
CAN DEAF PEOPLE SURVIVE “DEAFNESS?”

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Abstract

The article review was completed as an assignment for a Gallaudet University Counseling graduate course, “Psychosocial Aspects of Deafness,” reviewing MJ Bienvenu’s (1991) article entitled “Can Deaf People Survive ‘deafness?’” In the review, main points in Bienvenu’s article are discussed and the author’s reasons for reviewing this particular article are elaborated. Comparisons are made between issues within the Deaf community in 1991 and issues found today for the purpose of advocating Bienvenu’s point; additionally, another article is presented to assist in Bienvenu’s position. The author discusses the relevance of Bienvenu’s article to her developing profession as a counselor for Deaf children.

MJ Bienvenu is one of the first few people who brought on the concept and ideas of Deaf culture and probed it further during an era when the concept itself was just being introduced. In 1991, Bienvenu wrote the article, “Can Deaf People Survive ‘deafness?’” (Bienvenu, 1991) which was later included in Lois Bragg’s book, *Deaf World: A Historical Reader and Primary Sourcebook* (Bragg, 2001). In this article, Bienvenu discusses the word “deafness” and how it is critical in this day and age to clear up the definition of this word and what it means to be “deaf” in the pathological and cultural senses. She affirms what Deaf people are and are not, regardless of what society states.

She also brings up several issues within the Deaf community that need to be discussed and clarified in order to strengthen the community and to remove the pathological label of Deaf culture. One such example of this is cleaning up the long list of labels towards Deaf people and choosing an appropriate label for ourselves that best represents us. Yet another example of a much-needed discussion within our community is shown within Bienvenu’s clarifications of the misconceptions of ASL.

I chose this particular article because I am personally fascinated with Deaf culture and the issues within the community. I have always admired Bienvenu and her strong viewpoints. Today there aren’t many people who are willing to take a stand and bluntly share what they believe regarding controversial and new ideas, let alone develop innovative perspectives of

these ideas. As a student participating in the counseling course entitled “Psychosocial Aspects of Deafness,” I was elated when I discovered at the beginning of the semester that we’d be covering a broad range of topics regarding Deaf people and Deaf culture, allowing for further probing of varied perspectives. I chose this article because I knew it would contribute to the stimulation of my thinking and ideas about these topics.

I am tired of the same old viewpoints that have been repeatedly argued. I want to put on a new lens and develop new approaches towards the discussion of these topics in order to truly grow as a community in its wholeness. When thinking about what the world was like back in 1991, with the Americans with Disabilities Act in its infancy and with oralism and Total Communication (TC) still in their strong movements, I believe that Bienvenu’s discussion within this article was a breakthrough, thrown into people’s faces. I’m curious about how much this kind of discussion was already underway and how many other publications covered these new ideas during this time. Even with this “breakthrough,” I feel that the same arguments have been used for the past 16 years since then and I wonder about the efficiency of these arguments with the increasing rate of technology used today, not to mention in the near future.

Bienvenu says it best when she states: “It is time that we stopped being passive, and boldly declared our objections about how we are defined by non-Deaf people” (1991). This is especially true with the increasing rate of cochlear implant surgeries; that is a clear example of non-Deaf people defining Deaf people. The process of implanting Deaf people itself implies that non-Deaf people view Deaf people in the pathological sense. Deaf people are the minority and the majority’s strong use of media and technology makes it tricky for Deaf people to jump into their own selves and truly develop their own rightful identities as human beings. Because we are the minority, “How we label ourselves is very important” (Bienvenu, 1991). Labels send a message out to the majority about our community, whether we like it or not.

Bienvenu derives examples from other scholars’ articles and examples of various events (such as the production of various multimedia to promote Deaf culture) to back her viewpoints, yet at the same time her article is strongly developed from her own opinions. There might be questions about her use of other communities’ viewpoints and issues to compare with those within the Deaf community, such as comparing the label “hearing impaired”

to “nigger.” While this may be controversial, this can also be a wonderful strategy to begin a much-needed discussion about the implications of such labels.

A potential complication of this article is the broad range of topics stated in the article that need to be confronted in order to change the world’s perspective of Deaf people. It is almost as if Bienvenu is jumping from one area to another with the possibility of overwhelming readers who do not have a strong basis of knowledge regarding the Deaf community. This article needs to be taken in with an open mind and plenty of discussion with various people in order to be processed fully. This article is simultaneously an overview of and a crash course in the issues of the Deaf community.

Another article I found that can be used to increase readers’ understanding of Bienvenu’s article is “Signs of their times: Deaf communities and the culture of language” (Senghas & Monaghan, 2002). This article provides an elaboration of the importance of looking at Deaf community with a sociocultural lens rather than a pathological lens. The authors focus “on issues of community identity and related cultural phenomena, especially language, and appropriate theory and methods for analysis of such issues (Senghas & Monaghan). There are many other publications that follow the same course while there are very few that provide similar outlines to ideas such as that of Bienvenu. I believe that articles such as the abovementioned will help readers gain better understanding of the implications that Bienvenu provides. Readers can learn about topics such as the definitions of “Deaf/deaf” and sign language viewed as complex grammatical systems; upon reading about these topics, they can broaden their perspectives to take in those of Bienvenu and challenge their own thinking. I believe this was an intention Bienvenu had when writing this article.

As a future counselor, this article is beneficial for me. I will be working with Deaf children, the majority of whom will be from hearing families, as well as their families. It’s guaranteed there will be times where I will have to sit with these children and families and educate them about the various aspects of the Deaf community, as well as the perspectives within these aspects. This article provided me the opportunity to take a look at these perspectives myself from assorted angles and better understand the issues myself in order to be able to clearly explain and discuss them with these children and families.

Furthermore, there are many Deaf children who go through intense identity development and the mixed messages within and outside the Deaf community regarding what it means to be Deaf adds to this complication. It is my responsibility as a counselor to guide them through their development and teach them how to develop their own ways of thinking and seeing things. Empowerment is the key to genuine development. Our community will not grow if we do not teach our children how to think outside of the box for themselves.

While it is not my intention to encourage people to follow Bienvenu's beliefs, I believe it is my role to provide people with the various resources that are out there and allow them to develop their own viewpoints rather than manipulate their beliefs and thoughts to fit those that are mine. We need more people to think more critically within themselves about these topics and encourage this stimulation to other people around them. Our community's struggle to develop strength within ourselves is restricting our ability to reach out to the world and make waves for ourselves and others; once we develop this strength, who knows what kind of impact we can have on the world.

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