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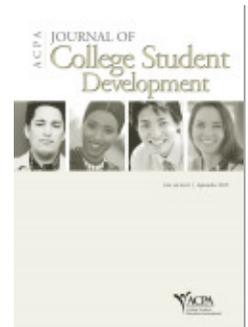
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# When Being Deaf is Centered: d/Deaf Women of Color's Experiences With Racial/Ethnic and d/Deaf Identities in College

Lissa Stapleton

*Approximately 30% of d/Deaf students are successfully completing college; the reasons for such a low graduation rate is unknown (Destler & Buckley, 2011). Most research on d/Deaf college students lack racial/ethnic diversity within the study; thus, it is unclear how d/Deaf Students of Color are faring in higher education or what experiences they are having. It is no longer appropriate or socially just to conduct research that does not intentionally seek out the voices of d/Deaf Students of Color. Using a fundamental descriptive qualitative methodology, this paper sheds light on a population of students, d/Deaf Women of Color, who are often invisible within the mainstream higher education literature and expands our understand of the types of experiences they are having related to their racialethnic and d/Deaf identity while attending college.*

## REFLEXIVE STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

It is about 2:00 p.m., and I am expecting Amy and her mother to drop by my office at any moment. Amy is an Asian American d/Deaf\* student who lives in one of my residential halls. She had been struggling with identity issues, and her mother, who was deeply concerned about her daughter's change in behavior, was coming to my office to discuss resources. As I hurry to finish a few random administrative tasks,

Amy and her mother, a small-framed Asian woman with a bright red jacket and large tan purse, knock on my door, apologizing for disturbing me. I quickly stand up to greet them and ask them to please come in and have a seat. I have had several one-on-one interactions with Amy over her two years at the institution. She struggled with shifting identities between her life at home and school. At home, her family treated her like a hearing person; she spoke her ethnic language, participated in all her ethnic cultural practices, and used hearing aids. When she came to school, she only signed and did not interact with other Asian students, as most of the d/Deaf students on campus were White. She did not feel hearing, Asian, or d/Deaf enough to fit into the residential or campus community. She struggled. Afraid, because of cultural taboos, to tell her parents that she needed counseling and unable to find a counselor to meet her communication needs (simultaneously signing and speaking), she started to shut down. The lack of congruency and peace she felt affected her schoolwork, her friendship circles, and now her ability to stay at school because her behavior had become unpredictable and distant.

I share this story as a way for readers to understand the tensions that may come from negotiating the intersection of d/Deaf and race/ethnic identities. As a Black hearing

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\* The upper case *D* in the word *Deaf* refers to individuals who connect to Deaf cultural practices, the centrality of American Sign Language (ASL), and the history of the community (Johnson & McIntosh, 2009; Mitchell, 2005; Woodcock, Rohan & Campbell, 2007). The lower case *d* in the word *deaf* refers to the audiological condition or medical severity of the person's hearing loss (Trowler & Turner, 2002; Woodcock et al., 2007). In this study *d/Deaf* is used because the differences are not always clearly identified in the literature or among the participants.

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woman, I worked at West Coast University for three years in student housing. I interacted with a diverse population of d/Deaf students. Some students struggled with their racial/ethnic and d/Deaf identities, whereas others gravitated toward one or the other, unaware or choosing not to navigate both identities. I never forgot Amy or the influence she had on my professional commitment to examine the college experiences of d/Deaf women of color (women of color referring to self-identified women who also identify as Black/African American, Latina/Hispanic/Chicana, Native American/Indigenous, Asian American/Pacific Islander, Middle Eastern, multiracial and biracial) and the intersections of their racial/ethnic<sup>†</sup> and d/Deaf identities.

## INTRODUCTION

Approximately 1 in 20 individuals identifies as d/Deaf in the United States (Mitchell, 2005). The d/Deaf community is dynamic and members of this community are very diverse in their range of hearing loss, cultural connections, and the methods they use to interact with the dominant hearing world. Historically, hearing people have remained in power positions relative to d/Deaf people's lives, thus labeling them as disabled. This power has played out within family life and during the formative years of schooling (Trowler & Turner, 2002). There are connections between early education preparation, family involvement, and identity development that influence the success of d/Deaf college students (Lang, 2002). Approximately 30% of d/Deaf students are successfully completing college;

the reasons for such a low graduation rate is unknown (Destler & Buckley, 2011; Lang, 2002). Most research on d/Deaf college students lacks racial/ethnic diversity within the study or does not use race as a variable; thus, it is unclear how d/Deaf students of color are faring in higher education or what experiences they are having.

There are several reasons why this research is important. First, d/Deaf students matter. d/Deaf students' attendance in our colleges and universities is continuing to grow (Lang, 2002; Woodcock et al., 2007). As of 1993, there were more than 25,000 d/Deaf students (National Center for Education Statistics, 1994) attending colleges and universities, and in 2000, there were 468,000 d/Deaf students enrolled (Schroedel, Watson, & Ashmore, 2003). Higher education practitioners and faculty must understand the college experiences of d/Deaf students in order to find ways to support and better work with d/Deaf students. Second, d/Deaf experiences and the d/Deaf community have been essentialized, fixed, or stereotyped to mean White or White people, and this must change. Parasnis (2012) stated, "The experiences of white American Deaf ASL users has created a perception of Deaf culture as a monolithic overarching trait of all deaf people and has suppressed recognition of the demographic diversity of individuals within the Deaf community itself" (p. 64). The voices and perspective of d/Deaf people of color have been left largely invisible (Foster & Kinuthia, 2003). Finally, there is limited research on the college experiences of students of color with disabilities and even less about the intersection of d/Deaf experiences

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<sup>†</sup> In an initial questionnaire, participants were asked how they racially identified, and throughout the interviews, some participants revealed and talked about their ethnic identity. For this study, race was defined as socially constructed categories loosely based on skin color, facial features, hair, and family background (Walker, 2011). Ethnicity was defined as a group of people who share attributes acquired through genetic, cultural, and historical inheritance, which are believed to be associated with their family's descent (Walker, 2011). The breakdown of the participants' race and ethnicity can be seen in Table 1.

and race (Foster & Kinuthia, 2003) within higher education literature. It is no longer appropriate or socially just to conduct research that allows the reader to assume unconsciously that all d/Deaf students are White or to conduct research with only White d/Deaf participants. In order to best serve their needs, improve our higher education practices, and encourage their success, the voices, experiences, and stories of d/Deaf students of color must more visibly and intentionally show up in the literature.

The overarching study explored the college experiences of d/Deaf women of color and what they perceived as salient to shaping their college experiences as it related to their families, their college classroom experiences, their extracurricular lives, and the role of their identities, specifically racial/ethnic and d/Deaf identity. It was conducted at a 4-year public institution on the West Coast of the United States that serves approximately 200 d/Deaf undergraduate and graduate students and will be referred to as West Coast University (WCU). This paper focuses on a portion of the overarching study and uses a fundamental descriptive qualitative methodology. There were two primary purposes: first, to shed light on a population of students, d/Deaf women of color, who are often invisible within the mainstream higher education literature; and second, to understand the types of experiences d/Deaf women of color were having as it related to their racial/ethnic and d/Deaf identity while attending WCU.

This paper starts with a literature review, followed by the research design. The research design incorporates the methodology, a more in-depth description of the participants, the guiding research questions, and data analysis. The summary of findings concentrates on the participants' voices and experiences, flowing directly into suggestions for future research and practice.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

There has been research focusing on the college classroom experiences of d/Deaf students (Boutin, 2008; Convertino, Marschark, Sapere, Sarchet, & Zupan, 2009; Foster, Long, & Snell, 1999; Lang, 2002, Stinson, Scherer, & Walter, 1987), but most studies have failed to acknowledge or address the multiple identities of d/Deaf students, specifically with reference to race. Kersting (1997) focused on the social interactions of d/Deaf college students who attended mainstream institutions and had no previous contact with the d/Deaf community. Seven men and three women participated in this study, and only their gender and age ranges were given. Students in the study ultimately found ways to connect to a community (d/Deaf, hearing, or both) and were satisfied but not without a struggle and moments of isolation, loneliness, and rejection. The types of communities students were trying to connect with is unclear (i.e., communities of color, White communities, or multicultural communities) as was if that information would have made a difference in the findings. At this point, there is "no empirical data available regarding the campus comfort level and educational satisfaction of racial/ethnic minority deaf students" (Parasnis, Samar, & Fischer, 2005, p. 48).

College and career programs for Deaf Studies have identified several thousand 2- and 4-year institutions that serve d/Deaf student populations and offer support services (Lang, 2002). Many institutions are serving small numbers of d/Deaf students and often do not have racial diversity within the d/Deaf student population. Parasnis et al. (2005) studied d/Deaf students' attitudes toward racial/ethnic diversity, campus climate, and role models at the Rochester Institute of Technology. One hundred and fifty-seven d/Deaf students participated in the quantitative study, and the

ethnic breakdown was 34 African Americans, 29 Asian Americans, 18 Latinos, and 76 Whites (Parasnis et al., 2005). The notion of “critical mass,” or having several individuals from the same d/Deaf racial/ethnic group was addressed in the study. A critical mass of students of color was seen as both affirming and problematic, because all d/Deaf women of color do not experience and/or embrace their race and ethnicity in the same way. One student commented, “It is a very positive experience to belong to both a minority group and the deaf community since it enhances my sense of identity.” Offering a contrasting perspective, another student observed that “subgroups make me feel uncomfortable. The lack of education about multicultural [sic] disappoints me deeply” (Parasnis et al., 2005, p. 56). There are multiple truths illustrating how d/Deaf women of color experience and embrace their race and ethnicity. Having a critical mass of racially diverse d/Deaf students allows d/Deaf women of color to have options to explore the intersections of these two particular identities whereby the student does not have to be d/Deaf or a person of color but has a community in which both identities are acknowledged. The study concluded that race and ethnicity matter in regards to influencing the perception of campus climate and that all minoritized d/Deaf student communities cannot be grouped together or assumed to have the same experiences, needs, or support (Parasnis et al., 2005).

The importance of not essentializing all d/Deaf women of color’s experiences can be clearly seen in Foster and Kinuthia’s (2003) qualitative study, which explored how d/Deaf college students of color think about and describe their identities, specifically their d/Deaf and racialized identities. Most of the college participants attended mainstream K–12 schools, had families who did not know American Sign Language and, as a result, had

to rely on gesturing and writing notes at home. Because of communication barriers within their family, understanding their culture and heritage was challenging. Some students did not have a connection to their culture, but one Black student said, “[I learned] myself . . . watch[ed] Black entertainment. Read magazines” (Foster & Kinuthia, 2003, p. 278). This particular participant relied on the media and pop culture to learn about her race, which can be problematic because of the gross stereotypes portrayed in the media regarding people of color (Aramburo, 1989). We have to look deeper at the ways in which d/Deaf women of color understand their racial and ethnic culture in order to understand how and if it influences them as they holistically develop. The findings from the study showed that identity “is conceptualized as an interaction between the self and the surrounding social structures” (Foster & Kinuthia, 2003, p. 286) and that identity salience changes depending on d/Deaf students’ of color environment.

d/Deaf students are diverse and come to college with a variety of experiences. They need to have support services, such as interpreters, captionists, note takers, and tutors, in order to be successful, but that is not all students need to thrive academically. The academic experience is just one component of the college experience. Foster (1989) said, “Social/personal factors play a critical role in the success of deaf students in higher education. . . . Qualities [such as] persistence, self-identity, self-efficacy, perseverance, ability to accommodate oneself in an integrative environment, and general maturity” (p. 269) all need to be further developed for student success in higher education. Unfortunately, most research on d/Deaf students and higher education has painted a broad and essentialized picture of who d/Deaf students are; thus, this study was the beginning step of exploring how d/Deaf women of color understood and

experienced their racial/ethnic and d/Deaf identities while attending WCU.

## RESEARCH DESIGN

### Methodology

This was a fundamental qualitative descriptive study, which is “a descriptive summary of a phenomenon, organized in a way that best contains the data collected and that will be most relevant to the audience for whom it is written” (Sandelowski, 2000, p. 339). The purpose of this study was to understand the experiences d/Deaf women of color were having as it related to their racial/ethnic and d/Deaf identities while attending WCU and to shed light on a population of students who often are invisible within higher education and mainstream higher education literature. Sandelowski (2000) stated that the goal of this type of study is “to stay closer to the surface of the data” (p.336) and to accurately convey the story or events as well as the meaning given by the participants. Fundamental qualitative descriptive studies use conceptual and philosophical frameworks as a way to organize and look at the data, but not necessarily to analyze, as they are not highly interpretative (Sandelowski, 2000). This study has phenomenological overtones, meaning it touches on the experiences of the women, but the purpose is not to produce “phenomenological renderings of the target phenomenon” (p. 337) nor were phenomenological methods and analysis used. Sandelowski (2000) stated that this is a common practice because “qualitative descriptive studies are different from phenomenological, grounded theory, ethnographic and narrative studies; [however] they may, have hues, tones, and textures from these approaches” (p.337).

This methodology is appropriate for this study because descriptive summaries and accurate accounts of the women’s experiences

fulfill the purpose of this study. It raises awareness about d/Deaf women of color and the experiences they had with their racial/ethnic and d/Deaf identity. In addition, this methodology is congruent with Deaf epistemology. Deaf epistemology is a Deaf-centered perspective that has been influenced by critical and cultural theories (Paul & Moores, 2010). This epistemology is anti-essentialist and makes no claims that there is one Deaf way of knowing (Parasnis, 2012). Deaf epistemology believes knowledge is socially constructed and centers d/Deaf voices and ways of operating in the world, using personal accounts to document knowledge (Holcomb, 2010; Paul & Moores, 2012). This study consciously privileges d/Deaf over hearing ways of knowing, and this methodological approach “produces a complete and valued end-product in itself. . . . [It] entails a kind of interpretation that is low-interference”; thus, allowing d/Deaf women of color to really speak for themselves. Deaf epistemology was used throughout the data collection and analysis process, as it justified why the women should have communication options during their interviews, stressed the importance of the women speaking for themselves, and centered and valued the perspectives of all the women, including the minority or differing voices. The following sections address the four components of the research design including participants, data collection, analysis, and representation techniques.

### PARTICIPANTS

Fundamental qualitative descriptive studies use purposeful sampling (Sandelowski, 2000). Patton (2002) stated, “The logic and power of purposeful sampling derive from the emphasis on in-depth understanding and selecting information-rich cases whose [perspectives] will illuminate the questions under study”

(p. 46). For this study, the participants had to identify as d/Deaf and a person of color as well as attend WCU at the time of interviewing. The hope was to recruit a group of diverse ethnicities and gender; however, eight d/Deaf female students initially volunteered, and seven completed the full study. Students were recruited through flyers hung on bulletin boards, e-mailing d/Deaf students and d/Deaf student organizations’ listservs, interacting with students while visiting campus, and contacting WCU’s academic advisors and staff interpreters. Students received a \$20 bookstore gift card for their participation. Participants’ names were changed to protect their privacy.

Each woman was asked to describe her life growing up and her educational experiences before college. As seen in Table 1, the women were diverse in regards to race/ethnicity, d/Deaf identity, majors, year in school, and preferred communication methods. All but two lived off campus. Five of the women were from California, one lived in multiple states growing up, and one was from out of state. All the women had siblings but were the only d/Deaf people in their families. Most of the participants were raised by two parents (male and female), but two were raised by single mothers. Most of the participants’ parents did not sign, but in the families that did sign, it

was mostly their mothers who communicated with them through American Sign Language, Signed Exact English, or signing and talking.

Each woman also had varying degrees of contact with d/Deaf people and culture before attending college, ranging from no exposure to deeply connected. They all attended K–12 mainstreamed schools, but their mainstream experiences were very different. Some were in small all-d/Deaf classes of one to two people and signed, whereas others were in hearing classes with an interpreter and some women were in oral programs. Most of the participants applied to more than one college, but most selected WCU because it was close to home and had resources for d/Deaf individuals.

### Data Collection

The data collection process within a fundamental qualitative descriptive study focuses on “discovering the who, what, and where of events or experiences, or their basic nature and shape” (Sandelowski, 2000, p. 338), which in this study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What experiences are d/Deaf women of color having at West Coast University as it relates to their racial/ethnic and d/Deaf identity?

Table 1.  
Participant Demographics

Name	Year in School	Race/Ethnicity	Deaf/Hard of Hearing	Major Category	Communication Preference <sup>a</sup>
Deidra	3rd	Chinese/Vietnamese	Hard of hearing	Deaf Studies	SS
Jodie	3rd	Korean	Deaf	Deaf Studies	ASL
Mel	5th	Black	Deaf	Education	ASL
Joyce	3rd	Asian American	Deaf	Deaf Studies	ASL
Chloe	3rd	Korean	Deaf	Liberal Arts	ASL/SEE
Tiara	3rd	Black	Hard of hearing	Education	SS
Sunny	2nd	Mexican	Hard of hearing	STEM	ASL

<sup>a</sup> SS = signing and speaking; ASL = American Sign Language; SEE = Signed Exact English.

2. What aspects of racial/ethnic and d/Deaf identity are salient to d/Deaf women of color?

Fundamental qualitative descriptive studies seek to collect as much data as possible in order to capture accurate accounts of events (Sandelowski, 2000). Thus, I collected data in two ways through a preliminary questionnaire and two “moderately structured open-ended interviews” (Sandelowski, 2000, p. 338). The preliminary interview questionnaire included demographics, educational background, and communication preferences, which were used to establish a context for each of the participants. Each participant filled out a consent form and face-to-face interviews were conducted on campus in a private room. All the questions were translated into American Sign Language syntax, and each of the women were given an English written copy of the interview questions to look at throughout the interviews. Based on the values of Deaf epistemology and my experiences within the d/Deaf community, it was important to build trust and rapport with the participants by conducting my own signed interviews without an interpreter. This allowed direct communication with the women, greater control over asking follow-up questions, and eliminated the filtering of the data through an interpreter.

The first interviews were video-recorded and lasted 1 hour. The second interviews were set up before each participant left and were conducted a month later, after the first interviews had been translated and transcribed. I read the transcriptions several times and developed additional and clarifying questions for the second interviews. Because of the time between the first and second interviews, and because of the fact that the participants and I did not live in the same state, the second interviews were conducted from a distance through instant messaging Google chat. I

used Google chat because each woman had a Google account. The second interviews were 60–90 minutes of typing back and forth, and the entire chat session was copied and used for analysis.

## Data Analysis

Using the first and second interviews, a qualitative content analysis was conducted. Fundamental qualitative descriptive studies primarily use this analysis to analyze visual and verbal data to highlight the regularity of ideas, feelings and thoughts within an event in order to create an accurate summary of the participants’ voices and stories (Sandelowski, 2000). During the initial step in analysis, the data was organized in a Word document and the transcriptions were read several times (Esterberg, 2002). Using open coding, color-coding was used for, all statements, stories, ideas, thoughts and feelings connected to racial/ethnic and d/Deaf identity. Then, experiences were identified that happened while the women attended WCU (working with faculty, encounters with peers, taking classes, student organization, etc.) or if it influenced their understanding of their racial/ethnic and d/Deaf identity while at WSU (encounters with family). Finally, focused coding was used to narrow down the categories, looking for similarities and differences among the women (Esterberg, 2002).

Sandelowski (2000) stated, “There is nothing trivial or easy about getting the facts, and the meaning participants give to those facts, and then conveying them in a coherent and useful manner” (p.336). Thus, fundamental qualitative descriptive studies seek interpretive and descriptive validity to ensure a comprehensive summary of events and stories. Interpretive validity is defined as “an accurate account of facts and meanings in which the participants would agree” (Sandelowski, 2000, p. 338). Member checks were done during the

second Google chat interview, and divergent participant perspectives were acknowledged throughout the findings in order to establish interpretive validity. Descriptive validity is defined as “an accurate account of facts and meanings in which others observing would agree” (Sandelowski, 2000, p. 338). This was addressed by working with the academic advisors in the d/Deaf resource center at WCU. The data were presented to them as a report, and a larger roundtable discussion was scheduled to talk through the findings as well as to compare the findings with what they experienced with students on a daily basis.

### Re-Presentation Techniques

The way in which a fundamental qualitative descriptive study is re-presented is a “straight descriptive summary of the informational data organized in a way that best fits the data” (Sandelowski, 2000, pp. 338–339). This study used Deaf critical theory (Deaf Crit) as a tool to re-present the women’s experiences because it is a Deaf-centered theory, created by and for d/Deaf people, to more accurately talk about their lived experiences. Developed by Gertz (2003), Deaf Crit is informed by critical race theory (CRT), an interdisciplinary race-centered movement that is rooted in critical legal theory and challenges notions of color-blindness and meritocracy (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012), which surfaced as a result of Gertz’s (2003) study with Deaf adults born and raised in Deaf families. She looked at how dysconscious audism, “a form of audism by means of an implicit acceptance of the dominant hearing norms and privileges” (p. xii), impacted their understanding of themselves as Deaf people as well as their awareness of unequal status in society. Deaf Crit was born as a way in which to examine and talk about audistic subordination and marginalization of d/Deaf people (Gertz, 2003).

The word audism was coined by Deaf scholar Tom Humphries (1977), who defined it as “the notion that one is superior based on one’s ability to hear or behave in a manner of one who hears” (p. 12). Many hearing people do not trust that d/Deaf people have the ability to control their own lives, and they believe they can dominate and discriminate against d/Deaf individuals (Eckert & Rowley, 2013). Audism is practiced overtly, covertly, and aversively. Overt audism are practices that directly and openly dehumanize d/Deaf people, for example, policies and behaviors that isolate and exclude d/Deaf people from society without consequences (Eckert & Rowley, 2013). Covert audism are practices that are disguised and more difficult to identify, such as hiring practices and providing reasonable accommodations. Aversive audism are practices that “concern a principle of equality accompanied by contradictions and high levels of anxiety when around Deaf people” (Eckert & Rowley, 2013, p. 109) including avoiding interaction and forcing d/Deaf people to assimilate into the hearing world.

Similar to how CRT has adopted a stance to challenge “the dominant group’s linguistic and cultural snobbery, and to respect non-dominant discourses” (Gertz, 2003, p. 419) as they relate to race, so too, has Deaf Crit focused on the liberation of d/Deaf individuals. The following four Deaf Crit tenets and explanations (Gertz, 2003), which are informed by the foundational principles of CRT, were used as a way to think about and understand the women’s stories as well as a way to organize and re-present their experiences:

- Centrality and intersectionality of d/Deaf people and audism,
- Challenge of dominant hearing ideology,
- Centrality of d/Deaf experiential knowledge, and

- Commitment to social justice for d/Deaf people.

The data were not pulled apart, dissected, or analyzed using Deaf Crit as “concerns remained concerns and perceptions remained perceptions” (Sandelowski, 2000, p. 338). However, Deaf Crit’s tenets helped organize and bring the women’s experiences together and served as a lens in which to start to understand how d/Deaf women of color at WCU experience their racial/ethnic and d/Deaf identity.

## LIMITATIONS

There were limitations to this study. First, the interviews were conducted in person and through Google chat. After completing the interviews, the women were asked which interviewing methods they preferred, and most said face-to-face. Google chat lacked the opportunity for nonverbal expression, which aided them in understanding the questions, and they felt more comfortable responding in sign language. Although, measures were taken to maintain the integrity and accuracy of the interviews, a second limitation was posed by the process of translating questions and data from language to language.

## SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The women understood their identities and cultures on a variety of levels. Some were reflective about who they were and where they came from, whereas others had a hard time articulating their identities and only knew they felt a part of certain cultures but could not express what the cultures meant. Coming to WCU gave the women an opportunity to be independent and discover who they were as d/Deaf people. This summary uses Deaf critical theory as a tool to re-present the women’s stories, feelings, and experiences as they related to their racial/ethnic and d/Deaf

identity and makes some connections and observations back to the literature. The purpose was to understand the experiences of d/Deaf women of color at WCU related to their racial/ethnic and d/Deaf identity, and ultimately, shed light on a seemingly invisible student population. The following tenets helped shape this summary: challenge of dominant hearing ideology, centrality and intersectionality of d/Deaf people and audism, centrality of d/Deaf experiential knowledge, and commitment to social justice for d/Deaf people.

## Challenge of Dominant Hearing Ideology

For many of the women, attending college opened up a completely new world of acceptance, communication, and friendship. Those who did not learn to sign growing up or were not exposed to d/Deaf people seemed thirsty to connect to the d/Deaf community. The ways in which the women challenged the dominant hearing ideology varied from subtle to direct. For some of the women, challenging meant proudly identifying as d/Deaf, whereas others refused to be boxed in with all d/Deaf people. Some women joined and supported d/Deaf-specific student organizations, whereas others educated themselves on d/Deaf history and culture.

Tiara grew up active within the Black community, used her voice and hearing aids, and in many ways was able to mask her hard of hearing identity. She focused mostly on her newfound d/Deaf identity within the interview. She talked passionately about her experience of entering the d/Deaf community:

Growing up I was very hearing minded and didn’t sign very well. When I came to WCU, I have been very involved in the deaf world and not the hearing world. I found my identity of who I am. I chose [the] deaf world; I can communicate in sign language rather than struggle to understand what everyone is saying.

Tiara consciously chose to find ways to learn and connect with the d/Deaf community at WCU. In her desire to be a proud d/Deaf person, she had to push back against her family's hearing ideology, as they saw her as a hearing person. Tiara refused to continue to be socialized or treated as if she was hearing. One way in which she pushed against this was through joining a d/Deaf student organization in spite of her family encouraging her otherwise. She shared,

I wanted to be more involved in the deaf world, and I am glad I did. I have finally found myself, and I love it, being able to communicate with all my [peers] perfectly and can really be myself in that [Deaf organization]. I wanted my family to respect my deaf identity, so I decided to join the [Deaf organization].

Opposite of Tiara, Mel grew up with more d/Deaf people around her. Her deafness played a larger role in her life than did her Black culture. She shared her thoughts:

I identify myself as Deaf, more so than with my Black ethnicity. I enjoy being part of the Deaf community; I feel at home with Deaf people because we are the same and we have a natural connection. It's ingrained in me. I feel like I am still clueless on Black culture.

Mel acknowledged her positive connection and sameness with d/Deaf people as a way to normalize d/Deaf spaces and ways of being; however, this connection overshadowed her racial identity, as she did not meet other Black d/Deaf people until college.

The d/Deaf culture and community at WCU afforded the women the opportunity and space to accept themselves as d/Deaf people. Deidra had a hard time explaining what d/Deaf culture meant, but knew she had it inside of her. Her way of challenging hearing ideology was to educate herself about d/Deaf people and culture as a Deaf Studies major.

She shared the following:

The classes I took, as a Deaf Studies major, I just learned a lot, so I feel connected. In high school, I would just stumble through conversation after conversation and just got by, and I did not know anything about the deaf culture.

Sunny's way of challenging can be seen through her development of self-acceptance. She spoke confidently:

Here at WCU, I have learned to accept myself and my identity as a deaf woman. I am finally comfortable. When I got to WCU and realized I sign, and everyone around me is signing, I felt I finally fit in.

Although, she used speech most of her life at home, Sunny spoke strongly about being a Deaf person and used sign language and not her voice at school. Challenging dominant hearing ideologies was complicated, as the women were the only d/Deaf people in their hearing families and were negotiating racial and ethnic identities. Sunny talked about how her identities were situational:

At WCU, there are Mexican students on campus, but within the deaf community here there are only a few that are Mexican, so I feel that it's not as high of importance. However, back home I have many deaf Mexican friends. I have a strong connection to my Mexican heritage and would give it the highest priority when I am there. Really, I feel that my identities are more of a two and two [Deaf/ woman or Mexican/woman] rather than all three all the time.

Challenging dominant hearing ideologies also meant questioning differences within the d/Deaf community. d/Deaf people are often essentialized to have only one culture, and while attending WCU, Chloe realized she was not like all d/Deaf people, particularly students at Gallaudet University, the largest d/Deaf university in the world. She shared, "For me,

deafness is very different from [the] hearing culture, but I am not into deaf pride like those students at Gallaudet. I think of myself as normal, but deaf.” When asked to explain further, she stated, “If you go to Gallaudet, those students are very different from here. Their sign language and their personality are very blunt. Deaf pride is usually in families full of deaf people.”

The multiple ways in which the women were negotiating and challenging hearing ideology varied, thus highlighting that not all d/Deaf Women of Color have the same experiences. For Tiara and Deidra, the d/Deaf community at WCU provided freedom, communication ease, and a deeper understanding of self, which was affirming, whereas other women, like Mel, had the opportunity grow up within the d/Deaf community, so WCU felt like a familiar home. Chloe and Sunny shared the complex ways they were trying to make sense of their d/Deaf identity as it related to others. This study, itself, continues to challenge dominant hearing ideology by raising consciousness about the importance of centering d/Deaf people of color’s discourse, thus further acknowledging their “cultural distinctiveness and validating Deaf people’s placement within the world” (Gertz, 2003, p. 424) and in research.

### Centrality and Intersectionality of d/Deaf People and Audism

Deaf people’s lives intersect with issues of audism, and it is a central and constant form of oppression that attempts to belittle and shape d/Deaf people into hearing people. Although the women did not directly use the word audism, they shared stories of overt, covert, and aversive discrimination felt from their families, classmates, and faculty. The women’s ability to share these experiences is vital, as it speaks to their current lived experience and it may open the door to understanding other systems of oppression such as racism and

sexism (Gertz, 2003). Jodie shared a couple of examples of when she was frustrated with an interpreter and faculty. She felt she was independent and could do a lot for herself, so having a motherly interpreter was annoying: “I got a bad interpreter [and] she treated me like I was a baby. She treated me like I did not know anything. Like how to raise my hand in class or meet other people for an activity.” This is an example of aversive audism. The interpreter was there to support and enhance access, but in practice belittled her and did not treat her like a competent student. There is a contradiction between what the interpreter was paid to do and what actually happened. Jodie continued by talking about an overt audist experience with a faculty member: “I did not have an interpreter during the professor’s office hours, so I would have to communicate through pen and paper. And when I had to do that, certain teachers had no patience for it.” The unwillingness to use alternative methods of communication outside of speaking is audist and privileges hearing people.

Covert audism can be difficult to identify, as it is easy for hearing people to deny and hide. Chloe talked more about working with classmates. She gave an example of covert audism when she tried to work on a group project with hearing students and felt their lack of follow through was connected to their discomfort with d/Deaf people. She shared,

My deaf friend and I experienced this, hearing people look down at us. It’s how they act around me. One time, I had a group project with two hearing students. We had to meet and discuss. They never showed up even though interpreters were requested. My deaf classmates and I think that they might not feel comfortable working with us.

Chloe further elaborated that the hearing students only wanted to e-mail and were not willing to meet in person after missing the meeting.

The subtleness of feeling left out or looked down upon also connected to Tiara's experience with her peers inside her mixed (hearing and d/Deaf) student organization. The purpose of the group was to support and uplift d/Deaf college women, but there are more hearing members than d/Deaf, and this shifted the dynamics of the group. Tiara wanted to increase d/Deaf membership, but the exclusive overt audist behavior of hearing members made this very difficult. She said,

During events, the [hearing members] will talk in front of [d/Deaf members]. How is that respectful to [d/Deaf members]? Because of [hearing members], we are viewed negatively. [Hearing members] don't socialize much with deaf people, so that's why [potential Deaf members] are uncomfortable joining our group. [Current d/Deaf members] have tried and tried [to fix things]; it is the same cycle. Seems like [hearing members] don't really understand how [d/Deaf members] feel about it. It's like nothing we can do about it.

The examples of hearing privilege displayed by hearing members including talking around d/Deaf members, and disregarding how this affected d/Deaf people in and out of the group were examples of overt audism. The hearing members' behavior was exclusionary, and there was no fear of consequences (Eckert & Rowley, 2013). Tiara's frustration with her peers not respecting and understanding Deaf culture is often seen and felt within families.

Families, in general, want their children to have productive and healthy lives, but because most d/Deaf children are born into hearing families, there can be a strong desire to make their children hearing by simply not acknowledging they are d/Deaf or by not allowing them to be involved within the d/Deaf community. In some cases, family members were supportive of the women, and in other cases, they were not. Mel's mother

helped her resist her extended family's overt audist behavior and thoughts by encouraging her to go to college. Mel stated:

I remember, after I graduated from high school, my mom told my family that I was accepted at WCU. They were puzzled, asking if I could go to college even though I was deaf, and my mom told them I could do it just like my other friends who went to college. She strongly believed that hearing and deaf were equal.

Audism was central to Tiara's upbringing, as she grew up learning only how to speak and was not allowed to be involved with the d/Deaf community. Once she began college, she found her own voice and identity and resisted her family's audist mindset:

My mom didn't really want me to be as involved [with d/Deaf-specific activities] because she thought that if I got involved I would try to get away with things easier and use my deafness as an excuse, but that's not how I work.

Most of the women talked about ways in which they resisted or navigated through audist moments, but Chloe was the only woman who talked about internalized audism, or feelings of shame or embarrassment for being d/Deaf and needing accommodations. She shared,

At [WCU] being the only deaf in a mainstream setting, sometimes it can be embarrassing . . . trying to communicate with gestures and [writing] notes. You can't communicate freely with hearing people having interpreters . . . it makes things awkward like it's supposed to be two people, but the interpreter is my voice.

In some cases, because of her embarrassment, Chloe would not request an interpreter but would rely on hearing friends to help her navigate events and club meetings. The negative ways internalized audism intersected in Chloe's life meant she struggled to be involved in campus life.

The women shared a variety of positive and challenging aspects of navigating their college experiences in and outside of the classroom as d/Deaf women of color. The women could more easily identify audist behavior or moments of discrimination from their family, faculty, staff, and students that were directed at being d/Deaf as opposed to their race. They had many resources but, often, overt, covert and aversive practices of audism continued on unquestioned and unresolved.

### Centrality of d/Deaf Experiential Knowledge

The experiential knowledge or lived experiences of d/Deaf people are not necessarily the same as for hearing people (Gertz, 2003). The d/Deaf community is a cultural group (Gertz, 2003), and there is no one lived d/Deaf experience; thus, it was critical to ask the d/Deaf women of color what their lives had been like and how they navigated the world and center the study around their experiential knowledge with their racial/ethnic and d/Deaf identity. When asked which identities were most salient, the women offered varying perspectives on how they understood and connected with their race/ethnicity as college students. The women did not necessarily see or understand race and ethnicity the same way. Some women talked about the importance of their d/Deaf identity and could only connect with their racial/ethnic identity through their appearance and ethnic cultural norms and not necessarily by membership in an ethnic community. After our first interview, I was curious about what Joyce meant by “I try to separate my Asian and American identities.” Joyce offered an example of how she understood her race/ethnicity as behaviors and not connections with a community.

I want to be independent like other races. I noticed that most Asian parents are strict about the kids' rules. [You have to] study hard [and] my parents won't

let me out alone even 5 minutes to walk from my house. I have to do chores for my parents since they are old. I want to break the rules from my parents because I want to experience the world like others. Of course, I accept who I am, but the point of curfew and being dependent are hard for me.

Unlike Joyce, who connected only cultural expectations to her race/ethnicity, Sunny was able to articulately in greater depth what it meant to be a part of her Mexican community, including values and behaviors. She shared,

[My family] taught me that the most important thing in life is family. I will always respect my Mexican culture and know that whatever happens in life, my family has my back. [They] also taught me the importance of love. Oh, and we also love our food!

Some women's lived experience suggested that race did not matter, but they still felt a connection to their ethnicity. Deidra shared, “Really, race does not matter, but for me I would say hard of hearing is my main identity. That is most important to me because that is who I am . . . I am always going to be hard of hearing.” Even though she felt no connection to a racial identity, Deidra believed her mother had taught her about her ethnic identity stating, “She taught me the way we pray, the way we eat, the way we have to go through with funerals, the way we have to believe things happen and the way we celebrate Chinese New Year.” Deidra's deep connection to her hard of hearing identity seemed to be influenced by her K–12 education and attending WCU. She shared, “The most important thing I have learned from the community here at [WCU] is my similarity with [d/Deaf people]. I feel equivalent to others in how we each got through life. My experience here has affected me.”

It is important to honor the roles Deidra's educational environments have played in

shaping who she is. She grew up going to oral schools, or a school in which she was taught to speak and not sign and where she was not allowed to interact with d/Deaf children or use sign language in school even though she knew some signs. Her hard of hearing identity may be more salient now due to her inability, but strong desire, to interact with the d/Deaf community when she was younger. Deidre no longer had to struggle to communicate with her peers, and she was obtaining a new awareness of what it meant for her to be d/Deaf through her major, Deaf Studies. When d/Deaf students have the opportunity to learn more about Deaf history, language, and culture through Deaf Studies courses or d/Deaf community interaction, they begin to better understand themselves as d/Deaf people and see themselves in more positive ways (Gertz, 2003). This is what happened to Deidra when she became active within her academic program and spoke often about how much she was learning in her Deaf Studies classes. d/Deaf students' identities change based on the interaction between self and surrounding social structures (Foster & Kinuthia, 2003). The college experience at WCU was fertile ground for Deidra to explore her d/Deaf identity more readily than her race/ethnic identity.

Some of the women had a hard time articulating how they identified and a harder time describing what their race/ethnic culture meant. These women did not express a tension between their race and d/Deaf identities because they seemed to have no context for what their racial identity meant. Based on comments like Mel's, it is evident that they had not had an opportunity to understand or fully connect to their race/ethnic community or culture. Mel spoke about her experiences as a Black Deaf person:

I have tried to learn, but I still don't feel a connection with that [Black] identity. I've watched many Black shows and

movies; I've tried to understand the Black perspective because I want to relate to that since I am Black. I don't speak or act like Black people do with the snapping—I'm a very humble person. When people tell me I don't act like a Black person, I feel discouraged when really it's just because I don't know Black culture.

Mel's experiential knowledge of Black people was based on stereotypical pop culture views of Blacks that she had seen in the media. She stated, "[Black people] tend to have an attitude and wear big hoop earrings and have big breasts and butts." This was also displayed in Foster and Kinuthia's (2003) research, as students used movies and entertainment as a source of education, which did not give a wide, positive, or diverse image of people of color (Aramburo, 1989).

Another potential factor that may have contributed to the women's experiential disconnection between their racial/ethnic identities was the small number of d/Deaf people of color with whom the women interacted. Parasnis et al. (2005) addressed the importance of a critical mass of d/Deaf people of color in helping students find congruency with both their d/Deaf and racial identity. This is not the case at WCU, and the women specifically talked about how there were not many d/Deaf people from their ethnic group or how they had met only one or two other people. Mel's first time meeting another Black d/Deaf person was in college. She thought she was the only one for most of her life. These experiences of disconnectedness cut across racial groups. Chloe said, "I grew up in America, so I have no idea about my culture and its traditions—I don't know how to cook Korean food."

Gertz (2003) stated, "The experiential knowledge of Deaf people is legitimate, appropriate and critical to analyzing and understanding" (p. 424) the lives of Deaf

people. In this study, family, media, and their current lived experiences played a role in the connection or lack of connection the women felt with their racial/ethnic identity. Most could not articulate what it meant to be a part of their ethnic community or culture, but this was not the case for all the women. Their desire to belong and communicate with others allowed their Deaf identity to be more salient than their ethnic identity, particularly while at school. They met other d/Deaf people with whom they could communicate directly and had similar life experiences.

### Centering d/Deaf People of Color Voices and Social Justice Commitment

The experiential knowledge and stories of d/Deaf women of color were acknowledged and centered in this study. Their voices were legitimate, and the study relied heavily on their narratives and family history. Intentional efforts were made to not essentialize or make claims that all d/Deaf students of color understand and negotiate their racial/ethnic and d/Deaf identity the same way. Research, similar to the women's stories, suggested the salience of identities can shift depending on different factors including family influence, peers, and access to community, to name just a few (Foster & Kinuthia, 2003). Thus, it would never be possible to capture one universal d/Deaf student of color experience. This is why it is necessary to center the voices of d/Deaf people of colors and not hear people speaking for d/Deaf people, as their lived experiences are fluid.

This study also falls in line with a commitment to social justice; as Gertz (2003) stated, "One of the important goals in the Deaf community for social justice is to ensure that the Deaf community is a cultural group in which Deaf people can view themselves as normal human beings" (p. 424). In order for this to happen, research that centers the

experiences of d/Deaf people of color, such as in this study, must be conducted. This study provides an opportunity to continue the dialogue on what is occurring in the lives of d/Deaf college students and, more specifically, d/Deaf students of color. It is an act of resistance to interrupt White and hearing ways of being. This study aids in preserving the stories of a marginalized community, creating visibility, and declaring that d/Deaf students of color matter. In addition, collecting data in d/Deaf-friendly ways, such as using multiple forms of communication, and building rapport with the community are all important components to social justice work with and within the d/Deaf community.

### CONCLUSION, FUTURE RESEARCH, AND PRACTICE

Most of the d/Deaf women of color in this study centered, acknowledged, and understood their d/Deaf identities more than their racial/ethnic identities. Family interactions, communication breakdowns, discrimination, isolation, the d/Deaf community at WCU, personal exploration, and personal desires to belong all influenced how the women saw themselves. Coming to WCU served as a gateway to a larger and more established d/Deaf world. They had the opportunity to explore language, form friendships with other d/Deaf students, and navigate their world more easily because of the support, community, and environment created at WCU, both socially and academically. They also faced discrimination and challenging moments as they navigated their majority-hearing world such as encounters with faculty, peers, and their families.

This fundamental descriptive qualitative study provides a starting point at which to more deeply explore the lives of d/Deaf students of color. The college experience is supposed to be a rich environment in which

students grow and develop more complex ways of seeing the world and themselves (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1998). Social and personal factors, such as self-identity and self-efficacy, are critical for d/Deaf students' success in higher education (Foster, 1989). Thus, it is important that higher education professionals and faculty are mindful of the complexities d/Deaf women of color are trying to navigate, as these professionals may serve as critical resources. The educational community needs to ask more questions and continue researching d/Deaf communities of color. Future research focusing on a larger and more gender diverse pool of d/Deaf students of color would offer additional perspective and depth. In addition, comparing the experiences of d/Deaf students of color from schools in different geographical locations may offer additional insight. Finally, concentrating on d/Deaf students of color who attended different types of institutions, including community, private, public, and for-profit institutions, would allow comparison of experience and thought. The dearth of research in this area makes this subject matter rich for investigation, allowing for continued exploration of the intersections of d/Deaf experiences and race, as well as other identities.

Concerning practice, there are many first steps practitioners can explore. First, start by asking questions in order to become aware. Do you have d/Deaf students attending your institution? If not, why? If so, how many students? What are the demographics of these students? What accommodations do they have access to? Second, acquire an understanding of Deaf identity development theory (Glickman, 1996) while maintaining awareness that intersecting identities, such as race, can influence how d/Deaf students see themselves and experience their racial and d/Deaf community. Third, it is important to expand diversity and equity trainings beyond race, class, and gender and incorporate audism

and hearing privilege, as our hearing ability is temporal; thus, issues of audism impact us all. Start with educating staff and faculty through retreats, diversity teach-ins, and campus workshops. Then, move to incorporating audism into orientation leader, Greek life, and resident advisor training, to name just a few.

Fourth, academic advisors and faculty mentors must support and promote the existence of Deaf and Ethnic Studies courses and programming on campus. This is often the first time students are exposed to social identity material, and their self-identity development can benefit from these opportunities (Gertz, 2003). Finally, institutions may not have a larger number of d/Deaf students or any d/Deaf students of color, but creating inclusive campus cultures, policies, and opportunities are changes that happen over time and cannot begin after students arrive. Make current student spaces more inclusive and considerate of intersecting identities. For example, provide resources for d/Deaf women in the women's center, purchase books on minoritized d/Deaf people for the multicultural center library, highlight famous d/Deaf people within ethnic month celebrations, and invite a d/Deaf queer speaker for National Coming Out Week. The purpose is to make our current spaces more d/Deaf friendly, which ultimately benefits and exposes hearing and d/Deaf students to new diverse opportunities. Being mindful of all students' multiple intersecting identities when hiring faculty and staff, planning orientations, designing programs, and constructing new buildings is critical because the decisions and equitable seeds we plant today affect students 10 to 20 years in the future.

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