
The Deaf Immigrant Odyssey: Sacrifices, Loss and Reconciliation

Danielle Thompson***Abstract**

This article interrogates the significance of identity to Deaf immigrants, and how their sense of identity transforms when they immigrate to a capitalist nation such as the United States. This article will further examine the “outsider within” among Deaf immigrants seeking to integrate into the Deaf world of the United States, feelings of isolation, and how Deaf immigrants can reconcile this new sense of identity with themselves. Immigration is a complex bio-psycho-social process and the immigrant has a truly complex task in navigating a new and often unfamiliar world. The immigration experience may cause a person to abandon their motherland, which causes deep disturbance within the self, as well as disequilibrium in emotional development.

Keywords: identity, immigration, integration, reconciliation.

Sacrifices of Immigration

Immigrants to the United States come for various reasons. A majority of the contemporary immigrants are escaping war and violence. Other immigrants seek better opportunities for their families and the middle class dream: home ownership and adequate education for their children. Deaf immigrants often migrate to the United States in search of better employment opportunities and to escape language oppression. Language oppression is not to be confused with language deprivation. Language oppression is the phenomenon when a person is denied the right to use a language of their choice as it is believed to be an inferior language. Sign language is not celebrated in many developed countries, and Deaf persons are denied the right to use sign language (United Nations, 2019).

Immigrants arrive to a new country with a plethora of knowledge, experiences, and family history. Often, factors of socio-economic status in their home country give them their personal identity. However, when the immigrants arrive in a new country, they must sacrifice their old social and professional status to survive. For example, it is not uncommon for Deaf individuals from another country to be an attorney for the local government office in their native country and find themselves working as a teacher's aide in a suburban high school upon settling in the United States, or to be an electrical engineer in Central or South America and end up employed as a construction worker here in the United States (Mann, 2016).

Deaf immigrants from non-European countries are an invisible and forgotten community. The numbers of Afro-Caribbean and Indo-Caribbean immigrants to America, immigrants from sub-Saharan Africa, Chinese immigrants from mainland China are growing. The 2001 United States Bureau of Census reported nearly 2.8 million foreign born immigrants who arrived from the Caribbean region (Guy, 2002). Yet, these groups of immigrants remain invisible and the primary focus has been on European individuals who immigrate to the United States.

Economic reality and patterns of immigration can be attributed to labor migration. Individuals migrating from poorer countries to wealthier ones, such as the United States, is the predominant pattern of immigration that exists in the Western hemisphere (Taylor et al., 2017).

Education, Acculturation and Identity

One of the most central tenets of immigration discourse is the idea that immigrants are hard working, will enter the labor market with a desire to work hard and get ahead, and that they will have a strong urge to assimilate. The classic immigration model is based on the European immigration experience, and assumes immigrants come to the United States with cultural values

that are similar to those held by white Americans: work hard, play by the rules, occupy a social position subordinate to that of the majority of middle class Americans and eventually begin to assimilate, merge and become “American” (Lee et al., 2017).

A large body of research on language, culture and ethnography has shown that for non-white individuals immigrating to the United states, for example, the European immigration model does not work for them. Black Americans' African ancestors did not immigrate in the same sense as Europeans did to America. Africans arrived in the United States through force and were sold as slaves. As a result, African-Americans occupy a social status below that of whites and have found it difficult to assimilate with European American society (Tambiah, 2017). Immigrants of color, especially from English speaking nations like Trinidad and Tobago, still take pride in their home countries. Often, English-speaking Afro-Caribbean and Indo-Caribbean immigrants idealize their home culture by expressing a sense satisfaction from being able to legally immigrate to America, and also being able to find legal employment upon arrival. This specific group of immigrants tends to value education and economic success as a measure of working hard versus seeking prestigious occupations. Moreover, they do not emphasize their POC (Person of Color) identities, rather they favor their national identities, e.g. Trinidadian-American, Guyanese-American, Surinamese-American, et cetera (Guy, 2016).

Acculturation Issues

Immigrants from non-white countries do not arrive in the United States as empty cultural vessels waiting to be Americanized. They come with their perceptions, images and values on issues of race, class and gender shaped by their home countries. Non-white immigrants display multiple forms of identity related to the diverse racial, ethnic, and urban areas they occupy. For the

majority of these non-white immigrants, incorporation into American society has two parts: 1) most immigrants are integrated into the service and education sectors of the US economy, and 2) given that American society places race as a fundamental factor into society, many non-white immigrants are placed in locations that are socially isolated (Daneshvary&Schwer, 1994).

American Deaf Culture

Dr. Thomas Holcomb's book "Introduction to American Deaf Culture" has highlighted the various perspectives of the Deaf community. There are two perspectives, the "pathological model" and the "Cultural Model". The pathological model is the same as the medical model. It is where the values of persons who can hear is superior to those who are Deaf. This view is often held by non-Deaf persons wanting to interact with the Deaf community on a professional basis (Humphries, 1977). It is also the view of this model that Deaf people have something wrong with them and needs to be "fixed" (Cripps & Small 2016). It is a negative perception of Deaf persons. This pathological view defines the Deaf community as a group of persons whose deafness interferes with the normal reception of speech and therefore are not normal because they cannot hear (Holcomb, 2016). The word "audism" arose from this view and it is aligned with the views of racism, sexism, and anti-Semitism (Bergey& Gannon, 2016; Gannon, 1981).

The cultural view is where a group of persons share a common mean of communication, sign language that provides cohesion and identity. It is also viewed as a group of persons who view the world visually (i.e. see things) and those whose primary means of relating to the world is visual and who share a language that is visually received (Tuccoli, 2009).

Dealing with Feelings of Loss

Immigrants suffer four basic losses when migrating to a new country. These losses are: 1) loss of mastery of surroundings, 2) loss of friends and family networks, 3) loss of language if from a non-English speaking country migrating to USA, and 4) loss of everyday life and familiarity.

Deaf immigrants suffer different types of basic losses, 1) loss of mastery of surroundings, 2) loss of language if from a non-English speaking country migrating to USA, 3) loss of everyday life and familiarity, and 4) if they have a strong network of friends and family back in their home country, they will have feelings of loss of family and friends. An additional challenge for Deaf immigrants is the feeling of despair (Schama, 2017). Oftentimes Deaf immigrants connect with other Deaf Americans, however, they instantly recognize they are “outsiders within” –they are Deaf like Deaf Americans, however, they do not have the same Deaf culture norms as Deaf Americans. For example, such immigrants may not value attending a school for the Deaf in their home countries, not having Deaf parents who are proud to be from a Deaf family, or not knowing ASL (American Sign Language) as much as Deaf Americans emphasize.

Self-Reconciliation Among Deaf Immigrants

Immigrants who are self reconciling are learning how to hold the two realities: what has been lost as an immigrant migrating to USA and what has been gained. The accomplishments do not replace the losses but they go together to help the immigrant feel more whole.

Deaf immigrants self reconcile in the same manner as non-deaf immigrants from non-white countries, however, deaf immigrants must be given the opportunity to validate their difficulties of their journey as being Deaf within the American Deaf society, which can be hostile socially at

times and provide a therapeutic breathing space for reconciling the different parts of themselves and healing.

Suggestions:

What can Deaf American educators learn from Deaf immigrants and do to assist them with succeeding in schools and in the community?

1. Acknowledge cultural differences among Deaf immigrants: They are significant differences among Deaf immigrants. Deaf immigrants from non-white countries choose to come to the United States for a variety of reasons, often unrelated to religion or religious persecution.
2. Cultural Adjustments vary among Deaf immigrants: Immigrants from English speaking countries are not struggling with language challenges, however, maybe struggling with why it is necessary to “pick” a cultural or ethnic group to belong. Many of these immigrants do not believe they are part of the melting pot in United States, but instead they try to navigate the American workforce or educational system.
3. Valuing Deaf Immigrants as a distinct immigrant group. Deaf immigrants today are not escaping the Holocaust, for example. They often share similarities of other nations that share a history of colonialism and exploitation. Their immigration must be understood within the context of sociocultural history and Deaf culture.
4. De-emphasize social integration or cultural assimilation as an educational goal. The reasons for Deaf immigrants immigrating to USA are often varied,

**(ISSN 2811-2466)****Danielle Thompson***<https://ijojournals.com/>*Volume 07 || Issue 05 || May, 2024 ||*

DEAF IMMIGRANT ODYSSEY

however, they are usually seeking better employment opportunities or better educational opportunities. As social integration is not a goal of many first generation Deaf immigrants, adult education programs that seek to foster social and life development goals for immigrants miss the point. Deaf immigrants are either segregated into distinct communities, such as, Jamaican-Deaf or Nigerian-Deaf communities and may not wish to integrate into other communities. Maintaining their own cultural and national identity remains important for these individuals.

(ISSN 2811-2466)**Danielle Thompson***<https://ijojournals.com/>

Volume 07 || Issue 05 || May, 2024 ||

DEAF IMMIGRANT ODYSSEY

References

- Bergey, J. L., & Gannon, J. R. (2016). Deaf History Goes Public. *Sign Language Studies*, 17(1),117-121.
- Camp, P. (2001). “A Struggle for Identity: The American Deaf Community”. Burtonsville, Maryland. *Humanities Journal*, March/ April 2001; 22, 2, pg. 18-24.
- Cripps, J., & Small, A. (2016). DEAF CULTURE CENTRE: How the Community Takes Its Rightful Place in History. *Sign Language Studies*, 17(1), 101-110.
- Daneshvary, N., &Schwer, R. K. (1994). Black Immigrants in the U.S. Labor Market: An Earnings Analysis. *The Review of Black Political Economy*, 22(3), 77–98. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02689974>
- Gannon, J. (1981). Deaf heritage: A narrative history of Deaf America. Silver Spring, MD: National Association of the Deaf.
- Guy, T.G. (2002). “Black Immigrants o the Caribbean: An Invisible and Forgotten Community”. *Adult Learning: Fall 2001/ 2002*, 12/13, 4/1; *Immigrant Learners in Adult, Post Secondary and Work Place Education Journal*.
- Holcomb, T.K. (2013). *Introduction to American Deaf Culture*. New York: NY: Oxford University.
- Humphries, T. (1977). *Communicating across Cultures (Deaf/Hearing) and language learning*. Union Graduate School, Cincinnati, Ohio. Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation.
- Lee, J., Bean, F. D., Batalova, J., & Sandhu, S. (2017). Immigration and the Black-White color line in the United States. In *The impact of immigration on African Americans*(pp. 27-58). Routledge.

(ISSN 2811-2466)**Danielle Thompson***<https://ijojournals.com/>

Volume 07 || Issue 05 || May, 2024 ||

DEAF IMMIGRANT ODYSSEY

- Lewis, H. (2016). *Deaf liberation theology*. Routledge.
- Mann, M. (2016). The American Journal of Psychoanalysis, 76, 122-139. American Association for the Advancement of Psychoanalysis.
- Quadros, R., & Lillo-Martin, D. (2018). Brazilian Bimodal Bilinguals as Heritage Signers. *Languages*, 3(3), 32.
- Schama, S. (2017). "America's Immigrant dream collides with nativist nightmares". London, UK, The Financial Times Limited, Business and Economics.
- Tambiah, S. J. (2017). Transnational movements, diaspora, and multiple modernities. In *Multiple modernities* (pp. 163-194). Routledge.
- Taylor, R. J., Forsythe-Brown, I., Lincoln, K. D., & Chatters, L. M. (2017). Extended family support networks of Caribbean Black adults in the United States. *Journal of family issues*, 38(4), 522-546.
- Tuccoli, T. (2009). Hearing Privileges at Gallaudet University. Gallaudet University, Washington, D.C. Unpublished Master's Thesis.
- United Nations. (2019). Human Rights. *un.org*. Retrieved from <https://www.un.org/en/>.
- United States Bureau of Census (2001). Profile of the foreign-born population in the United States, 2000. Washington DC; US Department of Commerce Economics and Statistics Administration U.S. Census Bureau.