



2011

# DEAF OR HEARING: A HEARING IMPAIRED INDIVIDUAL'S NAVIGATION BETWEEN TWO WORLDS

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## ABSTRACT OF THESIS

### DEAF OR HEARING: A HEARING IMPAIRED INDIVIDUAL'S NAVIGATION BETWEEN TWO WORLDS

Identity construction and how an individual chooses to navigate or display their identity play an important role in how they communicate and interact with other individuals. One group in which identity construction and navigation is a difficult process is the hearing impaired population. In an effort to understand how these individuals construct their identity and navigate their hearing impairment, this study utilizes Communication Theory of Identity. Through the use of interactive interviews, the researcher was able to examine how 11 participants manage their identity as hearing impaired individuals. The interviews provided insight into the four layers of identity proposed by CTI – personal, relational, enacted, and communal – in the hearing impaired individual. The author discusses the themes within each of the four layers and the gaps present between the layers that emerged as the hearing impaired participants discussed how they navigate their hearing impairment. Furthermore, the implications of these themes and gaps within the hearing impaired individual's identity, such as feeling disconnected from both the Deaf and hearing communities, are examined.

**KEYWORDS:** Invisible Disability, Hearing Impairment, Identity, Communication Theory of Identity, Social Identity Theory

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May 23, 2011

DEAF OR HEARING:  
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BETWEEN TWO WORLDS

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May 23, 2011



THESIS

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University of Kentucky

2011

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THESIS

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree Master of Arts in the  
College of Communications and Information Studies  
at the University of Kentucky

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2011

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The following thesis, while an individual project and personal exploration, would not have been possible without the support and guidance of my thesis committee. First, I thank Dr. Donald Helme, my thesis Chair, for pushing me to pursue a personal topic and offering a balanced blend of guidance and independence throughout the entire process. I also thank the other two members of my committee, Dr. Michael Arrington and Dr. Elisia Cohen, for providing support and offering insight and important information surrounding methodological and qualitative issues. Each member of my committee provided ample encouragement along the way and challenged my thoughts surrounding this project, substantially improving the final product.

In addition, I would like to thank the participants in this study (who remain anonymous for confidentiality purposes). Without your courage in stepping forward to discuss your hearing impairment and the challenges involved in living with what society has deemed a “disability”, this project would not have been possible. Thank you for your strength and candor in disclosing about such a sensitive and personal topic.

Finally, I would like to express my gratitude for the support and limitless encouragement provided by my friends and family throughout this process. Your belief in my success and inspiring words kept me pushing forward despite any difficulties or frustrations I faced. Without you, the strength needed to tackle such a personal topic may have escaped my grasp at multiple points along the introspective journey included in this project. I would like to especially thank my parents – thank you for not listening to the doctors who once told you I would never be able to succeed in normal, hearing society. Without that first step, this journey would never have been possible.

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Hearing aids are cool in Elementary School. My peers were fascinated with the “things in my ears” that helped me to hear the sounds in the world around me. Other than the occasional question, which was often soon forgotten, the kids around me treated me just like everyone else. This changes drastically once you enter Middle School. Suddenly, cliques are formed and I became the odd person out with the occasional lisp in her speech and the hearing aids in her ears. Whispering to each other while covering their mouths so I could not read their lips as they pointed and laughed became a common occurrence among my peers. I became the easy target – the person who was different from anyone else. With no one who understood to turn to at school, I soon spiraled downwards into depression. Concerned by the sudden change in my once outgoing and cheerful demeanor, my parents had me tested for mono. When that came back negative, they tried to find other activities outside of school to get me involved in to give me something to look forward to.

Junior High came along and in an attempt to hide my “disability” or difference, I quit wearing my hearing aids despite the fact that I often needed them. This attempt to “hide” my hearing impairment continued through High School as I avoided disclosing about my hearing loss, even to teachers. However, because of being pulled out of classrooms for speech therapy, teachers giving it away as they made sure I had accommodations in the classroom, and students remembering from earlier years, I was unable to escape the label of being different – of being the girl with the hearing impairment. Graduation came along as my time in High School drew to a close and I sat in a sea of my peers listening to the noise coming from the podium, but never

understanding what was said, as the principal spoke to our senior class. It was after graduating in the top percentage of my class that my mom shared a little secret with me – according to the doctors who diagnosed my hearing impairment, I was never supposed to have been able to graduate from a “normal” high school. Thank goodness my mom did not listen to them. I guess I am one of the lucky ones.

What about others like me? It was not until college that I decided to take a sign language class and discovered that there was a community of Deaf individuals who embraced their hearing loss as something other than a disability. In attempt to reach out to that community, I found that I was an outsider even there as they referred to me as a “talkie” or saw it strange that I used spoken language and lip reading to communicate. Thus, I felt stranded, straddling a fine line between two worlds wondering where I fit in as I was different and often singled out from my hearing peers and I felt unwelcome in the Deaf community. It made me begin to wonder. Where do I and others like me fit in along this continuum? How do we navigate our identity as a hearing impaired individual in an otherwise hearing world? Do others perceive similar challenges surrounding their hearing impairment and their identity? How do they overcome and deal with these challenges? I decided to find out...

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How a person self-identifies or manages and constructs his or her personal social identity influences many aspects of their life. Originally identity and identity construction were examined in the areas of psychology and sociology. However, identity has been constructed more recently within the communication field and conceptualized as being co-created in relationships and emerging through communicative interactions.

According to Jung (2007), current work “claims that identity is formed, maintained, and modified in communication” (p. 3). Jung and Hecht (2004) examined identity as constituted by self-reflection of discourse and interaction and the idea of identity being co-created in relationships to others. They stated that “people's identities are asserted, defined, and/or changed in mutual communication activities” (Jung & Hecht, 2004, p. 266). Furthermore, the dialectical pulls of individual and society were the original base for the examination of identity negotiation. Therefore, our identity is constructed and maintained through our interactions, communication, and relationships with others.

As a way to examine the complex process of identity management and construction, Hecht (1993) proposes the Communication Theory of Identity. Communication Theory of Identity (CTI) explores identity creation on several levels of interaction and the identity gaps between those levels. CTI also proposes four intertwining layers of identity: personal, enacted, relational, and communal (Hecht, 1993). Through the application of the CTI and an examination of the overlapping layers of identity that it proposes, one can gain insight into the identity construction and management of an individual. A person’s social identity, or “aspects of a person’s self-concept that reflect claims of membership in social groups or categories” (Weisz & Wood, 2000, p. 441), will influence his or her personal identity management as well. A communication theory that focuses on social identity specifically is Social Identity Theory. Social Identity Theory (SIT) explores how individuals make the distinction between their personal identity and the identity of their social group (Ellis, 2010). Through a combination of both CTI and SIT, one can gain insight into identity construction both on an individual level and a societal level.

## **Identity Construction and Hearing Impairment**

One such area of identity management that needs attention is that of the identity construction for hearing impaired individuals who must attempt to navigate between two cultures and worlds – that of the Deaf and that of the hearing. Hearing impairment is not only one of the most common chronic disabilities, but it affects the lives of those who are hearing impaired in profound ways as they attempt to navigate their lives around their disability (Luey, Glass, & Elliott, 1995). “Many D/deaf people are not sure where they fit: In a Deaf world? In an ableist but hearing world? In a disabled but hearing world?”(Skelton & Valentine, 2003, p. 453). Furthermore, as 90% of deaf children have hearing parents, there is often a cultural divide within families which further complicates identity construction within this population (Grosjean, 2010). Thus, it is the goal of this study to gain a deeper understanding of identity construction for hearing impaired individuals through the application of CTI and SIT.

The area of identity construction, in this case within a hearing impaired individual, deserves attention and research because our identities often influence our communication outcomes and day-to-day interactions and general well-being. According to Kam and Hecht (2009), identity gaps are linked to a number of negative outcomes such as depression, misunderstanding, and communication dissatisfaction. Identity construction is a phenomenon that can predict communication outcomes, influence a person’s general well-being, and impact interpersonal relationships (Kam & Hecht, 2009). Furthermore, the identity construction within a hearing impaired individual could affect his or her self-esteem (Jung, 2007; Nikolarazi & Makri, 2004), communication messages and relationship satisfaction (Jung, 2007; Jung & Hecht, 2004; Kam & Hecht,

2009), education (Grosjean, 2010; Najarian, 2008; Reagan, 2002; Wadsworth, Hecht, & Jung, 2008), and general accessibility to accommodations for their impairment (Najarian, 2008). In addition, this area of research has health implications as well for audiologists and speech pathologists attempting to interact with and best serve their patients.

Because this area is lacking in research (Skelton & Valentine, 2003), any insight we can gain into the navigation of identity for a hearing impaired individual will grant a deeper understanding of this phenomenon from which further studies can be conducted. Furthermore, a deeper understanding of the identity construction of hearing impaired individuals treading the line between the Deaf and hearing worlds is extremely warranted because of the implications of this research, the lack of previous research in this particular area, and the growing prevalence of disabilities within the U.S. (Matthews & Harrington, 2000).

Further implications surrounding the identity construction of a hearing impaired or deaf individual include the negative connotations and stereotypes attributed to those with hearing loss (Nikolarazi & Makri, 2004). These stereotypes and negative connotations, such as being “deaf and dumb”, can “have pernicious effects on deaf people’s feelings of self-worth and cause permanent harm to their personalities considering deaf people may internalize society’s negative attitudes” (Nikolarazi & Makri, 2004, p. 404). These negative stereotypes, discrimination, and society’s negative attitudes interfere and play a role in the identity negotiation of a hearing impaired person (Nikolarazi & Makri, 2004). Thus, the importance of understanding this role and the affect it has on a deaf individual’s identity construction is further emphasized.

The topic of deafness as an identity issue has wide-spread importance outside the Deaf community as well.

Its wider significance comes from the fact that it bears directly on an area in which we have confused and contradictory intuitions. That area is the value of cultures. Some of our intuitions seem to support the idea that cultures are intrinsically valuable; valuable, that is, in themselves, and without regard to the goods they make available to their members (Levy, 2002, p. 135).

Levy (2002) goes on to discuss the instrumental value of cultures as well because cultures often enable their members to live lives they find worthwhile.

Further reasoning to examine this area of research lies in the growing prevalence of disabilities within the U.S.; one fifth of the population is disabled in some way (Matthews & Harrington, 2000). It has been estimated that of those that are disabled, forty percent have “invisible disabilities” – disabilities that are hidden and cannot be immediately noticed by an observer except through the disclosure process (Matthews & Harrington, 2000). Hearing impairment is one such invisible disability that needs to be examined.

Audiologists would benefit from knowing the perceptions of their patients in order to best meet patients’ needs by considering how they identify and how they navigate between the deaf and hearing communities. Speech and language pathologists would benefit from an inside look at the struggles a hearing impaired individual faces outside of speech therapy to make their therapy more applicable to real life situations. Finally, friends, family, and peers of the hearing impaired individual could gain perspective on how the hearing impaired individual wants to be identified. Furthermore, audiologists, speech and language pathologists, and family and friends would benefit from understanding the identity navigation of the hearing impaired individual as they

become more aware of the messages they communicate and the meaning in those messages. Thus, due to the health, communication, and relationship implications, a deeper understanding of how a hearing impaired individual navigates his or her identity construction would be beneficial to hearing impaired individuals and to those who interact with them.

Another area in which this research on hearing impaired identity construction has implications is the field of education. Najarian (2008) states that, based on her study of the deaf women in college learning how to negotiate and disclose their identity, “the ways in which the women managed their impressions shaped their educational opportunities” (p. 126). She went on to state, “Language, along with the changing contexts of the schools, was a key aspect of identity construction and played a critical role in determining academic success” (Najarian, 2008, p. 127). The language we use and the messages that are conveyed through our language choices will influence the interactions with hearing impaired individuals. Thus, a deeper understanding of the identity construction process for hearing impaired individuals is needed due to the impact this research could have for these individuals in health, education, communication, and relationship contexts.

## CHAPTER TWO: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

### **Communication Theory of Identity**

Hecht (1993) proposed a Communication Theory of Identity that expanded on the current views of identity as individual and societal constructions to consider interaction, the idea of identity located in roles, and identity as a relational construct. The Communication Theory of Identity (CTI) was introduced as a way of explaining how individuals create, enact, and communicate identity through our interpersonal and intergroup interactions. “The theory is concerned with how individuals and communities define their identities as well as how those identities are nested in relationships and expressed through communication” (Hecht, Jackson, & Pitts, 2005, p. 31).

The main idea of CTI is “that identity is inherently a communication process and must be understood as a transaction in which messages and values are exchanged” (Drummond & Orbe, 2008, p. 3). Therefore, our identity is constructed, maintained, and challenged in our everyday interactions and communication. According to Hecht (1993) and Drummond and Orbe (2008), the Communication Theory of Identity focuses on four interpenetrating frames of reference: personal, relational, enacted, and communal. The personal level includes our individual thoughts, beliefs, and feelings. Our interactions with others and those interactions influence our identities through communication are examined on the relational level. In turn, the nature of these relationships on the relational level influences our expressions of identity (the enacted level). Finally, some of our identities extend beyond the individual and our one-on-one relationships to the groups to which we belong that influence our identities through collective beliefs, rituals, and practices (Drummond & Orbe, 2008).

## **Investigating Identity Gaps**

Because the Communication Theory of Identity is a complex, multidimensional process, studies examining identity and identity construction and management should consider these interpenetrating frames of reference and how they overlap, influence one another, and are competing and/or complementary with one another (Drummond & Orbe, 2008). This interplay of identity levels can create identity gaps or rifts between the frames of identity within an individual if there are discrepancies between one or more frames of identity. “The four frames of identity are not always consistent with each other. They can be contradictory or exclusive to each other” (Jung & Hecht, 2004, p. 267). For example, when a person is experiencing a personal-relational identity gap, he or she will see himself/herself one way, but think that others see him/her in another way (Drummond & Orbe, 2008). Furthermore, the differences between personal and enacted identities are explored in several theories. For example, “the concepts of "front stage" and "back stage" in Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical approach to self-presentation roughly correspond to the concepts of personal and enacted identities” (Jung & Hecht, 2004, p. 269).

As CTI argues that identity is inherently communicative and social, issues related to identity should be related to communication issues. To test this assumption, Jung and Hecht (2004) hypothesized that identity gaps should be associated with communication outcomes such as communication satisfaction, feeling understood, and conversational appropriateness and effectiveness. The findings of their study supported their hypotheses that both personal-enacted identity gaps and personal-relational identity gaps are

negatively correlated with communication satisfaction, feeling understood, and communication appropriateness and effectiveness. According to Jung and Hecht (2004):

These results have two important implications. First, the identity gaps were conceptualized as occurring in the process and/or as a result of communication, that is, as a communicative phenomenon. Second, the strong relationships between the identity gaps and the communication outcomes support the close relationship between identity and communication posited in CTI. Thus, it can be argued that the results provide an empirical evidence of the fundamental assumption of CTI — that identity is inherently communicative (p. 279).

These conclusions were further supported in Jung's (2007) examination of identity gaps and their relationship with the communication outcome of communication satisfaction and the communication inputs of assertiveness and communication apprehension. The communication outcome of satisfaction was significantly predicted by the three identity gaps examined in the study. Furthermore, the communication inputs influenced communication behavior which was in turn reflected in one's identity. This eventually affects communication satisfaction as an outcome. Thus, evidence is shown that identity is constructed through our communicative interactions and that our communicative inputs affect our identities which in turn affect our communication outputs (Jung, 2007).

The role of communication in identity formation receives additional support from the findings of Wadsworth, Hecht, and Jung's (2008) study of the role of identity gaps in international students' educational satisfaction in American classrooms. The study found that the communicative variables of acculturation and perceived discrimination influenced the identity gaps of the international students and in turn was significantly related to the communication output variable of education satisfaction. Furthermore, the connection between identity gaps and communication outcomes was also observed in

Kam and Hecht's (2009) study, which examined the role of identity gaps among communicative and relational outcomes within the grandparent-grandchild relationship. Their study examined the association of grandchildren's identity gaps with communication outcomes of topic avoidance, communication satisfaction, and relationship satisfaction. These studies are further examples of the connection between communication and identity management and display the important role identity can play in communicative outcomes.

### **Social Identity Theory**

Another communication theory that focuses on identity is Social Identity Theory. Social Identity Theory explores how individuals make the distinction between their personal identity and the identity of their social group. According to Ellis (2010), as a species, we have developed a process that enables us to recognize our preference for a group that facilitates reproduction, security, and fulfillment and "whose members have physiological, interactional, and normative properties in common" (p. 295). Furthermore, we can also identify the differences between our group and others, and tend to create an in-group bias towards our group norms and characteristics. "Thus, identities are crucially shaped by group membership – that is, their social identity. And the drive to enhance positive self-concept and maintain status motivates people to view their own in-groups more favorably than out-groups" (Ellis, 2010, p. 295).

If the distinction between the in-group and the out-group fades or becomes unapparent, members will seek to create a favorable distinction for their group (Ellis, 2010). This process "can take the form of increasing negative attitudes toward other groups, enhancing allegiance to one's own group (ethnocentrism), distorting one's

perceptions of in-groups and out-groups, or directly attacking out-groups to gain advantage” (Ellis, 2010, p. 295). These tactics are often the cause of many intergroup conflicts. The in-group phenomenon explained by Social Identity Theory can be seen with an examination of Deaf culture and the variation of identities constructed within the Deaf community.

## CHAPTER THREE: BEING DEAF OR HEARING IMPAIRED

### **Deaf Culture**

For decades, deafness has been understood to be a disability or a handicap – the idea of “deaf and dumb” has been prevalent within the medical community for years (Cherney, 1999). This outlook is slowly changing as the culture of being deaf is becoming more recognized within the hearing community (Breivik, 2005). As the majority of people experience the world as hearing individuals, hearing is assumed to be “normal”. This thought then leads to the “infirmity model” or “medical model” of viewing deafness as an affliction or impairment. Thus, it is understood through this model that in order for a deaf person to be a “normal” human being, his or her deafness needs to be cured (Hole, 2007).

However, a new view of deafness is on the rise: deafness as difference. This perspective views deafness merely as a physiological difference. “In fact, from a Deaf cultural perspective, hearing loss is valued. Deaf people do not want to be fixed; rather, they want to be respected as a linguistic, cultural minority and treated equally in relation to the hearing majority” (Hole, 2007, p. 263). Furthermore, Deaf individuals’ comparison that society would not “cure” the blackness of an African American exemplifies their view of deafness as a culture (Levy, 2002). However, the deafness as a disability view is still prevalent among hearing society and normalizing policies and attempts at mainstreaming place deaf individuals in a position of identity struggle as they endeavor to fit in with majority societal views while still celebrating deaf culture (Breivik, 2005).

“The Deaf are very aware of their status as members of a minority culture, and they have shaped an identity around this status. They do not identify themselves as disabled, but rather as members of a linguistic minority” (Cherney, 1999, p. 27). The Deaf are also aware of the attempt to normalize or oppress their community. Several normalizing endeavors include the practice of “oralism” (forcing deaf children to learn to speak and lip-read and prohibiting sign language), the cochlear implant, and mainstreaming deaf students into hearing schools as attempts to establish “normalcy”. “In fact, it is not uncommon to hear/read/see individuals who were raised orally but then turn to sign language referred to as ‘oral failures’” (Hole, 2007, p. 266). These practices are often viewed by the Deaf as examples of oppressive attitude that seeks to eliminate Deaf culture through “curing” deafness (Cherney, 1999).

According to Levy (2002), the Deaf community does not view the cochlear implant as an aid, but believe that “the implants are nothing less than a form of cultural genocide” (p. 135). This viewpoint is supported by those in the Deaf community who value Deafness as a culture and not as a disability that needs to be “fixed” (Levy, 2002; Cherney, 1999). Cherney (1999) goes on to re-enforce this belief that Deaf feel no need to be “fixed” through his discussion of cyborg politics and their rejection of the cochlear implant. He states that:

As a premise of their cultural identity the Deaf view their bodies differently than the dominant hearing culture. The Deaf world-view rejects any need for the cyborg as a solution, and argues that the real problem posed by deafness is the hearing inability to accept a different definition of what it means to be human (Cherney, 1999, p. 33).

This view is further supported by Sparrow (2005) as he states that “a sizeable portion of Deaf individuals say that they would not want to be granted hearing even if it were

possible” (p. 137), thus emphasizing the view of Deafness as a culture and not as a “problem” that needs to be “fixed” or “cured.”

This identity struggle is further examined in Davis’ (2007) article in his examination of problems with defining deaf people as a linguistic group. According to Davis, the benefits include the removed biological stigmas of deafness such as being “handicapped” or “disabled.” However, he also examines the negative side of establishing deafness as a minority group – as being oppressed. The main problem he discusses is in the definition of what it means to be Deaf. It often excludes those who were not native users of American Sign Language (ASL), those who were orally trained to speak, those who have cochlear implants, and those who have never had the chance to learn sign language. Furthermore, it seems to stigmatize deaf or hearing impaired individuals who are not considered to be “pure” deaf – who do not speak ASL or do not immerse themselves fully into Deaf culture (Davis, 2007). Thus, even those who identify as Deaf struggle with intra-cultural identities as they manage the continuum of deafness.

This intra-cultural identity struggle is further exemplified in Skelton and Valentine’s (2003) article which examines the difference between individuals who classify as ‘D’eaf and individuals who classify as ‘d’eaf. The distinction between ‘D’eaf and ‘d’eaf lies in whether the hearing loss is being discussed in a cultural or biological context. If the community that embraces the cultural values of being Deaf or an individual within that community are being discussed, the individual or community is ‘D’eaf. However, if the biological condition of having a hearing loss or an individual who does not embrace Deaf cultural values is being discussed, then the term ‘d’eaf is used.

Individuals who are Deaf are a part of the Deaf community and share the values and beliefs of Deaf culture as a minority culture. These individuals do not view deafness as a disability, but simply as a difference. On the other hand, deaf individuals are often raised orally with the view that deafness is a disability. Unlike the Deaf, these individuals, while they have a hearing loss (no matter the degree of that loss) are not considered part of the Deaf community. The establishment of D/deafness, then, has more to do with the social view of being deaf than the degree to which one has a hearing loss (Skelton & Valentine, 2003). Once again, it is important to note the distinction between being deaf (no matter to what degree – profoundly deaf, moderately deaf, etc.) and being Deaf (once again the degree of loss does not matter). A person who is Deaf embraces the cultural values of the Deaf community (even if they only have a mild hearing loss), while a person who is deaf, even profoundly so, views the hearing loss as a biological condition and does not embrace the Deaf cultural values. Thus, even within the phenomenon of being deaf, there are differing identities and a struggle of how deaf one is.

This intra-cultural struggle complicates the identity construction for hearing impaired individuals who do not internalize the Deaf culture and embed themselves into that community. Thus, their communal layer of identity (as suggested by CTI) is often neglected as they do not have a clear community tie due to the disconnect they may face from the Deaf community. Individuals with a hearing loss or impairment who attempt to fit into mainstream hearing society instead of becoming a part of the Deaf community are often looked down upon by the Deaf community. In discussing this separation between hearing impaired individuals and Deaf individuals, Hole (2007) described that in American Sign Language “there is a sign – THINK-HEARING – that is used, most often

in a derogatory way, to indicate or describe a deaf person who is not culturally Deaf, but rather, who identifies as culturally hearing, belonging to the hearing world” (p. 266).

Therefore, identity construction becomes a navigation between deaf and hearing worlds for these individuals as they face stigma and discrimination in each community and do not clearly fit into either world.

### **Deaf Identities**

Bat-Chava (2000) uses the two strategies used by members of minority groups to achieve positive social identity as identified by Social Identity Theory to examine deaf adults’ management of identity. Social Identity Theory examines the distinction between a person’s personal identity and the identity of their social group (Ellis, 2010). The first strategy in this process proposed by Social Identity Theory is that the members of the minority group will attempt to gain access to the mainstream or majority through individual mobility – attempting to leave the minority group either physically or psychologically. The second strategy is that the minority group member will work with other group members to bring about social change (Bat-Chava, 2000).

Through these two strategies, Bat-Chava (2000) proposes three identities of deaf adults. Those who use the first strategy assimilate into the hearing world as much as they can through the use of their residual hearing and lip reading and are categorized as “culturally hearing.” Individuals who use the second strategy come together with other deaf individuals using American Sign Language and participate in social and political Deaf organizations and networks and are classified as “culturally deaf.” A third category, a “bicultural” identity, is identified for the individuals who fall in between the two extremes proposed above. Furthermore, Bat-Chava (2000) mentions, but does not

explore further, a fourth possible category for those who are not sure about their feelings toward their deafness – a “marginal” identity.

Bat-Chava (2000) hypothesizes that the different identities shown within deaf individuals are due to their different family and school histories – whether or not their family is Deaf or hearing and whether or not the deaf individual goes to a mainstream or Deaf school. “The degree to which a deaf child is exposed to other deaf children and adults in the family and school is likely to have an effect on the identity he or she will develop as an adult” (Bat-Chava, 2000, p. 421). Bat-Chava (2000) found that deaf individuals who communicate orally often face difficulties in acquiring an identity, or they acquire a weak group identity. These individuals do not identify themselves as culturally Deaf, but at the same time they differentiate themselves from hearing people. As a result, they often feel trapped between different deaf and hearing worlds without being able to determine where they stand and belong (Bat-Chava, 2000).

Bat-Chava’s (2000) idea of a bicultural identity is examined further in Grosjean (2010) as the author emphasizes the lack of examining deaf people who are members of the hearing world as well as the Deaf community. Grosjean (2010) makes the argument that biculturals, in this case deaf biculturals, choose to identify and belong to either one culture, neither cultures, or to both cultures.

During the long, and sometimes arduous, identity process that is involved, deaf people have to take into account a number of factors such as: their type and degree of deafness, their ties with their family, their education, their network of friends, their competence in sign language and in the spoken, majority language, their acceptance or not by both worlds, their own identity needs, etc. (Grosjean, 2010, p. 138).

Thus, this identity navigation of deaf individuals between the Deaf and hearing world provides a deaf or hearing impaired individual with many variables to consider.

Furthering the complexities of identity construction for deaf individuals is the issue of disclosure. Members of stigmatized groups, such as the hearing impaired, “face the difficult question of when to disclose their identity and when to closet it” (Hecht, Jackson, & Pitts, 2005, p. 34). Najarian (2008) examines this complication to identity construction through her study of college deaf women. “What this study examines, however, is the process of how a group of Deaf women developed their Deaf identities and negotiated, as they describe, being ‘in between’ the worlds of the Deaf and the hearing” (Najarian, 2008, p. 118).

In addition, Najarian (2008) goes on to discuss the issues involved with ‘coming out of the disability closet’ as the deaf women faced the decision of whether or not to disclose their deafness. They were faced with the choice to reveal their deafness and confront possible stigma in order to receive accommodations they might need or to not tell anyone in order to avoid being stigmatized as disabled (Najarian, 2008). Najarian (2008) connects this decision process with Goffman’s (1959) idea of impression management. Goffman (1959) discusses how individuals attempt to manage the impressions others receive of them by putting on a “front” or a “performance” and allowing others to see only what you want them to see. The reason hearing impaired individuals may feel the need to put up this “front” is due to the stigma they may face upon disclosure.

One setting in which this issue of disclosure becomes prominent is the classroom. The choice not to disclose may be connected to the fact that a majority of teachers are able-bodied and many able-bodied teachers tend to act differently towards a student or stigmatize them once they discover the student is disabled in some way (Hart &

Williams, 1995). “Many instructors are uncomfortable interacting with and offering instruction to students with disabilities” (Hart & Williams, 1995, p. 140). Teachers are often unsure of how they should talk to disabled students, what they should talk about, and whether they can discuss the disability. This uncertainty negatively affects the learning environment for both the disabled student and the other students in the class (Hart & Williams, 1995). Thus, deaf individuals are not only faced with the issue of how they identify within both the Deaf and hearing worlds, but how they present their identity and whether or not to disclose it.

### **Invisible Disabilities**

One further thing to consider when examining the identity construction of hearing impaired individuals and this choice of the disclosure is the fact that hearing impairment is an invisible disability. An invisible disability is a disability that is not noticeable to an observer under normal circumstances unless the disabled individual or another source discloses information about the impairment (Matthews & Harrington, 2000). The problems associated with invisible disabilities, such as hearing impairment, further complicate the identity construction process a hearing impaired individual faces as the individual attempts to navigate between the choice to disclose and the need for accommodation. They must decide on a daily basis whether to disclose their impairment (and identify as a hearing impaired individual) or to keep their disability to themselves (and perhaps not get the necessary assistance they need).

In addition to navigating between disclosing despite facing possible stigma in order to achieve necessary accommodations and avoiding stigma by choosing not to disclose, a hearing impaired individual has to deal with the “invisibility” of the disability.

Due to the hearing impairment often not being noticeable through observation, hearing impaired individuals may face difficulty in gaining accommodations. Not only do they have to approach strangers to inform them that they are disabled and need accommodations, but they often have to provide detailed information about their disability or even proof of their disability.

Those whose disabilities are invisible may also have to convince other people that they really are disabled, not seeking some special—unfair—advantage: thus, what they must do is meet a burden of proof. They thus face a double bind: either they forgo the assistance or accommodation they need—and thus suffer the consequences of attempting to do things they may not be able to do safely by themselves—or they endure the discomfort of subjecting themselves to strangers’ interrogations (Davis, 2005, p. 154-155).

Thus, hearing impaired individuals are faced both with the struggle of whether or not to disclose and this “burden of proof” they may have to provide due to the invisibility of their disability.

As U.S. culture places emphasis on health and being “normal,” the disclosure process for those with invisible disabilities becomes even more difficult to navigate. Stone (1995) discusses the “myth of bodily perfection” and the implications this myth causes for those with invisible disabilities. She discusses how the dominant culture’s embodiment of this myth places negative connotations on the term “disability” and discourages those with invisible disabilities from disclosing in order to avoid those negative perceptions. This cultural outlook and pressure to conceal disabilities is further supported by Matthews and Harrington (2000) and Davis (2005) as both discuss the prevalence of this able-bodied mind-set within U.S. culture and the stigma that accompanies being “disabled” because of this attitude. Thus, the issues surrounding hearing impairment as an invisible disability and the stigma associated with identifying as

disabled further complicate the identity construction and management of a deaf individual through the decision of whether to disclose.

## CHAPTER FOUR: CONNECTING IT ALL

### **Combining CTI, SIT, and Hearing Impaired Identity Construction**

“Most of the current work drawing on CTI has focused on identity negotiation processes with specific racial and ethnic groups” (Drummond & Orbe, 2008, p. 7). However, Drummond and Orbe (2008) go on to state that the Communication Theory of Identity “can and should be used to explore a variety of cultural and social identities” (p. 8). Therefore, this theory should be expanded to examine deaf or hard-of-hearing individuals who are attempting to construct their identity and navigate the divide between the deaf and hearing worlds. Furthermore, one of the layers or frames of identity construction identified by Hecht (1993) is the communal layer. This layer examines identity construction from within a group as we use the group’s values, characteristics, and beliefs to create a collective identity (Hecht, Jackson, & Pitts, 2005). This communal layer relates closely to the idea of in-groups and out-groups explained by Social Identity Theory which allows us another viewpoint from which to examine the gaps between a hearing impaired individual’s identity construction and the identity of the Deaf community as a whole.

The four layers of identity discussed by CTI, the enacted, relational, personal, and communal, intertwine as each individual constructs his or her identity. However, these layers can sometimes be at variance with one another creating identity gaps within an individual. CTI was proposed to help make sense of these layers and the identity construction process (Hecht, Jackson, & Pitts, 2005). “In light of identity gaps’ strong and consistent associations with communicative and relational outcomes..., this surmise is argued to deserve scholarly attention in future studies” (Kam & Hecht, 2009, p. 475).

As an example, one such important communicative and relational aspect that could be affected by identity construction is the interaction between parent and child.

“The medical and phonocentric regimes of power are strong and still put continual pressure on parents of deaf children to go for ‘normal’ solutions (for instance CI surgery and mainstreaming in school)” (Breivik, 2005, p. 22). As 90% of deaf children have hearing parents, many deaf children do not become exposed to Deaf culture until adolescence or even adulthood (Grosjean, 2010). “By any definition, culture is a pervasive influence on communication and social relations. Culture provides our norms, values, and practices; it defines our communities and our relationships” (Hecht, Jackson, & Pitts, 2005, p. 22). Thus, this cultural gap between parents and children and the mainstreaming effect of majority society create obstacles for the navigation between the deaf and hearing worlds and the creation of an identity within the two worlds.

Grosjean (2010) argues for parents and caretakers to allow their deaf child access to both the Deaf and hearing world to aid in their identity formation as a bicultural and bilingual individual by exposing them to both sign language and spoken communication and allowing them to acculturate naturally into the two worlds.

To achieve this, the child must be in contact with the two communities (hearing and deaf) and must feel the need to learn and use both languages and discover both cultures. Counting solely on the hearing culture and on an auditory/oral approach to language, because of recent technological advances, is betting on the deaf children’s futures. It is putting at risk their cognitive, linguistic, and personal development and it is negating their need to acculturate into the two worlds that they belong to (Grosjean, 2010, p.144).

In Peters (2000), a hearing father of a daughter who was born deaf learns sign language and provides his daughter with the exposure to both the language and culture of

the Deaf community. He also explains how parental influence on a deaf child's cultural identity is different from that of other cultures:

Deaf culture differs significantly from all other cultures we have encountered. For one thing, other cultures (as opposed to life-styles) and languages (as opposed to vocabulary) are passed on *overwhelmingly* by parents. Our son Thomas, for example, was not suddenly born French, and our daughter Theresa was not mysteriously born Indian Hindu. All of our children were born Anglo-American and they will always be Anglo-American. But this high correlation (not absolute, but high) between parental cultural identity and the cultural identity of children is manifestly untrue in regard to Deaf culture (Peters, 2000, pg. 264).

Peters (2000) goes on to explain that most deaf children receive their Deaf cultural input from sources outside of their parents as many parents view the "oral" method of raising their deaf child to be in the child's best interest. This cultural divide between parent and child can cause for emotional struggles for both the parent and child as they struggle to maintain connections and closeness.

As shown through literature examining parent-child relationships and the effect a hearing impaired child's identity construction can have upon this relationship, we can see some of the implications of this research. As society pushes for mainstreaming the hearing impaired child, the parent is faced with the difficult decision as to what culture to expose their child to. This cultural exposure process is extremely crucial to a hearing impaired child's identity construction as it can make them view their impairment as a "disability" (exposure only to the hearing world) or as a "linguistic difference" (exposure to Deaf culture). In this example, we see several of the layers of CTI overlapping to construct the identity of a hearing impaired child – Deaf versus hearing society (communal layer), parent-child interactions (relational layer), and how the child views and displays their impairment through communication inputs and outputs (personal and enacted layers).

Furthermore, Social Identity Theory provides further insight into the identity management of a hearing impaired child's identity construction based upon their level of exposure to the Deaf community – the more exposure and connection to the Deaf community they have, the less likely they are to feel like being deaf makes them part of a minority or out-group as exposure will allow them to establish connections with others who share similar experiences because of the shared disability. The discussion of these layers of the Communication Theory of Identity, the Social Identity Theory's application to the communal layer of CTI, and how these layers and theories play a role in identity construction within a hearing impaired individual lead to the following research questions:

- RQ1: How do hearing impaired individuals describe the differences in communicating with deaf and hearing individuals? In what ways does a hearing impaired individual identify with individuals in the Deaf world and/or in the hearing world (communal layer of CTI/Social Identity Theory)?
- RQ2: How do hearing impaired individuals negotiate their personal identities as hearing impaired individuals (personal and enacted layers of CTI)?
- RQ3: How do hearing impaired individuals communicate about the communication difficulties they experience with peers, family members, and loved ones (relational layer of CTI)?
- RQ4: What communication difficulties do hearing impaired individuals experience when negotiating their personal identity as a hearing impaired

individual (identity gaps between personal and enacted or personal and communal or personal and relational)?

As rationalization to the broad research questions stated above, this area of research has been ignored to this point. Thus, a beginning study to provide information as a basis for future research is warranted to generate broad, background information. From there, further research can narrow down the research to specific sections and variables within this phenomenon.

## CHAPTER FIVE: METHODS

This study provides an examination of identity construction within hearing impaired individuals through the use of the Communication Theory of Identity and Social Identity Theory. By examining the identity gaps a hearing impaired individual experiences, further insight can be gained into the negotiation of identity and navigation between the deaf and hearing worlds. Furthermore, Social Identity Theory allows the examination of the deaf individual's distinction between their personal identity (whether they identify as Deaf, hearing impaired, disabled, etc.) and the collective identity of the Deaf community or hearing community as a whole.

### **Utilizing CIT and SIT**

Using the qualitative method of interactive interviewing, this study explores a hearing impaired individual's four frames of identity – personal, relational, enacted, and communal. Questions concerning the individual's thoughts, feelings, and beliefs about their hearing impairment provide the researcher with the personal frame of identity (RQ2). Questions surrounding how the person expresses their identity as a hearing impaired person to their family, friends, and peers explore the relational frame of identity (RQ3). The enacted level is examined through questions surrounding the expressions of identity through disclosure or communicative interactions (RQ2). Finally, to explore the communal frame of CIT and SIT, questions surrounding the individual's involvement with groups that influence their identity address this final layer of identity (RQ1). Further questioning examines the identity gaps of CIT by investigating the communicative difficulties hearing impaired individuals experience when navigating their daily lives (RQ4).

## **Interactive Interviewing**

The use of interactive interviewing allows for an in-depth and intimate understanding of people's experiences as hearing impaired individuals. As the researcher in this study fits into the population being studied and has a moderate to severe hearing impairment, the interviewer attends to her own feelings and experiences as the interview has an interactive conversation quality. According to Ellis, Kiesinger, and Tillmann-Healy (1997):

Interactive interviewing involves the sharing of personal and social experiences of both respondents and researchers, who tell (and sometimes write) their stories in the context of a developing relationship. In this process, the distinction between 'researcher' and 'subject' gets blurred. We also view researchers' disclosures as more than tactics to encourage respondents to open up. The feelings, insight, and stories that researchers bring to the interactive encounter are as important as those of the respondents (p. 121).

Thus, this process reflects conversations in real life where one person's disclosures can invite another person's disclosure. Additionally, it is important to note that since the researcher has a hearing impairment herself, she was able to both relate to her participants' experiences and share experiences of her own. This allowed for the participants to feel more comfortable and more willing to open up and share about personal experiences they might not have otherwise shared with an able-bodied researcher.

The interactive interview provides a structure that is not present in typical hierarchical interviews and promotes a dialogue (rather than an interrogation) that is co-constructed by both the researcher and the respondent as they search for mutual understanding (Ellis, Kiesinger, & Tillmann-Healy, 1997). This lack of hierarchical structure encourages self-disclosure both by the researcher and respondent and helps the

respondent feel more comfortable sharing information. Additionally according to Ellis et al. (1997), there are no set procedures to follow when using interactive interviewing. Due to its interactive and conversational flow, precise steps and rules are not only unnecessary, but would interfere with the emerging interaction and developing relationship between researcher and respondent. Thus, the researcher had a list of questions to guide the interview and to spur conversation about experiences as a hearing impaired individual. This interview protocol is flexible and allows for respondents and researcher to share stories and experiences as they come to mind (see Appendix for interview questions).

### **The Participants**

The participants for this study consisted of eleven hearing impaired individuals with mild to profound hearing loss. The hearing loss levels are as follows: moderate (41-55 decibels of hearing loss), moderately severe (56-70 decibels of hearing loss), severe (71-90 decibels of hearing loss), and profound (91+ decibels of hearing loss). Of this sample, one participant had a profound loss, four had a severe to profound loss, one had a severe loss, three had a moderate to severe loss, one had a mild to moderate loss, and one was profoundly deaf in the left ear only. Once again, it is important to note that despite the various levels of hearing loss, none of the participants considered themselves to be Deaf or a part of the Deaf community. Additionally, of the eleven participants, seven reported wearing hearing aids full time, one wore no hearing aids, and two reported wearing hearing aids only in class or at work. The sample consisted of five male and six female participants. The age range of the participants was 18-60 years of age with a mean age of 32.2 and a median of 21 years of age. Seven of the participants were

students (age range from 18-26; mean age 20.5) and four participants were non-students (age range 45-60; mean age of 52.2).

All eleven of the participants were raised in mainstream, hearing society for the majority of their lifetime and did not have strong ties to the Deaf community because the study is attempting to examine those individuals who do not have that community as a support or social system – to examine those who are unable to assimilate into neither the Deaf world (due to lack of association and/or acceptance) nor the hearing world (due to their hearing loss). Thus, these individuals do not have either community as a support or social system. Hearing impaired individuals who fit these specifications are difficult to track down as they often choose not to disclose and hearing loss is virtually an “invisible disability” (Matthews & Harrington, 2000). Due to the difficulty in identifying individuals with “invisible disabilities” such as hearing impairment, the sample size was limited.

### **Procedures**

In an attempt to recruit participants, the researcher used family members, advertising, and snowball sampling. The researcher advertised for participants through local audiologists, speech pathologists, and the Disabilities Resources Center. Due to doctor-patient confidentiality and HIPPA, the researcher was unable to access medical files to track down individuals who meet the specifications and thus, had to rely on advertisements to draw participants for the study. Several participants were recruited through the Disabilities Resources Center on the UK campus as well as through local audiologists and speech pathologists. Additionally, five participants were from the researcher’s own family (since the hearing impairment is genetic). “Some researchers

now advocate interviewing peers with whom one has an already established relationship and making use of everyday situations in which one is involved. Qualitative researchers have co-constructed narratives with family and friends” (Ellis, Kiesinger, & Tillmann-Healy, 1997). Once several possible participants were recruited through family and advertising, the researcher was able to utilize snowball sampling. The participants were asked if they knew of any others that fit the participant description. If so, the participants were asked to inform others about the study being conducted and invite them to contact the researcher if they were interested in participating. This led to a snowball sample to gain more participants to be interviewed for the study.

The in-depth interactive interview process proposed for this study allowed the researcher to delve deeper than basic survey questions would allow and to expand upon any answers that needed further consideration during the interview itself. Also, it allowed the researcher to develop a one-on-one relationship with the individual, making them feel more involved in the process and respected as an individual. A majority of previous research about deaf and hearing impaired individuals have used quantitative methods to compare deaf individuals with their hearing peers (Skelton & Valentine, 2003). However, as these methods do not allow the researcher to delve below the surface data or to expand on survey questions and answers, these quantitative data fail to capture the phenomenon at a more personal and individual level.

The importance of doing this study qualitatively is further emphasized as the viewpoint of the hearing impaired individual is often not examined fully. According to Matthews and Harrington (2000), the majority of research done on communication and disabilities is done from the point of view of an able-bodied researcher and thus is biased

from that perspective. Furthermore, research in this area often talks about the individuals with the “disability” as opposed to talking with them to gain their perspectives. Thus, in order to gain a deeper understanding of how the hearing impaired individual views their identity navigation it is important that qualitative studies are done to examine how *they* view their hearing loss and their identity surrounding it. Interactive interviewing was the best method for this as the participants were able to share their own thoughts and viewpoints with the researcher.

Once participants were recruited, the in-depth interview was conducted in-person and took approximately thirty minutes to an hour and a half per participant depending on the amount of detail the participant was willing to provide. The participants were given an informed consent form and were asked to read over this informed consent form. After any questions about the study were answered, the participants were asked to agree to participate in the study by signing the letter of informed consent provided. This informed consent was kept in a locked file cabinet separate from any audio-recordings or transcriptions of the interview process to separate any identifiable information from interview data.

The interview occurred at a time and location convenient to the participant and was audio-recorded. The recordings were then transcribed so that the interview could not be linked to the individual’s personal identity. The audio-recordings were then destroyed within two months of the interview date to further protect the personal identity of the participants involved in the study. The interviews themselves did not disclose the participant’s name so that the audio-recordings and transcriptions did not have any identifiable information in them – only general demographics were reported. Thus,

privacy was ensured for all participants. Moreover, any risks, such as providing responses to sensitive questions, were not beyond those experienced in everyday life. Additionally, given the nature of the interview procedures, the risk of loss of confidentiality or that a participant's identity be associated with one of these sensitive responses is extremely minimal ensuring that individual risks for participating in the study were minimal.

## CHAPTER SIX: RESULTS

Upon completion of the interviews, the researcher was able to identify the four layers proposed by the Communication Theory of Identity within the participants based upon their discussions of their hearing impairment. Within these four layers of identity – personal, relational, enacted, and communal – the researcher was able to identify themes as well as gaps between the layers of identity.

### **Personal Layer of Identity**

Several of the research questions examined how the participants felt about their hearing impairment on an individual level. The participants shared their personal thoughts and beliefs surrounding their hearing impairment and how it affected their identity. The common themes in the participants' personal layers of identity surrounded how they described their hearing impairment and its affect on their life, the importance of having a positive attitude, whether they defined being hearing impaired as a disability or a handicap (or neither), and whether, given the opportunity for normal hearing, they would change their hearing impairment.

### **Describing Hearing Impairment and Its Effect**

When asked how their hearing impairment has affected their life, several participants hesitated and were unsure of how to answer because it was not something that they considered – living with a hearing impairment is “normal” to them. Sarah stated that she “wasn’t sure what you’re looking for here” and was unsure on how to answer the question. After clarification, she stated that there might be some things that she has to do differently due to her hearing, but that she does not realize it – it is not something she thinks about. She went on to say, “As far as living in the hearing world, I guess I have

for most of my life so I don't think about it anymore. So I wouldn't really know the difference because I've always lived in the hearing world." When the researcher then clarified by asking if she saw her hearing impairment as normal, Sarah agreed that it was normal to her because it is all she has ever known. Will seemed to identify with this in his simple statement – "It's who I am." Shawn mirrored this statement and said, "It's part of who I am."

Despite this acceptance of the hearing impairment being a part of who they are, several participants emphasized the importance of not being labeled as *only* being deaf – that there was more to them than that. Renee, Andrew, Shawn, and Ashley shared this sentiment with the researcher and Ashley summed it up well when she stated, "I don't want to be labeled... I don't want people to be like that's the deaf girl. I don't want to have that label. I want people to see me apart from that." Morgan shares in this mindset when she explained that despite her hearing impairment she does not have to do anything different from that of a hearing individual: "I don't see why my life has to be any different from theirs. I don't do anything differently... I don't think. But then again, I've never heard. So I don't know if I'd change anything if I did hear." This same line of thought is described by Renee as she stated, "You know, most of the time, what I don't hear I don't know I'm not hearing. So I don't really know what I'm missing."

Andrew explained that even though he was born with the hearing loss, he was not diagnosed until he was five years old. He described his first memory of going to an audiologist to get fitted for hearing aids and compared himself to some of the other hearing impaired children in the office that he encountered:

I still remember sitting in the office with my best friend. I didn't really mind it [being diagnosed as hearing impaired]... didn't really care. I've known some

kids who will fight it. They'll take their hearing aids out and throw them against the walls and stuff. And I was never like that.

In this, Andrew explained how he had accepted his hearing loss as a part of who he was and had decided to accept it as a part of his life and not fight it.

### **Importance of a Positive Attitude**

In discussing how he accepted his hearing loss instead of fighting it, Andrew exemplified the importance of maintaining a positive outlook despite any challenges or obstacles. Other participants also went into how having a positive attitude was an important factor in navigating their identity as a hearing impaired individual. Shawn stated, "I'm not going to cry about it. It's whatever." He went on to make the distinction that "if you cry at every deaf joke made, then come on, you're going to be miserable. If you can laugh about it, then you're going to be laughing a lot." He also joked that it had its advantages and pointed out positives such as he didn't have to hear other's problems and could read and study without distractions from sounds and stated, "I like to look at it from the light that it could be 100 times worse... it could be so much worse. I'm thankful for what I have... I appreciate what I do have."

Shawn further explained the importance of keeping a positive outlook and not letting the hearing impairment define you or what you were capable of. Both Shawn and Ashley discussed having an experience with another hearing impaired individual when they were younger. They both explained that the other individual used their hearing impairment as an excuse or something to whine about – something the participants did not agree with or understand. Shawn explained his encounter with the negative individual and how it has strengthened him to become the positive person he is today:

She [the other hearing impaired individual] went about it with a loser attitude... like oh boohoo, I have a hearing problem... oh the world owes me because I have a hearing problem. It annoyed me so I avoided her. She saw it as the biggest obstacle, like her life was going to be defined by this disability. And that made me mad... and it made me change into the person I am – I didn't want to be like that. I was like look at you crying. What are you crying about? There are worse things than things being quieter.

He went on to explain:

It [the hearing impairment] definitely makes things more difficult. It is what you let it become. If you let it set you back, then it is going to set you back. It's a problem... you have a problem, you fix it. It's definitely a disability, but you deal with it and move along.

### **Defining Hearing Impairment as a Disability or Handicap**

When the participants were asked if they saw their hearing impairment as a disability or a handicap, the researcher received a variety of answers. Sarah, who also had the most severe hearing loss out of all the participants interviewed, stated, "Just because I can't hear... I can do anything. So I don't consider it either [a disability or a handicap]. I can do anything a hearing person can." Shawn shared this sentiment and stated that he labeled his hearing impairment as more of a "set-back" he had to overcome as opposed to a disability.

On the other hand, Will, Morgan, and Renee responded by explaining the differences they saw in the terms "disability" and "handicap" and that they identified hearing impairment as more of a disability than a handicap. Will agreed with this assessment and explained that he thought that "a handicap is more like if you are missing an arm or are physically impaired that way." Renee stated that her hearing impairment is "a disability. It disables me from hearing specific sounds. But it's not a handicap."

When asked to expand on why she did not view it as a handicap, Renee went on to say:

It is not preventing me from doing anything. I can walk, I can talk, I can watch TV – I just use subtitles, I can listen to music – I just increase the volume. There's nothing I can't do because of it.

Several participants, including the researcher, stated that they were told they would not be able to live normal lives, graduate from normal school, or even speak. However, they all reported going on and living normal lives despite being told they could not. Shawn explained his confusion at the shock people had when discovering he was hearing impaired when he shared a story about how he had made a play on his football team in high school and some people commented that it was so amazing that he did that despite his hearing loss: "I was like what does that have to do with anything. It's just interesting... people tell you that you can't do that, but what do they know?" The researcher agreed with his assessment and went on to share that doctors had told her mother that her and her sister (also hearing impaired) that they would never graduate from a normal high school, but that they had not let this determine the goals that they set for themselves or what they were capable of. Shawn expanded on this sentiment and went on to share that his doctors had told his parents that he would never talk and that he would rely on sign. He stated, "It's crazy, we weren't supposed to be able to do this, but here we are doing it."

Ben's response to how he defined his hearing impairment, as a disability or handicap, led into a comparison of growing up in the hearing world versus the Deaf world. He felt that having a hearing impairment was a disability, but it was even more so if the individual was a part of the Deaf community. He stated:

I guess I'm one of the lucky ones because I grew up in more of the hearing world so I was able to adapt. Because of that, it is a little less of a disability because I had an advanced education. But Deaf people... it is a major disability because they're limited.

This statement also exemplifies the disconnect that Ben and many of the other participants felt between themselves and the Deaf community – they did not quite fit into that community.

### **Gaining Normal Hearing**

To gain insight on how closely the individuals linked their hearing impairment to their identity, the researcher asked whether they would take normal hearing if it was magically offered to them (without surgery, costs, etc.). The participants' answers fell into one of two categories – yes, they would love to be able to hear what others hear or no, because their hearing impairment was too much a part of who they were. Andrew was one such participant who stated that he would not give up his hearing impairment. He stated, “I don't think I would take the opportunity for normal hearing. I say this because I feel like my hearing impairment has taught me much about being a better person and overcoming challenges.”

Shawn made the distinction that it would depend on when he had been offered the hearing: “If I was born and given that option... but after everything that I've been through, it's a part of me so I don't know if I would. I'm not desperate to change it – it is what it is.” Lexi also stated that she would not take normal hearing if offered: “It's become a part of who I am and you know – I'm fine for now.” Ashley agreed with this sentiment:

It's a part of who I am. It's a part of my family, it's a part of my heritage, it's a part of everything. It's made me who I am. And if anything it makes me a more well-rounded person. So I think I'd say no [to the offer of normal hearing].

Sarah answered the question surrounding whether or not she would take normal hearing if it was offered to her in a unique way by comparing her response to that of what her husband's would be:

I sure would do it – couldn't imagine why anybody wouldn't. Steve [her husband] wouldn't want me to because he thinks I would be a different person and that I would leave him. I probably will become a different person, but heck, I would do anything to be able to hear.

Also looking at the relational elements involved in his identity as a hearing impaired individual, Ben felt that he would take the normal hearing because he hates it when he misses something. He stated that he felt that “people would accept me in much better ways if I had normal hearing.”

Based upon Sarah and Ben's responses, these two individuals highlighted how the relational layers of identity (how their hearing impairment affected their relationships) are closely intertwined with the personal layer of identity as a hearing impaired person as they considered how others would feel about their having normal hearing.

### **Relational Layer of Identity**

The relational layer of identity was also addressed by participants during the interview process. Questions surrounding how they interacted with other individuals, both hearing and hearing impaired, and how those interactions influenced their identity examined the relational layer of identity in the participants. The common themes in the participants' relational layers of identity included negative communication interactions (and their effects), being faced with a burden of proof in interactions, the difficulty of group situations, and the differences between interactions with other hearing impaired individuals versus individuals with normal hearing.

## **Negative Communication Interactions**

When talking about different interactions they have had with hearing individuals, several participants discussed some negative reactions they have received when the hearing individual is unsure of how to communicate with them appropriately. Morgan stated, “Some people are very cordial about it and are accommodating and others don’t make the effort to be accommodating and can’t really identify with what it would be like to be hearing impaired.”

In an effort to explain a negative reaction that she has gotten from a hearing individual, Sarah told a story of a childhood friend who used to yell everything despite being repeatedly told by the participant that she did not need to do so. Sarah also mentioned that she had some clients in her current job that she would avoid working with because they would talk either really loud or really slow and never get anything done due to these communication tactics. Yelling was also highlighted by Shawn as a negative reaction that would offend him: “When people are talking at a regular volume to somebody else and then turn to me and start shouting, I don’t like that. I don’t like automatically being treated differently.”

Another negative interaction that participants noted was when individuals whisper to “test” their hearing. Andrew explained this when he stated, “Yeah, people just don’t think. I’ve had people sit behind me and whisper at me since I couldn’t hear and I’d turn around and catch them.” Additionally, Ashley stated that she had classmates come up and tap on her hearing aids when she was younger – something she reported as being “very annoying.”

When discussing negative interactions in one-on-one relations with a hearing person, Sarah explained that it is easier to talk to someone that she knows as opposed to someone new. She discussed how it is easier to talk to someone who already knows about her hearing loss because she does not have to deal with the difficulties in getting a hearing person whom she just met to talk to her normally:

A lot of times when you meet a stranger you've got to let them know, hey I can't hear. They say, oh I'm sorry, and then they won't talk to you anymore. That's because they've never been around one [a hearing impaired person] and it scares them – they don't know how to. So they just walk away from me like I'm some dummy or something.

Being considered dumb or being labeled as “deaf and dumb” was a stigma present in several interviews. Sarah discussed how some individuals automatically assume her to be less intelligent because of her hearing loss and how she usually addresses it by “just letting it go unless they say something stupid to me – then they're gonna hear from me.” Additionally, this stigma was echoed by Renee when she stated, “I've always had the scenario when a hearing person will talk to me like I have a mental handicap rather than a hearing impairment.”

Ashley also pointed out that she was aware and often confronted with this negative connotation of being “deaf and dumb”. In expanding on this negative stereotype, Morgan got emotional when asked about her biggest worry in communicating with hearing individuals. She stated:

My biggest concern is that I hate to be made to feel stupid. And that is the biggest thing – is that you are made to feel inadequate or stupid. People think that if you are hearing impaired, you're stupid... you're dumb. Years ago it was called 'deaf and dumb'. That's what they labeled you as. I think that label carries on today and I don't think society has been educated that way. And it's very upsetting because we're not stupid.

Several participants stated that their hearing impairment can lead to embarrassing or hard to navigate situations. Morgan noted:

It can be embarrassing at times because you do embarrass yourself because sometimes you are put in a position where you answer a question you thought was asked and it wasn't. You know, there you are looking like a total idiot.

This difficulty in navigating certain situations when the participant did not hear something but does not want to bring it to others attention was also discussed by Andrew, Shawn, and Ashley as they discussed the use of the “nod and smile” – when the participant nods along and smiles like they understand when they really do not. Andrew stated that this is a dangerous tactic to use at times because he has agreed to things he did not really mean to or walked out of a classroom having no idea what the assignment was or if he had any homework. Shawn echoed the danger in utilizing the “nod and smile” by joking about how he had answered questions awkwardly or incorrectly because of his use of this tactic to cover up the fact that he did not hear something.

Another negative reaction several participants touched on during their interviews was the use of “never mind” or the refusal of someone else to repeat themselves. Ben explained, “To me that’s an insult when you say to a deaf person ‘never mind’. You’re disrespecting the fact that they have a disability.” Andrew also identified this as a negative reaction that he gets from hearing individuals:

The worst that can really make me mad beyond points of repair is ‘forget about it’ or ‘don’t worry about it’, or ‘never mind’. I’m just like repeat it one more time, just one more. They will say it doesn’t even matter. Well let me decide if it matters or not. It’s interesting, but at the same time it sucks because they decide for you what is important for you to hear.

## **Burden of Proof**

The idea of facing a “burden of proof” was discussed by several participants as it often accompanies an invisible disability such as hearing impairment since the disability is not physically noticeable. When dealing with his hearing impairment with colleagues in the workplace, Will said he was often faced with this “burden of proof” when his co-workers think that he “selects his hearing”. In describing this, he explained that they feel like he is picking and when he has a hearing loss: “They think I select my hearing and I don’t hear when I don’t want to hear.”

Will further illustrated the “burden of proof” and disbelief surrounding his hearing loss as he discussed some of the negative interactions he has had with co-workers. He explained that on occasion he will catch that an individual is talking as they walk away – he does not understand what they have said, he just could tell they were talking. However, the individual will turn and say “you heard me, what’d I say?” Will explained that the other individual often does not understand that there is a difference between being *aware* that he or she said something and actually *understanding* what he or she said. Additionally, he says that he has been called out and doubted when he reads an individual’s lips from the side: “They say, how do you read lips sideways? I’m like come on man, I’ve been doing this a long time.” He goes on to say that when people do believe that he has a hearing loss “a lot of times they don’t want to cope with me or they don’t care.”

Ben also discussed the “burden of proof” he was faced with surrounding his hearing impairment and reported using a more aggressive approach to deal with the “burden of proof” he faced in interactions than Will did. He said that sometimes people

will say “you heard me” and his response is usually: “Really? It must be nice that you know a deaf person heard you. How does that work?” Ben stated that the hearing individual usually does not know how to respond at that point or they will go back and repeat themselves.

This issue of disbelief about the hearing impairment was also identified by Nick in his description of an event in which a coach thought that the participant was ignoring him and his instructions. When Nick went to explain that he was hearing impaired, the coach did not believe him: “He thought I was ignoring him, but I just didn’t hear what he said. And I was like, no I have a hearing loss and he was like no – he didn’t believe me. He thought I was being sarcastic.” Nick went on to state that he and the coach had to have a meeting with the team manager before they could finally get the coach to realize that he really was not trying to ignore him – he really was hearing impaired.

### **Group Situations**

The difficulty involved in navigating group situations was a theme that several participants discussed during the interviews. Sarah stated, “In a group, like with a lot of people, that can be difficult – because you’re trying to catch who is talking.” Will elaborated on the difficulty in a group setting by explaining how lost he was when communicating in a group because he can not hear everything. He stated:

You know, my doctor, she has this test. She has this thing – she can make it sound like there are people around me and then she says words to me. It’s bad. I think she says like 100 words and I get 40 or so – out of 100. With my hearing aids. Without my hearing aids – forget it.

Renee also describes the challenges in communicating in a group situation and how this affects her communicative behavior in that group: “If I’m with a group of people, I miss a lot of conversation, and I know I do, so I’m quieter.”

The struggle to communicate in a group setting was exemplified by Andrew as he discussed the concern of missing things and wondering later if he would have heard everything if the conversation would have gone differently: “In group settings when it is really hard because you can’t look at everyone at once and the conversation goes around. I’m like what did I really miss? Did I miss something important?” This concern or worry about missing things was also conveyed by Sarah, Ben, Morgan, Nick, Renee, Shawn, and Ashley as one of their major concerns when they are communicating with hearing individuals whether in group settings, one-on-one, in the classroom, or at work. Shawn stated that he will often unknowingly repeat things in group settings that someone else has already said because he did not hear them say it. He goes on to describe how he laughs off situations like that to break the ice and make it less awkward.

The difficulty communicating in groups was discussed by Morgan as well: It is difficult to participate in a group conversation because you miss so much because everyone is talking and you can’t read lips from everybody at once. And if they don’t know, they won’t accommodate that and a lot of times, even if they do know, they don’t accommodate it because they can’t identify with that. So it can be very frustrating, demeaning... it can make you feel stupid. And it does at times. But you just go on with it and accept it for what it is. I choose to live in the hearing world, not the Deaf. So this is a part of it.

In that statement, Morgan not only explains the difficulty in communicating in a group, but shows how she feels disconnected from both the hearing and the Deaf worlds as she does not clearly fit into either group.

### **Others with Hearing Impairment vs. Normal Hearing**

When asked to discuss the distinction between communicating with a hearing individual as opposed to another hearing impaired individual like themselves, many participants noted differences in the interaction. Will stated it was an awareness issue – people with normal hearing are not as aware of the challenges in communication because

they have never experienced what being hearing impaired is like and they forget to make sure that he can follow along in conversations or work meetings. He goes on to state:

A lot of times that person who can hear does not talk to the [hearing impaired] person – to them. They just talk to everybody in a group. What I'm saying is that let's say you have regular hearing and I don't. You talk to everybody and I don't know what you are talking about because you're not looking at me instead of talking to me and everybody else can hear what you're saying. They don't do that.

Another way Will highlighted the differences between talking to others with a hearing impairment and talking to individuals with normal hearing was in his discussion of understanding (or the lack thereof) when it came to the distinction between hearing noise and making sense of it:

A lot of people don't understand there's two ways of hearing. Yeah, you can hear noise, but you have to know what's going on to understand what they are saying. Oh man, sometimes people just don't get it. Or maybe they don't want to get it. And they think that because I have hearing aids it fixes everything. That's wrong. They don't fix it. I have nerve loss. It just makes everything louder – doesn't make it so I can understand. It's not the same as normal hearing.

In this, Will distinguishes the difference between hearing and understanding and exemplifies that people with normal hearing do not recognize this difference or realize that hearing aids do not magically provide him with normal hearing capabilities. This sentiment was supported by Ben when he stated:

It's never the question of whether a hearing impaired person can hear things. They hear you... that's never the question. The question is did they just understand what they just heard. That's the biggest thing. Hearing is one thing, but understanding what you heard is another thing.

Shawn exemplified the difference between talking *about* his hearing impairment with someone who has a hearing impairment as well as opposed to someone who has normal hearing. He joked and laughed as he explained how hard it is to describe his hearing impairment when a hearing person asks what it is like to be hearing impaired:

I don't know what to tell them. I'm like what's it like to hear? They don't usually have a response for that either. What's being deaf like? What's it like to hear? I don't know. I can't describe it to you. It's quiet?

He goes on to describe that there is a difference in talking to someone else with a hearing impairment because they *know* what it is like to live with a hearing impairment: "There's a difference between knowing... like I can explain it but they haven't gone through the same thing."

### **Enacted Layer of Identity**

To examine participants' enacted layers of identity, participants were asked questions surrounding how they actually expressed themselves as a hearing impaired individual in day-to-day activities and in the different aspects of their lives. The themes identified through the participants discussions of how they expressed their hearing impairment were basic day-to-day navigation of the hearing impairment, security issues and concerns, navigating in school, navigating in the workplace, wearing hearing aids, disclosure, dealing with stigma, and the use of humor.

### **Navigating the Impairment Day-to-Day**

In discussing how they navigate their hearing impairment on a daily basis, several participants highlighted the fact that they do not feel they need to do anything differently than a hearing person. Sarah discussed how she does not let her hearing impairment stop her from doing anything that a hearing person can do even if the activity requires hearing. She joked about how she goes through drive thrus to order food from fast food restaurants and relies on the screen to tell her if they got her order. She says if it does not work out from the speaker box, she will just drive up to the window and tell them that she's deaf and order there.

Will also reported not letting his hearing impairment guide what activities he could participate in. He stated that he even went to indoor movie theaters. He explained that it is mostly just watching what is going on, but he still goes. However, he goes on to state:

They [the movie theaters] don't know what they are dealing with. They don't know. A person who works there says, are you hard of hearing? They offer me these head phones. What good is that for someone with no hearing? I think they should have [captioning] all the time.

He goes on to talk about how with the technology today "they don't do enough" to help individuals with disabilities like hearing impairment. He stated, "They're not communicating. We don't know what's going on. We have to figure out what's going on to make it. That's not ok."

### **Security Issues**

Some individuals, including the researcher, mentioned that one of their concerns surrounding their hearing impairment had to do with security and safety. Andrew explained that he was given an employee parking pass for campus so that he would not have to walk to his dorms at night: "If someone were to come up behind me, especially in the dark, I wouldn't be able to hear them." The researcher shared this same fear as well as that of not being able to hear if someone broke into her apartment. Lexi also stated that riding her bike makes her nervous because she can not hear cars behind her.

In expanding on security concerns, Andrew discussed the fear of not knowing what was going on at night and explained that once he takes his hearing aids out for the night, he will not hear anything. He shared a story about how he had a gunshot go off right outside his dorm one night. The police came with sirens and he never knew anything was going on until the next morning when his roommates were talking about it.

He stated, “I didn’t wake up at all. I didn’t hear anything. That’s kind of scary.” Ashley also shared that her biggest concerns surrounded security: “I don’t want to walk around campus. I’m hesitant to live alone... being taken advantage of because of this loss.”

Despite this concern for safety due to the lack of hearing, several participants mentioned that their hearing impairment has made them more aware of their surroundings and more reliant and tuned into their other senses. In noting this heightened awareness, Nick stated that “people with a hearing loss tend to pay more attention to people” and both Will and Lexi stated that they might not hear sirens from an emergency vehicle on the road, but they notice everyone else pulling off so they figure they better do the same. Additionally, Will stated:

The other thing is vibrations. When you’re deaf, I don’t know what it is. It’s like it builds up all those years and you notice stuff. Like if someone opens the door downstairs, you don’t hear it but you know someone is there. It’s something you can feel.

Expanding on this, both Sarah and Will stated that they still could enjoy music, even if it was mainly through vibrations and bass. Will explained, “I don’t know the words to music, but I can feel it... the vibrations. Even if I can’t hear it. I can feel it – they are playing something over there. I can feel that... like a static.”

### **In School**

Several participants highlighted the obstacles and stigma they faced when navigating school with their hearing impairment. Ben discussed the challenges he faced with fitting in despite his hearing impairment when he was in school:

Unless you were a friend of somebody that was well-respected – then you’d have an edge because you were friends with that person so it was kind of like a way in. I had those kinds of friends. My brother [Will] didn’t have that... he didn’t have those kinds of friends. His sister [Sarah] was the one who protected him in high

school. Luckily I was able to figure out ways to overcome it, to make a joke of it. But it does have an effect on you. Even today, I think it does.

Shawn also discussed the difficulties in being picked on in school when he was younger. He explained that he was “self-conscious about it for a long time”, but grew to learn to deal with it in a more positive manner and laugh off any ridicule that he faced.

In discussing school and life prior to college, Andrew stated, “Grade school and high school were hell. I’m not going to lie. They were hell.” He went on to explain that the teachers were unaware and not skilled in working with a student with a hearing impairment and this made his academic career difficult before college. However, after graduating from high school and starting at college, he explained that things got better due to the campus Disabilities Resources Center and accommodations that they provided for him to ensure that he was able to follow along in classes. Ashley shared similar experiences as she stated that she had a hard time in high school, but the Disabilities Resources Center in college has made obtaining necessary accommodations much easier.

However, despite these accommodations, Andrew highlighted the fact that he has to do double the work as most hearing students because he has to not only attend class, but spend time outside of class re-reading all the transcripts provided for him from what was said in class. Also, Andrew reported that not all his teachers have been willing to work with the Disabilities Resources Center which has caused some difficulties as they fight against providing him with the necessary accommodations. Additionally, he stated that because of his hearing impairment he has to be aware of and navigate how big the class is – lecture halls make it hard to hear – and if the professor is foreign and has an accent or not. However, despite some of the difficulties in navigating the classroom,

Andrew continued to state how important the Disabilities Resources Center, and their discretion, has been in helping him academically.

### **In the Workplace**

In describing how they navigate and express (or not) their hearing impairment, several participants discussed difficulties in the workplace. Sarah described how she did not tell her employer about her hearing impairment until after he had hired her because of the worry that he would dismiss her right away due to her hearing loss:

I think they can take advantage of that. You know, they think, they can't do it – it's a deaf person – we don't want to deal with that. Or I don't want to take the time with that person because she's deaf.

She went on to discuss how it can be hard to get a job when individuals know you have a hearing loss, especially if the job requires the use of a phone because many companies are not willing to work with the hearing impaired individual. Will echoed this concern when he stated that his biggest worry is if he lost his job: “I'm worried if I ever lost my job, I'm screwed. Because society today... if you ever lost your job and with my hearing and something like that, I'm not going to get rehired.” Even Nick, the participant with the least severe hearing loss, discussed how he was nervous in applying for his last job because he was unsure of how the employer would view his hearing impairment.

Gaining the proper accommodations to succeed in the workplace was another struggle identified by several participants. Morgan described several difficulties that she had encountered with accommodating her hearing impairment in the workplace. She described how even though her boss knows she has a hearing impairment, there are days that he is very unaccommodating and rudely blunt about her hearing loss. She explained,

“It makes you feel very small. And it’s very degrading. It makes you feel stupid.” She goes on later to say, “The thing is he doesn’t understand. He has no idea what it is like.”

Despite the difficulties in the workplace, several participants mentioned how technology was helping them overcome some of the challenges they have had to face. Both Sarah and Will stated that they ask their co-workers to email them instead of calling. Will explained, “I tell people don’t call me – email me. Then I can answer you back. But don’t call me. I don’t like phones. Ugh. I hate phones.” Ben takes the use of technology in the workplace a step further in dealing with his hearing impairment. He reported using instant messages on his computer during a meeting with another individual who was also in the meeting to have them answer questions or fill in the gaps that he missed or did not hear.

### **Wearing Hearing Aids**

With the increasing technology available, several participants stated that they have gotten help from hearing aids. However, several participants stated that this provides further complications at times as some hearing individuals view the hearing aids as a “cure all” for their hearing impairment when it is not. Will discussed this as he stated, “I think hearing aids help you know when someone is talking to you, but you still gotta look and read lips.” He went on to explain that the hearing aids may amplify things for him, but they do not give him normal hearing – there are still issues with clarity and people do not understand that.

Supporting this perception of hearing aids as a “cure” for hearing impairment, Morgan discussed how her boss had been pressuring her to get hearing aids, but that she has doubts and knows that getting hearing aids will not “cure” the problem:

He thinks that by me getting a hearing aid, I'm going to be perfect. And that is going to be another challenge to try and explain to this guy that just because I have a hearing aid in, it's not going to be a perfect world and I'm not going to hear like he hears. Because somebody has a hearing aid, it doesn't mean their hearing is fixed. It just enables them to hear sounds and things. It is not going to correct everything... it's just not going to happen.

Another complication identified by the participants surrounding wearing hearing aids is that it sometimes takes away their choice of whether or not they want to disclose about their hearing impairment. Will stated that he quit wearing his hearing aids for a while when he was younger due to the fact that it highlighted his hearing impairment and caused others to pick on him. The researcher herself related to this as she quit wearing hearing aids in high school and has never worn them since due to wanting to avoid unnecessary stigma and disclosure about her hearing impairment. Additionally, Renee described how she faced ridicule because of her hearing aids and eventually quit wearing them: "I was made fun of, of course, for my hearing aids when they were in so I took them out or if I wore them, I wore my hair down."

### **Disclosing about the Hearing Impairment**

Disclosure was an issue that was addressed differently by each of the participants as they explained how they go about the disclosure process and why (or why not) they choose to disclose. Sarah stated that she preferred to wait and have an interaction with the other person for a while before letting them know about her hearing impairment. Her motivation to disclose stemmed from wanting a normal communicative interaction with the other individual. She explained, "I do that on purpose because I want them to know, just because I am deaf, I can still communicate with them."

Morgan shared the same thoughts and motivations surrounding choosing not to disclose right away:

Most often they aren't comfortable with it and may shy away from me because of it. And maybe we could become friends or have a connection and have a nice conversation and maybe once we get into the conversation and they feel comfortable with me, then yes, I might be comfortable telling them. But right off the bat, no because most people will then be uncomfortable and be like well how do I talk to somebody like that.

This discomfort in communicating with a hearing impaired person was also identified by Renee as she explained how her roommate had originally said that she did not know how to talk to the participant due to her hearing impairment. It was not until they got to know each other better that the roommate realized that she did not have to communicate any differently.

In discussing the choice of whether or not to disclose, Renee explained that she avoided disclosure at first because she did not want them to immediately identify her in connection with her hearing impairment:

I don't want their first impression of me to be that's the girl with the hearing loss. I want them to know me for me. Yeah, that's part of who I am, but that's not who I am. So I want them to know me, my personality, my likes, my dislikes, and stuff like that before they know that I'm partially deaf.

The researcher was able to relate to this sentiment as she has often chosen not to disclose for the same reasons. Andrew touched on this issue as well as he explained the difference between being identified as the *deaf student* and being recognized as the *student who happened to have a hearing impairment*. Shawn explained this clearly when he said "I don't want people to meet the deaf guy. I want them to meet me." Beth also stated "I never tell people about my hearing problems when I first meet them. I want them to know me for who I am."

Will elaborated on the difficulties of the disclosure process as he explained, "It is very hard for me to tell them. Sometimes they just don't want to work with it. They say

screw it. I have a hard time sometimes.” Despite this difficulty in disclosure, Will said that he usually does disclose about his hearing fairly early in the interaction so that they can be aware of it and talk to him in the right way – making sure that he can see them when they talk. He stated, “I tell them who I am. I tell them right away. It’s who I am.” Once he has disclosed, he discussed that he deals with negative reactions by walking away: “If they can’t communicate how I need them to, I walk away.”

The difficulty in disclosing was also mentioned by Ashley as she stated she always struggles with how and when to disclose. She explained this internal conflict as she described her inner thoughts as she is debating on how to disclose: “How do I bring this up? In that awkward beginning of the relationship thing. I think that’s the worst part of the whole thing... like how do I bring this up?” To make the process more difficult, Ashley goes on to discuss how several people have found out about her hearing impairment and have avoided her because of it: “They’re like eehhhh... disabilities? And they back off.” She explained that after getting this reaction a few times, she has become more hesitant to disclose.

Ben stated that he never discloses about his hearing loss when he first meets someone. He waits until they catch on through noticing his hearing aids, his speech impairment or his need to have them repeat themselves. Once they catch on, he says he will just tell them he is deaf at that point. Nick also explained how he avoids telling people out-right about his hearing loss: “I usually just don’t tell them unless something comes up and I feel like I have to tell them.” Additionally, Lexi said that it depended on the person and stated that she usually does not tell others except for teachers who might need to know in the classroom setting.

Several participants mentioned that they often attempted to downplay their hearing impairment and use humor to disclose about it. Shawn says that he will “crack a deaf joke or something and if they catch on great.” Additionally, Andrew reported using humor to “break the ice” or to talk about his hearing impairment. Shawn talked about downplaying the hearing loss when she discloses: “I don’t know the best way to go about it [disclosing], but I think you should just not make a big deal about it.”

The use of humor and downplaying the hearing loss were also reported by Ashley as she explained that disclosure is usually “a really quick side note thing – usually in a joking manner.” Beth also stressed that she wants the hearing person to realize that she is not any different once they know about her hearing loss: “I explain to them that I can hear because I have hearing aids and not to treat me any different. I am still the same girl that you knew before.”

### **Dealing with Stigma**

In dealing with stigma and stereotypes, the participants discussed several different tactics and strategies. Sarah stated that she usually just lets it go unless the individual says something rude or mean. She discusses the use of turning the tables on the other individual if they are rude when she says:

I don’t think I’d be very nice. I mean I will let them know how it bothers me. I will try to hurt their feelings to let them know. I mean why should we have to put up with that? Yeah, let them know what it feels like.

Renee also stated that being on the offense was one way that she dealt with stigma and people who “saw themselves as better than me because of it [the hearing impairment] and they thought it would be a good idea to rub it in my face.” She said that due to her

aggressive, outgoing personality and the fact that her “opinions intimidated people” – that “people knew better than to say anything” to her.

Will talked about dealing with stigma in a more passive way. He stated, “If they don’t want to talk to me, what am I going to do? If you can’t deal with people the right way, then don’t talk to me.” When explaining how he typically deals with stigma and negative reactions, Andrew also stated that he used the more passive strategy of just ignoring them and walking away:

I’ve never really had a problem with people knowing or looking for acceptance from them. I can go through this life two ways... with you or without you. I’ll answer any questions they have as long as they are seriously asking.

In discussing the negative connotations he perceived to be connected to hearing impairment, Will exemplifies the challenges he has had in dealing with stigma and stereotypes in the hearing community:

I don’t know what it is, but it’s tough today. I don’t know if it’s because they don’t want to make time to work with me or if they are busy or... I don’t know. You have to know how to adjust and move on and just live with it. Don’t let it bother you. Just move on. I learn and I adjust.

On the other hand, Ben feels that dealing with his hearing impairment today is easier than it was when he was younger:

When I was young I was very non-social. It was because of my hearing. I was too embarrassed. I was shy because of it too. But back in my day... today it is more acceptable, but back then it was like you’re abnormal because you wear hearing aids, you don’t say your ‘s’s and ‘t’s – you talk different. So they kind of pick on you. Today it is still around, but back then it was really bad.

Morgan agreed with Ben in the fact that it is more acceptable to have a hearing loss today than it was when she was younger:

In my day, you never told anybody you had a hearing loss. So everyone always assumed you heard. If you were to tell someone that you had a hearing loss, it

was like as if you had a disease and they didn't want anything to do with you. So it was always kept very quiet. So I never really discussed it.

## **Humor**

Several participants mentioned the use of humor to deal with the disclosure process, stigma, and as a coping mechanism. Renee joked about being able to read lips and eavesdrop on others from across the room. She stated that "I get the good scoop sometimes" as she laughed about this inside joke of being able to read lips. Andrew joked about the differences in hearing with hearing aids as opposed to what he is used to hearing without hearing aids. He laughed as he described how he thought his speakers in his car were great until he got his hearing aids and realized that they were completely blown. Both the researcher and Andrew joked and laughed as they talked about family members who had recently gotten hearing aids and were startled by the fact that something like paper made so much noise or that the turn signal in a car was so annoying. Shawn joked about having to "buy one of his senses" when he has to go buy batteries for his hearing aids: "Whenever one of my batteries goes out, I have to go out and pick up what everyone else has already... just implanted in their head."

Despite the positive use of humor, several participants mentioned that there is a line when it comes to humor – there is a point in which it is not appropriate anymore.

Andrew stated:

Jokes can be a sensitive subject. I don't mind joking about my hearing, but it kind of depends on the person. There is definitely a line between what is ok to joke about and what is not. I hate it when people joke and cover their mouth so I can't see their lips... that's not cool.

He went on to give another story in which joking was not appropriate because it threatened his safety and security when a classmate joked about being able to sneak into his house because no one would hear him. To further explain this, Shawn stated:

There's a difference between joking around and being malicious. You don't want someone to be malicious towards you... they can get in your head. As positive as you are, people can be mean and they can use it to make you look bad or make you feel bad. I'm positive about it and I'll make jokes about it, but if you're using me as a victim and categorizing me as a weakling or a handicapped person or something, I'm not going to be happy.

When it came to weighing the positives and negatives surrounding the use of humor, the positives seemed to outweigh the negatives as long as the humor was deemed appropriate by the hearing impaired individual. Ashley commented, "I use humor for everything. It's a huge defensive mechanism for me." Andrew drove home the importance of using humor as a coping mechanism when he stated:

You have to have some sort of humor about it and be able to laugh and make fun of it sometimes. If you take your disability seriously all the time, you would die by the time you were thirty from the stress of dealing with it.

Both Shawn and Lexi also stated that they used humor as a coping mechanism. Shawn stated:

You have to learn to laugh at it. If someone calls you four-eyes because of glasses, you laugh at it. If someone comments on your hearing aids, you have to laugh at it. I laugh at deaf jokes more than anybody. I like to think I make up more deaf jokes than anybody.

### **Communal Layer of Identity & Social Identity**

The final layer of identity, the communal layer, examines how groups with collective beliefs influence individuals' identities. The themes in groups that arose when exploring the communal layer of the participants consisted of the connection (or lack

thereof) they felt with the Deaf community and their family and friends and the support they receive from those groups.

### **Deaf Community**

When examining their connection to the Deaf community and whether it was a source of finding support from other individuals with hearing loss, many participants discussed the separation and exclusion they felt from this community. Sarah explains that the only experience that she has had with the Deaf community is when she went to a school for the deaf for five years before moving into a public school. She stated that this experience in the school for the deaf was a good thing for her as it allowed her to learn how to talk and read lips despite her profound hearing loss (92-96% loss in both ears). Will stated that he also attended a school for the deaf to learn how to speak and read lips.

Outside of the school for the deaf, Sarah stated that her only other experience with the Deaf community was when she ran into an old friend from the school she attended as a child some 20 years prior. She stated that her husband was the one that ran into her and set up a dinner for them to get together, but Sarah was hesitant about seeing this friend. She stated that the friend had forgotten what they had taught at the school for the deaf – how to talk and read lips – and had married a Deaf guy and reverted to using sign language. However, Sarah said that she went to the dinner her husband had arranged and it ended up being an uncomfortable experience:

We went to her house for dinner and it was hard to communicate because they signed to each other all the time. I don't understand why she quit speaking. It seems like they have a crutch and can't communicate with people outside their Deaf world. I was uncomfortable because I couldn't communicate with her anymore. They were blown away that I was so deaf, but that I didn't sign – that I could communicate like a hearing person. I didn't enjoy the experience and I have never seen her or spoken with her since.

Several participants mentioned having some limited experiences with the Deaf community through attending an event or two in that community. Shawn stated that he had no problem with the Deaf community, but he did not consider himself a part of it. He explained, “There’s nothing against the Deaf community and stuff, but I’d rather be a deaf... like a person who happens to be deaf. Like a person with glasses, but my ‘glasses’ just happen to be on my ears.” In examining his experience with the Deaf community, Shawn truly exemplified the disconnect many hearing impaired individuals feel between themselves and the Deaf community. He talked about how he was invited to play on a Deaf team and was “nervous about it.” He went on to explain:

I was nervous about meeting other deaf people... I didn’t know how to converse with them. I didn’t know... I felt like a regular person being tossed into a Deaf atmosphere. Chances are they are just like me, but I don’t know... it’s like alright, these people are Deaf and here I am deaf myself, but I’m not sure if I’ll be able to communicate with them or fit in.

Ben is the participant who reported the most involvement with the Deaf community. He stated that his wife (who is also deaf) and he attend an event in the Deaf community every now and then. Despite this occasional attendance and involvement in the Deaf community, Ben stated, “I don’t get too involved with them. It’s too much drama.” When asked to expand on this statement and what he meant by “drama”, Ben explained:

They [the Deaf community] are not tied in with the hearing world. So their lives are different. There’s too much drama. They make something out of something that’s not – something becomes more than it needs to be. So we don’t get too involved because you know, you can just do something or whatever and they’ll take it out of context and make a drama out of it. They are not all that way, but for the most part. We just kind of like to come and go.

In this statement, Ben makes a distinction between the Deaf community and the hearing world.

An important factor to consider in examining whether or not hearing impaired individuals feel the Deaf community is (or could be) part of their communal layer of identity surrounds whether or not they feel welcome in that community. Ben was able to describe the disconnect he felt between himself and the Deaf community as he discussed how they viewed him differently due to his ability to use lip reading and voice as opposed to sign language:

They'll single you out because even though you're hearing impaired, you grew up in the hearing world. So they'll say, oh he's a hearing world person. Most of the Deaf people I know, a lot of them single me out already. They've done that for years because I grew up in the hearing world and the way I carry myself as a hearing person, it makes them... they can't somehow fit me in. You don't sign and you're hearing impaired... some of them are really sensitive about that.

The researcher herself could relate to this feeling like an outsider as she had an experience where she was introduced to a Deaf person and referred by that Deaf person as a "talkie" because she communicated with voice and lip reading instead of sign despite her hearing impairment. This exclusion from the Deaf community was also discussed by Renee as she explained how she felt when she attempted to participate in a Deaf event: "I felt like an outsider even though I was one of them more or less." Ashley shared this mindset when she explained, "You're stuck in the middle. I can hear a little, but I can't hear a lot so what part am I in. You're still an outsider even though you're an insider."

Ben expanded further on the disconnect between the Deaf community and hearing impaired individuals that grow up learning to speak instead of sign. He stated, "It's [the Deaf community] a culture and they don't associate with the hearing world." He talked about how they view it as disrespectful to the Deaf culture when a hearing impaired person grows up without learning how to sign. However, Ben explains why he views it differently:

It has nothing to do with respect. It's just your life is so much easier when you understand someone who speaks. It makes your life so much easier. Your life becomes more difficult when you rely on that hand communication so you don't know what's going on [in the hearing world].

This statement showcases the clear divide between the Deaf community and their cultural values and the hearing impaired individuals in this study who have learned to speak and read lips. They clearly do not feel like they fit into the Deaf community and are often excluded due to their ability to operate as a hearing individual despite their hearing impairment.

### **Family and Friends**

When discussing whether or not they felt they had support and could relate to others about their hearing impairment, several participants reported leaning on their family members. Seven of the eleven participants (Sarah, Will, Ben, Morgan, Renee, Andrew, and Ashley) reported that hearing loss ran in the family so they had others they could relate to and talk about their hearing impairment and any difficulties with. The other four participants (Nick, Shawn, Lexi, and Beth) reported not having any family members with a hearing impairment.

Morgan and Ashley discussed how it is helpful to be able to talk to their family members who are also hearing impaired about the challenges or difficulties they have experienced due to their hearing impairment. Ashley noted that her family is a support group for each other as they all navigate their hearing impairment. However, Morgan went on to explain that this is not the case with a family member who has normal hearing because the family member with normal hearing does not completely understand what it is like to live with a hearing impairment. On the other hand, Shawn reported that none of his family members were hearing impaired but that they still played a role in helping him

navigate his hearing impairment. He talked about how his parents pushed him and told him that he could do anything and how his brother would never let him use his hearing as an excuse for anything. Additionally, he explained, “They never felt sorry for me. There was never a sorry feeling... it was always work a little harder.” Thus, even though none of Shawn’s family shared in his hearing impairment, he still saw them as a support system to help him get through any challenges.

Ben connected whether or not a hearing impaired individual will grow up as part of the Deaf community with that individual’s upbringing and their parents’ outlook on the hearing impairment. He described how his mother made sure that he got an education in the hearing world and because of that he did not become a part of the Deaf community and learn sign. This family tie to whether or not the individual becomes a part of the Deaf community was also explained by Renee. She explained that even though several of her family members were hearing impaired as well, none of them was involved in the Deaf community. Therefore, she said that she felt no connection to this community either.

Outside of family members, many participants stated that they did not know other individuals their own age with a hearing impairment. Andrew stated that he had no friends his own age with a hearing impairment (and no family members his own age) until he accidentally met someone at college. He stated that meeting her (the other individual with a hearing impairment) “was like a fairy tale. I’ve never known someone my own age with a hearing loss so it was so cool to find someone to finally relate to.” Shawn also mentioned that he only has one friend with a hearing impairment and he did not meet her until he came to college as well.

## **Identity Gaps**

When examining the layers of identity that participants reported, there were several participants who shared conflicting information within how they navigated their identities.

### **Personal and Relational Gaps**

One such gap that was identified within several participants was between the personal and relational layers. For example, Sarah emphasized the fact that her hearing impairment is not a disability or a handicap – that she does not feel limited in what she is capable of doing (personal layer). However, at the same time she reported that her biggest worries stem around whether she will be able to understand and relate to others with normal hearing:

There's always frustrations. When you have to talk to someone and you worry am I going to be able to understand this person? Or am I going to have to make this person repeat? That's probably my main concern – to be sure that I catch on every time because I don't – I miss a lot. Yeah, that's the biggest one – the hardest thing.

As shown here, Sarah displays a gap in her secure personal identity as a hearing impaired person and the worries she discusses in communicating with others (relational layer).

Morgan and Renee further demonstrate the gap between the relational and personal layers of identity. Morgan displayed an insecurity in how to identify as she explained that she is just like a hearing person (personal layer), but went on to discuss later difficulties with interactions with hearing individuals as she explained the occasional embarrassment she feels when answering a question that was not asked because she did not hear correctly. Renee exhibited a gap between her personal and relational identities when she stated earlier in the interview that she identified as a

hearing impaired individual (personal layer), but later stated that she worries about how others will see her: “I’m just worried about how I’ll be viewed. I don’t want to be viewed as less than I am because of my hearing impairment.” Thus, there is a gap between her personal identification as a hearing impaired person and her concern about how her interactions will be influenced by the hearing impairment.

### **Personal and Enacted Gaps**

Another gap in the identity layers displayed by participants was a gap between their personal identity as a hearing impaired individual and how they expressed that identity (enacted layer). For example, Ashley did not want to go to the Disabilities Resources Center because she didn’t want to draw attention to herself in her classrooms. She stated, “I don’t like singling myself out.” This was echoed by Renee when discussing asking for accommodations in school: “I don’t like to ask for accommodations.”

Andrew described how even though he needs subtitles to follow along with a movie in class, he often will not ask for them:

Teachers would do it [turn on captions], no problem. But I would have 32 complaints and moans and groans because they were being turned on so I didn’t really ever ask them to turn them on because I knew I had that waiting for me.

Ashley also stated that she does not like asking for subtitles in the classroom. Renee explained that the hesitation to ask for subtitles extends beyond the classroom to interactions with peers:

I will admit a part of me... if I’m not really close to them or it’s not someone that I’ve hung out with before, I’m a little... I don’t want to say embarrassed... definitely not ashamed, but I’m a little uncomfortable with it I guess.

As discussed in when examining personal layers of identity, many of the participants reported not wanting to be singled out or labeled as “the deaf person”. However, many of them still need accommodations so there is a gap between the enacted layer of identity (asking for accommodations) and the personal layer of identity (avoiding being labeled).

In addition to asking for accommodations, another area of enacted identity that conflicted with personal identity was disclosure of the hearing impairment. Will stated earlier in the interview that disclosure and telling others was hard to do (enacted), but later stated that he told people right away because his hearing impairment was part of who he is (personal). Additionally, he went on to state that he did not wear hearing aids in junior high and high school because of others picking on him: “They used to pick on me all the time. I got busted in the face.” Because of this, he avoided disclosing thorough the wearing of his hearing aids (enacted) despite identifying himself as hearing impaired (personal). This gap between avoiding disclosure while still identifying as hearing impaired was also displayed by Renee. She reported having an aggressive attitude and being opinionated about the hearing impairment (personal), but at the same time reported trying to hide her hearing aids with her hair or even taking them out (enacted).

### **Personal and Communal Gaps**

A major gap identified within the participants was that between their personal identities as hearing impaired individuals and their communal identities (social identities). Ben explained this gap well as he discussed how he attempts to have some involvement in the Deaf community despite the fact that he doesn’t always agree with

their culture. He stated that he feels there is too much drama and they are too disconnected from the hearing world. Renee, Shawn, and Ashley all shared how they felt that they were somewhat separated from the Deaf community even though they had the hearing impairment in common. These individuals said that they recognized that they had their hearing loss in common with individuals in the Deaf community but still felt uncomfortable or like an outsider. In addition to this lack of connection with the Deaf community, many hearing impaired individuals do not have family members or friends that have a hearing impairment to relate to – they have to depend on their relationships with hearing individuals who can not quite relate to what it is like to have a hearing impairment. Thus, there is no clear communal identity as these individuals do not fit or are not welcome in the Deaf community, many have no family members with a hearing impairment, and most have no friends with a hearing impairment.

## CHAPTER SEVEN: DISCUSSION

In attempting to construct an identity within a hearing world that considers them to be “disabled” or even “deaf and dumb,” many of the participants emphasized the difficulties and challenges that they face surrounding the navigation of their hearing impairment. Despite these challenges, most of the participants stated that they would not give up their hearing impairment if they were granted the opportunity to have “normal” hearing. They explained that their hearing impairment was too much a part of who they were at this point in their lives. Several participants even made their hearing impairment struggles a positive thing as they described how their hearing impairment has made them a stronger person and taught them how to overcome challenges – they said that they would be a different person if they were not hearing impaired. Thus, their hearing impairment has clearly become a part of their identity – part of what makes them who they are as an individual.

Although many participants had stated that their hearing impairment was a part of who they were, they also stated that they did not want to be labeled “as the deaf boy or deaf girl”. This juxtaposition of having a hearing impaired identity while still attempting to avoid the hearing impaired or disabled label creates a unique struggle for hearing impaired individuals. They internalize their hearing impairment as a quality that makes them who they are, but, at the same time, emphasize the importance that they are not labeled as *only* being deaf. Several participants stressed the fact that they did not want to be treated differently or singled out due to their hearing impairment. Additionally, the participants stated that they did not want to be seen as handicapped or disabled – that they could do anything a hearing person could do.

This navigation between having an identity as a hearing impaired person and avoiding being singled out is compounded by both the need for occasional accommodations and the disclosure process. Several participants mentioned that they avoided disclosing about their hearing impairment or even asking for necessary accommodations in an effort to be seen as a “normal” individual and to be recognized for other traits or talents they brought to the table. The participants explained that often once they disclose about their hearing impairment, the hearing individual either avoids interaction because they do not know how to react or how to communicate with the hearing impaired individual or will begin to treat the hearing impaired person differently. In highlighting the want for a normal communication interaction, many hearing impaired individuals will hold off on disclosure until the hearing individual gets to know them and their other qualities well enough so that their hearing impairment will not be the only thing they are recognized for or labeled with. This was a theme that was re-occurring as many participants stressed the importance for being recognized as an individual with likes, dislikes, and a personality outside of their hearing impairment.

The struggle with disclosure also encompassed the avoidance of asking for accommodations. Several participants stated that they did not like being singled out or treated differently. Thus, they would avoid asking for accommodations until it became a necessity. In doing this, they were avoiding the “disabled” label and attempting to blend in with the mainstream hearing world as much as possible. However, this becomes an issue when these individuals avoid necessary accommodation in the classroom or in the workplace – when they miss important information in these settings due to this avoidance of being singled out. Several participants explained how they did not like asking for

accommodations such as closed captioning on clips they watched in the classroom or for lecture notes to follow along with. These same participants went on to say that by foregoing these accommodations, they often did miss materials in the classroom. One participant explained that he received a B in a class that, if he had asked for appropriate accommodations, he knew he would have been capable of receiving an A in. Additionally, one participant explained how she was hesitant to seek the support of the Disabilities Resources Center on campus because she was afraid of being singled out in the classroom.

This avoidance of asking for accommodations was present in the workplace as the participants described how they avoided disclosing about their hearing impairment in that setting as well. Several participants explained that they relied on technology to make up for what they missed while on the job – often utilizing written forms of communication such as email instead of phones. One participant explained that meetings were a difficult setting in which he relied on the use of instant messaging to other individuals in the room as a way of asking about what he missed. In addition, participants explained that having to learn new things in the workplace was difficult – they preferred being able to continue with what they were already doing since they did not have to worry about understanding new explanations. This fear of having to deal with change seemed a result of their fear to discuss the necessary accommodations required from their boss or company to make things clearer for them. Several participants even discussed how losing their job was a big fear as it would mean that they would have to navigate their hearing impairment (and the choice of whether or not to disclose) with new employers who may avoid hiring them due to their hearing impairment.

Another compounding factor in both the disclosure process and asking for accommodations is the “burden of proof” that several participants mentioned that they often had to face in the classroom, in the workplace, and with peers. Several participants mentioned that hearing individuals would call them out if they noticed the hearing individual caught something (whether they understood it or not). The hearing impaired individuals were accused of “selecting their hearing” and picking and choosing what they heard as their hearing peers questioned their hearing capabilities. Explaining that they were often more observant (due to their reliance on visual communication) and were more adept at reading lips than most people realized, the participants stated that they would have to explain that they have been dealing with the hearing impairment their whole life and had become very skilled at doing so.

The participants also emphasized the there was a difference between *hearing* something and *understanding* it. They explained that they may hear a sound or notice that you said something, but still have no idea what it is that was said – they were not able to understand it or make sense of what noise they did manage to hear. Hearing impairment often does not only affect the volume of sound, but also the clarity as well. Thus, even if the participant managed to *hear* the noise or voice, they quite possibly were still unable to *understand* it. The participants also stressed the fact that hearing aids do not grant them with normal hearing – a fact often misunderstood by hearing individuals. Thus, the whole navigation between their identity as a hearing impaired individual and wanting to avoid being treated differently is complicated by issues of disclosure, accommodation, and the burden of proof.

This avoidance of being treated differently stems from the need to be seen as an individual who is capable of functioning within the hearing world and not being labeled as “disabled” or incapable. Many of the participants emphasized that their hearing impairment did not make them any different in terms of capability or competence than a hearing person. They stressed the fact that they were able to succeed in school, in the workplace, in sports, and even “listen to music”. Despite several participants, including the researcher, being told that they would never be able to navigate successfully in the hearing world, the participants all stated that they managed to lead “normal” lives (what they viewed as normal). They stated that there might be subtle differences in how they do certain things, but they still make it work. Compared to the fact that several participants were told that they would not be able to graduate from a normal high school or even speak without the use of sign language, the participants have managed to navigate their hearing impairments quite successfully.

Several participants mentioned that hearing people were often surprised when they achieved something, even if that something had nothing to do with the fact that they could not hear. For example, Shawn discussed how people were all shocked when he made a play when he was on his football team in high school. He explained that he did not understand what the big deal was as his hearing had nothing to do with his athletic ability. Thus, it seems that once identified as hearing impaired, the “disability stigma” carries into other aspects of their lives. In wanting to avoid being told they could not do something or having their abilities underestimated right away, it further strengthens the reasons why the hearing impaired participants report choosing to avoid disclosure.

To combat the stigma associated with being “disabled” or the negativity they receive surrounding their abilities to navigate their lives normally, many participants stressed the importance of having a positive attitude. They explained that they accepted their hearing impairment as a part of their life and did not let it limit their goals or let it get them down. Several participants described the importance of a positive outlook and not letting society or the fact that they were considered “disabled” define them or what they were capable of. In looking at their hearing impairment, they stated things like “it’s whatever” or “there are worse things”. Some participants even reported using their hearing impairment to their advantage as they joked about the positives of not being able to hear everything – studying without distractions, not having to hear everyone else’s problems, and having the ability to lip read. This use of humor was furthered as a coping mechanism many participants reported utilizing when it came to dealing with their hearing impairment, awkward situations, or even disclosure. Several participants explained that they often use deaf jokes to cope with the stress of navigating their hearing impairment and even stated that you have to be able to laugh and make fun of it sometimes or it will get overwhelming.

While the use of humor and a positive attitude helped participants cope with the navigation of their hearing impairment, they still reported being aware of the fact that their hearing impairment often caused them to be stigmatized. Several participants discussed an awareness of the “deaf and dumb” mindset as they had come face-to-face with interactions in which they were made to feel stupid or less intelligent just due to the fact that they had a hearing impairment. One participant even mentioned that her hearing impairment had been associated with having a mental impairment. Several participants

echoed the worry or concern that they would be viewed as stupid or incompetent based upon the fact that they had a hearing impairment. Additionally, several participants reported using the “nod and smile” tactic as a way of trying to avoid feeling awkward or embarrassed by the fact that they did not hear something or answered a question completely off-base. Morgan described that being frustrated or feeling stupid is a part of choosing to live in the hearing world as a hearing impaired person. Thus, this choice to live in the hearing world is often accompanied with feeling inadequate or facing stigma.

Another way in which the participants reported struggling to integrate into the hearing world and interact with hearing people was through their discussion about the use of “never mind” by their hearing peers. When the hearing impaired person did not utilize the “nod and smile” tactic in order to avoid embarrassment and went ahead and asked for clarification or to have something repeated, they reported that they were sometimes told “never mind” or “don’t worry about it”. Several participants explained that this was one of their biggest frustrations and that it was disrespectful or even insulting. They explained that it allowed the hearing person to decide what was important for the hearing impaired person to hear or understand. Thus, this power dynamic causes further obstacles as the hearing impaired individuals attempt to integrate into the hearing community but still feel disconnected due to their hearing impairment and inability to communicate when they miss certain things that others choose not to repeat.

Another instance in which communication becomes extremely difficult and this disconnect from the hearing world and their hearing peers becomes evident is in group situations. Most of the participants reported the challenges associated with group settings as lip reading becomes complicated with a conversation that moves around the room and

background noise. The participants stated that they struggle in these situations and are often concerned with missing things or not being able to follow along. Furthermore, as disclosure or asking for accommodations or repeating in a group situation is often more difficult (due to the increased number of people present for the disclosure), many participants reported just nodding along as if they understood when they really did not. This inability to follow along in group situations further demonstrates the disconnect the hearing impaired individual faces when interacting with individuals in the hearing world.

This feeling of separation or isolation within the hearing world was also explained by the participants as they discussed their struggles in the workplace and in schools. Several participants mentioned that school was an extremely difficult setting to navigate. Fitting in with peers in high school and the younger years is challenging enough for most individuals without having the added obstacle of a “disability” thrown in to deal with. One participant explained that unless you had an “in” with your peers in school, you were often excluded or even picked on. Several participants reported trying to hide their hearing impairment by covering their hearing aids with their hair or even taking them out all together. Thus, attempting to fit into a hearing world while navigating their identity as a hearing impaired individual is challenging no matter what the setting may be.

When discussing the difficulty they may face with communicating with a hearing person, the participants highlighted the fact that understanding and awareness are big issues they often struggle to overcome. They explained that many hearing individuals are not aware of the things they do that make it harder to communicate with them such as looking away, mumbling, and talking to the group instead of the individual. Additionally, the hearing impaired individuals discussed that the hearing individuals they

interact with just can not identify with what it is like to be hearing impaired in a hearing world – they just do not get it (or as one participant stated maybe they “don’t want to get it”). Several participants emphasized the difference between hearing noise and understanding that noise and making sense of it. Expanding on this distinction, several participants discussed that hearing people often assume that hearing aids grant hearing impaired individuals with normal hearing when this is not the case. While the hearing aids do *amplify* sound, they do not clarify noise or make it easier to *understand* the noise. One participant drove home the inability of hearing individuals to relate to having a hearing impairment when he explained that there is a difference when they have not *experienced* it. He stated that when someone asks him what it is like to have a hearing impairment, he is often baffled on what to say because it is something he can not describe because he does not know any different. Through this lack of being able to truly relate to hearing individuals on this level, many hearing impaired individuals are aware of the disconnect between their identity as a hearing impaired individual and the hearing world when it comes to communication.

Despite an attempt to fit into the hearing world, many hearing impaired individuals often feel disconnected from that world due to the stigma, communication difficulties, and their label as a “disabled” person. Most hearing impaired individuals face having to navigate their identity and their struggles surrounding their hearing impairment on their own, without support or someone to relate to. While many of the participants in this study stated that they had family members with a hearing impairment, this is not the norm – it was the result of the snowball sampling method of recruitment. To illustrate how most hearing impaired individuals have to navigate their hearing

impairment on their own, one participant described how no one else in his family or peer network had a hearing impairment – he was alone in that aspect. It was not until college that he accidentally ran into another individual with a hearing impairment. His statement was that finding another hearing impaired individual with a hearing impairment who was his age “was like a fairy tale.” Thus, many hearing impaired individuals do not have the privilege of knowing another individual with a hearing impairment and must face navigating their hearing impairment in a hearing world on their own without anyone to relate to.

While the hearing impaired individual is not able to completely fit into the hearing world due to the many obstacles they face in that setting, they are also unable to integrate into the Deaf world. This inability to connect to the Deaf community stemmed from several factors – feeling unwelcome, discomfort, inability to communicate, different cultural values, feeling singled out, and feeling like an outsider despite having a hearing impairment in common. One participant described how she felt extremely uncomfortable in reuniting with a past friend who had a hearing impairment because the friend had become a part of the Deaf community and utilized sign language. She felt awkward and was unable to communicate with the friend due to the friend’s use of sign language instead of spoken language and lip reading. The obstacle of communication was an issue that several participants stated as being reasons for them to avoid interactions with the Deaf community as most do not know any sign language and rely on lip reading to communicate in the hearing world.

Another reason many of the participants reported not becoming involved with the Deaf community stemmed from different cultural values. Many participants stated that

they had nothing against the Deaf community, but they just felt the way of life in the Deaf world was so different. One participant who had some experience with the Deaf community explained that it had nothing to do with disrespecting their culture, even though some Deaf individuals view his choice to live in the hearing world as disrespectful. He stated that it was a simple matter of his ability to speak and communicate in what is a majority hearing world making life easier for him. Additionally, he emphasized that the Deaf world was a culture and that they did not associate with the hearing world.

The disconnect between hearing impaired individuals and the Deaf world was further highlighted by the participants discussions of how they were not openly welcomed into the Deaf community when they attempted to make connections in that world. Individuals in the Deaf world reacted in a wide array of ways, all of which drove home the fact that the participants did not fit in. Several participants reported how they were seen as disrespectful or that the Deaf individuals did not understand why they chose to speak and not sign. Additionally, several participants reported that even though they knew they shared a hearing impairment with individuals in the Deaf community and they were similar in that way, they still felt like an outsider or like they did not fit in. One participant explained that he is often singled out when he attempts to interact with the Deaf community because he is able to use his voice and lip reading opposed to sign language. He said that he was often identified as “a hearing world person” despite having a hearing impairment in common with the Deaf individuals he was interacting with. By explaining further that the Deaf community was often sensitive about his decision (and other hearing impaired individuals’) to learn to speak and function in a hearing world, he

further showed the distinction between the Deaf and hearing communities. However, as shown here, hearing impaired individuals do not fit into either world and are often forced to navigate their identity as a hearing impaired individual without true support from either community.

In examining the participants from this study, it is important to make note of several limitations from the sample. To begin, all of the participants from this sample have had their hearing loss since birth or infancy. The fact that they have never had to live as a hearing individual and have never experienced what it is like to hear normally might affect their outlooks on their hearing impairment as well as how they have constructed their identity surrounding their hearing impairment. The construction of an identity as a hearing impaired individual is most likely a completely different process for someone who loses their hearing later in life and can remember what it is like to have normal hearing. Thus, future research should investigate the differences between these two populations of hearing impaired individuals and how the timing of losing their hearing can affect how they view the hearing loss and their construction of the identity surrounding that loss.

Another limitation in the sample for this study is that a majority of the participants (seven out of eleven) reported having hearing loss run in the family or having family members with a hearing impairment as well. It is important to note that this is not the norm – 90% of deaf children have hearing parents (Grosjean, 2010). Therefore, most hearing impaired individuals do not have family members who have a hearing impairment in common with them – they do not have this network of people to relate to. Hearing impaired individuals who do not have this family network may have more

difficulty constructing an identity or finding support. Additionally, many of the participants in the study who had family members to relate to reported having limited access (if any) to friends or other individuals outside of their family that were hearing impaired. Thus, individuals without this family connection may have no social support at all as finding a network of other hearing impaired individuals has been reported to be difficult. Despite having hearing impaired family members not being the norm, there were advantages in having participants with a family network in this study. Through their stories of relating to other family members (and interviewing some of those other family members), the researcher was able to get a more in-depth look at how they dealt with stigma or challenges and how they supported and helped each other out.

The actual sample size was extremely limited as well. Due to the invisibility of hearing impairment as a disability, many individuals choose not to disclose about their hearing impairment in order to avoid stigma. Thus, these participants were most likely not comfortable in stepping forward to participate in the study. In addition, the participants that *did* step forward all seemed to have positive attitudes and coping mechanisms. This might not be the case with individuals who were not participants in the study. It might be that individuals who do not step forward have more negative attitudes and are unwilling to talk about their hearing loss. It would be interesting to investigate further to examine individuals who are less willing to discuss their hearing impairment to see if they have a less positive outlook on their hearing impairment and, if so, how they may construct their identity differently.

The interactive interviewing as a method allowed for the researcher to share experiences of her own in order to facilitate conversation with participants and encourage

them to open up. Since the researcher herself has a moderate to severe hearing loss, she was able to relate well to the experiences the participants shared surrounding their own navigation of their hearing loss. Due to the fact that the researcher was able to relate and share experiences of her own, participants were able to open up and felt more comfortable disclosing their own personal experiences. Thus, the use of interactive interviews and the fact that the researcher was hearing impaired herself separates from others that have been conducted by able-bodied researchers in the past.

Additionally, several participants stated that they enjoyed talking to the researcher about their hearing impairment because it was nice to be able to relate to someone else about their hearing loss and the experiences involved with navigating it. Furthermore, Shawn emphasized this and said that hearing researchers and doctors are “on the outside looking in.” Sarah echoed the need for giving people with hearing impairments a voice because most doctors and researchers do not understand what it is like to have a hearing impairment as she explained, “The doctors do not understand because they do not go through what we do. They can’t understand because they’ve never lived like this.” Thus, the use of interactive interviewing and the lack of an able-bodied research bias, allowed for an interview process in which the participant felt comfortable discussing their hearing impairment since the researcher herself could relate to many of their experiences. Additionally, the hearing impaired population was given a voice in the research and was able to openly discuss the stigma they perceived, their identities as hearing impaired individuals, and the struggles they face navigating between Deaf and hearing worlds.

## CHAPTER EIGHT: CONCLUSION

Through the process of interactive interviewing, this study provided insight on how individuals with hearing impairment construct their identity as hearing impaired individuals and how they navigate their hearing loss in their daily lives. Through the utilization of the Communication Theory of Identity and the four layers of identity it proposes – personal, relational, enacted, and communal – this study presents an examination of the layers of identity within the participants and the identification of common themes within each layer of identity as well as gaps between the layers. These layers of identity (and the gaps between them) have provided a deeper look at the identities of hearing impaired individuals who attempt to navigate their hearing impairment while fitting into an otherwise hearing world.

The participants all discussed that they valued their ability to speak and their capabilities to function within the hearing community. Several emphasized that they were told that the normal interactions and lifestyles that they currently participate in would never be within their capabilities. However, the participants report attempting to interact and communicate to full capacity within the hearing communities they are involved in. Even though the participants identified as being hearing impaired, they seemed to all consider themselves more a part of the hearing community than the Deaf. They reported living their lives “normally” by going to movies, using drive thrus, listening to music, going to parties, etc. Despite this attempt to blend in with the hearing community, there are obvious communication difficulties and challenges these individuals reported that they must overcome due to their hearing loss such as dealing with stigma, following along in school and the workplace, dealing with group settings,

and just the basic making sure that they can follow along in a one-on-one conversation with another individual.

Through their discussions of the stigma, communication difficulties, and challenges, the hearing impaired participants demonstrated how they felt disconnected from the hearing world. However, as shown through the lack of a Deaf communal identity for these participants, they also felt disconnected from the Deaf world. Thus, they must navigate being hearing impaired within a hearing world without true ties to either their hearing impaired identity or the hearing world that they live in. This disconnect to both communities is exemplified by Sarah as she stated:

I think I am just like a hearing person – I can do anything they can do except hear. I am not part of the Deaf world and never will be. I can go through life just like a hearing person, I'm just deaf.

## APPENDIX

1. What level of hearing loss do you have?
2. How long have you had a hearing loss? How old were you when your hearing became impaired?
  - a. If you don't mind me asking, how did it happen?
3. Do you consider yourself a part of the Deaf community?
  - a. If so, how much do you participate in that community?
  - b. If so, how important is it to you to be a part of the Deaf community?
4. Describe any experiences you have had with the Deaf community or any Deaf events.
  - a. Were these experiences positive or negative?
    - i. If positive, how?
    - ii. If negative, how?
5. Are many (if any) of your friends and family members deaf or hearing impaired?
  - a. If any, are they part of the Deaf community?
    - i. How much do they participate in the Deaf community?
    - ii. How important is being part of the Deaf community to them?
6. Describe your hearing impairment and its effect on your life as a whole.
  - a. Do you consider your hearing loss to be a handicap or a disability? Why or why not?
  - b. If someone offered you normal hearing (without surgery or costs), would you take it?

7. Describe the differences you have experienced in communicating with another deaf or hearing impaired individual versus communicating with a hearing individual.
8. Do you typically disclose about your hearing impairment with people that you meet for the first time?
  - a. If so, how do you typically go about that disclosure process?
    - i. Describe an instance where you had to disclose about your hearing loss to a hearing individual.
      1. How did they respond?
      2. Were they positive, negative, or indifferent in their response?
9. How do you talk (if at all) to friends and family members about your communication difficulties or need for accommodation due to your hearing impairment?
  - a. Are they helpful? If so, how?
  - b. Are they not helpful? If not helpful, how did they make things more difficult?
10. Describe how you navigate your hearing impairment in day-to-day activities/work/life.
11. What are the biggest fears/concerns/worries you face when taking part in a communicative interaction with hearing impaired individuals?
  - a. How do you navigate those?

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