name and where from. The “where from” is more likely to refer to a residential school than a specific hometown. More background information is generally included in the Deaf introduction. If the person being introduced is a hearing person, then too, more information is included especially that which will answer questions of who you are and what your connection or interest in the Deaf world is.

Another interesting cross-cultural comparison between Deaf and hearing worlds is the view of the interpreter. This is no doubt a point of cultural difference that you as Codas who have been in the interpreting position have experienced often. The hearing world tends to look at you as part saint, part machine, and at all times, the one who is providing full and complete access for the Deaf person. In the courtroom you are providing for the Deaf person everything that is going on and as a result, it is viewed that the Deaf person is experiencing the process just as a hearing person would. In the bubble on the TV screen the same attitude applies. The bubble is there; therefore, the Deaf person is being served equally. To be deified and misunderstood by the hearing world on one hand, and to be viewed by the Deaf world gratefully,

to be sure, but more as a “necessary evil” on the other would seem quite a bind to find oneself in.

What happens to an individual who has membership in both Deaf and hearing worlds? You are the ones of course, who have the answers to this, not me. However, we might glean some understanding of this very unique circumstance by containing this line of cultural inquiry. Let’s look at the American setting. We are living in a world where Deaf people are studied in departments of Communicative Disorders, Speech Pathology, and Special Education. This is not to deny that the education of Deaf children needs special care. But we do know that this propensity for identifying the Deaf individual as pathological has produced and continues to produce devastating effects for Deaf people. This is particularly so for the Deaf child who often has the impairment to his hearing apparatus generalized over his entire identity.

We live in a world where the major institutions and general public sentiment is one that views Deaf people as “broken hearing people” and is generally bent on “fixing” them. They are generally seen for what they can’t do instead of what they can do – they can’t hear or they don’t have language. This all adds to a constant message of inferiority of the whole person.

The Coda is a part of this world. A world in which Deaf people are stigmatized on many levels – the deafness itself, being labeled deaf and dumb, or deaf mute; or just having to deal with the fact that hearing people have a hard time accepting people who do not speak “normally”.

There is a stigma toward the language itself. This used to be felt more strongly when signing in public would bring only stares, etc. We still have a long way to go toward general acceptance of the language. This latter point is particularly complicated for the Deaf identity as much as of the Deaf cultural identity is intrinsically bound to the use of the language.

Deafness is invisible. The Coda is often caught in the middle of that common event – the hearing world discovering the deafness in the parent and the subsequent stigmatization that occurs. It is not easy to resolve people “pitying” your parents, or worse, treating them like the child and you as the adult – “tell him...tell her...what does s/he want?...”

It is no wonder we find many Codas who at one time or another have harbored that painful and secret wish for their parents to be “normal” or frustrated that they are not “normal” in a hearing sense. Needless to say there is much guilt and remorse after such a thought. I think if we can understand the situation and acknowledge it, we might make it easier for future Codas to know that others like her/him have felt that way and that it is most normal.

As with other bicultural situations, it is the contact situations that are the points of conflict. Do you hug your hearing friends when they come into your Deaf home? Do you find yourself in positions where you seem to be held responsible for communication between hearing and Deaf people? Are you being held responsible for access to the hearing world by your parents?

Having touched on ideas of culture, culturally determined behaviors, values, etc., and on the concept of biculturality, in our discussion of a bicultural identity, let us now take a look at the concept of identity.

Identity

The word is from the Latin “idem” meaning “the same”. Most discussions of definition depend on differences as well as similarities. Similar to the high school English compositions of compare and contrast we all know so well. Our identity is determined not only by how we are the “same” but also how we are “different”. Our sameness or what we are is reinforced by what we are not.

Examination of identity is certainly not a new issue. There are works dating to 500 B.C. by Heraclitus and others by St. Thomas Aquinas, John Locke (1694) and David Hume (1738). Hume’s work, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, contained a chapter titled, “Of Personal Identity” in which he offered the following metaphor:

“An oak that grows from a small plant to a large tree is still the same oak, though there be not one particle of matter or figure of its parts the same. An infant becomes a man, and is sometimes fat, sometimes lean, without any change in his identity.”
(Cited in Dundes, 1983, p.237)

The idea here is one of constancy, the parts may change but the identity remains constant. These earlier works focused mostly on personal identity but the ideas can and have been applied to the idea of group identity. Such as, “We speak of the same nation as existing through many generations, and of the same corporation surviving many deaths.” (Fullerton, 1890).

Thus, the definition of the self or of the group are of the same principle, but differing only in the respect of the individual vs. the collective.

More recent work by Erikson further illuminates the issue of identity and I think for our purpose is quite helpful. He states, “The conscious feeling of having a personal identity is based on two simultaneous observations: the perception of self-sameness and continuity of one’s existence in time and space and the perception of the fact that others recognize one’s sameness and continuity” (Erikson, 1968, Dundes 1983). “Erikson has added the important feature of an individual’s awareness that his or her identity is recognized by others” (Dundes, 1983, p 238).

Personal identity formation is acquired through the reflection the individual sees of himself in others. The self develops an identity through this mirroring process, which occurs in social interaction. The majority of individuals develop multiple identities both personal and social (Dundes, 1983), which are context specific.

The idea of contrast cannot be overstated. “There is no self without the other, the contrast of self, that which we are not – so too, there is no group A if there is no group B. Each is defined by the absence of the other” (Mead, 1958). Blacks are also non-white; a French Canadian is not a British Canadian. Deaf is not hearing and hearing is not Deaf. To illustrate how people’s identity has depended on defining somebody else’s identity, Mead asked, “How can you define a man if you don’t mention woman and how do you define a woman without mentioning a man?”

This system of oppositions necessary for establishing and defining identity is particularly intense in situations of oppression. In such instances the identity needs to be maintained and consciously strengthened, for without this attention the minority group in question might easily be swallowed whole by the majority and cease to exist, i.e., French speakers in Canada, English speaking Scots, ASL speaking Deaf Americans. With reference to Deaf/hearing dynamics, the American Deaf community is one of the nation’s

more oppressed minorities and as such there is often found a very keen sense of who is DEAF and who is HEARING.

Additionally, in discussions of identity formation there is a sense of continuity. This continuity links the individual to the past. It roots the individual. We know who we are in large measure by where we have come from, who our predecessors are, and what our history is.

So we have issues of: self-sameness; the differences between personal identity and group identity; similarities and differences – our compare and contrast process; identity development through mirroring – individual and societal; and a potential heightened state of maintenance of identity due to oppression.

Bicultural Identity

How does this relate to identity formation and maintenance for the Coda? With reference to self-sameness, is there self-sameness as parent? As hearing world? As other hearing bilinguals? With reference to differences, is there difference from parents? From the hearing world? From hearing monolinguals? With reference to group identity is the Coda sometimes part of the Deaf group and sometimes not? Or part of the hearing group, and sometimes not? Does the Coda find his/herself opting for one or the other in an attempt to resolve the confusion? Does it seem to fit?

Mirroring can be particularly difficult for the bicultural individual. If you are the hearing child of Deaf parents, the hearing may reflect things such as: “you poor dear”, “you’re living in a world of silence”, “you must help and care for your parents”, “you must bring them the world of sound and music”, “you are so lucky you can hear”. In contrast, your Deaf mirror might reflect things such as: “you are hearing, therefore you know it all”, “hearing people are the oppressor”, “it’s your fault”, or “you owe Deaf people”. Of course, these sorts of messages are not necessarily conscious or willfully intentional. They just reflect some commonly held attitudes in the Deaf and hearing worlds.

These conflicts in the mirroring process are what Codas have in common. Maybe on many different levels, but it is the confused picture that is produced by having two mirrors that many Codas can identify with. Like the fun house with all the different mirrors – which one is the real person? It is

possible that subtly; the hearing child might get the impression that they are “the other”.

With reference to the idea of continuity – we may find that for the Coda this continuity may be truncated. Within families there is usually a clear line to one’s roots. For the Coda we must ask, where are his/her roots in the Deaf community? Where are they for his/her in the hearing world? Who is his/her liaison to them? The Coda is caught between Deaf values of “hearing” and by virtue of membership in the hearing world, hearing values of Deaf. The Coda can be easily confused as to where she belongs. Codas can be hearing people in a Deaf world and Deaf in a hearing world – especially as children and then gradually grow more toward the hearing world as they become older. Their early language and socialization may be more “Deaf” oriented. And later development, which is more based within the formal education system and with hearing peers, may be more “hearing world oriented”. Children are marvelously adaptive and learn easily how to code switch to the appropriate language and register depending on the situation.

We know that stimulating environments and challenge produce growth and a heightened awareness. I will assert that the Coda who early on had to learn two or more languages and their proper use, for whatever difficulties, has probably benefited greatly with abilities that his/her hearing monolingual contemporaries do not have.

Often Codas remember many pleasant times at the Deaf club or other Deaf social activities when small but seems less unconditionally welcome as they become older. For some, there is a feeling of rejection by the Deaf world because their parents have encouraged their participation more in the hearing world. Deaf people are masters of adaptation to the hearing world. I will assert that more than an effort to “exclude” the Coda from the Deaf world, the Deaf parent is probably trying to assure that their hearing offspring are “included” in the hearing world. For many who never heard the news that ASL is a “real” language and who have gone through an education system that has imprinted the idea that to have language is to have English, it may be easily understood that the best interest of the child’s “language” development is served by encouraging participation in the hearing world.

Questions of where do I belong can further be compounded by the confusion of the roles. There can be some role confusion when you are a child and are asked to do adult things such as interpret business or medical appointments

for parents; or being the interpreter at events that you were also a participant, i.e., school meetings, graduations, etc.

Sometimes the situation may be beyond the development of the child at that age. The child may be learning of things before s/he is ready or has had an opportunity to be prepared for it, i.e., the lawyer's or doctor's office. These situations surely have the potential for deleterious effects on children. One person may respond by becoming more timid, the other, more hardened. Sometimes there are no choices. This occurs to all of us – it is life and life is not found in a perfect world. We don't always have the opportunity to guide ourselves through with optimum conditions at all time. We are challenged and we rise to the challenge. Sometimes we are better for it. Sometimes these experiences of Cudas have produced a greater sense of self-reliance and a knowledge of the world and how to function within it. They have given some access to places, people, and information far in advance of their hearing peers.

Some Cudas live in families who did not have televisions, radios, or telephones, and for some, that may have made for a clearer world. However, some parents would have such things “for the children”. We can easily see an ironic bind from a Coda point of view if these things are for “them” and yet their presence adds to the Coda's responsibilities of interpreting or making these things accessible to Deaf family members.

Some Cudas find themselves timid in the hearing world. And for the child who does not have hearing role models on an intimate basis this could well happen. Again, however, there is another irony for the Coda. The very status that they feel less than secure in, i.e., “a member of the hearing world” is exactly the status that is often accorded undue respect and the erroneous assumption of being more intelligent – having the answers. So, the Coda may be looked to, as a knowledgeable authority by virtue of being a hearing person, by those people who the child herself feels is actually the authority – the parents.

To search for an identity between only the two poles of Deaf or hearing, the bicultural individual is likely to swing back and forth, back and forth on that circus trapeze. Yes, each time perhaps picking up a little more definition of what s/he is and what s/he is not from each of those worlds. But, imagine the feeling of having a third identifiable platform that one could call one's own. A home base from which you can swing to and from the hearing world and

swing to and from the Deaf world, and be able to land solidly upon it at will. I think that is the essence of what the acknowledgement of a bicultural identity can do – an acknowledgement by the bicultural individual as well as by the two cultural spheres that make up their biculturality. This is not a rejection of either world – and in fact, can only benefit both Deaf and hearing worlds by providing a clearer definition of “what is” and a better understanding to all – Deaf and hearing. As a parent myself, I think this is what parents would want for their children. I think that Deaf parents would indeed want this for their hearing children and it is what the bicultural Coda would want for themselves and those who come after them.

The process however, requires the issue to “go public” – a fundamental violation of a Deaf cultural value. To embark on an exploration of “what is” this cultural conflict must be recognized and respected. It is not an issue of Deaf parenting, but an exploration of a unique biculturality and identity. What is at issue is that this is a journey of inquiry that can only go forward to the extent it is travelled in a judgment free environment. There is no “right” and “wrong”, only “what is”. I feel privileged to have been invited into your world. I thank you and wish you all well on your chosen journeys.

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