

# Tracing Deafhood: Exploring the Origins and Spread of Deaf Cultural Identity

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## INTRODUCTION

THIS PAPER PRESENTS SELECTED RESULTS FROM AN ON-GOING PROJECT to identify how the formation and worldwide spread of Deaf cultural identity has occurred. ArcGIS, a Geographic Information System computer program, is utilized to map and visually determine the chronological sequences of and patterns in the establishment and spread of schools for the deaf, Deaf clubs, Deaf sport clubs, and national Deaf associations worldwide. Current research efforts focus on Europe and the United States.

Three key concepts, Deafhood, Deaf community 'pillars', and ArcGIS analysis are covered here. Understanding each concept is essential to understanding the purpose of this paper, which is to show that combining all three concepts opens up a new, promising avenue of analyzing Deaf history and Deaf geography.

Ladd (2003:xviii) defines the concept of Deafhood, which he describes "as a process by which Deaf individuals come to actualise their Deaf identity." This process includes discourse amongst Deaf community members (p. 3, also see p. 81). This term seeks to define the essence and existence of Deaf identity (pp. xviii, 3, 4, 81).

Four Deaf community 'pillars' are identified through the work of Lane et al (1996: 131-137; 137-138) and Eickman (2004:190, also see p. 34). These pillars are schools for the deaf, Deaf clubs, Deaf sport clubs, and national Deaf associations<sup>1</sup>. Each pillar has a role in maintaining the Deaf community's existence and serve educational, social, and political purposes. Lane et al



(1996:131-137; 137-138) describe how American schools for the deaf, Deaf clubs and Deaf sport have impacted the acculturation process of deaf people into the American Deaf community and the National Association of the Deaf's socially significant role.

Now, this brings geography into the equation. Why should the geography of Deafhood and Deaf identity be studied? Look at the following premises that are taken:

- 1) The four pillars influence Deaf identity development.
- 2) Deafhood is the same as Deaf identity actualisation.

Thus, it can be deduced that the four pillars influence Deafhood. Therefore, if the four pillars affect Deafhood through their impact on Deaf identity development, then the compilation and analysis of their origins and spread is vital to understand Deaf identity's origins and spread.

#### METHODOLOGY: USING MAPS IN DATA ANALYSIS

Eriksson (1998:21; 22-49; 49-65), who inspired this research, describes the beginnings of deaf education and schools for the deaf, particularly in Europe. He offers analysis of the spread of schools for the deaf there (pp. 53; 58-63; 82-83; 87-90) and to America (pp. 63-64), and of the teaching methods used by individual teachers and schools (pp. 21; 22-49; 65; 82-88; 88-89). He provides two maps of early European schools for the deaf showing their location (pp. 60-61) and the spread of the manual and oral teaching methods (p. 65).

ArcGIS's capabilities enable a deeper level of analysis building on Eriksson's (1998) work. Collected data on the four pillars permits geographic analysis of patterns to determine how Deaf identity has spread globally, as those four pillars serve as venues for Deaf identity development. All four pillars and their characteristics can be plotted on multiple map layers on top of a single map to aid studying their geographic origins, spread, and interplay. This method allows multi-dimensional analysis and aims to give greater insight into the spread of Deaf identity.

Over time, patterns in the pillars' development and locations of stronger and weaker Deaf activity can be learned and analyzed. Places having high and low degrees of Deaf community activity, evidenced by the formation and existence or absence of the four pillars, will be indicators of where Deaf identity has been/is strongest or weakest, representing possible manifestations of an 'ideal' Deaf community or forces of audism, respectively.

Also, the visual geographic impact of positive factors, such as Deaf-centered leadership, sign language usage, and pro-Deaf rights legislation, and negative factors, such as oralism, audism, and Milan, can be illustrated by mapping and analyzing the appropriate pillars affected by these factors.

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