EMPOWERMENT IN THE DEAF COMMUNITY:
ANALYZING THE POSTS OF INTERNET WEBLOGS

Alexis Hamill

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Committee:
Catherine Stein, Advisor
Robert Carels
Dale Klopfer
Deaf people represent a minority group usually considered disabled. However, about 300,000 Deaf Americans do not identify themselves as disabled, but rather as members of a cultural and linguistic group. The Internet has become a useful tool for Deaf people to communicate about this culture and work toward equality in the hearing world. Weblogs in particular have become a popular vehicle for communication in the Deaf world. The present study examined the degree to which Deaf authors of weblogs discuss personal empowerment and encourage the empowerment of the Deaf community through Internet weblogs. Three months of eight weblogs authored by nine members of the Deaf community were analyzed for personal and community level empowerment and Deaf cultural perspectives. Over 400 weblog entries were analyzed using qualitative methodology. Results suggest that Deaf bloggers frequently discuss community level empowerment and rarely discuss personal level empowerment. These bloggers demonstrated five main approaches to empowerment: encouraging and organizing members to action, disseminating information, highlighting members’ abilities and contributions, using the media to influence perceptions of mainstream society, and discussing injustice and oppression. Results also provide empirical support of previous literature on Deaf cultural perspectives. Implications of Deaf perspectives and community level empowerment strategies for working with the Deaf community are discussed.
“I am sure that eventually the memorable blog/vlog entries in the deaf v/blogosphere will be archived at Gallaudet University or elsewhere. In those future archives, researchers studying our culture and community will be dissecting our entries and it will be pointed to as a vivid snapshot of the deaf culture and community at that time period.”

- Jeannette Johnson, April 2007
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Introduction

An estimated 35 million people in the United States are considered deaf or hard of hearing (National Center for Health Statistics, 1997-2004 in Mitchell, 2005). Around the world, there is an estimated one out of 1,000, or 6.6 million people, that became deaf before learning language (Schein, 1992). Although deafness is traditionally conceptualized as a medical problem or disability, roughly half of one million people in the United States view deafness primarily from a cultural perspective (Lane, 2005). These people do not consider themselves disabled, but rather identify as members of an ethno-linguistic minority that takes pride in being Deaf (De Clerck, 2007). Writers in the field distinguish between loss of hearing and cultural issues using the written convention of Deaf with a capital “D” to denote cultural identity, and deaf with a small “d” to connote lack of hearing (Padden & Humphries, 1988). Although much has been written about deafness and Deaf culture, there is a lack of systematic studies of factors that contribute to Deaf people’s sense of empowerment, the transmission of that empowerment in the Deaf community and empirical evidence of Deaf cultural perspectives.

The Internet is increasingly becoming a method of communication and information dissemination for people throughout the world, including individuals in the Deaf community. For example, just one year after its inception in July 2006, DeafRead, one of the most highly regarded Internet websites in the Deaf community, had received 2,115,683 pageviews from 884,230 visitors. The DeafRead website provides centralized access to weblogs, known as blogs, which are public journals written by people on various topics of interest. Blogs, written chronologically through periodic entries called
posts, can include text, media such as videos and photographs, and hyperlinks that connect to other sites. Blogs allow public access to the views of Deaf people without the filter of the hearing community. With limited rules for posts, blogs allow people in the Deaf community freedom of expression and can provide insight into experiences of Deaf people.

The present qualitative research describes elements of individual and community empowerment as found in the chronological blog entries of nine members of the Deaf community posted on the Internet site DeafRead. Specifically, this study looks at the degree to which Deaf bloggers discuss their sense of being personally empowered by their community and examines the degree to which the content of their blogs advocates for empowerment in their readers. A brief review Deaf culture and community, empowerment and blog literatures are provided as background for the present research.

*Capital “D” Deaf Culture*

In order to begin to look for an empowering community narrative in the blogs of Deaf people, it is necessary to understand the capital ‘D’ cultural model of deafness. The term Deaf is used as a declaration of cultural identity rather than as a reflection of one’s audiogram, the results of a hearing test. It is what Carol Padden and Tom Humphries (1988) refer to as a “different center” in which the focus is cultural affiliation. Paddy Ladd’s (2006) term Deafhood takes this declaration a step further. He creates a term for a more empowered discourse; replacing the medical model of deafness by putting a name to a Deaf way of being in the world as defined by the in-group. Deafhood is said to capture the process of and pride in identifying as Deaf (Ladd, 2006).
This cultural view of deafness arose in the United States with the civil rights movement of the 1960’s. Unlike other movements of this time, the Deaf pride movements have not as of yet resulted in political acceptance. Currently, there exist very different views on deafness in American society. On one end of the spectrum, deafness is seen as a severe disability that should be corrected whenever possible by available medical technology, and at the other end as a fulfilling way of life that is different from the mainstream hearing world (Bender, 1981; Ladd, 2006). Skelton and Valentine (2003) found through interviews with 20 D/deaf young people, aged 16-25 that to identify as Deaf was to reject the notion of being disabled.

Some who do view deafness as a disability believe that the Deaf community is detrimental to deaf people. Balkany, Hodges and Goodman (1996) conclude that the concept of Deaf culture stands in the way of therapeutic treatments of deafness, specifically cochlear implants (CI). Balkany and colleagues state that depriving children CIs is not in their best interest because it makes the world less accessible to them, thereby giving them fewer opportunities for success. Great controversy surrounds the decision to implant children (Roots, 1999; Sparrow, 2005). Many Deaf activists are opposed to the implantation of children. This opposition arises in large part because 90% of deaf children’s parents are themselves hearing and do not have access to important non-medical information regarding their decision. Lane (1993) for example, argues that cochlear implants do not provide adequate ‘hearing’ to thrive in hearing society, and deprive the recipient access to the Deaf community. Lane proposes that this situation may create a child who does not feel a sense of belonging in either world.
Not surprisingly, the Deaf community is not a homogenous group. There is perhaps more variation in this group than any other as deafness crosses lines of age, race, religion, ethnicity and socioeconomic status. This list of meaningful difference extends even further as the type of education, languages known, and degree of hearing loss all contribute to the diversity of Deaf people. Additionally, there is diversity of Deaf communities in different nations throughout the world (stories from five continents have been compiled by Monaghan, Schmaling, Nakamura and Turner, 2003).

While keeping these important differences in mind, the focus here will be on the commonalities found in Deaf culture and community, and solely the United States will be investigated. Deaf culture is the foundation of the Deaf community, and the community is able to act as an empowering resource (Breivik, 2005; De Clerck, 2007). Deaf culture deals with the oppression and marginalization of D/deaf people, as well as the group’s improving status. Skelton and Valentine (2003) argue that Deaf culture provides great support and information to Deaf people, including being the source of Deaf rights activism. Therefore, an overview of culture and community are provided to deepen the understanding of how they operate to empower Deaf members.

A wealth of knowledge about Deaf culture is found in published writings that draw on and document the experiences of Deaf people (Padden & Humphries, 1988 and 2005; Erting, Johnson, Smith, & Snider, 1994; Bragg, 2000). However, there is relatively little attention given to Deaf culture in the psychological literature and there has been little empirical work done to evidence the existence of Deaf culture. Culture has been defined as a system of shared values, beliefs, behaviors and artifacts passed down through generations in order to function in that group’s world and interact with other
members (Bates & Plog, 1990). Like all cultures, Deaf culture has its own language, norms, views and values, key figures and unique forces acting on the identity formation of members. These are reviewed below and Deaf cultural perspectives found in this study’s sample are outlined in the discussion.

*Sign language.* Deaf culture has been defined by the central role of its signed language (Trybus, 1980). Compared to hearing people, D/deaf individuals experience the world more visually. George Veditz referred to himself and other Deaf people as “first, last, and for all time, people of the eye” (in Padden & Humphries, 2005 p.2).

The most obvious expression of this visual orientation is sign language. Sign language is extremely important in the Deaf community and a core aspect of Deaf culture. As Kannapell (1982) says about American Sign Language (ASL), “we create it, we keep it alive, and it keeps us and our traditions alive.” In the United States ASL is a defining factor that demarcates the Deaf from the hearing world. In their interviews with 20 D/deaf young people, Skelton and Valentine (2003) found that the transition identified as most important by most was learning a sign language and the move to an independent identity that linguistic knowledge allowed them.

In the 1800s Gallaudet, a hearing man, revered sign language as “the transparent beaming forth of the soul” (in Baynton, 1992). Despite praise such as this, it is only recently, in the last 40 years, that sign languages have gained recognition as true languages. This recognition helped to elevate the status of D/deaf people, and Deaf culture (Padden, 1996).

*Cultural norms.* Since William Stokoe’s 1960s research legitimating ASL and to a lesser degree Deaf culture, more has been published about Deaf culture as a real
phenomenon (Trybus, 1980). In terms of cultural values, Deaf culture values include allegiance to the community, passing on history and cultural knowledge and norms to future generations, giving culturally appropriate names, and giving weight to experiences that come from the culture as a way to form opinions (Padden & Humphries, 1988). Social interactions are directed by a set of customs unique to Deaf culture. Ladd (1994) reports that hugging and touching are more common. Greetings, attention getting strategies, and departures manifest in accordance with culture-specific expectations. Speaking frankly is valued, and what is considered polite is different from mainstream American culture (Lane, 2005).

Humor is intrinsic in signed languages and this humor is a part of Deaf culture (Bienvenu, 1989). In general, Deaf people may understand and find hearing humor interesting, but it is Deaf humor that makes them laugh. Humor is expressed though visual wordplay, focusing on physical characteristics or caricatures, poking fun at hearing people, and political themes. Telling funny stories that are specifically about the deaf experience is extremely common (Bouchauveau, 1994). Other art forms are also well established through the use of ASL. The National Theater of the Deaf in West Hartford, Connecticut and Deaf West Theater located in North Hollywood, California are world famous. Poetry, storytelling, and the visual arts are also used to great effect to convey the Deaf experience.

It is this shared experience that creates a universal Deaf culture, within which exist more specific Deaf cultures of different countries (Monaghan, Schmaling, Nakamura and Turner, 2003). In general, Deaf people from all different backgrounds will be very warm and friendly with one another upon their first meeting. Despite their
different backgrounds, they identify with a powerful similarity and as Bouchauveau (1994) says, they are immediately on the same wavelength. Lane (2005) contends that Deaf people from around the world are comparable to other ethnic minorities who are marginalized by the larger society and thereby encouraged to nurture their ethnicity to preserve their dignity.

**Heroes and villains in Deaf culture.** Deaf culture has heroes like Laurent Clerk who brought French Sign Language (which eventually grew into American Sign Language) to the United States (Roots, 1999). It also has villains such as Alexander Graham Bell who lead an Oralist movement to abolish signed languages, and supported the forced sterilization of deaf people (Lane, 1984). Additionally, Deaf culture has legends, such as the story of Abbe de l’Epee (Padden & Humphries, 1988). L’Epee’s story is powerful at the level of a creation story in Deaf culture. In this story, which is told and re-told, a hearing man educates two deaf girls who were alone in a dark wood. However, Padden and Humphries (1988) explain that in its true sense, Abbe de l’Epee is a story of sign language, the most revered and precious cultural artifact, being a light for all Deaf people, and of the search deaf people endure to find their community.

**Identity formation.** Similar to other minority groups living in a mainstream society, Deaf people are bilingual and bicultural; typically using both English and ASL on a daily basis, and living in both hearing and Deaf worlds (Grosjean, 1980). Of course, identity is far more complicated than this, with experiences varying between Deaf people of different races, ethnicities, religions, ages, sexualities, and educational backgrounds. Clubs and organizations, such as the National Black Deaf Advocates, have developed to
provide settings that create a better fit for the diverse experiences of Deaf people (for more information please see Parasnis, 1999).

Deaf people comprise a unique minority because they are not born into their culture. As 90% of deaf people are born to hearing families, much of Deaf culture is passed down and built upon in residential Deaf schools (Padden & Humphries, 1988). When asked where they are from, many Deaf people will give the name of the town where they grew up and the residential school they attended rather than their current place of residence (Roots, 1999). Bat-Chava (1994) found that being raised in a D/deaf family and attending schools for D/deaf children were significantly associated with group identification.

Socialization into the Deaf community is unique in that it begins years after the typical time for other cultures (Johnson & Erting, 1989). Jankowski (1997) highlights that for most deaf children attending a school for the D/deaf is the first time they see another D/deaf person, and the first time they experience communication beyond pantomime. Life long friendships are formed, socialization patterns are developed, and language is learned. It is arguable that American Deaf culture is only as old as 1817 (Baynton, 1992). The first school for the D/deaf was opened in this year by Reverend Thomas H. Gallaudet, and his Deaf head teacher from France, Laurent Clerc. As is common with missionaries, reformers learned sign language in order to teach the gospel, and schools were created for this religious purpose.

Nikolaraizi and Hadjikakou (2006) found a strong influence of education on the identity of hard of hearing and Deaf children in Greece. When interviewed in adulthood, 25 individuals’ cultural identity, language choice, and social and personal preferences
were all affected by going to either a general school, school for the deaf, or a combination of both. Those educated in only, or mostly D/deaf schools, held a Deaf identity, communicated in Greek Sign Language, had Deaf friends, and wanted Deaf partners. Those who attended general schools held a hearing identity, communicated through Greek, had hearing friends, and wanted hearing partners. In regard to partner preference, the authors concluded that the primary factor was ease of communication. Deaf participants reported wanting a Deaf partner in order to feel equal and comfortable.

Upon interviewing 15 Deaf leaders, De Clerck (2007) found an inspiring change in Deaf people’s views of themselves after exposure to the values and beliefs of Deaf culture in ‘barrier-free environments,’ such as Deaf organizations. Participants described this transformation as waking up. Both their identity and sense of agency was deeply affected, and De Clerck reported that their awakening translated into liberation and activism in their communities.

*Deaf boundaries.* The boundaries of the Deaf community are controversial. Aligning oneself with the hearing world is discouraged and can result in a lack of acceptance in the ethnocentric Deaf community (Emerton, 1996). This phenomenon is similar to the “Oreo” (Steele, 2003) concept in the Black community. In both instances, a desire to affiliate with the majority group is interpreted as a devaluation of the minority group. Emerton (1996) explains that through an effort to normalize what is stigmatized, a hierarchy has developed in the Deaf community with “pure deaf” people, those who are second or third generation deaf and prelingually deaf, as more central members than those who were raised orally, have CIs and hearing families, or are late deafened.
Furthermore, it has been proposed that because of the value of deafness as a cultural feature rather than a disability, D/deaf people who have vision, mobility, or other disabilities may struggle to find a sense of group belonging (Skelton & Valentine, 2003). Additionally, Corker (1998) proposes that Deaf culture is supportive of those who are fully accepting of Deaf culture, and less accepting of those who are in transition or not in agreement with cultural values and views. Thus, individuals who do not possess linguistic competencies in either a spoken or a signed language are in a place of true non-belonging, representing a minority even smaller than that of the Deaf community, and may feel marginalized by both hearing and Deaf culture. However, when those who do share the experience of being a visual minority in an auditory world come together they create a condition ripe for appreciation of others who share their experience (Padden & Humphries, 1988). This understanding and desire to be around like others maintains the Deaf community. Skelton and Valentine (2003) observed that the Deaf community is beginning to concretely address this in-group/out-group issue via the broadening of welcome and mission statements of Deaf clubs to be more inclusive. Similarly, it is the mission for national D/deaf organizations to advocate for Deaf as well as hearing impaired people. Additionally, some Deaf bloggers have discussed the need for the community to be more open and accepting to a greater range of D/deaf people.

*Deaf community.* It may come as a surprise that although less than one in 1,000 people find their way to this Deaf community, there persists a community to be found. This is even more striking given the systematic attempts to “cure deafness” in part by keeping D/deaf people separated and forbidding the use of signed languages, and even gestures in order to encourage the development of spoken language (Lane, 1992; Ladd,
Despite this, the signed languages have persevered, and Deaf people continue to find one another and maintain the Deaf World and the Deaf Way, or culture (Erting, 1994). It is perhaps this pull to band together that creates a collectivist orientation within even the most individualistic Western social structures.

In their daily lives, d/DeafD/deaf people live in a hearing world created by and for hearing people. As Schein (1992) says, it is a life of “being at home among strangers.” Many hearing families with deaf children focus on making them a part of the hearing world in part to avoid such an isolating experience. However, for some, the Deaf community is the only place where they feel like equals (Kannapell, 1982). They can communicate freely and share a common experience.

Desire for community. In addition to the social gatherings of Deaf people through Deaf clubs and sports teams, there has been support for a “Deaf-Mute commonwealth” since the mid 1800s. (Padden & Humphries, 1988). A fundamental motivation cited for towns of sign language users is equality, specifically that in a Deaf town people would not be discriminated against for being deaf. Other cited motivations include having Deaf role models for children, ease of communication, and a chance to feel included in one's own society (Press Association, 2005). Folktales, theater, novels, and political discussions talk of this “land of our own” as well (Lane, 2005).

Although not a formal Deaf town, Rochester New York is currently home to the United State’s largest deaf population per capita, with nearly one in seven residents identifying as d/DeafD/deaf or hard of hearing (York, 2006). The presence of other Deaf people and resources such as widespread movie captioning, videophones in doctors’ offices, and professionals who are fluent in ASL has allowed Deaf residents to feel free,
comfortable and able to participate (York, 2006). There are other cities around the country with concentrated Deaf communities. Like Rochester, these communities have formed around schools, which are mostly residential.

Nash and Higgins (1996) propose that it is not lack of hearing, but social construction and the interaction of deaf and hearing people that create the experience of deafness. The island of Martha’s Vineyard off Massachusetts illustrates this point. In the 18th century, a disproportionately high percentage of people living in Martha’s Vineyard were D/deaf. In one area, as many as one in four people were born deaf. Consequently, everyone in Martha’s Vineyard knew the now extinct Martha’s Vineyard Sign Language. In certain situations, even hearing people signed in the absence of deaf people. Since there were no barriers to communication, deaf people were not viewed as disabled. “They were not handicapped because no one perceived their deafness as a handicap” (Grose, 1985, p110).

On a smaller scale, Deaf clubs and residential schools have historically been a life force of the community (Padden & Humphries, 1988). They are viewed as havens away from the everyday hearing world where individuals can enjoy a positive identity and gain the support of a surrogate family. Indeed, many families have been born out of these social organizations, with an estimated 90% of Deaf people marrying other Deaf people. This is the highest percent of inter-marrying of any ethnic group (Schein, 1992).

**Benefits of affiliation.** It has been argued that membership in a minority group is a protective factor, reducing the impact of stigma and increasing self-esteem in minorities (Crocker and Major, 1989). This has also been investigated in the Deaf community. Both a study of 78 D/deaf college students by Jambor and Elliott (2005), and a meta-
analysis of the antecedents of self-esteem in D/deaf people by Bat-Chava (1993) found that affiliation with the Deaf community significantly contributes to positive self-esteem. Furthermore, Bat-Chava (1993; 1994) found that being involved in the minority Deaf community protects deaf people from negative majority cultural views. Additionally, in a sample of 152 D/deaf ASL using college students, Crowe (2003a) found that young adult children with D/deaf parents had significantly higher self-esteem than their peers with hearing parents, regardless of the hearing parents’ signing abilities. The importance of parental acceptance of their child’s deafness has been highlighted by Bat-Chava (1993). Positive self-esteem, defined by Rosenberg (1979) as an evaluation of worthiness as a human being, is a crucial factor of psychological functioning (Mann, Hosman, Schaalma, & Vries, 2004) and has been found to be lower in marginalized groups as compared to majority groups (Katz, Joiner, & Kwon, 2002).

It appears that Crocker and Major’s (1989) argument that affiliating with one’s minority group protects self-esteem holds true for Deaf individuals as well as the stigmatized minority groups originally reviewed. Since connection to other deaf people has been found to be of such value and since wellbeing has been associated with community involvement, Deafblogland is an important resource, particularly for those who are not involved in a physical Deaf community.

*Psychological Research on D/deafness*

It is only relatively recently that psychologists and other mental health service providers recognized the cultural model as an alternative to the medical model (Wax, 1996). Until the 1970s deafness was seen as a different way of perceiving the world and therefore abnormal and disordered (Leigh, 1999). An increasing amount of research
about deafness has begun to take into account the cultural model. A number of journals in areas such as education, special education, linguistics and disability, focus fully or partially on issues related to deafness. These D/deaf related journals include: American Annals of the Deaf, Deafness & Education International, Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education, Journal of the American Deafness and Rehabilitation Association, Sign Language Studies, Sign Language and Linguistics, Volta Review, Journal of Rehabilitation of the Deaf, Rehabilitation Psychology, Disability & Society, and Exceptional Children. However, with the exception of Rehabilitation Psychology, none of these journals are in the field of psychology.

Research concerning D/deaf people has been published sporadically in more general psychological journals that do not focus on deafness. For example, when searching in the Psychological Bulletin for the term ‘deaf’ 19 articles were found ranging from the year 1905 to 1973. In this general psychological and mental health literature there are two major areas, differentiated by their perspective of deafness as primarily medical or cultural. This difference in theoretical underpinning shapes the focus and design of the research (Taylor, 1999).

*Medical model research.* Research studies consistent with the medical model typically examine the effectiveness of cochlear implants, usually measured by language ability of children and adults implanted with a cochlear implant (Nicholas & Geers, 2007; Ross & Lyon, 2007; Lee, et al., 2007; Tait, Nikolopoulous, & Lutman, 2007). The majority of findings stress the importance of implanting children at a very young age, typically between 11 and 16 months. Additionally, Grantz, Woodworth, Knutson, Abbas and Tyler (1993) have done research on post-lingually deaf individuals and found
encouraging results for the audiological outcome of adults implanted with multi-channel cochlear implants. Research is also being conducted on approaches to training implantees to make the most of their implant (Rouger, et al., 2007). Cognitive psychology research has investigated language processing using sign language since it employs different sensory and motor channels than spoken language (Buchsbaum, Pickell, Love, Hatrak, Bellugi, Hickok, 2005; Hickok, Bellugi, & Edwards, 2007; Neville, Coffey, Lawson, Fischer, Emmorey, & Bellugi, 1997). Similarities have been observed in language processing, including the effect of word/sign length on memory (Wilson & Emmorey, 1998). Similarities in language use in verbal and signed languages have been explored as well. For example ‘baby talk’ is observed in the signed interactions of D/deaf parents and their children (Rodriguez, 2002). Differences in motion processing and sensitivity to motion have been investigated in deaf and hearing individuals (Brozinsky & Bavelier, 2004; Mohammed et al., 2005). Emmorey and Kosslyn (1996) found hemispheric differences between deaf and hearing participants’ abilities to generate images, with D/deaf signers being faster overall and faster with images in the right hemisphere, and hearing participants being faster when images were presented in the left hemisphere. This enhanced speed was attributed to sign language exposure rather than hearing deprivation.

Theory of mind (ToM) (Premack & Woodruff, 1978) has been investigated in deaf versus hearing children. ToM is the ability to infer the mental and emotional states of other people (Wimmer & Perner, 1983). Some researchers have found that deaf children, like children with autism, do not have ToM abilities that match their hearing peers (Peterson & Seigal, 1995). Schick, Villers, Villers & Hoffmeister (2007) found
that deaf children with hearing parents showed delays in ToM tasks while deaf children with deaf parents did not. However, Marschark, Green, Hindmarsh and Walker (2000) found no difference between hearing and signing deaf children in their ToM abilities, regardless of their parent’s hearing status. More recently, in 2005, Courtin and Melot’s study with first and second generation deaf children and hearing children concluded that early exposure to language (either oral or signed) was a key factor in development of ToM. Native signers performed as well as hearing children on one of two ToM tasks (appearance-reality) and surpassed them on the second of two ToM tasks (false belief).

Research shows that deaf parents differ significantly from hearing parents in their interactions with their deaf children (Loots & Devise, 2003). Harris (2001) found that deaf mothers were more successful than hearing mothers at making their signing accessible to their deaf children. It has also been found that deaf mothers may be more responsive to the tactile needs of their deaf children than hearing mothers (Koester, Brooks, & Traci, 2000).

Cultural model research. A second area of psychological research adopts the viewpoint of the cultural model and may or may not focus on aspects of Deaf culture. One common area of culturally Deaf research focuses on individual identity. Much research investigating Deaf identity employs the categories: bicultural, immersed (culturally Deaf), culturally hearing, or marginal (Bat-Chava, 2000; Cornell & Lyness, 2004; Nikolarai, 2007). Glickman and Carey (1993) defined these categories as: comfortable in both hearing and Deaf cultures (bicultural), immersed in Deaf culture with a negative view of hearing culture (immersed), immersed in hearing culture with a perception of deafness as a medical pathology or disability (culturally hearing), or
identifying with neither culture (marginal). Skelton and Valentine (2003) warn that identity is too complex to fit into categories such as hearing or deaf or Deaf. Through interviews with 41 D/deaf young adults they suggest that the desire to fit people into these categories creates tension in an already vulnerable group. Foster and Kinuthia (2003) broadened identity categories further by exploring deaf identities of 33 students from minority racial groups.

Self-esteem and other outcomes of identifying with the Deaf community have been explored as well. Rose and Kiger (1995) looked at the relationship between self-image and political action in the Deaf community through a review of historical events in the Deaf community of the 1970s and 1980s. They argue that the combination of a self-image that includes membership in the Deaf community, along with recognition of the inequalities faced by the group can set the stage for political action. Self-esteem has also been investigated (Bat-Chava, 1993; Crowe, 2003a; Jambor, & Elliott, 2005) at times in relation to identity (Bat-Chava, 1994). Findings show that identification with the Deaf community and the ability to get along well in both Deaf and hearing worlds is positively related to self-esteem (Jambor & Elliot, 2005). Also, greater hearing loss was found to lead to greater self-esteem, perhaps because individuals who are clearly deaf feel less in between worlds (Jambor & Elliot, 2005). A survey of 152 D/deaf college students found that having deaf parents was significantly related to higher self-esteem as compared to deaf children with hearing parents (Crowe, 2003a). This supports previous findings that family orientation to deafness affects self-esteem (Bat-Chava, 1994, 2000).

Access to resources represents another category of research. Harris and Bamford (2001) found that health, social and employment services in the United Kingdom were
not organized in a way that allowed Deaf and hard of hearing people full access to society. The authors concluded that current services in the United Kingdom do not provide for the full participation of D/deaf people in society. When exploring access to medical information through five D/deaf focus groups in the United States, Crowe (2003b) found a lack of knowledge about HIV as well as a lack of culturally specific prevention and education materials. Through focus groups with Deaf individuals, she explored the process of creating culturally appropriate materials to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS among sign language users.

Education is another area of research interest. Educational studies have been performed comparing mainstreaming deaf and hard of hearing children to sending them to specialized schools. For example, Angelides and Aravi (2006) found that both mainstream and special schools were marginalizing for deaf and hard of hearing students. With an eye toward Deaf culture, Thumann-Prezioso (2005) concluded that it is rare to find the perspective of Deaf parents regarding deaf education.

The effect of different hearing status between parents and children has also been investigated in the mental health literature. Young (1999) explored the effect of the cultural-linguistic model on hearing parents’ adjustment to their deaf child through an early intervention with Deaf consultants. Strong and Prinz (1997) found that deaf children with deaf mothers had higher literacy scores in both ASL and English, and that knowing ASL predicted greater literacy in English. Similarly, hearing parents who used sign as well as oral communication had deaf children with higher self-esteem than parents who communicated only orally (Desselle, 1994).
Cochlear implants have also been studied from a Deaf community perspective. Most, Wiesel and Blitzer (2007) interviewed adolescents with CIs about their identity and attitude toward CIs, finding that those who identified more strongly with the Deaf community had a less positive attitude toward their CI. The authors concluded that the advantages of CIs and involvement with the Deaf community were both beneficial. In a similar vein, Rosen (2000) found that the Deaf community has a great desire to work in partnership with medical organizations to make interventions early on in the lives of deaf children, including exposing them to ASL.

Research has been conducted to adapt psychological services for D/deaf people. Psychological assessment, specifically the creation and translation of assessment tools for Deaf and hard of hearing individuals (Mason, 2005; Polat, 2006), and how best to use them (Connolly, Rose & Austen, 2006) have been investigated. Some research has been conducted on therapy with Deaf clients. Cohen (2001) found that Deaf clients’ interpretations of the meaning of therapeutic processes were quite different than those of the therapists. Silence for example was viewed as a sign of disinterest or a trigger for past traumatic experiences. Additionally Cohen found that the therapist’s ability to meet the linguistic needs of the client was predictive of therapeutic outcome. Peters (2007) explored community affiliation and Deaf culture to help psychotherapists better serve D/deaf clients. LeBlanc and Tully (2001) also found that social workers incorporating community into therapy as well as employing appropriate communication techniques was very important. Glickman and Harvey (1996) edited a book focused on culturally affirmative psychotherapy with D/deaf clients.
Empowerment

The field of psychology has recognized the importance of conducting research aimed at understanding issues of empowerment among marginalized groups (Hur, 2006). There are a variety of definitions of empowerment. Empowerment is a challenging construct to define due to its contextual and dynamic nature (Rappaport, 1984; Staples, 1990). Hur (2006) argues that the key aspects of empowerment are its pervasion through many life spheres including “sociological, psychological, economic and political.” Individual empowerment and community empowerment are two forms of empowerment described in the literature (Hur, 2006). At the most basic level, individual empowerment is commonly defined as the ability to control one’s own life and to hold the belief that one’s goals can be achieved (Staples, 1990). Individual empowerment helps people engage in valued social roles (Solomon, 1976) and includes access to information, changing others' perceptions of one's competency and capacity to act, increasing self-image, overcoming stigma and the power to make decisions from a range of options (Chamberlin, 1997). Individual empowerment has been found to take varied forms depending on the person and context, and to vary over time (Zimmerman, 1995).

Community empowerment has been described as a feeling of belonging to, being involved in and having control over a community, as well as community building (Hur, 2006). Empowerment has been viewed not only as an outcome, but also as a process. Rappaport (1987) states that empowerment is a process by which communities come to master issues of their concern. Zimmerman (2000) proposes that community empowerment is defined by efforts made for the betterment of the collective, and by
fostering the quality of life for members. Hur (2006) argues that empowerment exists at different levels, such as individual and community. Individual and community empowerment are thought to be interdependent; to have community empowerment there must be empowered individuals (Zimmerman, 2000). Both personal and community empowerment are pertinent to the current research. Due to this interdependent nature of people in communities, individuals can both be empowered by their community and empower their community. This study will examine the sense of personal empowerment of Deaf bloggers that may be supported by membership in the Deaf community, and the messages sent by Deaf bloggers to their community in the effort to promote community empowerment.

Overall, most research done on empowerment takes an individual rather than collective perspective, and measures individual psychological changes even when examining groups (Staples, 1990). In addition to individuals, empowered groups are important to study as they have the power to change marginalizing social structures. Some research has been conducted on the role of the group or community in empowering its members. Speer (2000) found that both intrapersonal and interactional empowerment were associated with people who participated in and felt a strong sense of community. For example, Stewart and Bhagwanjee (1999) found that a spinal cord injury support group empowered those affiliated. Due to their participation and leadership in the group, the members realized their potential for self-reliance and their ability to hold a valued role in their community.

Through a review of literature from multiple disciplines, Hur (2006) described the process of empowerment at both the individual and community level. He found that
at both levels the process includes a realization by the disadvantaged group of their unequal situation, an increased awareness of the structures causing their lack of power, fostering of confidence, and mobilization to gain power. A reflection of this process can be seen in the recent history of the Deaf community including the 1988 Deaf President Now protest, and more recently the 2006 Unity for Gallaudet protest (Huslin, 2006).

In the Deaf literature, Breivik (2005) found that increased contact between politically empowered Deaf people in combination with the changing attitude toward deafness in Deaf communities has contributed significantly to the empowerment of Deaf people. While conducting a needs assessment, Taylor (1999) looked at empowering D/deaf ethnic minorities through social action. He found establishing community groups such as an information exchange forum comprised of community members and a social worker both reduced isolation and increased access to services. This was especially important because of the limited opportunities that these individuals had to interact with service providers.

Additionally, Hur (2006) argues that empowerment is a social process as power is relational in nature; therefore it is important to understand what is meant by powerlessness. Solomon (1976) speaks of powerlessness as a severe limitation on self-determination and an ongoing sense of dependency. Social structures (Staples, 1990) and society (Kieffer, 1984) have been named as the maintaining agents of these problems; thus it is groups who are powerless. This sense of powerlessness has concrete repercussions. Through interviews conducted with Deaf leaders, Bateman (1990) found that perceived powerlessness decreased political involvement and voting in the community, and that many Deaf people felt incapable of being politically active. A main
reason cited by Deaf participants for this inability was the perception that they had to go along with the majority, meaning hearing people, because they outnumbered Deaf people. It is possible for people to feel empowered (intrapersonal empowerment) and yet not be able to act on that feeling because of a lack of understanding of social change and power (interpersonal empowerment) (Speer, 2000). Thus, a sense of empowerment may be insufficient for working toward true empowerment that is reached through social change (Riger, 1993).

The following research shows that empowerment has been viewed as a tool for improving a variety of life spheres in marginalized groups. An empowerment approach has been found to be a necessary component for successful academic interventions with minority students (Tuafuti & McCaffery, 2005). Additionally, it has been shown that an empowering community narrative is important to the mental health of psychiatric consumer/survivors (Nelson, Lord, & Ochocka, 2001). Empowering interventions have been conducted to benefit a vast array of marginalized groups including: ethnic minority students with disabilities (Balcazar, Garate-Serafini, & Keys, 2004), Latina women to reduce disparities in cancer health (Buki, 2007), urban African American women to improve health (Becker, Israel, Schulz, Parker, & Klem, 2002), African American fathers in a Head Start program to increase parenting confidence (Fagan & Stevenson, 2002), African American homeless men to increase health education (1999), rural Canadians to survive globalization (Delaney, Brownlee, & Sellick, 2001), adults with learning disabilities (Gorfin & McGlaughlin, 2005) and in therapy with South Asian women survivors of domestic violence (Kallivayalil, 2007).
In one study exploring the social supports of Deaf gay men and lesbians, it was recommended that social workers employ an empowerment approach (LeBlanc & Tully, 2001), however results of a study with this focus has not appeared in the literature. LeBlanc and Tully (2001) also recommended using appropriate communication techniques and considering the communities of the individuals (in this instance both the gay and lesbian community and the Deaf community). Similarly, Taylor (1999) recommended that both researchers and service providers develop an empowering practice, specifically when working with D/deaf people from minority ethnic communities. Additionally, Taylor’s needs assessment worked from a focus of empowerment. While Taylor’s project does not constitute a psychological or systematic study, it does add to the impoverished literature on deafness and empowerment.

**Empowerment in the Deaf community.** The Deaf community is a marginalized group with which minimal research has been conducted. A review of the literature reveals no psychological research regarding the Deaf community and empowerment. When broadening the scope to look in all areas outside of psychology, it is found that there is only one systematic study of deaf empowerment. This exploratory qualitative case study was conducted by De Clerck (2007) in Flanders in the area of special education. She conducted narrative research with a group of 15 Deaf leaders, exploring how coming into contact with the Deaf community had been a transformative experience. Her findings show that Deaf leaders in Flanders experienced a change in identity and increased agency after experiencing locations where they did not encounter communication barriers and could see alternatives to their current world. De Clerck also
found that dialoging with others in the community encouraged Deaf leaders’ own activism.

Historically, it can be seen that the Deaf Pride and Deaf Power movements of the 1970s reflected the Deaf community’s view as an oppressed minority, its acquisition of ‘voice’ (Tajfel, 1978) and push to improve its minority status (Rose & Kiger, 1995). De Clerck (2007) proposes that the Deaf community of the United States was empowered by the following three arguments that created a new conceptualization of D/deaf people and a new way of life for D/deaf people. The community caught its first glimpse of empowerment with the recognition of sign language as a true language, as documented by William Stokoe in the 1960s. In 1980 a compilation of essays in his honor were published as a tribute to the significance of this discovery to the Deaf community (Baker & Battison, 1980). The second empowering occurrence was the reconceptualization of deafness from a disability to an ethno-linguistic minority with a culture. This understanding allowed for the third and perhaps most powerful change of view, that D/deaf people’s roles did not have to be paternalistically beneath hearing people, that D/deaf people could be proud of who they were. With the acceptance of these three Deaf cultural perspectives illustrated by De Clerck (2007), the Deaf community has begun moving forward with increased pride. As previously mentioned, recent protests are clear examples of publicly recognized outcomes of the process of community empowerment in the Deaf community.

Empowerment and the Internet. With the rise of Internet use, there has been an increase in the popularity of weblogs, making them one of the fastest growing online media inventions. Weblogs, commonly called blogs, are written chronologically through
periodic entries called posts, and displayed in reverse chronological order. Most blogs include text, media such as videos and photographs, hyperlinks that connect to other sites, space for reader comments, and a combination of news and opinions. It is common for authors use their blog as a type of diary that is open to the public.

Blogs can be written by anyone with access to the Internet. Blogging software, developed in the early 2000s, has made writing a blog simple. Many blog hosting sites are free, and some people even gain financial support by dedicating a portion of their blog to advertisers.

Blogs provide a vehicle through which people who are already acquainted, such as co-workers or students, can connect online. New communities of people who share interests or opinions can also form through blogs. Chau and Xu, (2006) propose that these communities can be thought of as two categories: implicit and explicit. Implicit communities are created by the links sponsored on a blog, the readers who leave comments, the links through which readers reach the blog, and the subscriptions people have for blogs. Alternately, communities can be explicit, with groups called blogrings that are intentionally formed.

Currently, the blogosphere, or community of all blogs and their interconnections, provides a forum for the discussion for people from all walks of life. While the authors of blogs are individuals, the network of the multitude of bloggers along with their readers constitutes a community. There are forums for all types of people with all types of issues.

Researchers are beginning to recognize the potential of the Internet as an empowering resource. For example, Bharat, Merkel and Bishop (2004) investigated
minority and marginalized groups’ use of the Internet. The researchers found that the
lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered community expressed their positive ‘queer’
identity and moved toward social change by posting emails to a mailing list. Bloggers
discussed barriers to resources, support and information, and actions that could be taken
to build a better community. The authors concluded that the Internet serves as a tool for
“marginalized individuals to take charge of their lives” (p. 789).

*DeafBlogLand.* A new chapter of Deaf history began with the development of the
Internet. As one blogger, Ricky Taylor commented, “Anyone who studied Deaf History
is familiar with “little paper family” — which deaf people kept up with information by
using deaf schools or organizations’ print shops. Vlogging/bloggng is part of “little
paper family” — it virtually replaced the papers, really.” Deaf people are now able to
communicate instantly and for free with others throughout the country and the world,
many of whom they do not know. The culmination of many factors has made this
communication possible. Deaf blogger Jared Evans (2007) argues that the online
environment is conducive to easy communication in what he terms DeafBlogLand.
Evans attributes this to the availability of high speed Internet, free distribution of videos,
and affordable and simple to use technology.

Further tightening the online Deaf community, the filtered feed aggregator
*DeafRead* ([www.DeafRead.com](http://www.DeafRead.com)) creates a centralized location connecting D/deaf blogs
around the world. Now people have immediate access to hundreds of D/deaf related
blogs, many of which they may never have found through online searches. As of July
14th 2007, 372 blogs linked through *DeafRead* had 2,115,683 pageviews from 884,230
visitors. A single blog post is visited by an average of 194 *DeafRead* users. Video
weblogs, or vlogs, have become an even more popular media for D/deaf people (Anand, 2007). Through the DeafRead website, an average of 384 users visit each vlog post. This site is used regularly for everyday reading, and is viewed as a sort of communication home base. When the Unity for Gallaudet protest lead to 134 student arrests, some sites linked through DeafRead received more visits than they could support and crashed. When his own site crashed, DeafRead creator Taylor Mayer established a new real-time blog that received 47,000 hits in three hours (McClintock, 2007).

Some argue that Deaf blogs gained great popularity and importance during the Unity for Gallaudet protests (Anand, 2007). During this time the Deaf community throughout the country kept in touch with the most up to date happenings. Whatever the catalyst, DeafBlogLand has become an implicit virtual community with readers commenting and leaving hyperlinks, and authors referencing and hyperlinking to other blogs. As Wellman and Gulia (1999) have observed in other virtual communities, this community creates new relationships, a sense of belonging and membership that is a reflection of the real-world communities, in this case the Deaf community. Some bloggers credit the centralizing power of DeafRead with helping the Deaf community to become closer, in part by discussing disagreements openly. The appreciation of respectful discussion is often commented on in blogs.

Research suggests that blogs allow for a conversational voice, candid writing and personal feel more than websites (Kelleher & Miller, 2006). Research with blogs has not yet been fully utilized. This methodology is still relatively rare with some similar studies conducted by Trammell, Tarkowski, Hofmokl and Sapp (2006) with Polish blogs, Chau and Xu (2006) with anti-Black hate groups, and Jones, Zahl and Huws (2001) and
Deaf Empowerment

Papacharissi, Z. (2002) with personal websites. More common is the use of naturally occurring message boards, or discussion forums (Giles, 2006; Malesky & Ennis, 2004; Moloney, Strickland, Dietrich and Myerburg, 2004). Blogs represent a new type of qualitative data. Blogs can be likened to a public version of personal documents, which have a far longer history of social science research (Taylor & Bogdan, 1998). These first-person accounts range in topic from autobiography, including diary, to reflections on topics. Blogs are often compared to public diaries (Nardi, Schiano, & Cunbrecht, 2004), though they have been defined as far more (Boyd, 2006). Through interviews with bloggers, Boyd (2006) found that engaging with a community of people and a desire to share with others were essential to their blogging practice.

Blogs are a viable way of accessing great amounts of writings on personal experiences. They are able to represent the voice of the people since it is a very accessible medium both to utilize and to consume. Additionally, without the editing that could be imposed by a publishing company, blog posts can become accessible to the world with a push of a button. Likewise, there is no outside influence from the researcher, thus the data source is generated entirely by participants in a naturalistic form and unbiased by the researcher.

This unbiased first hand data is crucial when studying certain groups who are typically underrepresented. Deaf scholar Paddy Ladd emphasizes, “there are few opportunities for colonized peoples to present accounts of their own cultural experiences.” The thoughts and opinions of Deaf people are rarely heard outside of the community. Rather, Lane (1996) points out that it is hearing professionals that create the generally accepted perception of deaf people, namely that they need help hearing. As is
seen by a review of medical literature, there is currently, and has for many years been a view of deaf people that is structured around pity for loss and a concern for how technology can cure the problem of deafness. Lane (1996) argues that the public construction of deafness does not reflect the lived experiences of many Deaf community members who think of deafness culturally rather than medically.

The disadvantages to using blogs for data collection include the risk that people may be hasty in their publishing and become less careful about the construction and word choice in their posts as it appears there is no external review and they only need to meet their own standards of publication before submission. Additionally, the topics discussed on blogs are dictated entirely by the author(s). Thus, the range of information contained in a blog is far less focused than the information gathered in more traditional methods such as interviews or surveys. It must also be recognized that information found on blogs represent the public face of the blogger. Therefore, a blog post represents only a portion of the individual’s thoughts, namely those thoughts that he or she wants others to identify with him or her. Because the researcher has access to only this view of the blogger no comparisons can be made between his or her public and private presentation. Finally, unlike interviews, which allow for clarification, ambiguous information that is on a blog cannot be clarified at the time it was generated.

Although the Internet is a recent phenomenon that does create more anonymity, it remains a human creation and is directly connected to the off-line world. Agre (1996, in O Dochartaigh, 2002) has said, “The Internet is not a separate cyberspace reality. It is a new nervous system for the physical world.” The Internet is a valuable resource as an archive of human interaction. Regarding validity, it has been found that data collected
from traditional methods is equivalent to that collected via the Internet (Smith & Leigh, 1997).

Information accessed through the Internet creates new ethical issues and blurs the line between what is public and what is private. While much information is publicly accessible, not all is intended for public dissemination. For example, many online forums provide a space and mechanism through which people who are often strangers can discuss personally important topics. While these are accessible to the public, Brownlow and O’Dell (2002) argue that the conversations could be considered private as the intended audience is limited to other forum participants with similar concerns.

There is an important difference between online forums and blogs. The focus of online forums is the often sensitive conversation between individuals with the intention of having an anonymous and convenient means of communication. The focus of blogs is to share experiences and thoughts with any and all people who read the posts. In support of Boyd’s (2006) findings that sharing with others was essential to bloggers, Trammell, Tarkowski, Hofmokl and Sapp (2006) found that the primary motivation for creating blog entries was self-expression. Unlike the expected reciprocal nature of forums, blogs are far more one-sided with the intent of telling rather than asking. For authors who want their blog to be confidential and read only by specific people, there is the option of making a blog accessible only with a password.

The public intentions of a blog are nicely illustrated with this quote from a Deaf blogger (Kirsi, 2007).

“I am all about advocating and spreading awareness among the hearing people. I am all about opening up my life (hell, why else I am blogging??) and crossing my fingers
in hope that people will develop insights and understanding toward a Deaf person that they may encounter in their pathways of life.”

*Present Research*

Within a society that views deafness as a disability, there is a community that supports a positive Deaf identity. This study explored the degree to which the Deaf community empowers itself and how the community approaches empowerment as conveyed in the weblogs of vocal members. The study also identified Deaf cultural perspectives, providing empirical evidence for Deaf culture and informing the context for empowerment in this community.

Specifically, this research examined personal and community empowerment in Deaf individuals as evidenced in 416 blog posts by nine individuals who are members of the *DeafRead* community. Common elements of empowerment found in the literature across a variety of disciplines include: evidence of valued social roles, improving others’ perceptions of oneself or ones’ own self image, overcoming stigma, changing or improving the community, informing the community and sharing expectations of what the community’s abilities. These elements constitute the framework for the current study. The study examined the degree to which Deaf bloggers discussed their sense of personal empowerment in their blog posts and the degree to which the content of Deaf blog posts advocated for community empowerment for their readers.

In addition to personal and community empowerment, the posts were examined for references to Deaf cultural perspectives. Deaf cultural perspectives previously identified in the literature and cultural references not previously identified by researchers
were examined in the blog posts. The types of Deaf cultural perspective and personal and community empowerment codes identified and the prevalence of codes were calculated.

To better understand the importance of empowerment and D/deaf issues in blogs in the Deaf community, comparisons were also made between the amount of posts pertinent to D/deafness and/or empowerment. Discussions of personal and community empowerment were reviewed for similarities across blogs to generate themes of approaches to empowerment in the Deaf community, and frequencies of these approaches were summed.

Finally, the connections between bloggers and readers were assessed by calculating the number of comments left by readers on each post, assessing bloggers’ knowledge of other bloggers included in the study, and investigating topics found in common between blogs.

Methods

Selection of Blogs from DeafRead

DeafRead is a highly utilized resource in the Deaf community. The site was launched in July of 2006 and as of November 2008 it had received 8,293,435 pageviews from 2,377,927 visits from 428,026 absolute unique visitors (T. Mayor, personal communication, November 8, 2008). This website subscribes to many web feeds, a data format that allows frequently updated content to be sent to anyone who subscribes to the feed. These web feeds are processed by human editors to filter out any non-relevant or inappropriate posts. Those blog and vlog posts that relate to deaf issues and are accepted by the editors are presented in a centralized location for easy access, thus creating an aggregation, or a filtered feed aggregator.
Deaf Read uses guidelines to select posts to publish. In addition to touching on deaf issues, posts cannot contain: adult material, articles written by authors other than the blogger, non-working links, repeats of a topic covered on another blog, information of commercial intent, only local interest, or discrimination (see http://www.deafread.com/guidelines/). Blogs in the present research identified using the Deaf Read site were then used in their entirety by downloading all posts between April and June of 2007 from the blog, regardless of whether the post was published on Deaf Read. The Deaf Read site was used only as a pool of websites from which to chose the sample of blogs fitting the study’s criteria.

At of the beginning of this study (June 14th 2007) a review of Deaf Read’s archived links yielded hyperlinks to 372 websites. One individual authored three Deaf Read archived websites, and had written three additional weblogs not hyperlinked via Deaf Read. The subtraction of duplicate sites and addition of the three blogs not linked to Deaf Read yielded a total of 374 website hyperlinks for v/blogs from the Deaf community on the Internet. From this pool of 374 sites, blogs that met the following criteria at the time of their selection were included in the present research. 

Criteria for the Selection of Blogs

To obtain current data and well-established blogs, each blog had to include post archives covering a minimum of the six months between January 2007 and June 2007. The most current three months of these posts were used. To avoid linguistic misinterpretations only blogs written in English were used. In order to identify blogs that posted consistently, each month from January to June had to include a minimum of three posts, with rare exception. To focus on the research question the majority of the
posts on each blog were required to relate to deafness. All blogs had to be accessible to the public, thus no broken, private, or deleted blogs were included. All authors of blogs were required to be Deaf to access first hand information about their experiences for the research. To access candid and personal expression, only personal blogs were included. Therefore, blogs created by companies or organizations were not used, as persons other than the author could structure or influence the content. Similarly, websites that were not blogs were not used. To reduce analytic difficulties arising from differences in culture and resources, only blogs written by residents of the United States were used. Due to the importance of sign language in Deaf culture, the authors were required to have at least a familiarity with the language. After excluding 366 blogs (see Table 1) for not meeting all criteria, eight blogs remained. These eight blogs provided data for the current study.
Table 1

*Blogs Not Meeting Criteria*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason for Exclusion</th>
<th>Number of blogs excluded</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Signed posts without written translation</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ended before June 2007</td>
<td>88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Began after January 2007</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than three posts per month</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Majority of posts not deaf related</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deleted or broken links</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hearing authors</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not personal blogs</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not blogs (websites)</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not authored in USA (UK)</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not written in English (Spanish)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For invited readers only (private)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No knowledge of ASL</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total blogs not meeting criteria</strong></td>
<td><strong>366</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Sample*

Nine authors of eight weblogs (blogs) from around the United States were selected for the present study. All nine participants are Deaf and post writings about their experiences on the Internet through their blogs. Participant blogs were selected from a listing of websites generated from an extensive, 40 hour review of web feeds from the archives of the filtered feed aggregator *DeafRead* (http://www.deafread.com/).

Statistics published by *DeafRead* about the popularity of the blogs on their site suggest that several of this study’s blogs are read by a substantial group of people. According to “*DeafRead* 100 all-time most visited blogs and vlogs” (Tayler Mayer,
out of roughly 600 video weblogs and weblogs, the weblog Mishka Zena was the number one most visited site with 269,623 hits. Ricky Taylor’s blog was ranked third, Fookem and Bug fifth, Mike McConnell’s site was sixth. Jamie Berke’s blog was ranked number 30, followed closely by LaRonda Zupp’s blog at 33. Jeanette Johnson’s blog was ranked 51st most visited. Steve’s Woparsb blog was not ranked, however another blog he writes (The Deaf Sherlock) was ranked 71st.

As blogs are public data published on the Internet with the knowledge and consent of authors, data used in the present study are considered in the public domain. It is the decision of the Human Subjects Review Board that this research does not involve human subjects, only publicly accessible documents similar to published books and journals. Indeed, many people engage in blogging with a goal of having a near limitless media in which to communicate their ideas. Similarly, DeafRead has been celebrated as a tool to educate the rest of the world about Deaf people. As such, bloggers were not contacted for permission to use their writings for analysis. All demographic data presented were derived from the information the bloggers made accessible on their weblog.
### Table 2

**Blog Descriptive Data**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Blog name / Blogger</th>
<th>Demographics</th>
<th>Blog Inception</th>
<th>Mean posts per month</th>
<th>Total Words</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ridor Live / Ricky D. Taylor</strong></td>
<td>White male in 30s Blog has focus on being controversial</td>
<td>Began blog 9/2003</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>38,257</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ear of My Heart / LaRonda Zupp</strong></td>
<td>White woman in 30s or 40s from California, married with one son Blog has focus on spiritual/inspirational posts</td>
<td>Began blog 12/2006</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>29,346</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fookem &amp; Bug / Fookem and Bug</strong></td>
<td>Fookem: married with 2 sons, from Chicago Bug: from Colorado Both white males in mid twenties to late thirties</td>
<td>Began blog 1/2007</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>47,934</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Woparsb / Steve</strong></td>
<td>White male in 30s or 40s, works with computers</td>
<td>Began blog 3/2006</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>22,380</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Kokonut Pundit / Mike McConnell</strong></td>
<td>White male in 30s Forest fire fighter, strongman competition, martial artist and Ragtime pianist</td>
<td>Began blog 10/2004</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>27,344</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mishka Zena / Mishka Zena</strong></td>
<td>White female in 40s or 50s from Maryland</td>
<td>Began blog 10/2006</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>31,193</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Berke Outspoken / Jamie Berke</strong></td>
<td>White female in 40s, one son,</td>
<td>Began blog 10/2006</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4,187</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The Deaf Edge / Jeannette Johnson</strong></td>
<td>White female in 20s from Michigan Blog has focus on advocacy/activism</td>
<td>Began blog 1/2007</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10,877</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Procedure

No bloggers were contacted about the study prior to recording all posts for analysis. In order to further prevent any interference or biasing due to the study, the researcher made no comments on any posts on any of the eight blogs. In this way the data are naturalistic and influenced only by the bloggers and their community. All posts from the month of April through June 2007 for each blog were saved to computer for analysis. This yielded 416 posts and nearly 184,000 words. The average amount of posts per month on the eight blogs ranges from seven to 59 over six months, and four to 79, with an average of 24 posts, during the three months of data investigated in this study.

Analytic Strategy

The qualitative data collected for the study was content analyzed by the researcher and two independent coders. Content analysis allows inferences to be made about the message itself and its sender (Weber, 1990). This is an appropriate method given that this study examines the content of blog posts and the information conveyed in posts about the author and his or her attempts to influence readers. The overall procedure for conducting the content analysis was consistent with the recommendations of Miles and Huberman (1994). The qualitative data analysis began with a framework broadly influenced by the focus of the research (namely deafness and empowerment), and more narrowly by hypotheses regarding Deaf cultural perspectives and established definitions of personal and community empowerment. Posts that had content addressing deafness and empowerment were a primary focus of the content analysis.

Based on previous research, it was hypothesized that Deaf cultural perspectives reflected in the posts would include messages that D/deaf should be treated as equals with
hearing people; pride in D/deafness; the value of sign language; and the value of Deaf culture. Based on previous literature, it was further hypothesized that posts would contain aspects of personal and community empowerment. To identify these occurrences, a catalogue of features was employed for coding. Based on a degree of consensus found in previous empowerment research, evidence of the following features of personal empowerment was sought: 1) ability to control one’s life and reach goals (Staples, 1990); 2) engaging in valued social roles (Solomon, 1976); 3) having access to information and the ability to change others’ perceptions of one’s competency and capacity; 4) attempts to enhancing self-image; 5) attempts to overcome stigma; and 6) the ability to make decisions from a range of options (Chamberlin, 1997).

In order to identify community empowerment features, examples of the following topics (found originally in hearing populations) were sought: 1) a feeling of belonging to or being involved in the Deaf community in a way that can create change; 2) having control over the Deaf community (Hur, 2006); 3) the process of mastering issues of concern to the community (Rappaport, 1987); 4) efforts made for the betterment of the collective or improving the quality of life for members (Zimmerman, 2000). When these types of personal and community level empowerment were identified, they were further classified through a summary of the content that represented the type of empowerment discussed, creating content summaries (to be used for determining approaches to empowerment commonly employed by the community).

Before coding began, each post was organized using a label in a system similar to that outlined by Langer and Beckman (2005). Using the Microsoft Office Excel
application, each post was placed into a cell with columns for the post’s label, date and
code(s) so that posts could be organized and codes could be calculated.

After labeling posts, the author and a Deaf coder collaboratively coded the first three
posts of each blog. Data analysis was enriched by having a person who is a
knowledgeable member of the Deaf community review the codes and posts as this
provided an “insider” interpretation of posts. Table 3 summarizes the levels of analysis
involved in the data coding procedure. This coding procedure involved the examination
of blog posts using the following five steps:  1) presence of D/deaf relevant content
and/or presence of empowerment relevant content, 2) Deaf cultural perspective (and if
present which type), 3) personal and/or community empowerment features (along with
type), 4) content summary of the personal and/or community empowerment features, 5)
approach to empowerment assigned based on content summary of the post in the context
of all other posts.
Table 3

Levels of Analysis of Blog Post Coding Procedure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Analysis</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Types</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>D/deaf Relevant Empowerment Relevant</td>
<td>Contains information that has to do with deafness</td>
<td>Present or absent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Contains information that has to do with empowerment</td>
<td>Present or absent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Deaf Cultural Perspective</td>
<td>Contains elements of Deaf culture</td>
<td>Pride in deafness, value of ASL, equality with hearing people, value of Deaf culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Personal Empowerment</td>
<td>Discusses empowerment at the individual level</td>
<td>Control over life, ability to reach goals, valued social roles, changing others' perception of competency/capacity, increasing self-image, overcoming stigma, making decisions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Community Empowerment</td>
<td>Discusses empowerment at the community level</td>
<td>Belonging/involvement in or control over community, bettering collective, improving lives of members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Content Summary of Coded Post</td>
<td>Brief description of empowerment content of coded post</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Approach to Empowerment</td>
<td>Element of empowerment found across many posts</td>
<td>See Table 7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. See also Appendix A and Appendix B for further coding information.

In addition to examining the posts for these previously identified signs of personal and/or community empowerment and Deaf cultural perspectives, coders were sensitive to emergent content not defined in the original codes. Three coders were responsible for analyzing the data. The hearing researcher and Deaf coder collaboratively coded the first three posts from each of the eight blogs. The Deaf coder was asked to both analyze these 24 posts and to look for any additional empowerment or Deaf relevant codes. Once the researcher and Deaf coder had established a final coding scheme with the addition of four Deaf cultural perspectives, the researcher applied the coding procedure to the entire three
months of posts for each blog. Upon completion of coding, a hearing coder knowledgeable in empowerment literature was responsible for coding a randomly selected 5% of the posts to establish reliability with the researcher for empowerment code assignment. The Deaf coder was responsible for coding a separate randomly selected 5% of the posts to establish reliability with the researcher for Deaf cultural perspective code assignment. As proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994), when a single post represented more than one code, all applicable codes were assigned. When a new code emerged from the data after the initial coding of the 24 posts, all previously coded posts were examined for fit with the emergent code.

Blogs were read and analyzed one at a time so that posts could be analyzed within the context of the entire blog. Using this coding procedure, the researcher generated a list of codes identified in the posts, along with a representative example for each code. After all posts were coded by the researcher and 10% were reviewed for reliability, the numerical and percent occurrence of Deaf cultural perspective codes and personal and community level empowerment codes were calculated.

A summary of the content of each empowerment relevant post was created by the researcher to highlight aspects of empowerment. Once all summaries of empowerment were created, the author read all content summaries using a grounded theory approach to generate themes of how bloggers were facilitating empowerment. To ensure the approach was not idiosyncratic, at least 10 examples of the approach were identified before the approach was considered in the final group. More than one of these approaches to empowerment could be applied to a single post. After approaches were assigned, the prevalence of each was calculated.
Although individuals wrote these eight blogs, the blogs’ connections to the larger Deaf community were examined in three ways. The relationship between the blogs and the readers was examined by calculating the number of reader comments left for each post on each blog. To address connections between blogs, it was noted when a blog mentioned another blog in the study in posts covered by the three months of collected data. This allowed for the calculation of a density matrix to measure the interconnection of the eight blogs. One final examination of the level of connection in the community was attained by noting when blogs discussed the same topic. This information generated a chart of topic overlap across blogs (Table 9), demonstrating what topics were of interest to multiple community members and the similarities between bloggers’ interests.

To address issues of inter-rater reliability, 10% of the posts were randomly selected and re-coded by two coders: a research assistant familiar with qualitative research and empowerment, and the original Deaf coder. Each of these two coders was given 5% of the posts, or 21 posts, totaling 42 posts, or 10% of the data. They each assigned codes in their area of expertise using the coding procedure and the list of codes generated by the researcher.

Results

Six types of data were obtained from the content analysis of blogs. These data will be presented in the following order. First, a list of empowerment and Deaf cultural perspective codes identified during the analysis, along with representative examples of each code is given. Second, the prevalence of each of these codes is shown. Third, types of approaches to empowerment derived from the posts are presented. Fourth, the prevalence of each approach is provided. Fifth, the amount of comments generated by
each of the 416 posts and the interconnections between the blogs in the study are
discussed. Finally, a summary of topic overlap across blogs is presented.

*Codes Identified in the Analysis*

A total of 18 codes were identified in the 416 posts. Codes representing each of
the three domains were identified: Deaf cultural perspective (8 codes), personal level
empowerment (4 codes) and community level empowerment (6 codes). Table 4
summarizes the codes identified in the sample.

Table 4

*Summary of Identified Codes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Deaf Cultural Perspective (DCP)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. DCP-Pride: Showing pride in Deafness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. DCP-VoASL (Value of ASL): Touching on the importance of sign language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. DCP-Equality: The idea that D/deaf and hearing should be equal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. DCP-VoStory (Value of Storytelling): Use of storytelling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. DCP-Joking: Use of jokes to convey information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. DCP-WE (Weak English): The idea that D/deaf people are lacking skills in the English language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. DCP-VoS (Value of Socializing with Deaf people): Touching on the importance of spending time with other Deaf people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. DCP-Support: The importance of supporting community members</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Personal Level Empowerment (PE)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. PE-Valued Social Roles: Discussion of deaf people in admired professions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. PE-Perception: Changing others’ perception of competency or capacity of oneself</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. PE-Image: Improving self-image</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. PE-Stigma: Overcoming stigma</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Community Level Empowerment (CE)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. CE-Change: Belonging or involvement in a way that can create change</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. CE-Collective: Bettering the collective/improving lives of members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. CE-Issues: suggesting or taking action to address an issue of community concern</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. CE-Info-on-Issues: Keeping community in the know, providing information about an issue of concern without suggesting action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. CE-Perception: Sharing expectations about what the community is capable of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. CE-Info: Community has access to information that can affect their level of power</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Deaf cultural perspectives. As outlined in the methods section, the first three posts of each of the eight blogs were analyzed using the coding procedure with a member of the Deaf community. This resulted in the Deaf coder identifying four additional Deaf cultural perspective codes and no additional empowerment relevant codes.

In total, eight Deaf cultural perspective codes were identified. The original coding procedure highlighted four Deaf cultural perspective codes: equality of D/deaf and hearing people; pride in deafness; value of sign language; and value of Deaf culture. Three of these four perspective codes were present in the posts. The perspective code of valuing Deaf culture was not specifically represented in any post.

In addition to these original codes, four emergent Deaf cultural perspective codes were added through discussion with the Deaf coder: the emphasis on communicating through stories; communicating through jokes; the value of socializing with other Deaf people; and the concern about D/deaf people having weak skills in the English language. One additional emergent code was identified by the primary investigator after the first 24 posts were coded, that of supporting community members. All posts were reviewed and coded using this entire list of codes.

Personal level empowerment. Four personal level empowerment codes were identified in the data. Of the original eight personal level empowerment codes highlighted in previous literature, four codes were not found in the 416 posts: the ability to control one’s life; the ability to reach goals; having access to information; and the ability to make decisions from a range of options.

Four personal level empowerment codes reflected in previous literature were found in the 416 posts. These codes are: engaging in valued social roles; the ability to
change others’ perceptions of one’s competency and capacity; increasing self-image; and overcoming stigma. There were no emergent personal level empowerment codes.

*Community level empowerment.* A total of six community level empowerment codes were identified. Originally four community level empowerment codes were included in the coding procedure. Three of these four codes were identified: involvement in the Deaf community in a way that can create change; taking action to master issues of concern to the community; and efforts made for the betterment of the collective. The code, having control over the Deaf community, was not identified in the 416 posts.

Through the process of analyzing the posts, three emergent community level empowerment codes were identified: providing information on issues of community concern; changing society’s perception of the capability of the Deaf community; and having access to information. These last two codes were originally only a personal level empowerment code, however, they appeared at the community level.

*Inter-rater Reliability*

In order to substantiate these findings two coders read 10% of the posts using the coding schema and classified posts independently of the primary investigator. One graduate student coder with expertise in empowerment coded 5% of the posts, resulting in 81% inter-rater reliability with the primary investigator before discussion, and 100% agreement after discussion. The other 5% of posts (21) were coded by a member of the Deaf community. Inter-rater reliability with the Deaf coder was 81% before discussion, and 98% agreement after discussion.
Examples of Codes

Representative examples of each of the identified codes are given in Table 5. When possible, examples of codes were chosen from the first 24 posts that were collaboratively coded with the Deaf coder. When an example could not be concisely quoted from the text, a summary was created. These illustrative examples were used to analyze posts.

Table 5

Illustrative Examples of Codes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Deaf Relevant (D)</th>
<th>“I’m glad that the Gallaudet Public Relations office has allowed Mercy Coogan to “retire.” (W-A-3)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Deaf Cultural Perspective (DCP)</td>
<td>DCP-Pride: “I like to think that another reason people choose not to wear their hearing aids is because they begin to accept their deaf identities. Grammie and I both grew in our journeys into deafhood, gradually accepting our deaf identities more and more until we were comfortable in our own skin. I gave up wearing hearing aids for many of the same reasons stated above, and I’m glad I did. Being deaf is a part of me now. I’ve been deaf longer than I’ve been hearing. I can’t imagine going back to try to work at hearing again. This may sound strange, almost unfathomable to some, but this is a sign of my deaf identity, and I wear it proudly.” (E-J-3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DCP-VoASL (value of ASL)</td>
<td>“Butterflies are free, independent and liberated, Sign Language allows Deaf people to be free and independent also.” (F-M-9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DCP-Equality: Blogger discusses feeling disempowered, he is quickly dismissed from jury duty because he is deaf but if he is tried his jury will be all hearing (so he cannot &quot;pass judgment&quot; on hearing people but they can pass it on him). (R-A-3)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(DCP-VoDC (value of Deaf culture): none coded in all posts)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>^DCP-VoStory (Value of Storytelling): …“Now there was one puppet whose name was Punchinello. He, himself, was a deaf puppet. His wood was rough and his paint was starting to peel. Punchinello tried hard to jump like the other puppets did, but he always seemed to fall. Once, he even tried to sing a beautiful song, but he only managed to croak. The other puppets ridiculed him. They thought he was ridiculous and that his voice sounded silly. They gave him more gray dots, rejected him and sent him away.” (E-A-6)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>^DCP-Joking: “[VIDEO* “Out first vlog / Hi our names are Fookem and Bug/ We want to discuss… Deafhood? Audism? Deaf-mute?/ Nevermind GASP!!!!!! Nothinkg for you to watch! Thanks for watching/ Have a nice day, you little fool! Oh, by the way/ Happy April Fools!”]” (F-A-1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Deaf Empowerment

**DCP-WE (Weak English):** “Granted, illiteracy in the deaf community is nothing new. It’s been a concern for many, many years. I am not surprised at all when people lament the failure of the education system to bring deaf children’s reading and writing levels up to par. Yes, we have failed many deaf children.” (F-A-2)

**DCP-VoS (value of socializing with Deaf people):** "DeafNation Expo in Richmond: More than 3,000 attended the event in Downtown Richmond. It was wonderful. I get to see my old classmates. Old faces, old friends, new faces." (R-A-1)

**DCP-support:** “Will anyone be working with her, or with the South Dakota Corrections Department (or whatever it is called, to insure she has access to information and a safe place to live? I worry that the Deaf Community in South Dakota will abandon her. Even though she was found guilty of a terrible crime, she is still a Deaf woman who needs our support.” (R-A-15)

**Empowerment Relevant (E):** “In Ontario, there will be over 1,000 Deaf people rallying against the mandates that Canadian government intend to impose that will forbid Deaf children with cochlear implants to learn ASL. We can help them by showing our support against the mandates at the Canadian Embassy on 501 Pennsylvania Ave near Union Station this Friday.” (M-M-8)

**Personal Empowerment (PE)**

- PE-Control: none found in any post
- PE-Goal: none found in any post
- PE-VSR (valued social roles): Blogger gives information about famous Deaf baseball players. (K-J-3)
- PE-Percep (perception): Blogger posted an article about a woman who was told she could not be a doctor because she is deaf, but she did it anyway and now enjoys changing people's notions about what deaf people can do. (F-A-32)
- PE-Image: “I found that I wasn’t hurt, disabled, ruined, broken down, or even new person. I was just me and this is who I am.” (E-A-3 – from letter to blogger)
- PE-Stigma: “It would potentially help hearing children understand how deaf children feel when they are teased, harassed and oppressed.” (E-M-4)
- PE-Decision: none found in any posts
- PE-Info: none found in any posts

**Community Empowerment (CE)**

- CE-Change: “All I know is, I’m sick of not getting my money’s worth when I buy a DVD. It feels like discrimination. To repeat my question above, what can we do about it?” (B-A-2)
- CE-Control: none coded in any post
- CE-Collective: “With all our unique differences, how can we as a “community” take action on important social issues, confront the injustice of barriers that separate human beings from one another and examine the role of prejudice and stereotypes in sustaining
these barriers without being rejecting or destructive toward one another or toward those we are trying to enlighten?” (E-A-1)

**CE-Issues:** Encouraging readers to write to their legislators (and providing contact information and an example of a letter written by the blogger) to fight for continuation of funding for the director of Michigan's Division of Deafness and Hard of Hearing (D-A-1)

**CE-Info-on-Issues:** “…we have contractors using convicted child molesters to work on projects inside campus. Also included in this group of felonious laborers are drug dealers convicted of illegal drug trafficking. This practice is unacceptable, putting vulnerable deaf and hoh children at risk, all because both FSDB and the contractors want to save few pennies. It is also illegal after the passage of Jessica Lunsford law became effective.” (M-A-2)

**CE-Percep (perception):** Blogger posts mainstream article about hearing people gaining understanding about difficulties deaf people face in the hearing world to show deaf people are not dumb. (F-M-25)

**CE-Info:** Blogger posts link to new video web broadcast in ASL about weather news. (F-J-6)

* Codes generated by the primary investigator through this analysis that were not highlighted in the literature reviewed.

**Prevalence of Deaf and Empowerment Relevant Codes**

This complete list of codes was used to analyze all 416 posts. Prevalence rates for each code were then calculated. In table 6 they are presented as percentages, which represent the ratio of the number of occurrences of a code divided by the total number of posts (416).

None of the codes are mutually exclusive. For example, a single post could be coded as representing multiple Deaf cultural perspective codes. Similarly, a post could represent multiple community level empowerment codes. Thus, the 135 occurrences of Deaf cultural perspective codes do not represent 135 separate posts and the 282 personal plus community level empowerment codes do not represent 282 independent posts.
However, 365 individual posts were coded as deaf relevant, and 183 individual posts were coded as empowerment relevant.

The deaf relevant code was assigned more frequently than any other code. Of the 416 posts, 365 of them (88%) were related to deafness. Deaf cultural perspective codes were much less common, occurring only 135 times (32%). Community level empowerment codes were far more prevalent than personal level empowerment codes. Community level empowerment codes appeared 266 times (64%), as compared to personal level empowerment codes that occurred only 16 times (4%).
Table 6

*Percent Occurrence of Each Identified Code*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Occurrences (out of 416)</th>
<th>Percentage of occurrence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Deaf Relevant</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>365</td>
<td>88%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Deaf Cultural Perspectives:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pride in Deafness</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value of ASL</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equality</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value of Storytelling</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joking</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weak English</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value of Socializing</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supporting members</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total DCP:</strong></td>
<td>135</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Empowerment Relevant</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>183</td>
<td>44%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Personal Level:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Valued Social Roles</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changing Perceptions</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>&lt;1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Image</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>&lt;1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overcoming Stigma</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total PE:</strong></td>
<td>16</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Community Level:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creating Change</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bettering Collective</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Addressing Issues</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Providing information on issues</td>
<td>120</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changing Perceptions</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to Information</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total CE:</strong></td>
<td>266</td>
<td>64%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note. Content codes are not mutually exclusive.*
Manifestations of Empowerment

Categorizing what ideas are being presented and what actions are being taken in the empowerment-relevant posts provides important information about how empowerment may be functioning in the Deaf community. For example, coding shows that bloggers are addressing issues of community concern (CE-Issues); looking at how that manifests, reveals that people are addressing these issues through encouraging community discussion, supporting a Deaf institution, and engaging in political action. Coding the post reveals the type of empowerment occurring, and analyzing the ideas and actions in the empowerment relevant post demonstrates how the community may be empowering itself.

Approaches to empowerment were generated using the 183 content summaries of empowerment relevant posts. These summaries were aggregated across posts and blogs. Each summary was read to answer the question, “What action is being taken to evidence or contribute to the empowerment of a person or the community?” The original list of empowering approaches was condensed so that they represented overarching concepts. For example, the action “using news media to voice views” was added to the “getting ideas into mainstream society” category.

Each approach to empowerment had to appear at least 10 times to be included in the final list so that it was sufficiently representative of an empowerment approach used by the community. Actions that appeared less than 10 times were inspected to determine whether they represented important information not covered by other types of empowerment approaches. This additional refining process lead to the elimination of five empowerment representative approaches: holding members accountable for community
change; questioning the status quo; sense of obligation to help community; demanding change; and encouraging community to support members. This process resulted in the current list of 19 approaches to empowerment that group into five categories (see Table 7). Upon completion of this list, all content summaries were analyzed for empowerment approaches a second time to ensure that all approaches were appropriately categorized.
Table 7
Approaches to Empowerment by Category

| Call to action: Ask readers and others to take action for positive change, sometimes by providing an example of their own initiative. | Encourage community contribution: engage in political action  
Encourage community contribution: call for discussion  
Encourage community contribution: support/improve a Deaf institution  
Provide example of personal initiative for community betterment  
Call on leadership to improve a situation  
Urge community collaboration |
|---|---|
| Keeping community in the know: Inform members to protect, alert them to potential resources, keep them abreast of issues. | Disseminate information on an issue of community concern  
Disseminate information to protect community  
Alert community to resources |
| Power of the People: Highlight abilities and contributions of members and asserting personal perspectives. | Affirm potential of community members  
Recognize community contribution  
Voice personal views  
Use other community members as resources |
| PR/Interactions with the hearing world: Use media, personal blogs to communicate to greater society, presenting community in a favorable light | Get ideas into mainstream society (hearing world)  
Present strong and capable image to outside community |
| Disquiet: Express anger over mistreatment, injustices, and highlighting injustices and protests | Point out injustices  
Deaf and hearing are not treated as equals  
Protest  
Anger |
**Frequency of Expressions of Empowerment**

The frequency of each of the 19 expressions of empowerment generated from posts was calculated to determine the relative salience of each approach across blogs. Frequency was calculated by dividing the number of identified occurrences by 183, the total number of empowerment related posts, to create a percentage.

Table 8

*Percent Occurrence of Each Identified Empowerment Approach*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Call to action</th>
<th>keeping community in the know</th>
<th>power of the people</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>discussion 24:183 13%</td>
<td>info of concern 112:183 61%</td>
<td>views 46:183 25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>political 12:183 7%</td>
<td>protect 24:183 13%</td>
<td>potential 17:183 9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>institution 17:183 9%</td>
<td>resource 12:183 6%</td>
<td>recognizing 23:183 13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>initiative 24:183 13%</td>
<td></td>
<td>resources 18:183 10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>leadership 11:183 6%</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>collaboration 15:183 8%</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>TOTALS: 103:183 56%</td>
<td>146:183 80%</td>
<td>104:183 56%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**PR**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Disquiet</th>
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<tr>
<td>ideas 20:183 11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>image 10:183 5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>protesting 17:183 9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTALS: 30:183 16%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The most frequently discussed empowerment expression category was that of keeping members up to date on important information. This theme of keeping community in the know was cited in 80% of the empowerment relevant posts, or 146 posts. The theme categories: call to action; power of the people; and disquiet were the next most frequent, each being cited almost exactly the same amount of times. These theme
categories were cited 103 (56%), 104 (56%), and 104 (56%) times, respectively. The public relations/interactions with the hearing world category was the least common, occurring in just 30 (16%) of the empowerment relevant posts. The most cited individual empowerment action was disseminating information on an issue of community concern, occurring 112 times (61%).

Community Connections

Connections between bloggers and readers. Many bloggers worked to engage the community by calling for discussion on a variety of topics. Evidence of some of this discussion is found in the comments readers left for bloggers on their site. Across all 416 blog posts, the average number of comments was 13 (12.72). The number of comments for each post ranged from 0 to 87. The post that generated 87 comments was a video sign collage with the theme “Deaf Rock.” Of the 416 posts, 44 received no comments and 38 received 2 comments each. The median number of comments was 27. The total number of posts generated in the three recorded months of these eight blogs was 5,312 comments.

Connections between blogs. In addition to connections between blogs and readers, there is evidence of connections between the blogs within the study. Note was made of any mention of one blog by another blog included in the study. A density matrix was calculated to determine the proportion of linkages between the study’s eight blogs. Out of 28 possible connections between blogs (k(k-1)/2, where K represents the number of blogs), 15 connections were identified. It was found that this study’s eight unrelated blogs have a density matrix of 15/28, or .54, indicating that 54% of the possible linkages between the blogs exist. Each blog referenced at least one other blog in the study, with one blog referencing five of the blogs in the study. Additionally, all but one blog was
referenced by another blog, with one blog being referenced by five of the other blogs. It is surprising that there are so many connections between these blogs considering the amount of deaf relevant blogs (372) listed on DeafRead from which these eight blogs were selected.

*Topic Overlap*

Commonalities were found in certain topics, demonstrating that some topics were of shared import to these bloggers in the community. Table 10 illustrates 18 topics that overlapped across the three recorded months of these blogs. Highlighting the importance of Gallaudet University, six of these 18 topics were related to this liberal arts university for the D/deaf. These topics were: the Gallaudet protests from May through October of 2006 over the installation by the board of a new provost; Gallaudet’s accreditation probation; an athletic probation; a party lifestyle of some Gallaudet students; censorship of a listserv, or email based discussion forum called GallyNet-L; and a lawsuit from a previous university employee, Karen Kimmel.

Two of the topics concerned two other protests. One protest was about possible legislation in Canada regarding not teaching sign language to children who receive cochlear implants. The other protest was by students from the Southwest Collegiate Institute for the Deaf who wanted a new dean of students, accusing the current dean of punishing the students and forcing religion upon them.

A popular topic discussed multiple times by five of the eight blogs was the murder trial of Daphne Wright, a Deaf woman on trial for the murder of another Deaf woman. Many questioned the ability to conduct a fair trial with a jury of peers in South Dakota for a Deaf Black lesbian with a third grade reading level.
Three of the overlapping topics were related to sports. These topics were: the Deaf Strongman Games; a documentary made by a Deaf man about the Deaf baseball player Dummy Hoy; and the Atlanta Falcons drafting Jamaal Anderson, son of Dr. Glenn Anderson who was a Deaf candidate whom many thought should have been given the job of being provost for Gallaudet. In addition, the concern over Gallaudet’s athletic probation is another topic suggesting the importance of sport in the community.

Another topic was the arrest and reported grave mistreatment of a deaf girl who had herself called police for help. Three blogs reported on a Deaf mentally disabled man, Vu Khoi, who had gone missing. Two blogs expressed dissatisfaction about the portrayal of the Deaf community on a special episode of the television show Law and Order that had a cast of several Deaf actors. Two blogs presented information about video remote interpreting, its limitations in certain settings and the inappropriateness of using it in settings such as hospitals. Video remote interpreting involves using an off-site interpreter with video conferencing equipment rather than bringing an interpreter to the location of the deaf and hearing parties.

Two blogs discussed the accessibility of vocabulary used on Deaf blogs, arguing bloggers should not reduce the sophistication of their writing and that, “we have to hold up a standard that shows that the deaf are just as good at English and critical thinking as the hearing.”

Within blogs, there is a range from discussing as many as 16 to as little as none of the 18 topics with an average of 6 topics discussed by each blog. Table 10 provides a sense of the similarities and differences between blogs. For example, LaRonda Zupp did not discuss any of these topics, while Mishka Zena and Ricky Taylor had nine topics in
common. Across blogs, the amount of overlap for each topic ranged from two to five with an average of three blogs discussing the same topic.

The two most commonly discussed topics were the Gallaudet protests (despite the posts being written six months after the end of the protests), and the current murder trial of Daphne Wright.
Table 9

*Topic Overlap*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Berke</th>
<th>Worpasb</th>
<th>Ear of my Heart</th>
<th>Fookem &amp; Bug</th>
<th>Kokonut Pundit</th>
<th>Mishka Zena</th>
<th>Ridor Live</th>
<th>Deaf Pundit</th>
<th>Jeannette Johnson</th>
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<tr>
<td>Law &amp; Order</td>
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<td>Gallaudet Protests</td>
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<td>Vu Khoi</td>
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<td>Daphne Wright</td>
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<td>Video Remote Interpreting</td>
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<td>Strongman Games</td>
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<td>Gallaudet Accreditation</td>
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<td>Party Lifestyle</td>
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<td>Athletic Probation</td>
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<td>GallyNetL</td>
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<td>Kimmel's lawsuit</td>
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<td>Dummy Hoy</td>
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<td>Jamaal Anderson</td>
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<td>deaf girl arrested</td>
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Discussion

This study examined the degree to which Deaf bloggers discuss personal empowerment and encourage the empowerment of the Deaf community through weblogs. These findings were analyzed in the context of Deaf culture and evidence of this culture was identified within these blogs. The sample consisted of eight weblogs that generated 416 posts written by nine members of the Deaf community from April through June 2007. The 416 posts were examined using a content analytic approach to qualitative inquiry.

It is clear that these nine bloggers are utilizing their blogs as vehicles for important community work. Just as Bharat, Merkel and Bishop (2004) found with the gay, lesbian, transgendered and bisexual bloggers they researched, these Deaf bloggers discussed barriers to resources, support and information, and actions that could be taken to build a better community. Results suggest that posts contained content that is consistent with previous literature on personal and community empowerment. Both types of empowerment were identified and community level empowerment themes were most frequently found. Community level empowerment themes were especially representative of the beginning stages of the empowerment process. Personal level empowerment themes were less prevalent than community empowerment themes. Five types of approaches to empowerment were represented in these posts: encouraging and organizing members to action, disseminating information, highlighting members’ abilities and contributions, using the media to influence perceptions of mainstream society, and discussing injustice and oppression. Eight Deaf cultural perspectives were identified.
Connections were present between bloggers and their readers and between the eight blogs in the study.

Community Level Empowerment

Bloggers frequently discussed community level empowerment throughout the three-month sample of their blogs. Indeed, 266 instances of community level empowerment were found within the analyzed posts. As there were only 16 instances of personal level empowerment, it appears that the empowerment of the community is more salient in the online social worlds of these bloggers.

A necessary step in understanding community empowerment is to demonstrate that community members are actually reading bloggers’ posts. Two sources of data suggest that these blogs have a substantial readership. First, the weblog aggregator DeafRead published statistics on the amount of visits received by highly trafficked weblogs. This data identifies half of the studied weblogs in the top six most visited sites on their aggregator (DeafRead, 2008). The second source of data is the amount of comments left by readers for each post on each blog. Although more individuals read these blogs than comment on each post, it can be assumed that those who comment do also read. Readers left 5,312 comments for the three months of posts included in this study. Therefore, it is likely that these bloggers’ posts are being read and acknowledged by the Deaf community.

Five areas of community empowerment were identified in these posts. These were: informing readers, addressing community issues, making changes (including changing perceptions), bettering the collective, and access to information. The sixth area of community level empowerment, control over the community, was not identified.
Informing readers. By far the most common type of community level empowerment identified in the present study involved informing readers on issues of community concern (CE-info-on-issue). This code represents bloggers recognizing an issue of concern, but as there is no foreseeable way to take action to address it, only information about the issue is provided. For example, in reference to the murder trial of a Deaf woman, bloggers created several posts about their concerns that proper accommodations were not being provided to insure a fair trial. Although bloggers understood that this trial could set a precedent and have far reaching consequences, it was unclear what could be done to impact the trial. Rather, posts echoed Mishka Zena’s sentiment, "We need to be ever vigilant that the civil rights of all deaf people in the judicial system are always protected" (M-A-19). Gibson (1995) describes this stage of empowerment as developing knowledge about the situation and building confidence that the situation could change.

As Rose and Kiger (1995) found in their study of Deaf historical events of the 1970s and 1980s, it was an awareness of inequalities that lead to political action. This suggests that informing members is an essential step in community empowerment in the Deaf community. This finding supports research on empowerment with hearing people as well and shows that this type of empowerment should be considered in research with D/deaf populations. In fact, the CE-info-on-issues code demonstrates an approach to community empowerment that is strikingly similar to the conscientizing (as coined by Freire, 1973) stage that Hur (2006) suggests in his model of the empowerment process.

Hur’s model of empowerment. Based on a synthesis of findings from previous studies examining how groups move from disempowerment to empowerment, Hur
proposed a five-step empowerment process. Hur’s model states that conscientizing is the second stage of empowerment, preceded only by the existence of oppression (identified as stage one). It is in the conscientizing stage that the community’s awareness about their oppression increases. Due to the similarity of these separately identified types of empowerment, the term “CE-info-on-issues” and conscientizing will be used interchangeably for this discussion.

This was the most common code across all codes; it was identified in 120 posts, nearly 30% of the entire data sample. Beyond informing research of the importance of this type of empowerment in the Deaf community, developmentally the prevalence of this code suggests that for many issues of concern, the Deaf community is in the beginning stages of empowerment. That is, the community is focusing on disseminating information to keep members knowledgeable and not yet able to take frequent organized action toward change, which occurs in the third stage of empowerment, mobilizing. Hur’s fourth stage is the maximization and sharing of power where a new social order can begin to be created. The fifth stage is the establishment of a new social order. Several examples of this stage exist in the history of the Deaf community; however, no maximizing stage examples were identified in the three-month span of eight blogs used for this sample.

Addressing issues. The third stage of Hur’s model, mobilizing, or the ability to take initiative and “mobilize collective action,” corresponds to the community empowerment code CE-Issues. This code was assigned only when action to directly address an issue of concern to the community was demonstrated. This type of empowerment was found in 12% of the posts, indicating that, while not as frequently, the
Deaf community is actively working to mobilize in order to improve conditions for the community. These actions all demonstrate great investment in the welfare of the community and a willingness to act on that investment.

Many of these posts highlighted the importance of strengthening the community rather than focusing on relations with outside groups or the dominant society. For example, one blogger provided all necessary information, including applications, to encourage readers to nominate people who believe in the equality of the D/deaf and hearing to a board of trustee’s position for Gallaudet University. Another blogger ran a support group for D/deaf parents and encouraged them to stay connected for support. Another blogger encouraged readers to serve the community by contacting a Deaf organization and asking how they could be of help.

Some posts did concern issues outside the community. One blogger wrote letters and encouraged others to write letters to their representatives. Some posts called for support of protests, one discussed filing a lawsuit and another post discussed contacting reporters to correct statements made about interpreting in a court case.

*Making change and improving the collective.* Whether or not action is being taken, further evidence of work toward empowerment is revealed in the 10% of the 416 posts that included content relating to improving the lives of community members (CE-Collective) and the 10% of posts that discussed working toward change (CE-Change). These posts often cited issues of oppression and discrimination. This discrimination was sometimes in relation to perceptions D/deaf people’s capabilities. Six instances were identified of bloggers attempting to improve these perceptions, for example, showing that D/deaf people are able to be good parents, play sports and have professional careers.
These findings suggest that individuals in the community are concerned by stigma held by the dominant society and are working to educate people outside the community as well as bolster the faith of members in their own abilities. Misperceptions about abilities of D/deaf people can have serious implications, including employment, education and child rearing.

Access to information. Six other posts provided evidence of community level access to information. This originally was a code in personal level empowerment only, however, since it was present at the community level this code was added. Like other language minorities, access to public information and the free flow of communication is an important issue for D/deaf people. Indeed, a Deaf author states that, “…communication is so highly valued that it is at the core of the conflict between the Deaf community and the dominant society” (Jankowski, 1997).

This code concerned having access to information that most hearing people take for granted; thus, not having access to this information puts D/deaf people at a disadvantage. These posts discussed topics such as information about the weather, parenting, sex education and school tutoring. Likely because of the barriers to communication and information D/deaf people encounter in the hearing world, these posts encouraged D/deaf people to use one another as resources for information and kept people abreast of resources that use ASL to communicate information. The importance of access to information through connection to D/deaf others supports Breivik’s (2005) finding that increased contact between politically empowered Deaf people in combination with the changing attitude toward deafness in Deaf communities has contributed
significantly to the empowerment of Deaf people. The Internet is a powerful resource in making this contact possible.

These posts support the idea that there are at least two barriers faced by D/deaf people that are being discussed online: stigma and communication. Deaf people may not receive the same opportunities as hearing because of misconceptions of ability; thus they are met with obstacles to activities for which they have no less ability to participate than other groups. In addition, communication creates other often avoidable barriers. Bloggers wrote about communication barriers that involved a lack of commitment to accommodation such as not providing closed captioning or interpreters in accordance with Americans with Disabilities Act requirements.

Control. Control over community organization has been found in previous research and was included in the analysis of these posts. However, this code was not identified in the data. While some political action is apparent in this data, it can be hypothesized that the Deaf community has not gained enough power to exert a great deal of political control, and the political power that has been acquired may rest with D/deaf organizations rather than with individual members.

Personal Level Empowerment

It was found that the bloggers in this study infrequently discussed empowerment at the personal level. There were only 16 instances (4%) of personal empowerment identified. However, this finding likely does not suggest that these bloggers are not personally empowered nor that personal level empowerment is not prevalent in the community. Since these writers have the confidence to direct, encourage and speak
publically to their community with the potential of affecting change, it is likely that these
bloggers are themselves personally empowered.

Several pieces of evidence suggest that these bloggers are personally empowered. It is clear that these bloggers do not present a state of powerlessness as defined by Solomon (1976), as they do not present themselves as possessing limitations on their self-determination, nor experiencing an ongoing sense of dependency. Indeed, these bloggers encourage others to develop community networks to further reduce dependence on the hearing world and also are active in creating and maintaining community networks through their blogs. In addition, several instances of community level empowerment are identified in these posts, which suggests a foundation of individual empowerment. Zimmerman (2000) asserts that to have community empowerment there must be empowered individuals and it is plausible that these bloggers are among those empowered individuals.

The nature of the material used for data may explain in large part the low occurrence of discussion of personal level empowerment. All data was gathered from weblogs, which are used to communicate one’s ideas to a wider audience. Ideas that are relevant to this audience typically involve issues beyond the individual. Had the study been conducted using personal diaries, the prevalence of personal level empowerment may have been more substantial.

Additionally, it should be noted that this research looked for specific mention of empowerment in the posts; therefore, some potential examples of personal level empowerment may have gone uncounted. For example, it could be argued that the leadership role taken on by the bloggers by creating posts that are widely read by
community members is an example of a valued social role (PE-VSR). Inferences such as this were not made in coding as only information brought up in the posts was coded. Similarly, as Bharat, Merkel and Bishop (2004) concluded through their research with sexual minorities that the Internet serves as a tool for “marginalized individuals to take charge of their lives” (p. 789), these blogs may themselves represent that taking charge or personal control (PE-Control). Due to their low prevalence rate, individual personal level empowerment codes will not be discussed.

**Empowerment Approaches**

Analysis of the 183 content summaries of the empowerment relevant posts produced 19 well-represented empowerment approaches. These approaches were categorized into five groups, each of which increases our understanding of how empowerment manifests in the Deaf community. Overall, these approaches suggest that Deaf people are taking action to address injustices, keeping the community abreast of information and in touch with resources, supporting community members, working to keep the greater society in touch with their community, and finally, that Deaf people are angry with the current state of things.

1. **Call to action.** The first category involved taking action for positive change. These approaches are in line with Hur’s mobilizing stage of empowerment; however, some may represent a stage in between conscientizing and mobilizing as the action is confined within the community. For example, some bloggers encouraged discussions on topics of concern to work out perspectives, problem solve and potentially decide on a course of action. This reflects the idea of community building which Fetterson (2002) defined as a sense of community and social cohesion that enabled members to work
together, solve problems and make decisions for social change. Similarly, some action was aimed at creating change in Deaf institutions rather than directly changing a situation existing between D/deaf and hearing worlds. When discussing current concerns, bloggers often called on leaders affiliated with the problem to address the issue.

Evidence of engaging in political action and of bloggers modeling their personal initiative were more in line with the traditional views of mobilizing for change. Examples of this type of action included protests, polling the community regarding elections and taking legal action.

2. *Keeping community in the know.* The second category focused on information sharing in order to protect members, alert them to resources and to keep the community up to date with regard to current issues, particularly those relating to deafness. Much of the access to information and conscientizing community level empowerment types were reflected in these manifestations of empowerment. This approach occurred most frequently, totaling 146 posts out of the 183 empowerment relevant posts. The frequency of this approach may also be a reflection on the use of weblogs for data since a main goal of weblogs is to distribute information to readers. However, these bloggers could have chosen to write about their favorite sports team, their pets and their family recipes, and instead we find they are writing about deaf schools, communication rights and legal issues.

This category provides evidence of the value placed on looking out for the community and includes phrases such as, “it is my duty to let the public know what happened yesterday.” One blogger even advised D/deaf readers how to deal with police officers in order to protect their safety and rights. Frequently posts would put readers in
touch with resources on a variety of issues and occasionally would inform members of safety precautions.

This empowerment approach demonstrates how the blogging community can act as a vehicle for empowerment just as community groups do by providing a means to convey information to others and connect with others. As Taylor (1999) found when looking at empowering deaf ethnic minorities through social action, establishing community groups such as an information exchange forum comprised of community members and a social worker both reduced isolation and increased access to services. DeafBlogLand can serve as an information exchange and reduce isolation even for those D/deaf people who are completely physically removed from any other D/deaf person.

3. Power of the people. The third category drew attention to abilities and accomplishments of members and reflected the expression of bloggers’ views. This category highlighted the power of Deaf people. Deaf cultural perspectives such as having pride in deafness likely support this approach. Additionally, affirming the potential of community members is also related to holding valued social roles, as bloggers discussed examples of individuals who achieved great success or hold great promise. This approach was identified 104 times and 46 of those posts related to bloggers asserting their personal perspective. This approach also demonstrates the importance Deaf people place on looking to others in the community as resources. For a group labeled disabled by the dominant society, it may be particularly important for members to read about and write about their own community as talented and capable, particularly without the tone of “overcoming great odds” (i.e. exceeding expectations).
4. Public relations (PR). The fourth approach to empowerment pertained to influencing general society’s view of the Deaf community and D/deaf people. This category occurred least frequently, with a total of 30 posts identified as using this approach. Many of these posts discussed the capabilities of D/deaf people (in a context of deserving equal treatment rather than being held up as a valued member) and aimed to increase hearing people’s understanding of D/deaf people’s experiences.

These posts touched on approaches akin to public relations, giving examples of how to improve the portrayal of the community to the larger society. Some posts showed published newspaper articles explaining aspects of deaf life to the general public. This category appeared to manifest in part to combat stereotypes of deaf people, for example that they cannot be good parents, play sports or have professional careers. In addition, one blogger created an online campaign to convey through a highly collaborative video the need for D/deaf people to have equal access to communication, called CAN, or Communication Access Now. This video may have served to rally D/deaf people but was intended for hearing people to view.

Some posts also expressed the importance of making community discussions accessible to the hearing world, in particular regarding topics impacting deaf children. For example, one blogger stated that hearing parents have little access to the Deaf community’s perspective of auditory brain implants and while signed video weblogs may be preferred by many Deaf people, they will not be consumed by hearing people who could benefit from the information. This concern for how to be a resource for the hearing parents of deaf children was not rare and is a potentially unique way that one community desires to connect with another.
5. Disquiet. Disquiet was the fifth and final category and was identified 104 times, indicating its significance. Although the term empowerment may suggest a person or group is not facing injustices, it is this element that is an intrinsic part of the empowerment process. In light of this and the current societal views of deafness, it should not be surprising that a substantial amount of the posts expressed anger over mistreatment and injustices and discussed ways to respond to unacceptable situations. This category corresponds to Hur’s second (conscientizing) and third (mobilizing) stages of empowerment. In this category general injustices are highlighted and instances in which D/deaf people are not treated equally to hearing people are discussed.

Regarding a visit to her eye doctor who refused to provide an interpreter, Jeannette Johnson said, “… I want to be able to make appointments with my doctors and have equal communication without fighting for my damned rights for over a year! Hearing people do not have to put up with this crap!”

Finally, these posts display examples of mobilizing collective action by encouraging reader’s participation in various types of protest. Most protests centered around the rights of D/deaf people and their families and the desire for improvements in schools.

Deafness and Deaf Cultural Perspectives

This study provides empirical evidence of the nature of Deaf culture. Although these nine bloggers do not represent all of Deaf culture, through coding it is clear their posts do support Deaf cultural perspectives proposed in previous literature as well as five perspectives not explicitly examined in pervious literature. Deaf cultural perspectives occurred in nearly one third of all posts. Additionally, 88% of the posts were related to deafness, indicating the salience of this experience in the lives of Deaf people. While this
study was designed to address empowerment in the context of Deaf culture rather than
the relationship between Deaf cultural perspectives and empowerment, the relationship
between some perspectives to empowerment merit comment.

**ASL.** The most frequently identified perspective was the value of American Sign
Language, mentioned in 12% of the posts. The high prevalence of this perspective may
be the result of both the deep human need for effective communication and the symbolic
importance of the language in legitimating the culture. The appreciation for this language
is clear in comments such as, “Communication between parent and child, or between any
two people, is just too vital to be embroiled in communication methodology. The simple
truth is this: if you want fluent communication and a meaningful exchange of ideas,
emotions, thoughts and love with your child, sign it” (Fookem and Bug, April, 2007).

**Pride.** It was expected that the perspective of pride in deafness would be
frequently identified as the sample’s bloggers were involved with their community,
identified as culturally Deaf and this perspective has been identified in previous
literature. However, only six posts were identified that explicitly mentioned being proud
of ones’ Deaf identity or community membership. One explanation for this is that these
bloggers have long ago internalized their pride and it is their actions rather than further
discussion of this pride that are the current manifestation of their affiliation. Notably, in
the posts used in this sample, pride was not associated with empowerment (only one of
the six posts identified with this perspective was empowerment-relevant).

**Equality.** The perspective that D/deaf people should receive equal treatment as
hearing people was strongly associated with empowerment. This Deaf cultural
perspective of equality was identified in 6% of the total posts, and mentioned at least
once in seven of the eight blogs. This Deaf cultural perspective was predominantly identified in posts that were empowerment-relevant; indeed, only four of the 24 instances of this code were identified in posts not relevant to empowerment. This connection between the cultural perspective that D/deaf should be treated equally with hearing and expressions of empowerment is not surprising. This perspective may be a rallying point for empowering the community since it deals with an unjust lack of power. It is after all inequality and lack of power that has driven other civil rights movements.

Perspectives Generated with Deaf Coder

Stories. Discussions between the Deaf coder and primary investigator generated four Deaf cultural perspectives. First, the cultural approach of using stories to communicate. The value of story telling was identified in only 1% of the posts. As this perspective was identified in previous literature as well as by the study’s Deaf coder, it may be the case that personal written communication (e.g. blogs) is not a modality as conducive to communicating through stories, as is live interaction. Much of storytelling in the Deaf community involves the animation inherent in American Sign Language. It is possible that a study of video weblogs would produce a higher percentage of instances of employing storytelling for communication.

Humor. The second perspective added was that of communicating through humor, which had also been previously documented (see Bienvenu, 1989 and Bouchauveau, 1994). Beyond communicating current events and interests, some bloggers had an eye toward entertaining their readers. Seven percent of the posts were given the joking code, supporting the importance of humor in Deaf culture. Again, this code may be even more
frequent in a different communication modality. It is notable that no posts identified as evidencing this Deaf cultural perspective evidenced empowerment.

**Weak English.** The third perspective added was the view that D/deaf people have weak English language skills. This code was identified in 11 (3%) of the posts. Seven of these 11 posts assigned this perspective were empowerment relevant. These posts demonstrate the role of DeafBlogLand as an information resource. These posts discuss tools to improve English skills, how to succeed without strong English skills, and present concerns over how the law treats people with weak English skills.

**Socializing with members.** Finally, discussions with the Deaf coder generated the perspective of valuing socializing with others in the Deaf community. This code was identified in 1% of the posts. It is surprising that this code was not more prevalent considering these blogs were written by active members of the Deaf community and the social context of these blogs as locations for the community to communicate. However, as the majority of socializing opportunities involve a common gathering space and these blogs are written for consumption across the nation (if not the world) it may be the case that local gatherings were not mentioned since it would not be useful for the audience.

**Supporting members.** One final emergent code, supporting members, was identified by the primary investigator and approved by the Deaf coder. This code was identified in 10 (2%) of the total posts and was associated with empowerment posts in nine out of the 10 posts. These posts encouraged readers to look to DeafBlogLand for support from the larger community and to support others by creating their own v/blog, discussed the importance of supporting Deaf organizations and Gallaudet University,
solicited funding for the production of a deaf focused film and urged readers to be more inclusive and supportive when drawing the boundaries of the Deaf community.

Culture and Empowerment

This study’s findings suggest a relationship between empowerment and culture as bridged by community involvement. For Deaf people, recognition of their culture may create a foundation for community affiliation, which provides a group to advocate for and raise up through individual and collaborative efforts. In a review of the literature, Fetterson (2002) found that community building was a vital element of community level empowerment. Thus, it is likely that the strength of the Deaf community could be aiding these bloggers and other active members in their work toward positive change for their community. Furthermore, the presence of certain Deaf cultural perspectives, such as equality with hearing people, may be important to this sense of empowerment as it creates cultural support for action.

Finally, this sense of community created through a common culture may be very important for Deaf people because of the protective resources it can provide against a mainstream view of deafness as a disability and the discrimination and oppression that comes with that. Deaf culture allows Deaf people to conceptualize deafness as a different way of being in the world that is shared by a group of others with similar experiences, rather than conceptualizing of deafness as a disability. This positive view of self and community may be another catalyst in empowerment work taken on by members. Supporting this is research by Rose and Kiger (1995) who found that a self-image that included membership in the Deaf community was a key ingredient for taking political action for the community.
Community Connections

As previously mentioned, there is evidence of readers connecting to these blogs. First, it was common for readers to provide evidence of reading posts by leaving comments on a post. Second, DeafRead’s data shows that some of these blogs are well trafficked. Since DeafRead does not track the demographics of blog readers it cannot be certain that the vast majority of the readership of these blogs is D/deaf people, however, it is a reasonable assumption since posts hosted by DeafRead are specifically relevant to D/deaf readers. Therefore, we can say with some confidence that a good deal of D/deaf blog readers have a connection to these blogs, and have the potential to be impacted by content on these blogs.

In addition to connections with readers, each of these eight blogs, which were chosen without regard to affiliation from a sample of 372 blogs, referenced at least one other blog included in the study and all but one was referenced by at least one other blog in the study. These were unexpected connections and ones that suggest a tight well-networked community or possibly well known individuals within that community. Furthermore, these connections suggest that there is a sense of collective belonging in the Deaf community. This term refers to the concept of identification with similar others (Gutierrez, 1990 as cited in Hur, 2006). While it has been called by different names, this concept has been cited numerous times as a component of community level empowerment. It may be the case that this sense of belonging along with Deaf cultural perspectives creates a strong foundation for empowerment.
Topic Overlap

Although these bloggers may have never met one another, some of their interests overlap because of their involvement in the Deaf community. These topics of overlap serve to inform research of what constitute some important themes in the Deaf community. The findings support previous literature on Deaf culture, which suggest that although these topics represent the views of Deaf individuals over only a brief three-month period, their themes may be present over far greater time spans.

The topic of greatest overlap concerned Gallaudet University. As a center for Deaf culture, language and development, it should not be surprising that six of the eight bloggers posted about the university, nor that there were six topics of discussion relating to Gallaudet (with an average of 3.3 blogs addressing each of these topics).

Another topic of long-time import is language rights and the resources available to parents of deaf children. One topic covered by three blogs was a protest regarding possible legislation in Canada about prohibiting the teaching of sign language to children who receive cochlear implants. These blogs provide evidence in support of previous literature of the importance of sign language through the frequent mention of it. Beyond the comments on the language, the content of those comments demonstrates the value placed on the language, with members citing the importance of protesting to protect it and publically defending its legitimacy and worth. In the case of this topic, the Canadian protest, the expressed concern was not only for the protection of a signed language but for the right of parents to decide how to raise their deaf children. This more general theme of the need to provide good education and support to parents of deaf children as well as to Deaf parents was raised by multiple bloggers.
The dissatisfaction with formal education of D/deaf children was another topic discussed on two blogs when citing the SWCID protest (as well as when discussing the academic probation of Gallaudet University). It is possible that the disadvantages faced by D/deaf people in the hearing world, combined with the passing down of Deaf culture in schools creates for a greater involvement in not only one’s own alma mater, but of all schools serving D/deaf children, in order that these children receive the best possible start. Similarly, two bloggers posted about the need for D/deaf people to improve their English vocabulary and the role of blogs in this aim.

Three topics illustrated a theme of the need to protect the community and its members from potential injustice. A topic cited in five of the eight blogs discussed the justice system’s treatment of a Deaf woman on trial for murder. Protection of her rights and fair treatment, particularly in communication, were the focus of multiple concerns. Three bloggers wrote about a Deaf mentally disabled man who had gone missing. Two bloggers also reported on the arrest and grave mistreatment of a deaf girl who had called the police for help.

As with the involvement in D/deaf schools, there is the suggestion in these posts about Wright’s trial, the girl’s arrest and the search for the missing Deaf man that Deaf must look out for themselves and one another. There is a sense that if the community does not police the schools, the justice system, medical providers, employers, and so on, that the hearing world will not either and that the community will suffer for it. In this same vein, two bloggers posted about people’s rights regarding live interpreting versus a technology called video remote interpreting.
Sports appear from these blogs to be a popular topic for the community. Four of the eight blogs commented on sports related topics, with two bloggers discussing each of these topics. Sports may represent not only an area where D/deaf individuals can hold valued social roles (and even fame as demonstrated by Dummy Hoy, credited with creating baseball signals), but also an activity D/deaf can enjoy without the common barriers of communication found in the hearing world.

**Study Limitations**

Although results of the present study are intriguing, the research is limited in several important respects. The study examined the blog posts of a small number of individuals who are not necessarily representative of the diverse D/deaf community. Additionally, the bloggers do not represent collective groups, such as the National Association of the Deaf, who are involved with legislative action and the promotion of the rights of D/deaf Americans. The generalizability of present results to other individuals or groups is not clear.

Little is known about the demographics and backgrounds of these blog authors since this study limited the information to that provided on their weblog. It is possible that these bloggers have very similar backgrounds and are a skewed sample. It does appear that they are all Caucasian and between the ages of 20 and 50. Though it would be helpful to understand, this study cannot gauge the prevalence of activist members, those who are influenced by these members and those who are not. Additionally, this study looked at how members of the Deaf community are empowering other community members, a focus of inquiry that is not fully inclusive of those who do not identify as culturally Deaf. This study does not address the degree to which non-members
experience or approach empowerment, nor how this could be impacted by cultural identification.

This study sampled blogs from only one filtered feed aggregator chosen for its popularity and connection to many weblogs. However, other aggregators are emerging for the Deaf community. A more comprehensive study selecting from all available blogs and using less restrictive criteria may reveal different findings. For example, this study looked at blogs that had three or more posts each month for six months. This criterion excludes those bloggers who post frequently but not consistently, as well as newer blogs.

Both the brief time period and the modality of data used for this study may limit the findings since individuals may express themselves differently on weblogs than in other communication domains. This study looked at the degree to which Deaf people work to empower their community through weblogs alone. It may be that other modes of communication within the community foster different approaches to empowerment.

Since all data was naturalistic and created outside this study’s research questions, it is very possible that members of the Deaf community, even these nine bloggers, would share different thoughts on how they attempt to empower their community in addition to the results found here. Although this study examined both Deaf cultural perspectives and empowerment, the cross-sectional nature of the research cannot support causal relationships between Deaf cultural perspectives and empowerment. The present study is simply an important first step in describing the ways that empowerment may manifest itself in the Deaf community.
Future Directions for Research

The study represents one of the first attempts to systematically examine empowerment in the Deaf community and opens the doors to many more research questions. Future studies could examine the differences between culturally Deaf and hard of hearing individuals’ approaches to empowerment. This type of research could illuminate the relationships between empowerment in non-members, their view of deafness (cultural, medical or other) and their view of self and similar others as compared to members. Such research could increase our understanding of the impact of cultural views on empowerment and its expression in individuals. Future longitudinal research may also be able to determine the effect of holding a culturally based positive view of self and community on experiences of empowerment.

Now that this study has provided evidence that empowerment approaches exist in the Deaf community with no external prompting (due to the study’s naturalistic approach), future research could collect richer and more focused data regarding how empowerment functions in this community. Ideally, this would be done with a more diverse and representative sample. For example, future studies could gather information through interviewing Deaf individuals about their thoughts and experiences of their own empowerment and their actions to empower others. This approach would better address the question raised by this study regarding whether the low rate of expression of personal level empowerment is representative of Deaf people’s lived experience.

Since this research focuses solely on communication via weblogs, future research could examine the empowerment approaches found in other areas such as: personal conversation, club meetings, plays, poems, books, speeches, group gatherings,
classrooms, and even in increasingly popular video weblogs (vlogs). This type of data could allow for comparisons and determine whether weblog communication is a reasonable reflection of the empowerment approaches used by the community. Additionally, future research could compare the developmental stages of community level empowerment as represented in advocacy groups such as the National Association of the Deaf to the individual stages represented in this study.

**Implications and Conclusions**

Groups are defined by the society surrounding them. Therefore, changes in cultural views can dramatically change the perceptions of minority groups. Although the traces of history are indelible, gay and lesbian groups in the United States have gone from being viewed as people with a treatable disability to being seen as a minority group deserving civil rights. Although the dominant culture currently views Deaf people as disabled, Deaf people themselves have a different story to tell and through the world’s increased access to communication through the Internet, the mainstream may be more able to hear this alternative perspective.

The Internet has enabled greater numbers of people to get their ideas out to greater numbers of people. This study aimed to take advantage of this condition to examine the perspectives and contributions of Deaf authors of weblogs in their own voice. Findings support previous research concluding that the Internet can serve as an empowering resource (Bharat, Merkel & Bishop 2004). Indeed, the Internet may be the exact tool the Deaf community in particular needs to empower itself. It allows for complete access to communication. Thanks to technology and resources such as schools and libraries, nearly anyone can participate and despite being separated by geographical
distance, sites like DeafRead put visitors in instant touch with the Deaf community the world over. Furthermore, there is the possibility that hearing people may connect to this network as well, allowing for increased communication between Deaf and hearing communities.

Research on the Deaf community and its perspectives can increase general awareness about this group. This study suggests that the Deaf community of the United States is actively involved in improving its own status, increasing its power and working toward social justice for the community. Furthermore, it provides evidence that in regard to many current issues the community is in the beginning stages of empowerment work, informing members of problems and discussing possible approaches to those problems. This research and future research may help increase the understanding of the Deaf community as an empowering force and may expand views of how D/deaf people may see themselves and their group. This information allows hearing people to be more informed and respectful of a culture that may otherwise be completely unfamiliar. This information allows those interested in working with the Deaf community more insight into the existence and manifestations of empowerment and its ties to cultural perspectives.

Cohen’s (2001) research found that D/deaf clients’ experience of therapy was different from that of hearing people in ways that can inform therapists’ approaches to D/deaf clients. This current research supports assertions of previous literature on Deaf cultural perspectives, providing empirical evidence for many of these perspectives. Therapy, and other areas such as education, with Deaf clients may benefit from an understanding of these perspectives. This research also informs therapists about
approaches to empowerment currently being used by the Deaf community. Employing these approaches allows for a more culturally appropriate, and therefore more ethical, treatment of Deaf clients.

It is beneficial to understand how marginalized groups can have pride, a positive sense of self, community support and true appreciation for their differences. When people are told they are less than, what does it take to generate and maintain feelings of power and pride? Interestingly, when much research on empowerment focuses on how to empower a group from the outside, the Deaf community is an example of how a community can empower itself from the inside without the direction of professionals. This study represents a first attempt at understanding ways in which the Deaf community empowers itself through members and a shared sense of a valued culture. Hopefully this research will contribute to an ongoing dialogue about issues of empowerment, culture, and access for individuals who are often overlooked by society.
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Deaf Empowerment


Appendix A

Coding Blog Posts: Example One

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Example 1</th>
<th>“Good news for Deaf vloggers! YouTube has made improvements and is providing more space for video files…”</th>
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<td>D</td>
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<tr>
<td>Step 1B</td>
<td>Empowerment content</td>
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<td>NoE</td>
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<td>Step 2</td>
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<td>Step 3A</td>
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<td>(n/a)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 3B</td>
<td>Community Empowerment</td>
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<td>(n/a)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Step 4</td>
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Appendix B

Coding Blog Posts: Example Two

Example 2: “Growing up I didn’t know any deaf people and I felt alone most of the time. Finally in 7th grade I met my teacher Mrs. Martin and she knew sign and had a deaf husband. They brought me to my first deaf picnic and my whole world changed, a whole group of people signing, and they were deaf like me and they had families and jobs and they were friends! I wish all deaf people could have that feeling of coming home.”

<table>
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<th>Coding Steps</th>
<th>Coding Category</th>
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<td>Yes</td>
<td>PE-VSR (valued social roles)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Step 3B</td>
<td>Community Empowerment</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>CE-Collective (bettering the collective)</td>
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