



The SAGE Deaf Studies Encyclopedia

Deaf Gain

Contributors: Joseph J. Murray

Edited by: Genie Gertz & Patrick Boudreault

Book Title: The SAGE Deaf Studies Encyclopedia

Chapter Title: "Deaf Gain"

Pub. Date: 2016

Access Date: November 23, 2016

Publishing Company: SAGE Publications, Inc

City: Thousand Oaks

Print ISBN: 9781452259567

Online ISBN: 9781483346489

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781483346489.n65>

Print pages: 187-189

©2016 SAGE Publications, Inc. All Rights Reserved.

This PDF has been generated from SAGE Knowledge. Please note that the pagination of the online version will vary from the pagination of the print book.

Deaf Gain is a term conceived and elaborated on by H-Dirksen L. Bauman and Joseph J. Murray in a series of lectures and articles on American Sign Language, International Sign, and English from 2008 onward. The concept has been adopted as a key conceptual lens in studies of deaf people and sign languages across multiple disciplines in the humanities, social sciences, and cognitive sciences.

The idea of Deaf Gain reverses the traditional hierarchy of normalcy to ask how the view of deaf people and of the world might change if society stopped viewing deaf people as individuals with a hearing loss and instead looked at what contributions accrue to the world by the existence of people with a different sensory orientation. Deaf Gain is a term given to the idea that the unique sensory orientation of deaf people leads to a sophisticated form of visuospatial language and visual ways of being. This orientation has shaped human interaction and human societies in ways still being fully realized.

Deaf Gain is part of a larger trend among scholars looking to redefine our understandings of human experience. Instead of measuring individuals against a baseline of “normal” physical bodies, scholars are increasingly conceptualizing humanity within the framework of biodiversity. Cultural, ethnic, and linguistic diversity is recognized as beneficial for society. The various ways in which people interact with the world—through different bodies and different cognitive and sensory experiences—can also be seen as adding to the richness of the human experience. As with all other theoretical constructions, deaf gain should not be understood to be universalist. Any investigation of deaf gain must be attentive to the existence and experiences of particular deaf people situated within specific temporal, societal, and cultural contexts.

A shift to Deaf Gain perspective must first acknowledge that current ways of understanding deaf people are rooted in a perspective of loss, specifically hearing loss. This perspective draws from the 19th-century invention of the category of “normal” versus “abnormal” humans. The bell curve, or normal distribution, is the most prominent symbol of human variation being seen as measurable. These measurements are then arranged on a scale from superior to subnormal, one prominent example of this being the Intelligence Quotient (IQ) test. The rise of normalcy and the grouping of human populations on a normal distribution according to physical, sensory, and cognitive differences is an integral part of contemporary life. The stifling of sign language in Deaf education and deaf lives has much to do with efforts to reshape deaf people to fit ableist standards of normalcy. A bias toward normalcy has led to oral-aural education, and an apparatus of technological intervention designed to restore some semblance of hearing to deaf children.

But there is an alternative model for understanding people with physical, sensory, and cognitive differences. An integral trait of life is its biological diversity and its strong correlation with cultural and linguistic diversity. There are numerous languages and cultures in the world, each with people who have their own finely evolved ways of approaching and coexisting with their lived environments. Many languages contain concepts and ideas that have proved to be a boon to people from other cultures. Approaching deaf people from a perspective of biodiversity opens up new ways of understanding the existence of deaf people and of sign languages as an integral part of the world’s biodiversity. Deaf people and the sensory universe created by deaf ways of being have existed throughout human history. Scientists are now starting to explore what this means for the rest of the world.

The turn to Deaf Gain encompasses several key epistemological paradigms. First, it notes ways in which the world has changed because of the existence of deaf people. Second, it

studies how deaf people's different sensory experiences led to different ways of organizing and navigating society. And, finally, deaf gain looks at how deaf people contribute to human diversity.

One prominent example of the Deaf Gain in human diversity is the existence of sign language. There is documented evidence of signing being used by deaf people as far back as classical Greece, and numerous signing communities composed of deaf and hearing people have likely existed numerous times in human history. Regional and national sign languages arose, fostered by the advent of formal deaf education and the sustained contact of deaf people from these schools. Scientists had long persisted with a mistaken understanding of language as purely spoken until the 1960s. The discovery of language as having multiple modalities—signed and spoken—revolutionized the understanding of the language capacity in human beings. Gene mutations are often kept because they confer some benefit on the organism carrying the mutation. By moving into genetic diversity, it has been shown that carriers of connexin 26, the most common of the more than 400 genes for deafness, have thicker skin and thus are less susceptible to infections from skin wounds. This includes those who have only one copy of the gene and may not be deaf. Other genes for deafness also have multiple functions, so even on the genetic level, deafness cannot be reduced to a loss.

By turning away from focusing on hearing loss to viewing deaf people as sensory beings, one can find studies that show deaf people have increased facial recognition skills, use a wider peripheral field of vision, and have increased spatial cognition skills, compared with nonsigning hearing people. In addition, studies have shown deaf people have a keen ability to interpret body language and are shown to have a keener sense of touch in laboratory studies. Some of these traits may be related to sign language, others to increased visual attention from being deaf.

Deaf communities around the world have developed cultures in which these different sensory orientations can develop. These cultural expressions provide new ways of participating in different areas of human life. Deaf creative arts, such as sign language literature and poetry, offer new perspectives on visuality and embodiment in the arts. Deaf people's approaches to music have much to offer to our understanding of the role of music and rhythm in humans. Deaf communities are characterized as collectivist cultures, and when this idea is paired with architecture, the concept of DeafSpace emerges. DeafSpace shows our lived spaces can be redesigned to encompass visual ways of being and, as a result, open new forms of interaction for all people.

Another remarkable aspect of Deaf culture is its transnational character. Deaf people have had sustained transnational connections over several centuries. Sign languages are not universal: Each country has one or more signed language, and they are mutually unintelligible. Through sustained international travel, deaf people have developed regional and global linguistic codes—commonly known as “international sign”—that allow them to communicate across linguistic barriers. Some variations of international sign have developed into near-creoles through sustained interaction and generational transmission of common signs across time. This ability to spontaneously develop a common linguistic code through gestural interaction is now considered unique to deaf people. However, historians have uncovered instances of gestural communication playing an important role in cross-cultural interactions among hearing explorers and traders. The cultural practices of deaf people thus highlight the role and potentiality of gesture in human history and culture.

The benefits of sign language are not limited to deaf people. Studies have also shown the use

of sign language has led to cognitive and visual gains among hearing people. The use of sign language by hearing babies allows them to develop bimodal language abilities. Not only is this a boon to parents and caregivers; it also gives children a head start in processing the world around them. Hearing children who use sign language have been shown to have increased spatial memory compared with nonsigners; they remember where things are located in space. Studies also show that members of this population have increased visual working memory; they are able to mentally manipulate and orient objects in their minds. Knowing sign language has also been correlated with better reading outcomes in hearing children as well as deaf children. Hearing people who use sign languages also have increased facial recognition and processing skills and enhanced ability to detect and categorize motions. All of these skills point to a clear cognitive gain to learning sign language. There is a sign gain for hearing people who learn sign languages, a gain that goes beyond the normal cognitive gains associated with bilingualism.

Deaf Gain pushes aside traditional hierarchies of normal and abnormal to show how the world has changed due to the existence of deaf people. Transcending the limits of normalcy opens up people to the manifold ways in which the existence of deaf people has changed the world and how the sensory orientations that come from deafness have numerous gains for individuals, societies, and the world. Consider that the electric light, the telegraph, the telephone, and the Internet were all invented by people who were deaf or who had a significant family member who was deaf. While there is no research showing a direct correlation between one's deafness and these inventions, it is clear the traits described earlier would be considered valuable in a wide array of professions. Indeed, deaf history has examples of deaf workers being considered prized workers because of their visual acuity, among other traits.

This reframing of normalcy to demonstrate sensory difference as a form of diversity is also being presented by other groups of people with physical, cognitive, and sensory differences, most notably in the neurodiversity movement led by people on the autism spectrum. Ultimately, *Deaf Gain* signals a shift in ways of viewing diversity. It is now commonly accepted that the multiple perspectives given by people of different nationalities, ethnicities, genders, sexual orientations, and cultures serve to strengthen societies. The acceptance of the gains inherent in the manifold physical, sensory, and cognitive differences in humans is just as essential for humanity.

Joseph J. Murray

See also Bilingualism; Deaf Centrism and Deaf Centricity; Deaf Culture; DeafSpace

Further Readings

Bauman, H.-D. L., & Murray, J. J. (2009). Deaf gain and the future of Deaf Studies. *Deaf Studies Digital Journal*, 1(1), 1–10.

Bauman, H.-D. L., & Murray, J. J. (2010). Deaf Studies in the twenty-first century: Deaf-gain and the future of Deaf Studies. In M. Marshark & P. Spencer (Eds.), *Oxford handbook on Deaf Studies and Deaf education* (Vol. 2, pp. 196–225). Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Bauman, H.-D. L., & Murray, J. J. (Eds.). (2014). *Deaf gain: Raising the stakes for human diversity*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Joseph J. Murray

<http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781483346489.n65>

10.4135/9781483346489.n65