



Reframing: From Hearing Loss to Deaf Gain

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Chapter 1 Introduction

Since its establishment, the field of Deaf Studies has consistently challenged conceptions of normalcy (Bauman, 2008). The idea of normalcy first appeared in the nineteenth century when scientists began to apply statistical principles to human populations (Bayton, 2000). When measuring characteristics such as intelligence and physical abilities, statisticians found that most people fell within a range clustered around the mean. As one moves away from the mean in either direction, the percentage of the population that presents the given characteristic decreases. This produces a bell-shaped curve, what is known as the normal distribution curve. When measuring different traits, the majority of the population will cluster around the mean, and over time, society has assigned this population to the category of “normal”. In contrast, people who lie far from the statistical mean are said to deviate from normalcy (Davis, 2006).

Within this context of a normal distribution of human populations, the concept of disability emerged. Society interprets disabled people as outliers, as statistical anomalies that need to be elevated to normalcy. It is this interpretation that underlies Deaf people’s long struggle with “normal”. The frame of normalcy has shaped the Deaf community’s fraught relationships with the field of education, with the medical profession, and with mainstream society. It has established a statistical ideal—the perfect “normal” person—toward which all Deaf people are exhorted to strive. But, upon achieving the heights of normalcy, one can see that the landscape below is actually quite dismal. It is one of hearing loss, of genetic tests, and of medical technology, i.e. of a purely audiological view of deafness.

The frame of normalcy opens up the possibility, even the inevitability, of eliminating deaf people. Genetic tests and technology are seen as tools to eliminate deafness from the face of the earth—or at least to shrink the Deaf population to the point where the signing community is no longer viable (Johnston, 2004, p. 165).

In the twenty-first century, we see new threats from those who espouse normalcy. Based on his research in Australia, Trevor Johnston (2004) predicts that the Deaf, signing community in that country won’t exist in its current, viable state within a span of 20 to 30 years. Johnston identifies three factors that are contributing to the decline of the Australian Deaf community. The first is that general improvements in health care have reduced the incidence of deafness among newborns. Second, there is a tendency for programs geared toward children with cochlear

implants to discourage the use of sign language. As a result, fewer young people have the opportunity to acquire Auslan as a native language. The third factor is the development of prenatal tests that can identify embryos carrying deaf genes. This has the potential to reduce dramatically the number of deaf babies who are born.

If one looks at a graph of the current Deaf population in Australia, it is easy to see that the community there is rapidly aging. There is a strong positive correlation between age and number of deaf people, i.e. with each successive generation, fewer and fewer deaf babies are born. As the number of deaf births continues to fall off and the population continues to age, the future of the Australian Deaf community becomes ever more uncertain.

Scientists have already mapped over 100 different genes related to deafness (Arnos, 2003). The most common of these is Connexin 26, and there are already techniques available to identify the gene in utero. Medical professionals have the goal of the eradication of disability, and with deafness within the frame of normalcy, the eradication of deafness is seen as self-evident. In 2008, the British Parliament passed a law that prohibits couples from choosing a deaf or disabled embryo for implantation. Thus, we are already seeing the concept of normalcy applied to Deaf people with the goal of limiting the Deaf population.

Now, in the 21st century, we are confronting a new landscape of normalcy—one which has the potential to threaten the very existence of the Deaf community. The Deaf community has long struggled with the concept of normalcy, and consistently challenged the audist landscape it exists within. But what happens if we de-center—and minimize—the frame of normalcy? Once we do this, a white space opens up, with new possibilities. That white space gives us the opportunity to construct a new paradigm.

Chapter 2 Frame

We will now turn to Frame Theory to analyze this issue of encouraging Deaf people to become “normal”. Framing refers to how we interpret the world and, specifically, to how certain views are encouraged while others are expressly discouraged. George Lakoff (2005) provides an example of framing from the realm of politics. Political conservatives use the term tax “relief” to refer to a decrease in the rate of taxation, thus implying that taxes are a burden. Of course no one wants to bear a greater “burden”, and so political conservatives encourage that particular view of taxes—any additional taxes are an additional burden. It is quite possible, though, to frame taxes not as a burden but as a part of one’s social responsibility to support better education, health care, and public safety. Thus we have two different frames we can apply to taxation; taxes can be viewed as a social duty or as a burden.

Lakoff is a cognitive linguist who studies how the mind processes metaphorical information and how we perceive the world around us. Framing is a key element of our perception of the world. Let’s explore another example of framing by analyzing the well-known phrase, “Some people see the cup as half full, while some see it as half empty.” Again, we have two contrasting

perspectives, but, if we step back, we can see that both perspectives are really based on our definitions of “full” and “empty”. We tend to think of the cup with no water as empty, but we could also say that it is full—of oxygen. The reason that we tend to see this cup as empty is because we are placing greater value on water than on oxygen. Most people would never even consider how much oxygen is in the cup. It’s only when we step back from our narrow view that we become aware of other frames that exist. Lakoff emphasizes the importance of assessing multiple frames and multiple layers of meaning.

Frame Theory can be applied to the concept of “deaf”. Deafness has long been viewed as a hearing loss—an absence, a void, a lack. It is virtually impossible to think of deafness without thinking of loss. And yet Deaf people do not often consider their lives to be defined by loss. Rather, there is something present in the lives of Deaf people, something full and complete. They view their lives through a frame that is diametrically opposed to the frame of hearing loss. We call this opposing frame Deaf Gain. For the remainder of this article, we will analyze and explore this concept of Deaf Gain.

Chapter 3 Deaf Gain

The first mention of Deaf Gain was by an Englishman named Aaron Williamson. Williamson, a performance artist gave a presentation to Dirksen Bauman's graduate class, Enforcing Normalcy: Deaf and Disability Studies in the spring of 2005, where he told of his experience of going deaf later in life. At the onset of his deafness, Williamson consulted many doctors, and they all told him the same thing: 'You're losing your hearing.' He wondered why it was that not a single doctor told him he was *gaining his deafness*.

Deaf Gain is defined as a reframing of “deaf” as a form of sensory and cognitive diversity that has the potential to contribute to the greater good of humanity. There are three different signs that we use to mean Deaf Gain. The first can be glossed as DEAF INCREASE, and it expresses the opposite notion of hearing “loss”. It emphasizes that Deaf people have something of importance. The second sign can be glossed as DEAF BENEFIT, and it emphasizes that deafness is not just a loss but a benefit as well. The third sign can be glossed as DEAF CONTRIBUTE. This sign emphasizes the importance of considering all the ways that Deaf people contribute to humankind. We will use all three of these signs in our discussion of Deaf Gain, choosing the sign that best fits the context.

Applying the new frame of Deaf Gain helps provide an answer to the question, “Why should we continue to value the existence of Deaf people?” This is a bioethical question, and it can be answered by using one of two different approaches, as proposed by Theresa Burke (2006). The first is an intrinsic argument that says that Deaf culture ought to be valued and preserved for its own sake. The other, an extrinsic argument, states that Deaf people should be cherished because they have something to contribute to the general society. Traditionally, the intrinsic argument has held sway. The preservation of Deaf culture clearly benefits Deaf people, but there has been

little consideration given to how Deaf culture can contribute to the general good of humanity. It is this extrinsic argument that we will discuss from here on out.

Chapter 4 Biodiversity and Cultural Diversity

One important deaf contribution has been in the field of Bio-cultural diversity. Biodiversity is the study of the health of the Earth's ecosystems. The greater the diversity of living organisms, the healthier our planet is; the less diversity we have on Earth, the weaker the planet is. An example of this phenomenon is the Irish Potato Famine of 1846. In 19th-century Ireland, there were only two varieties of potato, and both were susceptible to blight. The disease ravaged potato crops across the country, which resulted in mass starvation, death, and emigration to the United States. Ireland paid dearly for its lack of biodiversity (Maffi, 2005).

Biodiversity became a hot topic among stewards of the environment in the 1980s. In the 1990s, a connection was made between biodiversity and cultural diversity. For example, many indigenous tribes have a rich understanding of their natural surroundings, and this knowledge is reflected in their lexicon. Knowledge about a particular plant or animal may be found in only one native language, so it is easy to see how a diminution of biodiversity quickly translates into a loss of cultural diversity and also of linguistic diversity. There is a strong correlation between these three types of diversity.

Luisa Maffi (2005) has identified four areas of study within the field of bio-cultural diversity. The first is the study of the correlations between bio, cultural, and linguistic diversity and what those correlations entail. The second is the study of what threatens the three kinds of diversity. This area is particularly important because the current count of 6,000 spoken languages worldwide is expected to halve within 100 years (Crystal, 2002). In other words, the world is currently losing one language every two weeks. The third area is concerned with finding ways to increase bio, cultural, and linguistic diversity, and the fourth focuses on how to protect the linguistic rights of indigenous populations.

Chapter 5 Decline of Sign Languages

The field of bio-cultural diversity has focused primarily on native languages, but of course our discussion centers on sign language, which has not traditionally been included in bio-cultural diversity studies. Most native languages reflect generations of accumulated knowledge about plant and animal species, and this information has become a valuable asset to the medical community. Sign languages, though, tend to be quite young in comparison and do not boast this same wealth of knowledge about the natural world. And yet, sign language does have a role to play in the field of bio-cultural diversity. In fact, Deaf Studies can enhance the field of bio-cultural diversity itself by broadening its scope to include cognitive diversity. Sign language uses a different modality, and its visual, kinesthetic nature is a source of diversity. It represents a different way of perceiving the world and a different way of expressing oneself, and that is the heart of bio-cultural diversity.

By including sign language in studies of bio-cultural diversity, we can expand our conceptions of the human potential for language, for expression, and for creativity. Deaf people contribute to the greater diversity of humankind, which in turn contributes to the greater health of humankind. The discussion now becomes about how humanity can preserve the existence of Deaf people on Earth.

Chapter 6 Three Forms of Diversity

One of the key Deaf contributions is a greater understanding of what it means to be human. This is important to consider because the concept of Deaf Gain is not merely a rhetorical frame but is firmly rooted in scientific fact. We will now discuss three different kinds of diversity: cognitive, creative, and cultural.

Chapter 7 Cognitive Diversity

Centuries ago, scientists knew for a fact that the Earth was flat. Not only scientists but the Church as well knew this, and the Church, along with everyone else, persisted in knowing this for many hundreds of years. Mapmakers warned ships that they to navigate around the edges of the Earth, and all of life was set up around the indisputable fact that the Earth was flat. Now, of course, we know they had it all wrong.

For centuries, scientists knew that the basis of language was speech. Speech was the crucial ingredient, the stuff of language, and so it remained until a mere sixty years ago. Once again, the scientists had it all wrong. The foundation of language isn't speech but the human mind and its ability to create language. This fundamental characteristic of the human brain is called plasticity, and it is what allows people to develop social interactions through language, be it signed or spoken (Petitto et al., 2000).

The recognition of sign language as a legitimate language dramatically altered how scholars perceive the concept of language (Sandler et al., 2005). Their understanding of everything from acquisition to production to the human ability to create language has been fundamentally reshaped by sign language. This is one of the key examples of how Deaf people have contributed to society and to human knowledge.

In addition to the benefit to society, there is a direct benefit—a Deaf-gain—to Deaf people who use a visual-based language. Research has shown that, among other things, they have more well-developed peripheral vision, a greater ability to form quick mental images, and better facial-recognition skills. Deaf Studies scholar Ben Bahan (2008) notes that Deaf people are visually-oriented to the world around them. One example that he provides is of a father and a daughter who are out by a busy street packed with pedestrians. The father asks his daughter if she can spot the Deaf pedestrian, and she does so easily. The Deaf pedestrian stands out because he is constantly scanning his surroundings as he walks. He is orienting himself to the world visually,

and the Deaf-gain to him, as to all Deaf people, is a different way of perceiving and understanding the world.

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to learning. Gardiner (1993) proposed a theory of multiple intelligences, which states that there are a variety of different learning styles. Some people are text-based learners; they depend heavily on language in its written form. Others are more visually inclined and learn best by observing the world around them. Still others prefer to learn kinesthetically. They like to explore their surroundings through the sense of touch.

One example about the Swiss national snowboard team demonstrates how Deaf people's way of being—their way of perceiving and interacting with the world—can benefit the general hearing population. The Swiss hired a Deaf person to teach the junior national team, and the Deaf coach realized that the snowboarders were listening to the sound of the board cutting into the snow to tell whether or not they were making the quickest stops and sharpest turns possible. The Deaf coach was not satisfied with their reliance on auditory cues, so he had all the snowboarders practice with earplugs. Deprived of their usual sensory feedback, the snowboarders initially felt out of their element, but the earplugs forced them to learn to depend on the feel of the snow beneath their boards. In the end, the snowboarder's performance improved markedly, and it was thanks to the Deaf coach and the different style of learning that he brought to the team. Such multiple ways of learning and multiple intelligences are an example of Deaf-gain as a contribution to humanity, as something Deaf people can offer to others.

Chapter 8 Cultural Diversity: Transnationalism

Scholars are moving away from understandings of culture as fixed referents, as bounded entities, to understandings which recognize that culture is a fluid process, shaped by multiple discursive and human interactions. If we look specifically at the Deaf community and its trajectory through time, we see that it is a transnational community. Moreover, because of their constant interaction with others, Deaf people can become a model of a cosmopolitan community. Through the use of gesture and international sign language and through their empathetic bond that is a product of the shared Deaf experience, Deaf people are models of human interaction in a globalized world.

It is a common experience among Deaf globe trotters to meet other Deaf people in foreign countries and immediately be able to communicate using improvised and international signs. This is in stark contrast to hearing travelers, who must take the time to learn each other's language before they can hope to communicate successfully. For Deaf people, such formal language boundaries are no impediment.

International sign language has not been given much attention in the literature, though there is some evidence that it's currently developing along the path from a creole to a full language. Despite the lack of research, International Sign has the potential to shed light on the ways in which early human populations communicated across national and linguistic boundaries. There is currently a dearth of research on the ability of hearing people to communicate in situations

where no shared language exists, so once again Deaf people have a valuable contribution to make to our knowledge of human communication.

Chapter 9 Cultural Diversity: Collectivism

The particular ways that Deaf people use language to relate to each other, for example by maintaining eye contact or managing turns in a conversation, help to develop a sense of collectivism (Bahan, 2007). In his research of how Deaf people walk and chat at the same time, Robert Sirvage (forthcoming) found that the interlocutors set up a system of mutual trust. Each signer is expected to monitor the physical environment and warn the other of obstacles that are out of his field of vision. This is just one example of the many everyday behaviors that could open a door to further research on how humans establish bonds with each other—bonds that exist not only in one-on-one interactions but at the group and community level. In this way, Deaf people have the potential to contribute to our understanding of human collaboration.

Chapter 10 Creative Diversity: Literature

Now our definition of language has expanded to include sign, making it more accurate, and the definition of human language potential has been tied into human creative potential. These two capabilities intersect in the realm of poetry and literature.

Poets have long tried to make their words jump off the page and create a visual image in which the reader can perceive the poet's thoughts (Bauman, 2006). Often, though, hearing poets felt constrained by the linear nature of written language. In their attempts to overcome this limitation, they experimented with different ways of arranging the words on paper. Out of these experiments grew the tradition of concrete poetry, in which the words of the poem form shapes on the page. Those examples of concrete poems demonstrate the poets' desire to break through the flat paper to a more visual form of literature. In addition to concrete poetry, there is another poetic tradition that is more physical and performance based. This style traces its roots back to the earliest poetry, which was an oral art form. This poetic style is very popular today in its current incarnations: spoken word, performance, and slam poetry.

Both of these traditions point to a desire to move beyond linear poems, and at their convergence is the art form of sign poetry (Cook, 2006). Because sign incorporates the visual and performance aspects of these two poetic styles, it is truly an advance in the field of poetics. In fact, the renowned poet Allen Ginsberg has recognized that ASL poetry has already achieved what he has long been trying to accomplish in his own work. Thus, by adding to the variation of forms of expression, sign poetry is an important contribution to humanity.

Chapter 11 Creative Diversity: Deaf Space

Let's imagine a world designed by Deaf architects. How would it differ from the status quo? It would most certainly be the end of the rectangular table, so popular among hearing architects. Deaf architects would no doubt make all tables round, so that people could interact with everyone present, not just with those seated next to them. Similarly, college classrooms would look different. Rather than rows of table and chairs, desks would be arranged in a large circle, which provides a different way for the students to connect to each other. Buildings too would get a makeover. When designing buildings, hearing architects tend to think of lighting as an afterthought, but, for Deaf people, the quality of the light is of the utmost importance and warrants considerable attention.

Considerations like the quality of lighting and the potential for human connections entail the concept of Deaf Space. Deaf Space has been the focus of an ongoing research project for the last three years, and there is now a newly-established institute devoted to this study. The goal of the Deaf Space Institute is to explore the ways in which Deaf people can contribute to the field of architecture and to the planning of human environments. With the input of Deaf people, buildings can be designed in a way that promotes a more human way of coexisting (Hansel Bauman, forthcoming).

Chapter 12 Creative Diversity: Film

Research on the structure and process of signing has shown that it shares a great deal in common with the language of film. The relationship between signing and moviemaking is homological, meaning that the two processes exhibit the same structural principles. As an example, I will now tell a short story in ASL, adapted from Clayton Valli's «Lone Sturdy Tree», and then I will analyze it using cinematic discourse:

I was driving along, cruising through a landscape of rolling hills, when I spotted something small by the side of the road. It looked like a drooping plant, and it stood out in the sun's glimmering rays, but I was past it in a flash. Along I drove, through the rolling hills, disappearing into the horizon.

That short ASL story involves different camera shots, movements, and editing techniques. For example, "I was driving along" uses a medium shot, capturing the signer's torso and head. The camera then pans and cuts to a long shot of the car "cruising through a landscape of rolling hills." Again, the camera pans and cuts to a long shot of "something small by the side of the road." Then the camera zooms to a medium shot of the object that "looked like a drooping plant" before panning once again to capture the sun in a low-angle shot. The process continues, using various shots and editing techniques to piece together an integrated story. It is a signed story, but the structure is comparable to that of film language.

Considering the innate storytelling ability of Deaf people, whose everyday form of expression is similar to that of film, imagine the contribution that they could make to the world of cinema.

Imagine the possibilities if we gave cameras to Deaf children so that they could tell their stories through the medium of film. The benefit to the film industry would be immense.

Chapter 13 Conclusion

Thus far, we've been discussing Deaf Gain primarily as a thought experiment, focusing on the concept level, but how can this concept have a real impact in the lives of deaf people born today? For most parents, the birth of a deaf baby conjures up anxious thoughts of isolation, limited communication, and myriad other difficulties for their child. But that is the old frame. The new frame, the frame of Deaf Gain, sees the baby not as a problem but as an asset. A family with a deaf baby benefits by being exposed to a new language and culture and to new people, ideas, and experiences. A deaf baby is value added to a family, but the contribution benefits not only the family but general society as well. Every deaf baby born on this planet is a gift to humankind.

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