Deaf culture, deaf community

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Abstract: Deaf community is one of the most cohesive, well-structured and active of all communities of adults with disabilities. The deaf community has a strong coherence and a sense of its identity. Members of the deaf community tend to view deafness as a difference between individuals than as a disability. A distinctive view on the deaf community is that is a linguistic or cultural ethnicity, perspective largely accepted by the deaf community. The central element of this ethnicity is the deaf culture, a set of knowledge, experiences, beliefs, a specific language, customs and traditions that are transmitted by sign language. In this paper, the concepts of deaf community, ethnicity and deaf culture are analyzed alongside with their main characteristics. Also, the influence of the rapid advancements in medicine and technology over the structure of deaf communities and modes of communication is taken into account.

Keywords: deaf community, deaf ethnicity, sign language

1.   Introduction

In the last decades, the disability discourse is more and more present in the public and social debates in the Romanian reality. General information about disability condition, rehabilitation, rights, humanitarian public appeals or presentation of role models is present on television or social media every day. This fact is a consequence of the great implication and dedication of the parents` support groups and of the communities of disabled adults who fought for their rights and to be heard.

The deaf community is one of the most cohesive, well-structured and active of all communities of adults with disabilities. It is individualized by the other communities because it is considered a cultural ethnicity (Lane, 2005, Davies, 2007, Lane, Pillard, Hedberg, 2011).

The term "community", despite the fact that is one of the most approached in modern social sciences (Cohen, 1985), is very hard to define, due to the theoretical diversity and historical background (Ladd, 2003). "A state of community exists when four elements co-exist: membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connections" (Borgatta, Montgomery, 2000, p. 400). All these elements can be found in the deaf community: all members share a common trait, the deafness, they have a great influence on each others` live decision and can influence the majority decision on disability aspects, have a sense of membership and play a great

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role in their needs` fulfillment. One of the most popular definition of deaf community is given by Ladd (2003, p. 41): "The deaf community comprises those deaf and hard of hearing individuals who share a common language, common experiences and values, and a common way of interacting with each other, and with hearing people".

There are a few common denominators found in deaf community definitions: membership, culture, experiences, path to interacting with the hearing world. The membership is based on the existence of a common trait, the deafness. The hearing disability is defined as any loss of hearing, from easy to profound, including deafness and hard of hearing. The terms deaf and hard of hearing can be defined from two major perspectives on disability studies: medical and socio-cultural. From the medical perspective, deafness is "a hearing impairment that is so severe that the child is impaired in processing linguistic information through hearing, with or without amplification" and hard of hearing "means an impairment in hearing, whether permanent or fluctuating, that adversely affects a child's educational performance but is not included under the definition of "deafness"(Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, IDEA, http://sinche.uom.gr/sites/default/files/14_disability_categories_under_idea.pdf). The members of the deaf community are very diverse (Pray, Jordan, 2010): deaf, hard of hearing, deaf with cochlear implantation, bilingual deaf, deafened adults, deaf people who primarily communicates orally. In Romania in 2010 were registered 31.000 members of Deaf National Association (Florea, Chiriac, 2012) with various degrees of deafness.

From the socio-cultural perspective, deafness is seen as a sociological phenomenon not a physical disability (Davis, 2007), gathering all people with a common trait (deafness), the same language (sign language) and same difficulties in accessing the majority. The members of the deaf community, regardless of the disability level or mode of communication, define themselves as deaf, and do not think about themselves as disabled or impaired. They are proud of their condition, rejoice the born of a deaf child in the family and value living in the deaf community. All members share the same life experience, because they encounter the same specific barriers in interacting with the hearing world: perceived rejection, feeling of loneliness, identity conflicts, social isolation (Liversidge, 2003), incapacity of understanding others and being understood, peoples curiosity in using sign language. Also, sharing personal testimonials about live and growing up experiences is frequent among members.

At the core of the deaf community sits their culture, and its components: sign-language, values, behavioral patterns, assistive technologies, arts, history and life experiences (Mahfooth , Abushaira, 2014).

In the 90s Harald Lane (1995) defined the deaf community as a linguistic or cultural ethnicity, and this conceptual view was largely accepted by the deaf community (Davis, 2007). The consolidation of the deaf community as a linguistic ethnicity is based on the scientific demonstration that sign language is a genuine language and the Deaf rights movement in the 60s. Currently different constructions of deafness are addressed: ideological, cultural, linguistic with political, social and educational implication (Reagan, 2002).

2. Deaf community as a cultural ethnicity

Deaf studies approach the deaf communities from three different perspectives (Senghas, Monaghan, 2002): the historical one, in which the origins and evolution of deaf communities is analyzed, the emic perspective, in which deaf community members tell their life story and the linguistic approach, with the central focus on the sign language phenomenon.

The educational and therapeutic approaches to deaf communication development evolved from two majors models: oralism and manualism. Nowadays, there are many approaches to deaf education, but the main two still remains: the oral and the bilingual/bicultural approach. The deaf community embraces the bilingual/bicultural philosophy and way of life, for which they campaigned for decades. The bilingualism of deaf community consists in the usage of two languages: the mother tongue, considered to be the National sign language, and the one of the majority, the national language. They communicate both in the language of the minority (deaf community) and of the majority, in its written form and some in its spoken form (Grosjean, 2010). Nicolaraizi (2007) reviews the study on deaf identity and lists the following cultural identities: culturally hearing, culturally deaf and bicultural. The culturally hearing are educated in the oral philosophy and never communicated in sign language; some were educated in orally special schools, some in inclusive schools and several of them use cochlear implants. The culturally deaf embrace only the deaf culture and are not interested in the culture of the majority. They live only inside the deaf community and are self sufficient in this hypostasis. Mostly, this category is represented by the deaf seniors, who did not learn the majority language and all their live communicated in sign language. Bicultural persons adopt both the deaf and the majority culture.

Deaf community describes social beliefs, behavioral patterns and literary traditions, arts, history, values and community courts that are influenced by deafness and sign language used as the primary means of communication (Padden, Humphries, 2005). The most important aspect in the Deaf community is that they have a common heritage, common language, similar life experiences and sense of deaf identity.

Harlan Lane is the initiator of the concept of deaf community as a cultural ethnicity. In the article entitled "Ethnicity, ethics and the Deaf-World" (2005) he advocates for the deaf cultural ethnicity position, bringing arguments to this position. The author argued his position by analyzing the characteristics of an ethnicity applied to the deaf community. The main characteristics of an ethnicity (Lane, 2005) are:

3. Collective name. The members of an ethnicity identify themselves with a common name that give them an identity marker and unites them under its umbrella. For the hearing disabled this common term is "deaf", in Romanian "surd", for all those who assume deafness as their personal identity.

4. Feeling of community. Gusfield (1975, apud. McMillan, Chavis, 1986) described two major connotations of the community term: territorial and geographical as in neighborhood, and relational, which reflects the quality of the human relations. The sense of community enrolls in the second category and express the feeling of togetherness, of thoughts and emotions shared, of belonging. The deaf community members

share the common feeling of having "a distinct social, cultural and linguistic foundation, which results from community members being deaf "(Atherton, 2009, p.443).

5. Norms of behavior. In the deaf community social norms evolved over time, in special referring to the relation with the hearing world: decision making, managing information, constructing discourse and gaining status (Lane, 2005). Also important norms within deaf community refer of communication situations, positioning, basic rules, gaining attention. All this norms of behavior derive from the developmental specificity and the special mode of communication.

6. Distinct values. This characteristic refers to the values that individualize them from other groups, resulting from the identification marker, in our case, the deafness. In the deaf community this distinct values refer to pride of being deaf, the joy of a deaf child born, endogamous marriage, valuing the sign language and all the deaf culture.

7. Knowledge. Refers to the important information relating to the community, that are a must know for all members, pass through generations as a heritage. In deaf community this knowledge refer to important historical dates for community, mark figures, rights and social benefits.

8. Customs. The deaf customs are related especially with interacting with other people and communicating with deaf and hearing individuals. These customs derived from real needs, for example positioning face in face in a conversation or addressing from a close distance, gaining attention by a small touch in the shoulder.

9. Social structure. Insight the deaf community exist a real social structure, with leaders, social institutions, different groups and a solid organization. The social structure can be seen as a macro system, reflected the National Deaf Association, and also in micro systems, the regional and county groups.

10. Language. The deaf community has a specific language, the sign language, that gives the major individualization note for the deaf community. The sign language is the foundation stone both for deaf culture and community.

11. Arts. Deaf people can embrace many arts, but specific for the community are: storytelling, , narratives, oratory, word play poetry (all in sign language), pantomime (Lane, 2005), dance. Other arts, such as painting, photography or theatre reflect also themes from deaf experience and culture.

12. History. Every community has its local or national history, which was transmitted over time from people to people, in stories or books. The Romanian National Deaf Association is the one who preserved the history, traditions and culture of the community. In Romania the first institutionalized form of the national deaf association occurred in 1919, under the name of „Societatea Amicala a Surdo-mutilor din Romania" (http://ansr.org.ro/istoric/).

13. Kinship. The deaf community is acknowledged by the strong sense of belonging, the solidarity of human relations and the social cohesion. "The Deaf-World does pass its norms, knowledge, language, and values from one generation to the next: first through socialization of the child by Deaf adults (parent or other) and

second through peer socialization" (Lane, 2005, p.293). However, the deaf community individualizes among other ethnic groups by the fact that the majority of deaf children get in touch with the community, sign language and deaf culture only at the school age, rather late.

Deaf community has a strong coherence and a sense of its own identity. Often it manifests itself as a micro-society insight the hearing majority, as a cultural and linguistic minority. Lane, Pillard and Hedberg (2011) identify the above motioned ethnicity characteristics also as cultural cohesive forces for a community: language, bonding to one`s kind, cultural rules and values, social institutions, the language arts, history, ethnic boundaries and kinship.

Members of the deaf community tend to view deafness as a difference between individuals than as a disability (Jones, 2002). Historically, deaf culture and the feeling of belonging to the Deaf community have been developed in deaf schools and clubs. Albeit they live insight the hearing majority, the deaf have a strong sense of deaf identity and belonging to the deaf community (Hintermair, 2008). A major role in creating this sense of deaf identity and community is played by the deaf culture, the real foundation stone for all the process.

3. Deaf culture

Deaf culture includes sign language, deaf community values and beliefs, norms of behavior, common history and assistive technology (Kaplan, 1996). Florea (2010, p.81) defines deaf culture as a "set of knowledge, experiences, beliefs, a specific language, customs and traditions that are transmitted by sign language".

The most important aspect of deaf culture, practiced within the community is the sign language, the native language of the deaf, by which they define their identity and culture transmitted to future generations. Sign language is a visual-gestural language used as a means of communication for deaf communities, being considered the deaf` mother tongue. Each country has its own sign language, in which there are numerous dialects, reflecting the geographic and ethnic differences (Turkington, Sussman, 2000). Sign language differs from the orally language in three main ways (Sutton-Spence, 2005): is a visual-gestural language (lack the phonological component of language), does not have a written form (hence the reading and writing require the acquisition of the majority language) and are minority languages (being spoken by a just few people).

In many other aspects sign language is similar with the spoken ones: are natural languages that arise spontaneously in a community of people who interrelate, satisfies all social and cognitive functions of a verbal language, and it`s spontaneously learn by the deaf child, by mere exposure to an environment of sign language speakers.

Just as a verbal language, sign language has the vocabulary and grammar, which govern how individual gestural units are formed, modified and combined into phrases and sentences. Signs are composed of the following elements: hand shape, movement, body stance and using one or both hands (Marschark, Lang, Albertini, 2002).

Anca (2001) lists the following characteristics of gestures, derived from imaging characteristics on which they were elaborated: concretism, indefinite meaning (same gesture express different things, objects or actions), mimic parallelism (more gestures for the same object) and the relative universality.

Pufan (1972) highlights the following features of Romanian sign language:

- one and the same gesture may act as noun, adjective or verb

- the lack of certain grammatical categories: article, numeral, conjunctions, prepositions

- verb has only three tenses: past, present and future

- facial expressions convey interrogation and exclamation

- the genres or number of the noun are not expressed

Deaf culture components, such as values, norms and customs are transmitted from one generation to another by sign language. Thus, the sign language is the real depositary of the deaf culture (Florea, 2010).

A bilingual education gives the child the opportunity to learn verbal and sign gesture language and ensure their access to curriculum in any language that are more accessible to them, in an environment that values deafness, deaf culture and sign language (Swanwick, 2010). Therefore, the Deaf community wants to educate their children in sign language, but due to these characteristics of the RSL, the Romanian language acquisition is difficult based on this language support. Also, the Romanian healthcare services do not offer assistance in communication in the form of a sign language interpreter therefore integration into hearing society cannot be done entirely in the absence of the verbal language. "The communication barrier between the Romanian Deaf communities and the hearing mainstream society represents the source of the most of the problems in the field of deafness"(Damian, 2011, p. 138). Currently, in Romania schools that practice the bilingual/bicultural education does not exists. All of the special schools for deaf embrace the total communication approach, some of them with emphasis on orality, some on sign language. Nevertheless, when deaf children enter school they, quickly and spontaneously, embraces RSL and deaf culture.

Historically, deaf culture and deaf sense of identity were acquired in the special schools for deaf and in deaf social clubs (Jones, 2002). A central element of deaf culture is represented by the special schools for deaf. They represent not only an educational environment but also a cultural and social background for the deaf children. Many of them come from hearing families and the special school represents the first encounter with the deaf culture. Within month they spontaneously learn the sign language and experience the sentiment of belonging. The school educational and therapeutic philosophy can influence the development of deaf identity and the development insight deaf culture. In a study performed in Timis county special school for deaf, Luştrea (2014) determined that the teachers and parents of the deaf children consider that deaf culture is formed primordially in special schools, but also in National Deaf Association and the affiliated clubs, also in the national cultural and sportive competitions for deaf.

The Romanian National Deaf Association and its local clubs organize many cultural events for deaf, such as: carnivals, celebrations of Mother or Children Day, national competitions in literature, history, geography, sculpture,

painting, handicraft or literary creation, dance and pantomime festivals or beauty contests (https://ansrcn.wordpress.com/filiala-timisoara/).

The specific values and beliefs also focus on deafness, sign language and specific accessibility adaptations. The main value is the pride of being deaf and the belief that deafness is not a disability but a cultural condition. The birth of a deaf child or the marriage between two deaf is a motive of celebration. They can oppose to cochlear implantation and want to raise their children to be deaf, insight bilingual/bicultural schools. The group is viewed as an important force, and many of their actions are to advocate and promote the deaf community.

Culturally deaf have rules for specific life situation, especially rules of communication. They have rules about getting attention, discussing in sign language, positioning in a conversation with a hearing or deaf person, leave taking or signing in a hearing environment. For example, eye contact is a necessity for a good communication in sign language, facial expressions and body gestures can be accentuated to express the important ideas, a shoulder touch or a hand wave are used for getting attention. When deaf peoples meet they hug and discuss in a very open mode, entering directly into the subject. When discussing with a hearing person, they must position face to face, with the hearing person facing the light, at a distance no more than two meters. The hearing person must avoid things that can cover their mouth: hair, moustache or hand covering the mouth.

Another element of the deaf culture is the support technologies, compensatory tools used for a better adaptation to everyday life and communication with hearing world. Gierrach (2009) classifies the support technologies in three main categories: hearing technologies, alerting devices and communication support. The hearing technology includes assisting listening device and personal amplification (hearing aids or cochlear implants). The alerting devices include clocks, door bells, computers, telephones or fire detectors. Communication support consists from telecommunication (cell phone, amplified phone, computer with web camera, video phone), note taking or voice to text devices. The culturally deaf oppose to hearing amplification but other members of deaf community (hard of hearing or bicultural) use them. However, the cultural deaf use the other types of support technologies.

4. New challenges for deaf community and culture in the virtual society

In the latest decades the rapid advances in technology and medicine caused a change in both population structure and remodeling the deaf community and culture into new coordinates.

The deaf population structure change especially from the medical advances in cochlear implantation (CI). More and more children benefits from today's CI and the first generation of children with CI are reaching the adult age. They were orally educated and benefited from inclusive education. Many of them consider themselves culturally hearing and assume a hearing identity and they do not know sign language. Traditionally the hearing cultural and non-users of sign language are not found in deaf communities, but if deaf communities want to survive they must adapt to the medical and societal progress and welcome new members.

Technological advance has led to increasingly sophisticated hearing aids and other assistive technology (Prey, Jordan, 2010) allowing them to better communicate orally and adapt the communication to different environments. Now, the hearing aids permit the amplification for higher degrees of hearing loss allowing them to better adapt to the hearing society.

The advances in communicational technology, such as social media or video phone, allow the deaf to communicate at distance via sign language. On the one hand this possibility is a great advancement for deaf who always communicated at distance by written means, and so they can use for distance communication also the sign language. On the other hand, the necessity of communicate in writing created the opportunity to practice this skill further and conserve the level of writing proficiency acquired in school. If in the future the deaf persons will communicate only in sign language they will lose a significant part of their writing and reading ability, and will be increasingly less in contact with the culture of the country of origin.

5. Conclusions

Deaf community is one of the most cohesive, well-structured and active of all communities of adults with disabilities. Deaf community has a strong coherence and a sense of its own identity. Members of the deaf community tend to view deafness as a difference between individuals than as a disability. The deaf community is characterized by membership, culture, common experiences and the path to interacting with the hearing world. The membership is based on the existence of a common trait, the deafness. At the core of the deaf community sits their culture, and its components: sign-language, values, behavioral patterns, assistive technologies, arts, history, and life experiences.

Another perspective on the deaf community is that is a linguistic or cultural ethnicity, this conceptual view was largely accepted by the deaf community. The consolidation of the deaf community as a linguistic ethnicity is based on the scientific demonstration that sign language is a genuine language. The main characteristics of the deaf ethnicity are: collective name, feeling of community, norms of behavior, distinct values, knowledge, customs, social structure, language, arts, history and kinship. Currently different constructions of deafness are addressed: ideological, cultural, and linguistic with political, social and educational implication.

The most important aspect in the Deaf community is that they have a common heritage, common language, similar life experiences and sense of deaf identity. The central aspect of deaf culture, practiced within the community is the sign language, the native language of the deaf, by which they define their identity and the culture is transmitted to future generations.

Historically, deaf culture and deaf sense of identity were acquired in the special schools for deaf and in deaf social clubs. They represent not only an educational environment but also a cultural and social background for the deaf children.

The Romanian National Deaf Association and its local clubs organize many cultural events for deaf, such as: carnivals, celebrations, national competitions in literature, history, geography, sculpture, painting, handicraft or literary creation, dance and pantomime festivals or beauty contests.

The specific values and beliefs also focus on deafness, sign language and specific accessibility adaptations. Culturally deaf have rules for specific life situation, especially rules of communication: about getting attention, discussing in sign language, positioning in a conversation with a hearing or deaf person, leave taking or signing in a hearing environment.

In the latest decades the rapid advances in technology and medicine caused a change in both population structure and remodeling the deaf community and culture into new coordinates. More and more deaf persons benefits from cochlear implantation and become culturally hearing. Therefore, the deaf population structure is changing and the deaf community must welcome new categories of members. Also, the technological advances determine new opportunities in hearing amplification and distance communication. Now, the deaf can communicate via phone, video phone and use sign language for distance communication also. This fact can induce deteriorations in writing and reading abilities, since they will no longer be practiced and a distancing of the country's culture of origin.

All these developments generate the need from the deaf community to reconsider the situation and adapt to these new developments and integrate new members.

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