

Understanding the Social Engagement of a Select Group of Deaf Individuals

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Abstract

Deaf individuals are stigmatized with the notion of their inability to engage due to the differences in their abilities to communicate. However, studies involving the social engagement of the deaf remain unexplored. To describe and understand the concept of social engagement of deaf individuals in the light of their family, friends and church community, this descriptive qualitative study was conducted with 38 purposively selected deaf participants from a community that advocates for persons-with-disabilities. Multiple modes of data gathering were used, autograph, word frequency, word cloud and photo elicitation. Qualitative Content Analysis was used in analysing the results. Cool and warm analysis of the written and photographic accounts revealed three themes and eight subthemes which describe the concept of social engagement of deaf individuals concerning their families, friends, and church community. Deaf individuals become 'differently-enabled' as they find alternative and unique ways to socially engage despite the differences in abilities. This can be attributed to the support and understanding provided by their family and friends, and the empowerment they receive from the church ministry's program for PWD's.

Keywords: Deaf, social engagement, multiple methods of analysis, Philippines, person-with-disabilities

1. INTRODUCTION

Deaf individuals struggle each day to engage with the hearing (Kouwenberg, Rieffe, Theunissen & de Rooij, 2012; Säljö, 2000). Differences in the hearing and the deaf individual's means of communication may highlight the need for deaf individuals to go beyond the conventional and find sustainable alternative ways to become socially engaged (Rosenbaum, Armstrong & King, 1988). Current research on deaf individuals focused on concepts like bullying (Hadjidakou & Papas, 2012; Bauman & Pero, 2011; Bourke & Burgman, 2010), victimization (Schenkel, Rothman-Marshall, Schlehofer, Towne, Burnash & Priddy, 2014; Bauman & Pero, 2011; Anderson, 2010), impact of cochlear implants (Rich, Levinger, Werner & Adelman, 2013), effects of parenting on abstract thinking skills (Hao, Su & Chan, 2010), language development (Cejas, Barker, Quittner & Niparko, 2014), emotional relations between adolescents (Kolibiki, 2013), and dynamics between siblings with and without disabilities in general (Hosseinkhanzadeh, Seyed, Noori, Yeganeh & Esapoor, 2014). Despite this, studies regarding their social engagement are still quite few. Knowing that the act of avoidance can cause shifts in the psychological well-being like feelings of loneliness and withdrawal (Schenkel, Rothman-Marshall, Schlehofer, Towne, Burnash & Priddy, 2014; Leigh, Maxwell-McCaw, Bat-Chava & Christiansen 2009). This can affect the person's chances of engagement in social activities (Morgan, Meristo, Mann, Hjelmquist, Surian, & Siegal, 2014). This seems relevant as social engagement integral for people to connect with the different parts of their society and make their existence known to their social circles. Social engagement in this study, refers to the socialization process wherein a deaf individual creates a positive connection with another individual or a group of individuals, may they be deaf or hearing, in order to relate or establish a likeable bond.

Thus, this paper aimed to describe the concept of engagement of deaf individuals among their immediate social circles. This improves the understanding of the deaf's ways of relating with others, lay groundwork for future researches and may serve as basis for programs for the deaf.

The objectives of this study are:

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- To be able to explore the concepts of social engagement of a select group of deaf individuals with regard to their families, friends and church community.
- To be able to understand the nature of the relationships formed by a select group of deaf individuals with their immediate social circles.
- To utilize multiple methods of data gathering and analysis to understand the nature of the relationships and how the deaf individuals view their social circles

2. METHODS

This descriptive qualitative study was conducted with 38 purposively selected deaf individuals from a church community that advocates for persons-with-disabilities. Table 1 shows the demographic profile of the thirty-eight participants of the study in which 34% (n=13) of them are aged 16-20 and 89% (n=34) are Roman Catholic. Twelve out of thirty-eight participants youngest in the family (f=32%) and twenty-six live with both parents (f=68%).

Table 1: Demographic profile

Demographics	N	%	Demographics	N	%
AGE			LIVING SITUATION		
10-15	3	7.89%	Without parent	4	10.53%
16-20	13	34.21%	With one parent	9	23.68%
21-25	8	21.05%	With both parents	11	28.95%
26-30	8	21.05%	With siblings	14	36.84%
31-35	3	7.89%	With grandparents	11	28.95%
36-40	2	5.26%	With other relatives	14	36.84%
41-45	2	5.26%	With pets	11	28.95%
RELIGION			EDUCATION		
Roman Catholic	34	89.47%	Elementary	7	18.42%
Others	4	10.53%	High School	14	36.84%
ORDER IN THE FAMILY			College	3	7.89%
Eldest	11	28.95%	Unspecified	13	34.21%
Middle	11	28.95%	WORK		
Youngest	12	31.58%	Employed	15	39.47%
Unspecified	4	10.53%	Unemployed	10	26.31%
			Unspecified	13	34.21%

Multiple modes of data gathering were used in the study. Autograph (Herzog & Shapira, 1986) helped gather participant information while incomplete prompts (Deacon, 2006), photos and written accounts conveyed their concepts of engagement. Accounts and responses were encoded and run through a word counter (Ryan & Bernard, 2000) for frequency count, and then generated into a word cloud (McNaught & Lam, 2010). Photos were clustered (Anderberg, 1973) based on their similarities and analyzed through photo elicitation (Bowling, 2000) while Qualitative Content Analysis (Cole, 1998; Krippendorff, 1980) was used in making meaning from the written accounts.

2.1. Photo elicitation

Participants were asked to capture photos that describe their concepts of family, friends and church; paste the photos and write their explanation on their autograph sheet.

2.2. Image clustering

Photos captured by the participants were grouped based on their similarities and the number of times they appeared.

2.3. Word frequency

With an aid of a word counter, word frequency was used among the written accounts of the participants.

2.4. Word Cloud

Tagul and Wordle, online word cloud generators, were used to summarize the main concepts obtained in word frequency count wherein the most frequently used words were emphasized.

The most frequently taken images are of the religious images or depictions of God. These items provide a specific portrayal of the Catholic God. Images of the church often included statements indicating that they may be enjoying the time in the church as well gratitude. One participant also stated that the church itself is a blessing from God. The next set of images focuses on people. The terms they associated with the images are love, gratitude and being blessed. The sky's the main focus in the next cluster of images. The sky has been associated with God, repentance, God watching over, blessings they received and even prayers. The last and less frequent set of images are the plants and animals. Statements pointed out the beauty of the flowers and how cute the cat was.

3.2. Warm Analysis

Through the Warm Analysis of written narratives of the deaf participants, three themes and eight subthemes have emerged. The Wheel of Social Engagement represents the concepts of social engagement of the deaf individuals with regard to their families, friends and church community. The themes that surfaced suggest a continuous cycle akin to the ancient and cultural symbolisms of the wheel. This wheel is a cycle of gaining, growing and giving back whenever the deaf individual engages with their families, friends and church communities.



Figure 4: The Wheel of Social Engagement

The engagement of deaf individuals allowed them to *Gain* by participating in activities and experiencing belongingness, happiness, affection and support from others. They are able to *Grow* by taking part in social activities that empower them through education, livelihood, self-expression, morality and catechism. They then *Give* back by expressing their gratitude, love and affection towards the people who've been there for them.

3.2.1. Gain

Deaf participants conveyed their feeling of sense of belongingness and acceptance as their families, friends and church communities provided them with love, support and companionship. They tend to benefit more from the relationship they have within their social circle, hence Gain emerged. There were four subthemes that serve as benefits they gain from the relationship surfaced in this themes.

3.2.1.1. Belongingness

Obtaining a sense of acceptance, love and care in the midst of their family, friends and church community.
“*the Time to be with go my family in the Church* “ [Participant No. 27]

3.2.1.2. Filial Support

Receiving support and love from their families in various circumstances.
“*I love my family because of my parents thank you for support me school fare money save for life so much.*”
[Participant No. 24]

3.2.1.3. Fellowship

Finding people within their social circles through which they can share their mutual experiences.

"I want to be together them make Happiness loveable, Funny" [Participant No. 29]

3.2.1.4. Companionship

Associating friendship not only among people but among pets and plants as well.

"was feed to dog is eat any beef and sometimes I just play with dog" [Participant No. 10]

3.2.2. Grow

As the participants continue to take part and engage in the different activities of the niche they belong to they learn to be empowered and seek spiritual wellness. This is Grow which encompasses the concepts of empowerment and spirituality. They are able to be equipped with enabling skills that allow them to traverse the difficult road laid out by the hearing. Through these, they are able to grow as persons and adapt well enough to be able to socially engaged.

3.2.2.1. Empowerment

Enabling them to socially engaged through education, livelihood and self-expression that allows their integration into society.

"...teacher of Gem is help teach you learn of people many deaf in the Sunday everyday" [Participant No. 5]

3.2.2.2. Spirituality

Establishing a meaningful connection with God through catechism, morality and practice of their faith.

"I feel blessed when I go to Church because hearing the gospels and homily makes me realize how lucky I am to be love by God" [Participant No. 2]

3.2.3. Give

The theme Give encompasses the subthemes of gratuity and filial service. Both ideas are all about giving back what is due. The principle is that the deaf were aided in their time of need and once they've risen up they will return the favor. Some who have been enabled by the church now volunteer to assist their peers. They have also shown appreciation and gratitude to the people who have helped them get where they are now.

3.2.3.1. Gratuity

Conveying the feeling of being blessed through thanksgiving directed to their social circles and God.

"...teacher of Gem is help teach you learn of people many deaf in the Sunday everyday" [Participant No. 5]

3.2.3.2. Filial Service

Reciprocating love and gratitude to their family through acts of service like doing chores, working for hard for their families and providing emotional support

"I would lay down my life for them..." [Participant No. 2]

4. DISCUSSION

This study utilized both a cool and warm analysis. In the cool analysis, the statements and the pictorial representations from the photo elicitation were comparatively analyzed. Analysis for the Family reveals the underpinning concepts of Love, House and Help; for Friends it was Happy, Love and Dog; and for Church it is Family, God, Bless and Love. In the warm analysis, the three themes Gain, Grow and Give were surfaced with eight subthemes namely Belongingness, Filial Support, Fellowship, Companionship, for Gain; Empowerment, Spirituality, for Grow; lastly, Gratuity and Filial Service, for Give.

This study upholds the research conducted by Gallimore, Weisner, Kaufman & Bernheimer (1989) which conceptualized an Ecocultural Theory of Family Accommodation to a Child with Disability. This theory suggests

that sustainable routines create opportunities through which families could communicate effectively with their deaf family members in household settings. The scheme stresses the significance of examining the family's efforts to cope with a deaf family member (Gallimore, Weisner, Kaufman & Bernheimer, 1989). The theory thus support the outcome of the study suggesting that deaf individuals and their families find an alternative avenue to connect. First of which is through the support they receive from their families in the forms of love and care to name a few. Second is their expression of love and affection by providing filial service by helping at home.

Deaf youth is at greater risk to become victims of bullying as they appear weaker and more vulnerable due to their hearing incapacity and because they cannot report what had happened to them (Tresh, 2004). The participants in this study seem to be well-adapted to their society for they are part of a church ministry that provides them with love and support in spite of their differences. Based on the narrative accounts, no one from the participants shared any experiences with bullying. In addition, people with disability are more prone to face rejection from their friends that is an important feature for victimization (Martlew & Hodson, 1991; Whitney, et al, 1994; and Hodges and Perry, 1996). These deaf individuals conveyed that aside from humans, they also consider other living beings such as their pets and plants as their friends since they both experience differences in communicating with one another.

Based on the existing literature it has been noted that deaf individuals find it easier to form bonds with one of their own (Rich, Levinger, Werner & Adelman, 2013); however, they prefer to make connections with people hearing rather than the deaf (Kolibiki, 2014). Narratives suggest they enjoy being amongst both hearing and non-hearing peers. This supports previous studies that revealed the importance acceptance in social niche (Rich, Levinger, Werner & Adelman, 2013). A strong support group may provide an alternative to the early mitigation to the deaf feeling lonely (Leigh, Maxwell-McCaw, Bat-Chava & Christiansen 2009). The theory of mind states that people have different meanings they ascribe to an experience (SvenOlof , Sandberg, & Larsson, 2010). This holds true for abstract idea such as values and religion (Bradford, Jentsch, & Gomez, 2015; Hao & Su, 2014; SvenOlof , Sandberg, & Larsson, 2010; Baron-Cohen, Leslie, & Frith, 1985); however, analysis here reveals that they can understand abstract concepts but they have a different view or understanding of it as compared to the hearing.

5. MODERATUM GENERALIZATION

As the deaf individuals find unique and alternative means to socially engage despite differences in abilities, they are 'differently-enabled'. They *gain* a sense belonging, support, fellowship and companionship from their social circles; they *grow* as individuals through empowerment and religion. and *give* back to through thanksgiving and service. This is the result of the combined efforts of their family and friends to support and understand enhanced by the church ministry that provides programs for PWD's. This research is a testament to the idea that a strong support system encompassing the social circles of the individual greatly affects their ability to integrate and engage themselves in society even with differences in the person's ability.

Social Engagement is important to deaf individuals as they are able to interact with the world of the hearing. The differences in the means of communication have made it difficult but not impossible for the deaf to connect and establish their identity and become part of this world. This is clearly seen in the way they interact with their social groups, furthermore illustrated by the 'wheel of social engagement.

Advocacies to programs that may help increase the deaf's mainstream engagement may be put in place. Future researches may investigate concepts about religion and coping abilities; and the efficacy of methods for data gathering in studies involving the deaf. Homogeneity of participants; multiple modes of data gathering and analysis are as well recommended. Researcher immersion in the study sites and data gathering in various deaf communities may also be studied.

6. LIMITATIONS

This study was faced with the constraint of time. The method of data gathering is also a new take on qualitative studies. The place for performing photo elicitation was in one community and this may have limited options for the participants. The participants themselves are varied in terms of demographics and there was notable poverty of words.

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