Deaf Persons of Asian American, Hispanic American, and African American Backgrounds: A Study of Intraindividual Diversity and Identity

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This article explores the ways in which deaf college students who are members of minority racial groups think about and describe their identities. In-depth, semistructured interviews with 33 deaf students of Asian American, Hispanic American, and African American background were analyzed for themes regarding the self-reported identities of respondents. Results suggest that each person is a constellation of many parts, some of which are stronger than others but any of which can be drawn out in response to a particular set of circumstances, resulting in a contextual and interactive model of identity. Four factors are described as central to this “intraindividual” model: individual characteristics, situational conditions, social conditions, and societal conditions. Additionally, the model includes a biographical component reflected in changes in identity that occur over time. Findings are discussed as they relate to identity theory. The article is concluded with recommendations for further research, as well as considerations for educators and counselors of deaf minority students.

It is now generally recognized that many audiologically deaf people are also members of a unique culture with its own language, history, shared experience, and perhaps most importantly, identity (Bienvenu, 1991; Higgins, 1980; Padden & Humphries, 1988; Schowe, 1979; Van Cleve & Crouch, 1997; Woodward, 1972). How do deaf persons discover Deaf culture? Because most deaf persons are born to hearing parents, they rarely learn about Deaf culture from their families. Many grow up thinking of themselves as part of the hearing culture, attending mainstream schools, churches, and family events, only to enter Deaf culture as adults. Others discover Deaf culture through enrollment in specialized educational settings, such as residential schools and colleges for the deaf.

These scholars and others have added to our understanding of Deaf culture, the processes through which communities of deaf persons are formed, and the routes by which deaf persons come to perceive themselves as members of these communities. However, there is less written about the impact on deaf persons of competing identities, such as those related to hearing loss and race, gender, and ethnicity or the ways in which these identities evolve over time. How does being deaf influence one’s sense of membership and belonging within an ethnic or racial culture, and conversely, how does race or ethnicity influence one’s identity as culturally Deaf? What has been the experience of deaf minority persons with regard to family, school, and friendship circles, and how have those experiences influenced their identity? The purpose of this article is to explore these questions and to describe the ways in which a group of 33 deaf minority persons have come to think about and define their identities.

Review of Relevant Literature

The literature suggests that the academic, personal, and social development of hearing minority youth in the United States is often complicated by minority group
status and that schools often reinforce ambivalence and insecurity rather than the development of strong cultural identity (Cummins, 1986; Spencer & Markstrom-Adams, 1990). For deaf minority youth these conditions may be further aggravated by membership in more than one minority group, lack of appropriate role models, and the often-negative attitudes of the dominant culture (Anderson & Grace, 1991). For example, Cohen, Fischgrund, and Redding (1990) note that deaf Black people may experience discrimination from both Black hearing people and White deaf persons.

Other research documents the broad educational, social, and economic circumstances of deaf minority persons. For example, Christensen and Delgado (1993) noted that approximately 37% of deaf children in the United States are from minority racial or ethnic cultures, yet 97% of their teachers are White (European American). Holt and Allen (1989) found that deaf minority respondents are more likely to attend segregated classes and be placed in lower-level classes. Delgado (1981) found that deaf respondents from non-English-speaking homes are three to four times more likely to be classified as mentally retarded, emotionally disturbed, or learning disabled. Studies by Allen, Rawlings, and Schildroth (1989) and Schroedel and Watson (1991) revealed a pattern of overrepresentation of African American deaf respondents in vocational preparation courses in secondary and postsecondary educational settings.

In their discussion of the special needs of Black deaf adolescents, Anderson and Grace (1991) suggested that deafness should not be viewed as a dominant or defining experience that supersedes racial or ethnic differences. Instead, they proposed that Black deaf persons are more like “a minority within a minority.” This theme was repeated in the work of Cohen et al. (1990) and Hairston and Smith (1983), who argued that being deaf and a member of a minority ethnic or racial group constitutes a double liability in which the individual experiences stigma and prejudice relative to both deafness and ethnicity. MacLeod-Gallinger (1997), reporting on the economic attainments of deaf minority persons as compared with deaf Whites, concluded that with regard to the lower socioeconomic status generally associated with members of hearing racial and cultural minority groups, “minority within minority status appears to act as an exponential factor.”

Scholars in Deaf studies have compared minority groups and culturally Deaf groups, including broad trends and individual experiences. For example, Rittenhouse, Johnson, Overton, Freeman, and Jaussi (1992) described similarities between the Black civil rights movement and the social protests organized by persons with disabilities, including deaf persons. They proposed that many of the most important lessons of these social movements, as well as the most persistent challenges, apply to both Black and deaf Americans, including the importance of coalition building, a need for role models in education, continued barriers to success in employment, and interpretations of legislation that seem to undermine intended outcomes. Similarly, Parasnis (1997) suggested that there is much to be learned from research that focuses on possible areas of common experience among deaf persons and members of other minority groups in America, including studies of identity development.

Other scholars have examined how communities of deaf persons develop and how this contributes to or is the result of identity formation. Foster (1989) and more recently Woll and Ladd (2003) have explored the dynamic and interactive ways in which deafness and Deaf communities are constructed. Grounded in ethnographic interviews with deaf persons, Foster (1989) concluded that persistent rejection and isolation within hearing communities in combination with acceptance by and identification with other deaf persons is fundamental to the social construction of deafness and the culturally Deaf community. Woll and Ladd (2003) proposed a multidimensional model that includes the attitudes of the majority society toward deafness and sign languages (positive or negative), size of the deaf population (many or few), and life choices available to deaf persons (same as for hearing persons or different). Variations across these dimensions produce oppositional communities (in which hearing status defines access to society), single communities (where Deaf and hearing communities are virtually inseparable), and variations in between, called integrated communities.

Most of the research on identity of deaf persons has focused on general identity development without special consideration of minority group status. Building on his 1993 work in which he describes the Deaf Identity Development Scale, Glickman (1996) offered a detailed
model for conceptualizing the development of culturally Deaf identities. Adapted from cultural and racial identity development theory, this model follows a stage theory approach in which deaf persons move through four stages of identity: (a) culturally hearing, (b) culturally marginal, (c) immersion in the Deaf world, and (d) bicultural. The first two stages are characterized by a “hearing” reference group, pathological view of deafness, and feelings of despair, depression, confusion, and conflict. The latter stages are characterized by a Deaf reference group, cultural view of deafness, initial feelings of anger (mostly with hearing people), and extreme love of everything having to do with deafness, leading to a more balanced self-acceptance and group pride. Glickman noted that this model is cyclical in that an individual may move through all the stages more than once; he also raises questions about whether a person must move through all four stages in order to be mentally healthy, noting that in the case of African Americans, this is a point of disagreement and debate.

Leigh, Marcus, Dobosh, and Allen (1998) modified Glickman’s (1993) scale to include hearing children of deaf parents and hearing professionals who work closely with deaf persons. They found that one’s parents have a significant influence on identity, with deaf and hard-of-hearing children of hearing parents being more marginalized than those whose parents are deaf, and hearing children of deaf parents being more marginalized than deaf children of deaf parents. They recommended additional testing of the bicultural scale, noting that it had low levels of consistency in their study, a result they suggest may be due to the influence of a politically charged climate with regard to Deaf culture and respondents’ desire to exhibit the politically correct answers to this set of questions.

Bat-Chava (2000) defined three kinds of identity in her study: culturally hearing, culturally Deaf, and bicultural. Four “cluster variables” were used to group research participants into identity groups; these were the importance of signs, the importance of speech, the construct of group identification, and attitudes toward deaf people. Additionally, two ecological variables (family and school histories) and an outcome variable (self-esteem) were measured. She examined the impact of family and schooling on identity development, as well as the kinds of strategies that individuals use to achieve a positive social identity. She found that those with deaf parents and experience in separate schools were the most likely to have a culturally Deaf identity but that those with bicultural identities held the most positive attitudes toward deaf persons. Identity group membership was not related to gender or the ability to hear without hearing aids, nor was it related to family deafness alone. Although culturally hearing persons did have somewhat lower self-esteem than culturally Deaf or bicultural persons, this difference was not significant.

Little work has been done specifically on the identity of deaf minority persons in the United States. In one such study (Aramburo, 1989), 60 Black respondents at the Model Secondary School for the Deaf were asked the question, Which do you identify with first, your Black culture or your Deaf culture? Eighty-seven percent said they identify first as Black and second as Deaf, whereas the remaining 13% said they were Deaf first. Those who identify as Deaf first were primarily educated in schools for the deaf with a largely White population, had Deaf parents, and were active in their local deaf communities and knowledgeable about Deaf culture. Respondents who said they were Black first were more knowledgeable about Black culture and less active in their deaf communities. Aramburo’s findings suggested that minority racial or ethnic heritage is a complicating factor in the development of identity for culturally Deaf persons.

Dively (2001) interviewed five Native American deaf persons to explore “Native Deaf experiences in the family, in Native Deaf and hearing communities, in school, and in non-Native Deaf and hearing communities” (p. 395). Her respondents experienced significant difficulties in maintaining their Native cultural identities within the Deaf community, as well as barriers to full participation in the traditions and customs of hearing Native American cultures. Although they remained strongly connected with and proud of their Native cultures, they also described some degree of isolation and alienation in interactions with hearing Native people. Many had left their tribal homes at some point, either to attend residential schools for the deaf or to live in or near cities where they could find work and become involved with the Deaf community.

Maxwell-McCaw, Leigh, and Marcus (2000) reviewed the racial and bicultural or acculturation models
of identity and discuss implications of each for the study of identity for deaf persons. They described advantages and limitations of each model, as well as the potential in these models to frame bicultural identity as a healthy state in which deaf persons can discover meaningful affiliations with both deaf and hearing persons. They further noted that “current thinking is also beginning to shift away from bicultural approaches per se, towards a recognition that many individuals struggle with not two, but possibly three or more cultural affiliations” (p. 17). Our research falls within this recent trend, in which the focus is on understanding the multicultural identities of deaf minority persons.

Data Source and Method

The data reported in this article were drawn from a larger project initiated in 1992 at the National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID), one of eight colleges at the Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT). Approximately 1,100 deaf students attend NTID or one of the other colleges of RIT and comprise approximately 10% of the overall student population. The primary goal of the larger project was to examine those factors that led deaf minority students to attend NTID and to derive recommendations for enhancing recruitment and retention of these students (Foster & Kinuthia, 1996b). There were also several secondary goals, one of which was to learn about the ways in which respondents describe their identities. In this article, we report on the results from discussions of identity.

At NTID, a student data file is maintained and regularly updated. One of the elements of this file is the self-reported racial or ethnic background of students. Review of the NTID student data file at the time of the study showed 134 self-reported minority deaf students. Of these, 40 self-reported their racial or ethnic background as Black, 43 as Hispanic, and 51 as Asian.

Letters were sent to each of the 134 students informing them about the study and inviting them to sign up for an interview. Interviews were scheduled with the first 30 students who signed up, and a waiting list was established to accommodate those who came in later to volunteer. In total, 33 semistructured interviews (Bogdan & Taylor, 1975; Spradley, 1979) were conducted, 11 each with Black, Hispanic, and Asian students. Although we did not review the audiological tests of these students, it can be fairly assumed that they have a hearing loss in the better ear (unaided) of 70 dB or greater across the 500- to 2000-Hz range because this is a requirement for admission to NTID.

Three sets of questions were explored with respondents. The first set focused on experiences prior to college, including family background, early school experience, and the decision to attend college. The second set covered college experiences, including residence hall life, classes, extracurricular activities, friendships, perceived incidences of discrimination, and identity. The third set asked respondents for recommendations regarding improvement of campus life for minority deaf students. In this article, the topic of identity is the primary focus, with additional data drawn from the other topics to the degree that they relate to respondents’ descriptions of their personal identity, as well as social and cultural affiliations.

Interviews were recorded on audiotape. Although both investigators use sign language, their skill level was often insufficient for comfortable and fluent conversation with informants using American Sign Language (ASL). An interpreter holding comprehensive skills certification was therefore available for every interview and assisted as needed with communication during the interviews and with recording the respondents’ comments. Interview transcripts were analyzed and coded for recurring patterns and themes (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992).

Data Analysis

Data analysis procedures used for this study were grounded in the premise that all the interview data must be accounted for during analysis; that is, when complete, the analysis must result in all parts of the interview being placed in one or more code categories. This strategy is central to the integrity of analysis of qualitative data because it requires researchers to review and consider all the data in the search for patterns across interviews, rather than allowing a review of interviews to be selective in search of information that supports a particular point of view. The specific procedures used in analyzing the 33 interview transcripts can be broken down into five steps.
1. The researchers read each transcript and took extensive notes regarding potential broad code categories. In a semistructured interview study such as this, the interview topics serve as a general guide for developing code categories.

2. The researchers discussed their findings. Using both the interview guide and their individual notes, they created a set of 16 primary code categories (see Appendix A). Collaboratively, they developed a working description of each code category as well as examples of the kinds of interview data that would be placed within a given category. Sometimes as a result of these discussions descriptions of code categories would be broadened; for example, code category 11, friendships, was expanded to include dating.

3. One of the researchers read through every interview a second time, using a notation system to assign sections, or “chunks,” of data to one or more code categories. Having one person assign data to code categories increases consistency—the likelihood that the same kinds of comments will be coded in the same ways. When preceded by careful, independent reading and discussion of how code categories will be defined, this strategy strengthens the coding process. As is generally the case when working with qualitative data, some material coded for one category was also relevant to another category. In these cases, the material was double- or triple-coded to document the overlap between code categories. Once code categories were assigned and noted in the margins of interviews, the data were copied, cut and pasted, and sorted into separate code folders.

4. The researchers divided responsibility for the 16 code folders and repeated the same procedures for the data within each folder—carefully reading through data, taking notes, and searching for ways to subcode (further organize and divide) the material that would account for all the information within the folder. Each researcher then wrote a detailed code memo that described the subcodes used to organize material in the folders and how the summary explained and reflected the diversity of experiences and perspectives of the respondents on that topic. Another researcher reviewed the coded data within the folder and the code memo, offering feedback. Code memos are the foundation of reports, presentations, and publications. The code memo for code category 13, identity, is the foundation for this article; the four factors used to organize and present the results on the topic identity in the next section are subcodes.

5. Patterns across code categories emerged through tracking double- and triple-coded material. These multiply coded data provided a kind of “code map” that facilitates exploration of connections across codes. It also allowed the researchers to triangulate data across interview questions, thus enabling investigation of contradictory responses or conflicting respondent experiences. Connections were found between respondents’ discussions of identity and their comments on interactions with family members, friendships and peer groups, school experience (both prior to and at college), discrimination, and memberships in student clubs, activities, and organizations. These connections are incorporated into the presentation of results.

Results

In this section, results are organized within three parts: family background and early years, elementary and secondary school experiences, and self-reports of identity. The first two parts provide an overview of respondents’ family and school experiences. The third part focuses specifically on how respondents define and explain their identity and the ways in which being deaf and a minority group member influence identity.

Family Background and Early Years

Respondents’ family backgrounds varied widely, even within the core categories of Asian, Hispanic, and Black American. Those with Asian origins either were born outside the United States or had parents who were first-generation American—examples of countries of origin include Cambodia, Vietnam, Korea, Hong Kong, Philippines, China, Trinidad, and Taiwan. Four Hispanic respondents had one or two parents from Mexico; other countries named by Hispanic respondents as their places of cultural origin include Chile, Nicaragua, Columbia, Puerto Rico, and Cuba. Black respondents were divided between those who were born or lived in other countries (Guyana, St. Kitts, Zimbabwe) and those who were born and raised in the United States. Two respondents were adopted, one from Columbia and the other
from Vietnam; they were both adopted by White couples. All the respondents had one or more siblings, with most having at least three. One respondent’s entire family was deaf, and five had one or more deaf or hard-of-hearing siblings; the rest had only hearing siblings.

Respondents were asked when they became deaf and the cause of their deafness. The majority of the respondents (29) reported that they became deaf before 5 years of age. Of the remaining four, two said their deafness was discovered in their teens, and two didn’t specify when they became deaf. Etiologies include rubella, meningitis, chicken pox, seizure, falls, high fevers, and chronic ear infections.

In discussing communication within their families, respondents described the reactions of their parents to their deafness. Except for the respondent with a deaf family, a majority of the parents were reported to have expressed at least some negative reaction to the deafness of their child (or children). Most parents wanted to normalize their children and encouraged them to speak and speech read. Some parents believed that learning and using sign language would hinder the child’s speech development; these parents did not encourage the acquisition of sign language skills by their children. In some instances, especially with Asian and Hispanic respondents, parents spoke a language other than English, such as Chinese or Spanish, and that was the language of communication at home. One family sent its deaf daughter to Chinese language classes to enable her to converse with an elderly family member.

In a few families, parents and siblings attempted to learn sign language to communicate with the deaf child; however in most cases, communication with family members depended on writing, gestures, reading, or speech and speech reading. As a result, communication at home was often described as frustrating for both parents and children, and conversations were limited. Most respondents learned sign language from other deaf students, especially at residential schools. A few respondents had not been exposed to sign language until they came to NTID.

Although many parents wanted their deaf child to understand their culture and heritage, communication barriers in the home often made sharing of such information difficult. For example, when asked whether his parents had taught him about his Asian heritage, a respondent said, “No, never. . . . My parents [and I had] just very short conversations about the past, about culture. Never really talked very much, no. . . . my parents mostly communicate with my sister. It’s easy to communicate with her. With the three of us [deaf siblings], nothing. Hard to communicate, that’s why.” Another respondent began to realize what she didn’t know about her heritage only after arriving at college. She came to believe that most hearing persons gain cultural knowledge incidentally, that is, through daily routines and interactions with others; deaf persons must learn about their racial or ethnic heritage on their own or through alternative or supplemental means:

I realize that even though I was in the hearing world I still missed out on some things because I can’t hear everything. Maybe I thought I heard everything that was surrounding me but still my level compared to a hearing person was still different even though we interact. Because they hear. They still hear more, you know what I mean? . . . I still missed out. . . . [For example, I missed] History of Black people. . . . It was like I had to read more in order to be knowledgeable. . . . But this [hearing Black] person could just hear it by somebody just walking around talking. . . . just word of mouth and things like that. But it’s different with deaf individuals—you have to read. . . . because that’s the only way we’re going to educate ourselves. Because we cannot hear everything that’s surrounding us.

Elementary and Secondary School Experiences

Respondents generally described their schools as either residential or mainstream. The mainstream settings varied considerably; for example, in some mainstream settings the respondent was the only or one of very few deaf students in the school, whereas in other mainstream settings there was a special class for deaf students. The majority of respondents had attended only mainstream schools, but a significant number had experiences in both mainstream and residential settings. Often, respondents were moved several times over the course of their schooling—for example, from a mainstream setting to a school with special services, to a completely separate or residential school, then back to
a mainstream program. Sometimes the moves were prompted by a geographical relocation by the entire family. In other instances, the moves were within the same geographic region as part of the ongoing search for the most appropriate educational fit for the deaf student. Sometimes a family emigrated from its homeland to the United States at least in part to secure a good education for its deaf child. One respondent, whose family lived in the Caribbean, was sent to a residential school in the United States. Her aunt lived near this school and became her guardian. The student did not see her siblings for six years. Table 1 provides a breakdown of educational placement by race, ethnicity, and gender.

The availability, extent, and quality of support services reported by respondents varied widely. Some mainstream schools provided no support services, whereas others provided note takers, tutors, speech therapists, psychologists, interpreters, resource rooms, special classes for deaf respondents, or teachers who signed for themselves. Some respondents had support services and were satisfied with them. Those who did not have support services were often frustrated. For example, one respondent had to sit in front of the class and speech read but sometimes the teacher would forget to face him; he said that when this happened “I was very frustrated to study. Sometimes I was so angry by myself. Everyone would go ahead and only me, I would stay behind and try the best I could until I succeeded.” However, he also said that he was very proud of his success in school. Another respondent preferred teachers who signed for themselves because he “often had to ask for clarification with the hearing teachers.” A third respondent’s parents hired a private tutor because the school did not provide support services.

Even when support services were provided, some respondents preferred not to use them. One respondent did not use the interpreters provided at his school because he felt their skills were poor. Another tried note takers but said that “it didn’t work out.” A third respondent refused support services because she “did not want to be treated differently.”

Respondents whose families spoke a language other than English at home faced special challenges to communication in school. They had to learn English as a second language. One respondent’s parents hired a Spanish interpreter who sat with him during classes and interpreted everything in Spanish. Similarly, those who had never learned sign language were also at a disadvantage; interpreters could not facilitate communication because the student did not understand sign language.

Respondents who attended residential programs for part or all of their schooling spoke very favorably of the experience. For some, the residential school became a kind of family. For example, a respondent who went to residential school at age 17 said that the teachers “were like parents.” Respondents often first learned sign language in residential school and spoke of the importance of communication ease with deaf schoolmates. In comparing peer interactions in both mainstream and residential school settings, an Asian respondent said, “in [the residential] school I always interacted with deaf people. . . . It was easy to communicate, but in the hearing high school, I had to speak slowly [because] I wanted them to understand what I was saying.” She added that making friends in mainstream schools was “a very slow process.”

Respondents who attended only residential schools reported the highest level of involvement in extracurricular activities, although those who transferred from mainstream to residential or large, separate programs tended to become more involved, as well. For example, one respondent who attended a residential school was class president and a member of the softball team and the drama club. By comparison, respondents in mainstream programs were generally active in only one organization, and often this was a club specifically for deaf students, such as the Junior National Association for the Deaf. A few joined sporting activities such as swimming or skiing because as one respondent put it, “they did not require [me] to talk.” One person quit the all-hearing baseball team because he felt the others were treating
him “like a slave,” asking him to go get the ball; later he went to a community college where he joined an all-deaf volleyball team.

Both respondents who had attended residential schools and those who had attended mainstream schools faced barriers to learning about their cultural heritage. Communication difficulties often isolated deaf students who attended only mainstream programs from hearing peers who shared their cultural background. Separate classes and programs for deaf students were often largely White, in which case the minority student had little opportunity to interact with students from a similar heritage. For example, one respondent had attended a large city program for deaf students. He lived in the city, but most of his classmates commuted from the suburbs, and they were mostly White. The only Black student in his classes, he describes how his experience differed from that of his hearing siblings:

And that’s the difference for me to understand about Black... My brother went to school with all Black kids. My little sister, too. So my mother sent me to school with deaf for a while and... my brother learned a lot of different things and my little sister learned a lot of different things too. I don’t learn that much.

When asked how he learned about his Black culture, he responded, “Myself. Talked to my grandmother and my mother. Watch Black entertainment. Read magazines. Simple.”

Reports of Identity

Respondents were asked to discuss their sense of identity. This topic was introduced toward the end of the interview by reviewing the different ways in which the respondent had described him- or herself over the course of the interview—member of a minority ethnic or racial group, hearing or hard of hearing or deaf, male or female, and so on. The respondent was then asked to think about these various characteristics, roles, and experiences and to consider whether any elements were more central to his or her identity than others.

Analysis of responses suggests that respondents’ identities can best be conceptualized in terms of four factors: individual characteristics, situational conditions, social conditions, and societal conditions. Individual characteristics include the physical, mental, and spiritual attributes of the individual and the ways in which the individual has chosen to select, highlight, and represent these attributes as identity. Individual characteristics may include primary physical or cultural characteristics such as gender, racial or ethnic heritage, language, and hearing loss. They may also include secondary characteristics such as age (e.g., youth, older person), roles (e.g., daughter or son, parent, student, athlete), beliefs (e.g., political, religious), and character (e.g., courageous, proud, survivor). Individual characteristics are internal and foundational; they represent the core elements or “building blocks” of identity, reflected in the ways individuals perceive themselves in relation to others and the world around them.

The other three factors are external and conditional. Their meaning is defined through interactions between the individual and the environment. The individual interprets these conditions and uses these interpretations to construct identity. In this manner the conditional factors play a role in determining how a respondent describes his or her identity. Situational conditions raised by respondents included geographic location (e.g., immigration to the United States from another country, being home or “away”), program location (e.g., mainstream as the only deaf student, special class in the mainstream, separate school or college), and functional location (e.g., home or neighborhood, school, or work).

Social conditions are a reflection of interactions with others. Respondents described feelings of alienation (a sense of being different or apart), discomfort, and rejection as integral to identity. Conversely, they described feelings of social identification (being similar), comfort, and acceptance. These interactions and the resulting emotions were powerful influences in identity, and they often varied by situation.

Societal conditions, although less influential than the first three factors, were also mentioned by respondents in their discussions of identity. These conditions include broad societal trends and patterns. For example, institutionalized forms of stereotyping and discrimination such as racism are part of this theme, as is socioeconomic status. The visibility of an individual charac-
teristic in popular culture, politics, and the economy was also important—for example, movies and television programming featuring deaf persons, the civil rights movement, the Americans with Disabilities Act, and the women’s liberation movement.

Together, the four factors act in combination to produce a fluid, dynamic sense of identity in which one or more of the individual characteristics is selected, mediated, and drawn out in response to a particular situational, social, or societal condition. Below, examples from interviews are used to illustrate the varied and complex ways in which the four factors combine to produce different identities or identities that change over time. Examples are introduced with notations of those individual characteristics that have been highlighted by respondents in describing their identities and those conditions that had the greatest influence on the individual’s definition of identity. They are organized from the more simple expressions of identity (a single individual characteristic linked to one external condition) to the more complex expressions of identity (two or more individual characteristics linked to two or more external conditions).

For some individuals, identity was both simple and clear—they described themselves in terms of one individual characteristic and linked this characteristic to one external condition. For example, a Black respondent was absolutely clear about his identity as a deaf person (individual characteristic), which he explained in terms of the ways in which he communicated with those around him (social condition):

Interviewer [in discussing identity]: You never had on the list at all “I am a Black person.”

Respondent: No, I don’t like to say I’m Black or I’m White. I just like to relate to people and that’s the way I use my language. That’s the way I communicate.

I: That’s really interesting. And deaf is first?

R: Yes. You know, when people say, “Oh, I’m Black,” you know I always ask, “What are you talking about? What does that mean? You know, what does that say?” When people say “I am deaf “I know what that means. I know that I need to work and I need to study . . . and I use my eyes and hands to communicate. I don’t know what Black means. . . . I am an athlete that’s deaf. I know when I am on the track team when they send me in . . . [when] the horn blows and I can’t hear it they touch me and then I would take off from the line. You know, all of those characteristics center around the fact that I am deaf.

Some respondents listed several individual characteristics as central to identity but still referred to a single external condition in elaborating or explaining their responses. A respondent highlighted four individual characteristics (man, deaf, hard of hearing, Hispanic), linking three of them to a situational condition (school versus home):

Interviewer: What is your identity when you think about yourself?

Respondent: A man, of course. Deaf. Here [at college] I think I am deaf more than at home. Because at home there are not that many deaf . . . [so] there I think I am hard of hearing . . . Here [college] I am deaf because [I] use sign language a lot . . . At home with my parents, I don’t use sign language. I just speak with my voice and speak Spanish.

Another respondent highlighted her racial background when describing her identity. Although she included gender and deafness in her discussion, these characteristics clearly played secondary roles in her sense of self. For her, the societal conditions of racism and stereotyping had a dominant effect on how she perceived herself and her understanding of how others saw her:

Interviewer: Do you think it’s more difficult to be a deaf Black person than to be a [hearing] Black person?

Respondent: No it doesn’t matter if you are Black deaf or just Black hearing. Being a Black person, period, is difficult. . . . I mean because of society, when a person looks at you, they look at your skin color first. I mean, people tend to do that in society. They look at your skin color and say, “Oh, she’s a Black person.” Period. For me, myself, I have three things that society can hold against me: being Black, a woman, and hearing impaired. That’s three things that I have to struggle with for the rest of my life. And I have to deal with.
I: You just said . . . you are Black, you’re a woman, you are hearing impaired. When you think of yourself, what comes to mind first?

R: Black. Being Black, then a woman, then my hearing impairment. Because . . . as a Black individual you tend to think, I’m going for this job interview, will I get it? He might not give it to me because I’m Black, you know? That’s the first thing you think. . . . You know, when I walk into the restaurant, they’re looking at me because I’m Black. Or I’m going into the store, they follow me because I’m Black and they think I’m going to steal something, you know? That’s the attitude they have.

At the next level of complexity are expressions of identity in which one or more individual characteristics are linked with two or more external conditions. One respondent described his efforts to modify his behavior in order to fit better into the social setting of an American college. In describing his identity, he referred to several potentially conflicting individual characteristics (man, part hearing/part deaf, American, Cambodian), a major shift in his situational condition (immigration from Cambodia to the United States), and his concern regarding the social conditions he has encountered since arriving at college (rejection by deaf American students, desire for acceptance):

Respondent: My first year was in [name of residence hall] . . . very frustrating. Some people didn’t understand me, my culture, my behavior, my sign language. And I felt very sad at that time.

Interviewer: You said that people [in your residence hall] didn’t understand your culture. Can you explain? What is your culture?

R: My culture is Cambodian culture. And my culture is different. But it started to change since then. My culture has become more American culture and change my behavior a little bit. Step by step until it becomes perfect. [Now] it is not perfect.

I: You mean perfect is more American?

R: More American culture. . . . Now I started to change. I am part American and part Cambodian culture. And I learned everything and I have been so happy that my life is changing and different. . . . Because when I live in the United States now I can act like an American. I try to forget Cambodian culture sometimes because it’s not funny.

I: So you prefer American culture now?

R: I prefer American culture because I am living here.

I: Do you think about yourself as deaf?

R: I think about myself as part of hearing, part deaf.

I: So, in between.

R: Yes, between.

The theme of difference as a defining component of identity ran through several respondents’ stories. In the extreme, difference in the form of social alienation can lead to deep isolation and the inability to find or establish a sense of identity. In the example below, a respondent described herself as Chinese and deaf (individual characteristics). However, she perceived these attributes as a burden and went on to describe her alienation from three social groups—hearing Chinese, hearing White, and deaf people. As a result of this rejection (social condition), she was uncertain of her identity:

Respondent: I feel burdened because I am Chinese, I’m deaf. It feels like such a burden. Do you know what I mean? Chinese people expect me to know how to read Chinese and how to talk and write but I don’t. Deaf people expect me to understand their suffering, their preference for sign language. I don’t know where I am. I’m someplace in the world. Some of me fits one place and other parts of me fits the other. And the hearing world, they expect me to understand when I listen to their voices, but I can’t do that. I can hear the sound but I don’t understand the words they say. They expect me to know their idioms. They expect me to laugh because it’s funny but I don’t know what they’re talking about. . . . So, it’s like three different worlds.

Interviewer: Wow! I can understand how that would be really a burden for you. That’s three worlds. . . . Do you feel there is one world that is the most connection for you?

R: No, I can’t find it. I don’t know.

In other situations differences combine with similarities to highlight in positive ways one or more indi-
vidual characteristics. For example, another respondent of Chinese heritage described her identity as primarily a function of age. When asked to elaborate, she explained that as an older person attending college with younger students (situational condition) she had a different outlook and needs, and she found the most support (social condition) from other older students. When asked to reflect on the relative importance of those individual characteristics she had discussed throughout the interview (woman, Chinese, older student), she responded, “I think being older . . . because I have similar experiences to older students. We are happy associating with each other. We share a lot. We help each other a lot. I think that’s good.”

As this quotation suggests, the discovery of connections with others can be as powerful as alienation in shaping identity. In the following example, a respondent described her identity in terms of gender (individual characteristic), grounded in political activism (societal condition), as well as support and acceptance from other women (social condition):

[The most central part of my identity is] woman. Right now there is like all these women’s lib, conferences, women are making a change. . . . All women will be there for each other, no matter what. . . . Some women might not help you because you’re Black but most women will. I mean, I have never been turned [away] because I was Black by a White woman.

A few respondents described their identity in terms of all three external conditions. Often this was because they found themselves in challenging situations where complex, unusual, or dynamic self definitions were necessary for survival. For example, one individual referred to himself as Deaf, White, and sometimes Hispanic (individual characteristic). His identity was dependent on movement between schools or from school to “out in the world” (situational conditions), the acceptance and comfort he finds with deaf persons, who are generally White (social conditions), and his perception that he was most likely to encounter discrimination because he is deaf (societal condition). Initially he attended a mainstream school. Although he did meet and interact with deaf peers during this time, his sense of connection to the deaf community was greatly strengthened when he enrolled in a residential school at age 12:

I learned sign, ASL . . . and then I had a lot [of] experience with deaf people. . . . I learned that deaf are all alike. I feel a real connection [with schoolmates] like brothers and sisters because I lived in the school during the week away from my family.

Communication was more important to his identity than race, as reflected in his discussion of college roommates: “None [have been] the same color [as me]. . . . That’s not necessary. The point is that we are all deaf, feel comfortable signing and communicating. That’s what’s important.”

When asked to reflect on whether he has experienced discrimination and if so, on what basis, he thought in terms of his identity as a deaf person: “Well, more related to deafness. I don’t think of myself as Hispanic really. I think of deafness—discrimination. For example interview for job and not hire me because I am deaf, that’s the kind of example that I could have from hearing people because I am deaf.”

Because he associated mostly with White deaf persons, he had come to think of himself as White rather than Hispanic. However, he realized that White hearing persons are most likely to view him as Hispanic. The result is a kind of social role discontinuity in which he was perceived by the larger hearing world in a fundamentally different way than he perceived himself: “Most of my [college] friends are deaf and White. But when I go out into the world I feel like a White person, but really I am Hispanic. But I feel like White because I have been involved with White [deaf] people for so long. People look at me as Hispanic, yes, but . . .”

As noted by this respondent, the perceptions and responses of others play a role in defining one’s identity. In the following story, a respondent described her identity as a Black single mother (individual characteristics) largely in response to her experiences as a single mom on a college campus that (at the time of the study) offered few social or structural supports (situational condition). In telling her story, she recounted alienation from other deaf students and a growing identification with other single mothers, most of whom were White and hearing (social conditions). Additionally, she described how
others often perceive her circumstances negatively, that is, as the stereotype of a Black woman as a single parent (societal conditions), and the impact of these perceptions on her identity as someone who has specifically rejected welfare as a source of economic support:

Interviewer: [You’ve described yourself as a] Black person . . . woman, deaf or hard of hearing . . . mom. Which do you feel is the most close connection? Which is your first identity?

Respondent: I look at myself as a mother with a kid. I love my kid a lot. So it’s like a single mother, single Black mother with a child. That’s the way I look at myself. But I am proud of my child. I’m back here at school. I look at it like that. I’m proud of all the women who are back here in school with kids. Because we have kids and we want to take care of them. We don’t want to wait for the check in the mail. I’m proud of them all. Every one of them.

I: We talked about discrimination against being a single mother . . . [and] discrimination related to being Black. Any discrimination happen to you related to being deaf?

R: Nope. It’s me being a mother and Black with a kid. That’s all. Doesn’t have anything to do with my hearing. It’s just that.

The nature of identity for the respondents was very complex. In fact, the data were difficult to analyze in part because of the many twists and turns reflected in each person’s story. For example, one respondent noted that his identity shifted when he arrived at college. In his words:

When I was in junior high school, I was thinking of myself [as] hard of hearing. I told my teacher “I am hard of hearing, not deaf.” And I got into college—Gallaudet—they told me that deaf and hard of hearing . . . they explained it to me what the difference is. Hard of hearing is just like you can hear something. But Deaf is [hearing] nothing. It is Deaf with a capital D for a group. Something like that. So I said, “I accept that.” So I consider myself being Deaf.

For this individual, a situational condition (transition from high school to college) accompanied by a social condition (peer influence) prompted the identity shift. Examples like this run through many of the interviews and led us to conclude that identity also has a biographical component in which respondents chronicle a series of events, experiences, and moves that lead to modifications in identity across time.

The best way to illustrate this quality of identity is to present full life stories. We have selected two interviews and summarized them below in the form of biographical life stories. The first respondent was from American Black heritage, and the second was a first-generation Hispanic American whose family is originally from Cuba. The names are pseudonyms.

Daniel’s Story
A Black deaf child born into a hearing family, Daniel first attended a Catholic school where he and the other deaf students were forbidden to use signs. He recalls that they were “sort of hidden,” and he was embarrassed by his deafness. Later he went to an all-Black mainstream public school. He says that the deaf and hearing students were separated at this school, “deaf all there and then . . . separate all Black hearing.” (Although Daniel’s description is not very clear, it seems likely that deaf students were in separate classes at least part of the time.) He learned sign from deaf peers at this school and found that signing was much easier. Reflecting on these early years, Daniel said,

I never actually went to a residential school [when I was younger]. Never. But it seemed like the hearing and the deaf communities, Black, were mostly the same. The Black deaf children live next door to the [Black] hearing students . . . . My whole family is hearing so I am used to hearing friends all around . . . . I grew up in the Black community. I didn’t really think of myself as Black. Our race was all the same.

As he got older, Daniel became curious “about the deaf residential world.” He expressed this interest to his parents and as a result was enrolled in a residential school for deaf students. At first, he was somewhat overwhelmed. As he put it, “I got there and whoa, they were all deaf and signing. I really wasn’t used to that. I was homesick. It went right over my head. They insulted me. They picked on me. I didn’t know why.” However, he learned ASL quickly and began to feel a part of the deaf community more than the hearing community. He
says, “I think the deaf community was better because it
[was] easier to communicate with each other and under-
stand the culture.” He adds, “Then I kind of lost my
parents’ history.”

Upon graduation from high school, Daniel came to
NTID:

The first year I focused on Deaf culture in gen-
eral. . . . Now I am focusing on Black culture. Black
and Deaf culture. Now I’m learning Black history,
about racism. I was surprised. I woke up. . . . Now I
feel comfortable with the Black Deaf culture. . . .
We stay together. I don’t feel so comfortable with the
White culture.

Daniel reflected on how things have changed for him:

When I was growing up . . . my family had a real
strong Christian association with the hearing com-

munity. Then [I] was kind of embarrassed because I
was deaf. Then I learned the Deaf culture and deaf
community, learned ASL. I wasn’t so embarrassed.
Still a little bit, but . . . now I feel really free. Really
enjoy being with the deaf. . . . Now finally I’m fo-
cusing on being Black and Deaf rather than Black
and hearing.

At the time of the interview, Daniel was working with
other Black Deaf students to organize a special group
focused on Black Deaf culture:

Yesterday we were all talking about Black Deaf and
we were discussing in depth about setting up a
group and what we might call it. . . . Where you
come here and you see that Black Deaf have a dif-
ferent behavior and different signs . . . become in-
volved, go around together in the community. For
example NTID deaf community in general is dif-
ferent. Then there is ASL which is different. So be-
cause it’s a small group—community—we call that
Black culture or Black community. I got that idea
from Deaf history research last quarter.

Elian’s Story

Elian described his Cuban heritage as Black Hispanic.
He explained that most people just think of Cubans as
Hispanic but that a lot of people from Cuba have very
dark skin. The culture, however, is more Spanish:

Elian: The food, the Spanish. . . . My grandmother
and everybody speaks Spanish. I used to know Span-
ish when I was [younger]. . . . But the reason why
I don’t anymore is because when I was younger
my grandmother taught me and when I lost my
hearing they didn’t want to confuse me with English
and Spanish. So they wanted to make sure I learned
English perfectly and well.

Interviewer: So they stopped talking with you
in Spanish?

Elian: Yes.

Before he entered high school, Elian had never met
another deaf person:

Elian: To be honest, when I was younger I thought I
was the only person who wore a hearing aid. I mean
I knew I wasn’t because I had been to . . . my hear-
ing aid doctor, and I would see some deaf people
there. But that was mostly elderly people, so it was
different.

Interviewer: You figure you were the only
child in the whole world to have a hearing aid?

Elian: Not realistically, but that’s the way I
felt. . . . And plus, I think just starting about now
the Deaf culture starts becoming more familiar. The
reason why is because they started to have deaf com-
mercials or sign language [on television]. Marlee
Matlin’s “Reasonable Doubts.” The deaf protest at
Gallaudet. . . . So it’s just kind of changing, yeah.

Elian attended a public high school with about 1,000
students in grades 9–12; all but 35 were hearing. During
his senior year almost all his classes were with deaf stu-
dents only but prior to that he was mainstreamed part of
the day with hearing students. He had an interpreter for

some of the mainstream experience. When asked his
opinion of the experience, he responded, “I felt com-
fortable because I always wanted to be around hearing
people. . . . Especially because I grew up in that area. But
if I was just put into a total deaf institute, I don’t think I
would’ve been happy. . . . I mean, after eight years of
school with hearing students, you kind of get used to it.”

Elian continued to interact with hearing students
during his freshman year in high school, but after a
while he “got used to the sign language . . . and started
to interact with the deaf students more.” When asked
to elaborate on why things changed, he responded, “Maybe one reason . . . was because the communication became easier. And the second reason I would say, I was kind of influenced by the Deaf culture.” He further explained that

Deaf students just kind of stick in their own deaf groups. They didn’t really try to communicate with the hearing students. So they kind of influenced me and pulled me into that group. . . . Unconsciously. And I just got used to just being with them. Even if I wanted to communicate with hearing students, I just kind of forgot how to, you know? . . . Like I can still talk and everything, but just to, like, how to approach them and stuff like that.

When asked to explain more, Elian continues, “More like forgetfulness [about] the way . . . being comfortable of going up to a hearing person and start talking.” He also said that once he joined the deaf group he was kind of labeled as a deaf student. Before, when I was growing up, I thought of myself as a hearing person or hard of hearing. Most of the time the word “deaf” wouldn’t even cross my mind. [But] now when I see a hearing person I think of them looking at me as a deaf person now. So they might be afraid to communicate with me and when I go up to them I feel like maybe they might not want to have the conversation. You know, they are afraid of communication breakdown or they might be a little biased against deaf students. . . . Before . . . I never had that problem. But now I kind of see those kinds of things.

When he entered college, Elian began looking for a fraternity. In choosing one, he considered his past experience in high school and decided he did not want to be pulled into the deaf group again:

Elian: I was looking for . . . somebody to kind of guide me into meeting more students, especially hearing students because I felt it was kind of a déjà vu thing that I was kind of being pulled into the deaf world again.

Interviewer: You mean like high school?
Elian: Yes, and I just saw that happening again so I said, “No, I don’t want this anymore.” So I felt this fraternity will help me kind of go back into the hearing world, but not forgetting about the deaf world of course.

In talking about his identity, Elian explained,

Elian: Basically, instead of calling myself a man I mostly consider myself a gentleman. And kind of a working person, which you could say is a student. And racially I consider myself a Black Hispanic. Simply I say Black.

Interviewer: Where does hard of hearing fit? . . . it is part of your identity?
Elian: It is now, but before when I was younger it wasn’t.

Later Elian explained more about what he meant when he described himself as a Black Hispanic. He said that many Cubans are very dark-skinned and that they have elements of both African and Spanish cultures. Although his mother was White, Elian said that he identified as Black Hispanic:

Elian: Because my father is a real strong Black [Cuban] person and I grew up with most of my father’s side of the family . . . almost every day of my life before college. I have always felt that I was, I acted kind of in a Black culture a little bit. And I am proud of it.

Interviewer: Because of the influence of your father’s side?
Elian: Yes. I look a lot like my father more. It is just the way I felt about myself, and that’s what my father told me too, you know? [He said,] “No matter what people see in you, you might be really light-skinned but inside you are Black.” And I believe that I agree with him.

When asked why he felt that his identity changed with regard to hearing and deaf worlds, Elian responded, It depends on how people . . . think of you. . . . It depends on yourself plus what other people kind of shape you up. You know? . . . I think maybe it started kind of when I just entered the deaf institute and that kind of started changing my identity to being hard of hearing or a hearing-impaired person. Before that I mean I just thought of myself as a hearing person. . . . That’s how my parents kind
of pushed an identity in me as a hearing impaired person. . . . Not purposely, but yes. [Before] they always pushed the hearing part. It just happened that . . . when they put me into the deaf [institute] they were unconsciously doing that [pushing a hearing impaired identity].

Elian discussed his social groups at college. He noted that he doesn’t hang around with all deaf or all hearing, “I do both. . . . So for me it’s kind of in the middle of the line.” However, he felt that when he graduated, this would change again:

When I start my career I won’t be seeing as many deaf people. Probably forget some of my sign language. That happened once before and [I] probably will forget a lot about the Deaf culture.

This led Elian to talk more about the power of friends and social circles in creating and sustaining a particular element of one’s identity. He described a White friend who identified himself as culturally Black:

The reason why is because all his friends at home are all Black. . . . He lived in the neighborhood and that’s how. . . . That’s another example of how people can control your identity, because people around you can unconsciously change you. Not purposely doing it, but it happens . . . [My friend] is aware of it, but I don’t think he really knew what was going on as it just started. That’s what I think.

The stories of Daniel and Elian are both about the search for identity, but each person followed a different route. For Daniel, identity became more narrowly and closely defined over time, moving from the hearing world to the Deaf world, then to the Black Deaf world. With each succeeding event, Daniel further refined his identity. He described himself as moving from embarrassment to freedom and from ignorance to a search for a deeper understanding of Black Deaf culture. Elian had clearly given a lot of thought to his evolving identity and was able to articulate both how things had occurred in the past and the ways in which things might change for him in the future. His experience was more cyclical than Daniel’s in that he moves in and out of the deaf and hearing worlds, all the while maintaining ties to his Cuban Black Hispanic heritage through his father’s family. He had made conscious decisions about how he chose friends and social groups and seemed quite positive about the next phase of his life, when he anticipated leaving the deaf world at college and returning to the hearing world as a college graduate. The stories of Daniel and Elian are simply two out of 33; each individual had his or her own history, and all had ways of interpreting the major events in their lives.

Discussion

Leigh et al. (1998) and Parasnis (2000) both framed the concept of identity for deaf persons as a socially constructed and dynamic phenomenon influenced by many factors, including external social and societal conditions as well as internal mechanisms of self-definition. Foster (1989) and Woll and Ladd (2003) made similar arguments in their analyses of the social construction of deafness and the development of deaf communities. Each of these conceptualizations is rooted in symbolic interactionism, articulated within the broad field of identity theory by many scholars, including Lal (1995), Rosenberg (1997), and Stryker and Burke (2000). Although not a perfect fit, the model of identity that emerges from analysis of our data most closely follows the interactionist perspective in which identity is conceptualized as an interaction between the self and the surrounding social structures. In their review of major trends in identity theory, Stryker and Burke (2000) referred to the early work of Mead (1934) and James (1890) as central to the notion of identity as a socially situated experience: “Acceptance of Mead’s ‘self reflects society’ dictum implies that the self is multifaceted, made up of interdependent and independent, mutually reinforcing and conflicting parts. Identity theory thus adopts James’s (1890) vision of persons possessing as many selves as groups of persons with which they interact” (pp. 285–286).

In our study we used respondents’ descriptions of their identities to build a model for understanding and explaining the ways in which such self-meanings are reflected in as well as constructed through interactions with others and with the environment. As we have noted, our model consists of four factors: individual characteristics, situational conditions, social conditions, and societal conditions. The model also includes a bio-
graphical component, reflected in changes in identity that occur over time. The resulting proposition is that each person is a constellation of many characteristics, some of which are stronger than others but any of which can be drawn out in response to a particular set of conditions, resulting in a model of identity that is fluid, responsive, contextual, and dynamic. Within this model, identity is a function of the individual’s response to a given situation and reflects two or more factors working in isolation or, more often, together.

Stryker and Burke (2000) also discussed the concept of identity salience, which they defined as “the probability that an identity will be invoked across a variety of situations, or alternatively across persons in a given situation” (p. 286). Identity salience provides a way of understanding the perspectives of respondents in our study who described a particular individual characteristic as more central to their identity than others or more persistent over time; for example, the woman who identified most strongly in terms of gender because women are “always there for each other.” Changes in identity salience occur when individuals experience changes in their environments that reduce opportunities to reinforce the identity. Upon arrival at NTID, the respondents in our study encountered circumstances that had the potential to cause changes in the salience of an identity. These included reduced opportunities for maintaining an identity (congregation within a college for deaf students reduced opportunities to maintain a culturally hearing identity) and increased opportunities to modify identity (interaction with a critical mass of deaf students with diverse racial or ethnic backgrounds increased opportunities to discover a deaf minority identity).

In an earlier article that took a more microlevel approach to identity, Burke (1996) examined the ways in which individuals regularly verify their identities through reinforcing interactions with others and the resultant psychosocial stress that occurs when this feedback loop is interrupted or otherwise fails. Respondents in our study experienced stress when they were unable to verify a dimension of their identity. Stress resulting from interruptions of the self-verification feedback loop was often a contributing factor in shifting identity salience for our respondents. For example, one respondent recalled that while attending a mainstream school she covered her hearing aids because she did not want to appear deaf in front of hearing peers. However, these students interpreted her failure to respond to their speech as snobbish, and she struggled to make friends. Eventually she became more open about her hearing loss, finding friendship with those peers who understood her communication needs and were willing to make accommodations. This respondent was unsuccessful in verifying a normally hearing identity, and the resultant social stress eventually led her to abandon this identity for a hard-of-hearing identity.

A common source of stress for our respondents involved conflict between the cultural heritage of their families and the identity of being culturally Deaf. Several recalled difficulty learning about their racial or ethnic heritage because communication with family members was limited, or they attended special schools where most students were White. Like the Native Americans in Dively’s (2001) study, many of our respondents experienced difficulty both in participating within their hearing minority culture and in sustaining their minority culture identity within the deaf community. Respondents often expressed closer identification with those of a shared ethnic or cultural background but when asked whether they would be drawn more to a hearing person from this background or a deaf White, they usually chose the deaf White because of communication ease. For these persons, the process of self-verification was constantly interrupted due to language barriers, and the resultant stress led them to withdraw from social situations in which verification of the racial or ethnic aspect of their identity was dependent on interaction with hearing persons. Under these conditions, deafness was more salient than race. However, many of these respondents also maintained an ongoing search for peers who shared both their deafness and racial or cultural heritage. As a result, when they found themselves in social contexts within which verification of the deaf minority identity was possible (e.g., upon arrival at NTID), this identity became the most salient (as in the case of Daniel). Some respondents who had additional characteristics and experiences that were important to them, such as Ushers Syndrome, searched for social groups where these aspects of identity would also receive social verification. We call this phenomenon a nested identity, in which individuals seek out those with whom they share key individual characteristics with a clear opera-
tional salience hierarchy, for example, deaf first, then deaf Asian, then deaf Asian with low vision.

A few respondents were caught between two or three worlds, rejected by all and struggling to fit in. These respondents described themselves as uncertain of their identity or frustrated with the constant effort required to explain or credential themselves to others. A few, such as the Chinese woman who described herself as alienated from everyone, felt they had no identity. These respondents had never experienced the kind of strong positive social feedback that is essential to verification of one or more elements of identity; their stories were riddled with expressions of depression, anxiety, frustration, and loneliness. Even those respondents who verified an identity through alienation or discrimination (e.g., “I am Black because people discriminate against me due to my skin color”) seemed better off because they had a sense of themselves, albeit through the negative experience of discrimination.

Lal (1995) described the ways in which symbolic interaction theory interacts with concepts such as human ecology, race prejudice, and collective definition in the development of identity. These concepts are all reflected in our data. The ecological model is consistent with our definition of situational conditions, whereas race prejudice is an element of what we have called the societal condition. Collective definition is more a function of what we describe as a social condition, reflected in affiliation and bonding with others who share one’s circumstance.

Lal also defined a phenomenon she called the “ethnicity paradox,” in which ethnic group identities are generated at least in part to promote the political or economic interests of the group: “The celebration of difference and the assertion of a separate group identity may be valued in and of themselves as well as being a strategy to improve the self-esteem of members and enhance their competitiveness with regard to the universal values sought by all or most members of the society at large” (p. 428). In other words, the social construction of identity has political as well as personal and social functions. Rose and Kiger (1995) raised a similar theme in their description of the ways in which ethnocentrism, stereotyping, and inequitable resource distribution interact with self-image to produce political action within the deaf community. Solidarity among deaf Americans is central to political action, which in turn depends on development of a strong personal and social identity as culturally Deaf: “To bolster group members’ self-image, the group must exaggerate its members’ distinctiveness and value it. . . As a minority group acquires ‘voice,’ it develops ethnocentrism to a heightened form as well (Rose & Kiger, 1995, p. 524).

Lal’s paradox and Rose and Kiger’s (1995) discussion of the connections between ethnocentrism and political action in the deaf community are particularly relevant to the circumstance of deaf minority persons, as reflected in the frequently competing functions inherent in defining oneself in terms of disability, culture, or race. Our research suggests that individual choices regarding personal, social, and ultimately political alliances may vary across time and locale, depending on the relative impact of situational, social, and societal conditions. In an effort to strengthen their position vis-à-vis political action, different minority groups may lay claim to the deaf minority and argue that its voice should be the strongest in determining identity. As a result, deaf minority persons may find themselves torn between two or more political agendas or between political, cultural, and social goals that are mutually exclusive.

Aramburo’s (1989) study of identity of deaf Black persons and Bat-Chava’s (2000) discussion of three cluster identities explain some of our results. For example, the finding that individuals who attended separate schools and have deaf family members are the most likely to have a culturally Deaf identity is consistent with the stories of some of our respondents. Bat-Chava’s findings that identity group membership were not related to gender or the ability to hear without hearing aids and that there was very little difference in self-esteem across identity groups is also supported by our model of identity as a situated phenomenon reflecting complex interactions between the individual and various external conditions.

The stage theory of identity development proposed by Glickman (1996) does not fully explain the results of our study. We would argue that stage theory, even when considered as a constant cycle of growth, does not adequately explain our findings because it is grounded in a developmental model in which movement through the stages represents individual progress. Although those who experience few or no opportunities to verify any of their more salient individual characteristics may parallel
in some ways Glickman’s category of “culturally marginal,” our findings suggest that every stage described by Glickman may be an appropriate and healthy response to a specific situation. Thus an individual can identify as hard of hearing at work and culturally Deaf at home or as Hispanic at home but culturally Deaf at school. We realize that proponents of a stage theory of identity may argue that this is the hallmark of the bicultural stage, and in some ways perhaps it is. Still, we believe that stage theory cannot adequately capture the variety of identities that our respondents described, and we resist the conclusion implied by stage theory that those who experience ambiguity with regard to their identity or reject a cultural conceptualization of deafness are somehow “behind” their peers who have completed the cycle. In fact, we would propose that those who are able to articulate and usefully employ one or more identities, even when the strategy is invoked in response to negative experiences such as rejection, may be stronger as a result of the experience. Emerton (1996) made a similar point when he argued that marginality is not necessarily a negative or lesser state and in fact may represent a uniquely advantaged form of biculturalism. He noted that the experience of being an outsider may lead marginalized persons to “become individualistic and have dual orientation to the social reality of any given social situation” (p. 137), qualities that in turn shape the unorthodox viewpoints characteristic of those who engage in social change.

The model proposed by Woll and Ladd (2003) is similar to ours in that it is grounded in a dynamic interaction between the individual (or groups of persons) and other factors (attitudes, opportunities, etc.). However, their discussion of minority persons was focused on culturally Deaf persons who additionally have a minority status (e.g., race, ethnicity, religion, or sexual preference) within the larger Deaf community. They therefore described these individuals as part of “Deaf subcommunities,” which parallels in some ways Daniel’s story and our notion of “nested identities.” Their model is less helpful in explaining Elian’s experience and that of other respondents who defined their identity as varying by context or changing over time.

There are limitations to our study. We interviewed a relatively small and select group of students (all college students, all from a specialized postsecondary program for the deaf), and the interviews were done some time ago. Additionally, we interviewed them at a single point in time; our findings suggest that if we had done these interviews at other points in their lives we would have been given different responses. We recommend that additional research on identity of deaf minority persons be done through either replications of our study with a current, larger, or demographically different group of young adults or with individuals who are at different points in their lives. Longitudinal studies in which the same respondents are interviewed over a 5- to 10-year period would increase understanding of the biographical element of identity. The concept of identity salience should be pursued further, particularly as regards the kinds of opportunities (or lack thereof) that cause changes in the salience of an identity, for example, from Deaf to Black deaf or from culturally Deaf to hard of hearing. The role of social feedback in the maintenance of identity should also be studied for this population, including the impact of interruption to the feedback loop and resultant psychosocial stress. The concept of minority group status could be expanded to include sexual preference, religion, and other key individual characteristics. Differences in identity salience and the self-verification process could be compared across several different minority groups or in the same minority group but across several generations. Identity could also be studied at key transitional points in the individual’s life, for example, upon school graduation, entry into the workplace, marriage, or becoming a parent.

The findings from this study have implications for curricula and counseling of deaf students in school environments, particularly regarding individuals with diverse backgrounds. Deaf minority students may have difficulty verifying both their deaf and racial or ethnic minority identities and as a result experience stress and conflict. Teachers of younger students may want to design learning activities that incorporate recognition and support for the additional “self-meanings” expressed by these students. Teachers of older students may want to consider framing lessons in sociology, psychology, history, and political science in terms of the ways these disciplines shape students’ individual and group identities. Those who administer educational programs that separate deaf students from the general school population or from their local neighborhoods must consider the unin-
tended consequence of distancing deaf minority students from their parents’ cultures. In the meantime, separate or special schools should provide information and support for the diverse cultures represented in their student populations and find ways to increase the involvement of parents from Asian, Black, and Hispanic cultures in school events and programming.

Finally, our model may provide counselors with a framework for discussing identity with deaf youth that allows for intraindividual diversity and lessens the tension inherent in managing varying yet equally valued individual characteristics and beliefs such as race, gender, religion, sexual preference, and linguistic minority status. This model also encourages deaf persons of all ages to consider the many ways in which it is possible to construct meaningful identities within the broad range of situations they encounter as they move through complex and changing social, political, and technological landscapes.

Appendix A: Code Category List

1. Family background and recollections of early experiences
2. School experience prior to college
3. Other experience prior to college (e.g., work, neighborhood)
4. Decision to attend college
5. Experience at college other than NTID/RIT
6. Decision to attend NTID/RIT
7. First impressions at NTID/RIT
8. Experiences in residence halls at NTID/RIT
9. Experiences in NTID/RIT classes
10. Memberships in student clubs, activities, organizations (both on and off campus)
11. Friendships
12. Discrimination
13. Identity
14. Recommendations regarding recruitment to NTID/RIT
15. Recommendations regarding improvement of campus life at NTID/RIT
16. Descriptions of culture(s), including stereotypes of other cultures

Notes

1. Generally, Deaf (capitalized) refers to a group of deaf people who share a language—ASL—and a culture, whereas the lowercase deaf refers to the audiological condition of not hearing (Padden & Humphries, 1988; Woodward, 1972). In this article we use Deaf culture, Deaf studies, and culturally Deaf. We use deaf for everything else, except when citing another’s work, in which case we follow their usage.

2. The terms Asian American, Black American (or African American), Hispanic American, and White American (or European American) will be reduced to Asian, Black, Hispanic, and White unless other words are specifically used by those cited. We chose these terms because they were the most frequently used by respondents when referring to themselves or others.


4. A form of retinitis pigmentosa (RP) that in addition to deafness causes vision impairment that may eventually result in complete blindness.

5. As the minority populations of schools for deaf students continues to increase, this may be less of an issue for these students. However, it may become a reverse issue in which Whites of various European cultural backgrounds become distanced from their heritages.

References


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