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## Dinner Table Syndrome: A Phenomenological Study of Deaf Individuals' Experiences with Inaccessible Communication

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### Abstract

Conversations at the dinner table typically involve reciprocal and contingent turn-taking. This context typically includes multiple exchanges between family members, providing opportunities for rich conversations and opportunities for incidental learning. Deaf individuals who live in hearing non-signing homes often miss out on these exchanges, as typically hearing individuals use turn-taking rules that differ from those commonly used by deaf individuals. Hearing individuals' turn-taking rules include use of auditory cues to get a turn and to cue others when a new speaker is beginning a turn. Given these mechanisms, hearing individuals frequently interrupt each other—even if they are signing. When deaf individuals attempt to obtain a turn, they are frequently lost in the ongoing dialogue. This experience, wherein deaf individuals are excluded from the flow of conversations at mealtime, is known as the dinner table syndrome. This study documents deaf adults' retrospective experiences with dinner table syndrome growing up. Personal interviews and a focus group were used to explore how deaf adults experienced conversations during family dinner gatherings. A phenomenological approach was used for analysis. Developed themes include: Missing out on Communication and Language with Hearing Family Members, Access to Current News and Events, Conversational Belonging and Sense of Exclusion within the Family, and the Realization of Missing Out on Conversations. These themes revealed the essence of Loved, yet Disconnected. Results of this qualitative research study can help identify what happens when participants miss cues during dinner table conversations, leaving them out of the conversation.

### Keywords

Deaf, Qualitative Research, Phenomenological Study, Communication, Missing Out, Belonging

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## **Dinner Table Syndrome: A Phenomenological Study of Deaf Individuals' Experiences with Inaccessible Communication**

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*Conversations at the dinner table typically involve reciprocal and contingent turn-taking. This context typically includes multiple exchanges between family members, providing opportunities for rich conversations and opportunities for incidental learning. Deaf individuals who live in hearing non-signing homes often miss out on these exchanges, as typically hearing individuals use turn-taking rules that differ from those commonly used by deaf individuals. Hearing individuals' turn-taking rules include use of auditory cues to get a turn and to cue others when a new speaker is beginning a turn. Given these mechanisms, hearing individuals frequently interrupt each other—even if they are signing. When deaf individuals attempt to obtain a turn, they are frequently lost in the ongoing dialogue. This experience, wherein deaf individuals are excluded from the flow of conversations at mealtime, is known as the dinner table syndrome. This study documents deaf adults' retrospective experiences with dinner table syndrome growing up. Personal interviews and a focus group were used to explore how deaf adults experienced conversations during family dinner gatherings. A phenomenological approach was used for analysis. Developed themes include: Missing out on Communication and Language with Hearing Family Members, Access to Current News and Events, Conversational Belonging and Sense of Exclusion within the Family, and the Realization of Missing Out on Conversations. These themes revealed the essence of Loved, yet Disconnected. Results of this qualitative research study can help identify what happens when participants miss cues during dinner table conversations, leaving them out of the conversation. Keywords: Deaf, Qualitative Research, Phenomenological Study, Communication, Missing Out, Belonging*

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### **Inaccessible Communication at Home: A Phenomenological Study of Deaf People**

Many people who are deaf<sup>1</sup> have experienced watching their family members communicate with each other while they are unable to participate in or understand the conversation. This scenario in which deaf members are excluded from family conversations and often feel isolated as a result has been termed “dinner table syndrome.” During these conversations, deaf individuals frequently express difficulty deciphering these rapid conversations (Hauser, O’Hearn, McKee, Steider, & Thew, 2010). Therefore, deaf people are not getting the same amount of contingent dialogic conversation as the rest of their family members. This phenomenon is not only something that happens during dinner time; rather, it happens in many situations, such as riding in the car, playing on the playground, school time conversations, as well as in other instances where a deaf individual interacts with a group of hearing people. Therefore, the “dinner table syndrome” is a metaphor for all of the

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<sup>1</sup> This paper uses the word “deaf” in two ways. Following the conventions of Woodward (1972), deaf is used for those who have a diagnosis of being deaf while capitalized “Deaf” is used for those that consider themselves to be members of the Deaf community and a member of Deaf culture.

conversations that are not completely accessible when deaf people are in situations with hearing groups. The lack of accessibility is related to dialogic rules that differ between Deaf and hearing conversations.

Dialogue for hearing people focuses on the use of aural and oral communication (Scheetz, 2012). Here, one relies on switching attention based on noting who is speaking. Therefore, the tendency is to bounce back and forth between who is talking, with hearing people often talking over each other during the conversation. However, this rapid turn taking, through identifying the speaker by the sound of their voice, frequently results in deaf individuals being unable to follow the flow of the conversation. By the time the deaf individual has identified the speaker, he or she has likely missed what was said. Frequently, to avoid having to ask for clarification or to inform other family members that they did not follow the flow of conversation, the deaf child does not participate in the conversation (Bodner-Johnson, 1991). Rather, they develop strategies to avoid having to ask for clarification. Informal reports from deaf adults about the strategies they used as children to avoid having to ask for clarification include reading at the table, laughing when others do to make it appear that they understand, or asking to be excused early from the table (Lewis, 2016). These strategies avoid awkwardness in conversations but leave the deaf child unaware of many important discussions, leading to their isolation.

To reduce deaf children's isolation, families can adopt or adapt the conversational turn taking strategies used within native signing families that prevent the conversational overlap typical of hearing culture. In signing, rules for turn taking, getting attention and repairing communication breakdowns are visual in nature (Coates & Sutton-Spence, 2001). Sign dialogic rules involve only one person having the floor at a time and ceding the floor upon being visually requested to (e.g., via hand raising or waiving). In larger groups, there are rules to prioritize who will have the floor as well as mechanisms for helping all members shift visual attention. These practices, indigenous to sign environments, can be exploited in mixed deaf and hearing interactions as well (Laurent Clerc National Deaf Education Center, n.d.).

Mealtime should be an opportunity to have rich conversations between family members in order to exchange ideas, express emotions, or ask questions. Communication among family members should be open and equal, with everyone participating. Having contingent and reciprocal discourse between family members stimulates language and intellectual growth for the deaf child, which leads to their independence (Marschark, Schick, & Spencer, 2006). When there is a lack of contingent and reciprocal dialogue due to these differences in dialogic strategies between family members, there is a lack of incidental learning because the deaf child is not able to listen in on conversations (Hauser et al., 2010). Incidental learning can happen by overhearing conversations, typically unavoidable for hearing individuals. However, for deaf people, incidental learning needs to involve overseeing a conversation (Calderon & Greenberg, 2011). An important time for this type of incidental learning is during dinner time, when family members discuss all manner of topics, from local or international news, to what they did at work/school, or what events transpired during the day (Meadow-Orlans, Spencer, Erting, & Marschark, 2000). Deaf individuals who have early and complete access to language, independent of the modality used (spoken and/or signed language), develop world knowledge much like hearing individuals (Hintermair, 2015; Marschark, 2007). However, as 95% of deaf children are born to hearing parents (Mitchell & Karchmer, 2004), the majority of deaf children do not experience this type of language rich environment. Missing parts of the conversation limits incidental learning as well as learning of appropriate social norms following corrective feedback from parents; these gaps impact socio-emotional growth as well as vocabulary development and world knowledge (Convertino, Borgna, Marschark, & Durkin, 2014).

The fluency of communication and language in the deaf child's family should be balanced between all members so that all can understand each other and participate in

contingent and reciprocal dialogues (Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2015; Quigley & Kretschmer, 1982). Following and expanding on the deaf child's interests and comments will build their language skills and provide them world knowledge (Hauser et al., 2010). Deaf children are empowered as communicators when they are socialized as conversational participants with others (McKee, Johnson, & Marbury, 1991) and, therefore, can acquire more general knowledge from these interactions. However, recall that the rules for communication within deaf and hearing cultures are different, leading to conflicts in mixed hearing and deaf groups (Laurent Clerc National Deaf Education Center, n.d.). This study fills in the gap in understanding that deaf individuals do experience this phenomenon and speculates how missing out on conversations affects the lives of deaf individuals.

The present study utilized a qualitative method of inquiry to uncover the lived-experiences of the "dinner table syndrome" as it is experienced by deaf individuals born to hearing families. The purpose was to explore the retrospective experiences of deaf individuals during family dinner conversations. This study specifically focused on deaf people's feelings, opinions, and attitudes during family events. This study sought to uncover how deaf signers follow dinner conversations when they are the lone deaf participant in a hearing family.

I selected phenomenology for this qualitative research because the primary goal was to reveal the full meaning of the participants' experiences as shared in their own words (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Hermeneutic phenomenology as described by van Manen (1990, 2016) is oriented toward the lived experience of individuals and interpreting the documentation or content of life. Phenomenological research begins with wonder at what gives itself and how something gives itself. It can only be pursued while surrendering to a state of wonder. A phenomenological question explores what is given in moments of prereflective-prepredicative experiences as we live through them. Phenomenology aims to grasp the exclusively singular aspects (identity/essence/otherness) of a phenomenon or event. In this study, the author brought to light and reflected on the lived meaning of the basic retrospective experiences of deaf individuals during family conversational events.

### **Author's Personal Experience**

I have often missed out on conversations in events with my family members. Though I only recently learned the term "dinner table syndrome," I have known the phenomenon all my life. I was intrigued by the definition and wanted to know more about it. It was not until then that I started analyzing the meaning and how it pertained to me. I had the same experience of missing information during conversations—trying to fill in the gaps so that it would make sense to me.

When I think of my family getting together for events, I often think of our gatherings during the holidays. We followed the dialogical rules in hearing conversations, everyone pretty much spoke when they had something to say, which meant that conversations between my family members often overlapped. It was often difficult for me to understand what was being said. I would often say, "What?" as I would miss what one person said because I was focusing on another person who was speaking at that moment. I did not have any technological devices (such as cellphones, portable gaming systems, laptops) that would have aided communication when I was younger. Even if those were available, I would not have been permitted to bring them to the table. We were expected to sit and eat properly and have conversations about our daily lives or what was happening in the world.

Before I started teaching at a school for the Deaf, I taught life skills in a public school classroom. This job required me to communicate using spoken language with my students as well as with my assistants. My supervisor's evaluation of me was not positive, however, and this experience of being negatively evaluated inspired me to look for a job within a more fitting

ecology. Shortly thereafter, I decided to apply for a teaching position at a school for the Deaf. My position at this school not only provided me positive self-esteem as a teacher, but I also found my Deaf identity. Being immersed in an environment where ASL was the primary mode of communication, I began to develop my Deaf identity.

Of course, finding my Deaf identity was not always easy. It was more difficult to find this identity having grown up mainstreamed all my life. However, I was welcomed into the Deaf world by those I met and worked with at the school for the Deaf. I had a sense of belonging that came from interacting with other deaf people. I found a matching ecology and learned that occupying a Deaf space was easier than passing for hearing (Harmon, 2013). This experience and the encouragement of the school's principal inspired me to pursue a doctoral degree in Deaf Studies and Deaf Education at Lamar University. Here I continue to learn more about being Deaf and to further embrace my Deaf identity.

I was mainstreamed in public school all my life. Sometimes, I continue to live my life as an oral deaf person who passes as hearing in the hearing world. Like many other deaf and hard of hearing individuals, I have had my share of struggles with missing out on conversations. My parents did not have prior experience with deafness, and they learned about it through the medical model of disability. My parents, like most parents of deaf and hard of hearing children, felt concerned and wanted what was best for me.

While my story is obviously uniquely mine, it is by no means uncommon. Most deaf people recount having experienced "dinner table syndrome" at some point. I know that my family and others like it do not intentionally exclude their deaf members from conversations. My intention, nonetheless, is to draw attention to the exclusion and isolation that often occur, no matter how inadvertent.

## Method

### Participants

The Institutional Review Board of Lamar University approved all procedures. Convenience sampling was used to recruit all participants. Of the six participants in this study, three graduated from a K-12 school for the Deaf in the southwest of the United States. The other three graduated from a K-12 mainstream program within the same location. The K-12 mainstreamed participants were recruited in three ways—by tapping the author's deaf community network, by posting a notice on a social media resource page for deaf individuals, and by asking participants directly. Participants from the school for the Deaf were first recruited with the assistance of former teachers and friends, and then via snowball recruiting wherein the original Deaf school participants recommend others.

Six self-identified Deaf participants were involved in this phenomenological study. There were four females and two males; two were Latinx, two were African American, and two were Caucasian. The ages of the participants ranged from 18 to 30. Three of the participants attended a school for the Deaf, and the other three attended a mainstream program. All six of the participants communicated primarily in ASL. All of the participants had hearing caretakers. There is a range of modalities that is used in the home setting: two participants used spoken English; three used sign and speech simultaneously; and one used idiosyncratic home signs with their family members. Two participants used a cochlear implant; one used hearing aids; and the other three participants did not use hearing devices. To assure the confidentiality of the participants, they were given pseudonyms (see Table 1): Oliver, Peyton, Luke, Carmen, Ria and Shelby.

**Table 1.** Participant Characteristics

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Age Range</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Self-Identification</b>	<b>Ethnicity</b>	<b>School</b>
Oliver	24-26	Male	Deaf	African American	Mainstreamed
Peyton	21-23	Female	Deaf	African American	Mainstreamed
Luke	24-26	Male	Deaf	Caucasian	Mainstreamed
Carmen	18-20	Female	Deaf	Latinx	School for the Deaf
Ria	21-23	Female	Deaf	Latinx	School for the Deaf
Shelby	27-30	Female	Deaf	Caucasian	School for the Deaf

## Materials and Procedures

Participants qualified for this study if they were prelingually deaf or hard of hearing, between the ages of 18 and 30, used ASL as their primary language, and had hearing family members. All participants completed the demographic communication survey including questions about hearing status, gender, age, level of education, and communication modality for participants and their family members. Participants were mailed a consent form to sign and return. They were then scheduled to meet one-on-one with the author, who is Deaf and a fluent ASL signer. Videoconferencing software, familiar to deaf individuals, most of whom use it on a daily basis, was used. Based on the participants' stories, I wrote a description of the essence of the phenomenon, noting themes. Then, after the initial 1-hour individual interview, a subsample of four participants was invited back for a 1-hour focus group. At this point, saturation was reached as no new themes were identified in the focus group; rather, interview themes were repeated. Participants were paid a \$5 Amazon gift card for the one-on-one interview and another \$5 Amazon gift card for the focus group.

At the beginning of each individual interview, participants were reminded about their rights and their consent was confirmed. The interviews took place via video conference through these platforms: appear.in, videophone software or Facebook messenger in both one-on-one interviews and the focus group. The author used semi-structured interview questions (see Table 2). Participants were informed that there were no right or wrong answers, that they should feel comfortable with their answers and they could stop the interview at any time. Interviews were recorded using QuickTime Player for data collection. Once participants understood and agreed with the setting and protocol, the interviewer made sure that they could see each other comfortably online. Near the end of each one-on-one interview, participants were invited to ask lingering questions or express remaining concerns. No participant did.

**Table 2.** Semi-structured Interview Questions

1. Do you have any other deaf/hard of hearing relatives (excluding relatives' loss of hearing due to old age)?
2. Do any of your relatives use sign language?
3. How often do your family members get together?

- 
4. What were the rules during the event with your family?
    - A. Were you allowed to converse at the dinner table?
    - B. Were you allowed to bring books or have any technical devices at the table?
  5. What was your most memorable event with your family?
    - A. How did you communicate with your family members?
    - B. Describe your feelings and thoughts about how you communicated with family members.
  6. If you missed out on the conversations, what do you do?
    - A. Did you have a moderator who would assist with any missed conversations? Explain.
  7. If you could chat with hearing parents that have a deaf child, what would you tell them? What advice would you give?
    - A. What advice would you give to hearing parents NOT to do?
    - B. If you were to teach parents with a new deaf baby, what would you suggest for communication to be successful?
- 

After the one-on-one interviews were completed, four out of the six participants gathered for a focus group using ASL. Because of the emergent and open-ended nature of focus groups, the purpose of this study was to provide opportunities for fluid discussions during the focus group and thick descriptions of personal experiences and interpretations (Charmaz & Belgrave, 2012). During the focus group, three of the participants were in the room with the author and one joined by video conferencing. The video conferencing software recorded the conversations using ASL, without sound. After the focus group was concluded, the author did a fifteen minute follow up interview of the participants to see if they had additional information they wanted to share. If the participant had felt nervous or was not ready to share or comment during the one-on-one interview or during the focus group, this follow-up gave them the opportunity to express their thoughts, feelings and feedback or to offer clarity or insight about the interpretation of data. The follow up interview also allowed me, as the researcher, to validate the responses given by the participants.

During the consent process, participants were informed in ASL, that their video-recording would be kept safely on a USB drive and locked in a storage space. The information on the USB was destroyed immediately after the study was completed. The interview and focus group video-recordings were translated from ASL to written English by the author. To ensure reliability of the interview translations from ASL to English, member checking was utilized where copies of each of the translations were provided to the six participants to check for reliability and to ensure accurate understanding and portrayal of the participants' stories. The findings of this research were shared with the participants.

## Results

Findings are presented through thick, rich description to which my interpretations add meaning and context. First, the essence of the interviews will be discussed followed by the details that went into making up that essence. The overall essence was labeled Loved, yet Disconnected. This overarching view was then followed up with each participant's experiences with their families and the thoughts and feelings those experiences engendered. Four broad themes were identified through comparing and contrasting the transcripts from the interviews and the focus group. These themes included Missing out on Communication and Language with Hearing Family Members, Access to Current News and Events, Conversational Belonging and Sense of Exclusion within the Family, and the Realization of "Missing Out" (missing



information) on Conversations. Each of these themes is discussed after the discussion of the essence.

**The Essence—Loved, yet Disconnected.** Participants expressed an understanding that their families tried to include them in conversations and family events. However, several of the participants discussed feeling disconnected from their family, or not feeling a sense of belonging at home. If they spent time around non-fluent or non-signing people, the communication was either stifled or limited. They would try not to put themselves into situations where they would have to socialize with non-signers or allow others to pressure them into socializing with those who were unable to communicate effectively with ASL. Some of their parents signed, but most of their signing was basic and unable to support deep discussions. One mother was an interpreter, but for whatever reason, choose not to sign at home. This state of affairs led the participants to feel that they were undervalued when they were in communicative interactions that were partly or totally inaccessible. They found that socializing with other people who are signers enhanced the quality of their lives and gave them a stronger sense of belonging.

This sense of disconnection was discovered earlier by those who attended residential schools for the deaf. Looking back, these participants noticed that they had to shift their language modes from school to home. The bus ride home was a struggle, leading to a desire to stay in a fully accessible environment where they could understand everything. This bus ride was taking them from a place where they had full language access and communication with their teachers and peers to their homes, where they would have to simplify their language for non-fluent or non-signers to understand. At their homes, they tended to struggle to be understood or to understand what was going on in conversations around them. They expressed anger at and misery about the situation, which they felt was out of their control. Home was frequently a place where they were bored and anxious to leave to return to their new “home,” which included accessible communication.

Deaf participants who attended mainstreamed programs arrived at this feeling of being valued and loved, yet disconnected more than the residential school participants. These participants explained that they felt that they were consistently out of step socially; they frequently did not understand jokes and often lagged in understanding what was happening within their environments. They noted that when conversations moved on, it left them with a limited or complete lack of understanding of what was happening social conversations.

The three participants from the mainstream program had never experienced being immersed in a deaf environment until they attended the homecoming football game at the state school for the deaf. They were in awe of ASL being everywhere. Currently, they “hang out” in the department that includes deaf faculty and a signing environment. This area is a sanctuary in a hearing university, where they feel most comfortable and able to have full inclusion by using a language that is visually accessible. They reported that this department was a place where they were included and in tune with everyone, as they shared a language, a common culture, and self-identify as a group.

Most deaf people greatly enjoy being in the company of other deaf people and actively seek ways to connect. The three participants who were mainstreamed now have a safe haven to go to if they feel the need to escape from the hearing world. This scenario is similar to their upbringing in public schools. Most of the mainstreamed participants had an opportunity to reconvene in a classroom full of deaf and hard of hearing students at the end of the school day. Sometimes, the rule of saying goodbye went out the window. This behavior may seem unusual in hearing culture; however, Deaf culture highly values being interconnected with all of its members (Padden & Humphries, 1988). Next is a discussion of the five themes that supported the development of the essence just discussed.

### **Missing out on Communication and Language with Hearing Family Members.**

Participants discussed communication within their family. A mixture of language modes was used in the home, including spoken language, gestures, idiosyncratic home signs, and ASL. Each participant identified the communication mode used in their homes as well as whether and when their hearing families started learning to communicate using either ASL or a sign communication system. For those who attended mainstream schools, families relied on sign supported speech or spoken language when communicating with their deaf child. While Oliver and Peyton spoke English with their families, Luke's family used sign and speech simultaneously. For those participants who attended schools for the deaf, a spectrum of language modes was used. Modalities ranged from ASL (Carmen) to home signs (Shelby). Interestingly, because Ria's family had an early intervention professional who taught her family ASL, her mother became an interpreter but did not communicate through sign with Ria at home; rather she used spoken language. Ria explained this situation in the following way:

My mom learned (ASL) along with me. My family really had no choice but to learn to communicate with me. (Ria)

For some family gatherings, participants had mixed feelings as deaf adults. While they loved their family and loved seeing them, sometimes they quickly wanted to leave family get togethers because the events were socially awkward in terms of communication with their hearing families. Ria again commented:

I couldn't really understand some of the social cues; because I really couldn't understand the conversation. (Ria)

Although Ria had difficulty understanding some of the social cues (i.e., laughing at certain jokes or sarcasm), she was able to learn them outside her family conversations. However, she reported usually missing about three-fourths of the discussions that were going on at the table:

I watched TV while we were eating because I had difficulties following the conversations. (Ria)

Being the only deaf person in the entire family can be difficult when it comes to communication, especially at the dinner table. Family members tend to bounce back and forth between who is talking. They talk over each other resulting in the participants feeling lost. Most of their time is spent trying to figure out what is going on if they do not have a common language with their family. Some participants felt that if they could not really understand the conversation, they would not be as interested and not participate in the conversation at all. Carmen, Ria, Shelby, and Luke stated that when it was time to eat, they were usually the first to finish and leave the table. A comment from Carmen included:

I eat fast and leave as soon as I can. I probably eat the fastest in my family. (Carmen)

Even though Carmen's family all signed to her, her family would exclude her when they used their voices at the table, stating:

Dinner conversations aren't always the greatest. I usually ask what is going on. I know that they don't always feel like interpreting for me. (Carmen)

Luke was unable to escape from the dinner table because his family ate out at restaurants most of the time. He used a different form of escape, that of technology:

If I didn't have my phone, I couldn't leave the table and escape. I ended up being stuck at the table watching everyone's conversations. (Luke)

The participants clearly expressed the use of different modes of communication at home. Some participants expressed a lack of understanding about social cues. Pragmatic language skills are the most abstract and complex components of spoken language. A young deaf adolescent may have difficulty even if they have age appropriate vocabulary and syntax skills. They may not yet have learned how to use these skills in a socially appropriate manner. Ria mentioned that she picked up social cues, especially sarcasm, from the Disney Channel, which she watched with captioning. In such ways, participants became aware of "social gaffes" and learned acceptable pragmatic behaviors.

To a person, participants reported that they would sit, smile, and nod like they understood everything that was being said, when in fact, they felt that they missed out on half of the conversation. For the participants who wanted to "escape," they simply "tuned out" to avoid having to admit that they were lost in the conversation. Interestingly, it is important to note that now as adults they have changed their language preference, and all feel more comfortable in a signing environment. This level of comfort was expressed in an anecdote by two participants. They stated that they felt more "at home" in the ASL/Deaf Education department at their college rather than with their non-signing college peers. One sees the impact of communication in establishing a level of comfort within discourse that unfortunately can separate deaf people from hearing individuals.

**Access to Current News and Events.** One of the reasons why the author focused on participants between the ages of 18 and 30 concerns today's technology. Studies show that people ages 18 to 30 years old use cell phones more than any other age groups (Smith, 2015). Therefore, the experiences of the younger generation differ due to the available technology that allows them to escape. Most deaf participants brought their phones to the dinner table. This technology provided access to information as well as an escape from conversations that were not accessible. In contrast, hearing individuals have an advantage and can access world knowledge from direct conversations in their home environment, which provides more context for later learning. Most of the deaf participants were not able to catch all of what was happening in the world, limiting their world knowledge. To compensate, they would use their phones to catch up on today's world events. Carmen's family did not allow any technology at the table due to wanting a family connection while eating. Given that her family limited technology, she used alternative strategies, stating:

As soon as I was finished eating. I would leave the table and then play on my phone. I think that is where I got some of my world news from. (Carmen)

Peyton, Oliver, Luke and Shelby's family did not mind having the phone at the table. Most said that they noticed that the rest of the family did not have their phone at the table. The participants assumed that they were allowed simply because they are deaf. Physically, the participants were at the dinner table with their families. However, their families did not engage them in conversation. Technology allowed more access to the world, but it also permitted the participants to escape an uncomfortable situation.

Most of the participants get their news from Facebook, daily news and Daily Moth (a Deaf Facebook vlog based on Deaf culture, hosted by Alex Abenchuchan, who delivers the top

news, Deaf news, and Deaf humor in ASL). Some of the participants stated that they sometimes watched the news on television. However, one downside to watching the news on television is that live captions tend to lag, be out of sync or be garbled. Wherever they are getting their world knowledge could be hit or miss, as noted by Peyton:

The captions being delayed is the reason why I do not like watching the news.  
(Peyton)

However, on Facebook and other social media outlets, they could control the flow of information and gain incidental and world knowledge.

Multiple participants reported using seating as a strategy to optimize visual access to their family. Several of the participants stated that they would try to find a seat where they could see everyone when they were talking. When they did not understand something that was said, they would ask, most of the time getting the short version. The participants really wanted to be involved but knew that they were not totally involved in the dinner table conversation. Some family members would check on them from time to time to see if they were following conversation. Over the years, they would let the subject of the conversation go. If the participants still wanted to know more information, they would wait until everyone had left and ask a parent, as noted by Peyton:

When my mom and dad are discussing the news, I feel left out. My mom sometimes would later tell me one-on-one about what's going on. (Peyton)

Shelby, however, did not learn anything about politics until she went to the school for the deaf.

My parents really never sat down and discussed politics with me or how it worked. I never really understood until I went to the deaf school. (Shelby)

Given that ASL is a visual language, Shelby had the opportunity to understand politics in an environment that was comfortable and where she was able to communicate freely and fully. Participants noted that they obtained basic world knowledge from more visual sources given their limited comprehension of auditory information.

The ability to listen to the television is something that most hearing people take for granted. Hearing people may obtain information from radio and television at the local, state, national and international levels, or overhear information shared by bystanders or passersby. For deaf individuals, there are not as many news outlets that are easily accessible. As stated by the participants, the captioning of live news can be distracting and overwhelming. They preferred visual media newscasts to get trending news stories and deaf topics with a twist of humor and Deaf culture. Conversations in ASL can increase deaf individuals' access to everyday knowledge and can create incidental learning opportunities. Accessible language is important for the development of academic or world knowledge, both of which are often limited among deaf adults.

**Conversational Belonging and Sense of Exclusion within the Family.** All of the participants noted that they frequently or always felt left out of the conversations with their families at the dinner table. Even when they tried to follow along, they invariably missed something. Then, confusion set in and they were lost, making them feel isolated and left out. Since they deeply want to be a part of the family interaction, they frequently reported tapping mom, dad, or sibling on the shoulder and asking, "What is everyone laughing about?" However, the second time around, the information is not as detailed as it was the first time.

Many times, the mother, father, or sibling filtered details when they repeated a joke or story. Often the participants are told, “Oh, it’s no big deal,” or, “Never mind,” or, “I will tell you later.” Ria described her experience:

I see them laughing and then I ask what was funny. Then, my mom would tell me to stop interrupting and let them finish what they were saying. (Ria)

The discussions between the participants and the family members would also be shorter. The participants knew that they were not expanding on their conversations when questions were asked by their hearing family members. For example, Oliver has stated:

My family may ask me what I’m doing in my life, but I don’t really get into discussions with them. I give them short answers and then move on to the next person. It’s hard for me to understand and I know the communication isn’t working well. (Oliver)

Peyton and Shelby shared that their parents tend to work harder to pull them into conversations around the holidays, especially at Christmas. Peyton’s family was more involved with conversations. She stated:

I remember my mom tried her best to sign, more than usual. My family also talked a little slower so that I could understand. (Peyton)

Shelby had hands-on activities which kept the whole family in sync with their conversations. She added:

We would all get together and cook and open up gifts. We would all do things together. (Shelby)

Even though some families worked hard to include their deaf child, the conversations were never as rich or detailed.

While Peyton and Shelby shared their positive holiday experience, Ria shared a story of a negative holiday experience. Ria comes from a Mexican heritage, and in that culture, family cohesiveness is a strong cultural value. She explained that she felt conflicted between two cultures—Mexican and Deaf. As she began telling her experience, her face started to turn red. She stated that she has never felt more unvalued in her family as she did on this Christmas Day. Ria shared:

My family wanted to play a game called Mad Gab (which aren’t real words, but it makes it sound like the actual word). I told my mom that I would not be able to participate. She suggested that I should go watch TV. I was livid. I would look over and see my family all enjoying the game, laughing and really getting into the game. I so wanted to be a part of that. I felt so alone. It’s funny because in the Mexican culture, families do things together. This, to me, was a conflict between two cultures. (Ria)

Ria experienced not only the repercussions of having two different holiday celebrations because of parental divorce but was also torn between the two cultures in their households. While her mother knows ASL, Ria felt that she did not understand Deaf culture even though she is an interpreter. In contrast, Ria’s father’s Mexican culture values the togetherness,

inclusion and unity among family. Therefore, he found techniques and strategies to integrate his deaf daughter into their many celebrations. In this way, her non-signing parent created a feeling of community and a place for Ria to be included in his family. Importantly, togetherness is a quality that is also valued within Deaf culture. Ria also added:

On my dad's side, it's very different. I'm very much involved. It's a stronger Mexican culture so it's more inclusive. My mom's side is more of a Mexican-American culture. My dad would listen and then break down the conversation or jokes and tells me. I feel that with the Mexican culture on my dad's side, it's more inclusive. It feels that my mom knows the ASL language but does not know the Deaf culture even though she is an interpreter herself. My mom still doesn't understand the scrunchy face when I ask WHAT-YOU-SAY? She thinks I'm mad! My dad knows what it means. (Ria)

Here, Ria is noticing the lack of incidental learning when she is with her mother and stepfather. In contrast, she is exposed to many cultural traditions from her Mexican heritage when she is at her father's home, thereby gaining knowledge about who she is and where she is from. These experiences increase her episodic knowledge through her father's determination that his daughter will be included, and, in this way, she gains incidental knowledge about her background.

The average hearing person does not understand how "dinner table syndrome" affects deaf individuals. People who can hear do not intentionally exclude their deaf family members from conversations. Many times, a hearing person understands everything that is going on. They are not experiencing what is missed and, therefore, do not appreciate the impact. Luke shared his experience of when he first brought his hearing girlfriend home for dinner to meet his parents for the first time, stating:

While at the dinner table, I was used to looking at my food and eat quietly. After dinner, my girlfriend asked me privately if that is how our normal dinners are. I responded yes and that I was used to that. My girlfriend thought that was awful and it made her sad that my parents didn't talk to me and acted as if I was not there and didn't include me in their conversations. (Luke)

Luke's girlfriend noticed that his response to the dinner table behavior was not what one would think would be "normal." In this scenario, his avoidant behavior was the norm at the dinner table. He also added:

If I could have changed it, I would go back to when I was young and really try to get that exposure and try to get my family to talk to me. Teach me signs when I was young or to teach them more, so I can have that conversation with them. Even though, I don't require my family to sign to me. But it would be nice to have a conversation. It's just so ingrained now into our routine. (Luke)

Some of the participants have an easy time understanding their place in the Deaf community. It seems that participants who attended a school for the deaf understood this sense of "home" earlier than those who were mainstreamed. This comprehension was noted when they discussed how they felt about going home on the weekend, which now was not home. Unlike the participants who went to the school for the deaf, mainstreamed participants found it difficult to feel a sense of belonging as they attempted to function within a hearing world. At the dinner table, they felt isolated as they frequently misunderstood their hearing siblings and parents.

This situation alienated Luke, leading to this sense of not belonging. This lack of a shared experience was related to not fitting in due to limited communication between the deaf child and their hearing family.

**Realization of Missing Out on Conversations.** The participants who graduated from the school for the deaf realized at an earlier age that they were missing out on conversations. While staying at the school for the deaf, the participants are surrounded by ASL throughout the day. When they arrive home, they have to stop using ASL and try to speak, code switching from ASL to English in order to communicate with their family members. Carmen, Ria, and Shelby were between the ages of 11 to 12 when they realized that conversations among their hearing families were missed. These feelings were also shared by Carmen, Ria and Shelby:

I've noticed that I missed out on a lot of conversations with my family.  
(Carmen)

It irritated me that I was missing out on the laughter, jokes or stories. When I came home, I wanted to know everything, but I realized that I was really missing out on a lot more than I thought. I was used to 100% communication at the school and then when I came home, I was isolated. (Ria)

The school for the deaf opened many things for me. I realized that I could chat with anyone, especially my friends who I chatted with all the time. When I came home, it was back to basic signs. I could really have a deep conversation with my friends. (Shelby)

For Ria and Shelby, their mood changed on the bus ride from the deaf school to their hometown. Ria and Shelby stated:

It came to a point, where I didn't really want to go home. The transition from the deaf school to home was unsettling. Going home, I had to change the way I signed, my expressions, from ASL to basic signs. (Ria)

Every time I went home, my attitude changed. I would always say that I was bored. It was because I was lacking the communication when I was home. I loved staying at school. (Shelby)

Ria and Shelby were resident at the school for the deaf with other deaf and hard of hearing students. They lived on campus during the week and went home during the weekends and holidays. For both participants, there was still an instinctual yearning to be with family; however, there was disappointment and isolation at home from the lack of communication.

Oliver, Peyton and Luke attended public schools in which they were mainstreamed. They took classes alongside their hearing peers. Most likely, these participants had access service provisions to facilitate communication. Although they might have missed out on Deaf culture, they did experience a sub-culture within the mainstreaming program. They had friends and classmates who grew up together and who were placed in the same program, developing in some ways a "created family." In a similar way, these students noticed how they were unable to share family time. Imagine your favorite TV sitcom where a family sits around the table talking about their day. They discuss positive and negative experiences, tell jokes, and have light-hearted conversations. For Luke, it came as a surprise when he realized that his family was not like those he saw on television. He added:

I thought...wait a minute, that is not like my family. My family do not chat as much as they do on sitcoms, or maybe they did, and I just didn't know it. (Luke)

Oliver, Peyton and Luke did not notice that they missed out on individual words or phrases during communication and that they had relied on their knowledge of what was being discussed to fill in the gaps until after they experienced a more deaf-centric environment. Oliver shared:

After graduation, I had dinner with my extended family. I had a very hard time communicating with them. I've been so used to using ASL on a daily basis since I've been in college. (Oliver)

Peyton similarly supplied:

I had friends who were deaf with hearing parents that knew sign. I saw the communication with them and compared it with my family. They were not the same. I just saw how much my friend was involved with her family conversations. (Peyton)

These types of comments suggest that exposure to a more accessible environment changes how these mainstreamed students understood that what they had missed when relying only on auditory input.

All six of the participants had this insight at some point in their lives. For some, it came earlier when they became immersed within the culture of a school for the deaf. For others, it came later when they entered university with a deaf centric program. Then participants finally understood that their identity was not that of a “broken” hearing person who was trying their best to fit into the hearing world; rather, they understood that they were deaf, whole, but different from their hearing families.

Participants acknowledged that understanding speakers was like putting together a puzzle without all the pieces or making sense of a movie where they had missed the ending. These participants constantly felt like they were walking in on the middle of a conversation and trying to figure out what is going on. When these participants arrived at a signing environment, they realized that they were excluded from much of the incidental learning that occurred while in a spoken language environment. One striking example is Oliver, who started learning ASL when he came to a college attended by other deaf individuals and enrolled in a degree program that focused on ASL. The natural outcome for Oliver was that ASL became his second language to understand his professors, classmates, and peers, hearing and deaf. Now, we turn to the essence of these participants' experiences and their awakening and understanding that they were deaf and did not need to pass for hearing.

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore retrospective experiences of deaf adults regarding their memories of conversations at the dinner table as children in hearing families. Until now, this phenomenon has been discussed, but there is limited research (Hauser et al., 2010; Listman, Rogers, & Hauser, 2011; Marschark & Hauser, 2012). Recently, there has been a focus on investigating the impact of the “dinner table syndrome” on academic performance (Hall, Smith, Sutter, DeWindt, & Dye, 2018). Without access to incidental learning and world knowledge, deaf individuals often are puzzled as to why others can more rapidly pick up on implicit conversational meanings.

When looking at the essence of “Loved, yet Disconnected,” it is clear that easy access to incidental knowledge is difficult (Schegloff, 2000). These participants note that when they sought clarification, they often got brief explanations or were told that they would get the information “later.” On the other hand, hearing children have full, effortless access to similar



information. These participants spontaneously discussed that they understand that their hearing peers knew things that they did not; one even stated that he wondered how they had learned that information. This knowledge can be thought of as “behind the head” information that is learned by overhearing how their parents and siblings talk to each other. For these participants, information has to be “overseen” to be understood; something that hearing parents did not fully understand. It would be worth exploring in a future study how access to incidental learning may contribute to a child’s development of empathy. Children carry these “conversational lessons” into their own relationships; however, deaf children do not have access to this form of learning, and it impacts their later social functioning.

The essence of “Loved, yet Disconnected” captured the participants’ and my own lived experiences growing up in hearing families. We struggled with access to “Communication and Language.” We were frequently unaware of what was happening around us related to “Current New and Events.” We struggled to be engaged in dialogues with our families as well as at school, noting problems with “Conversational Belonging and Sense of Exclusion.” All of these frustrations and missed opportunities led to our “Realization of Missing Out.” The lived experiences of the participants led to an approach/avoidance issue with their families. The participants desire to be part of their families’ lives but upon entering their world feel left out. The hope is that an understanding of these feelings—frustration and even anger—can help families as well as others to develop strategies to reduce these feelings of isolation.

Among deaf and hard of hearing individuals from hearing families, the lack of incidental learning is a common part of their lived experiences (Hauser et al., 2010). Their everyday experiences of conversations in person, on the radio, or on television are not easily accessible through passive listening. What a hearing person might think is common sense may not be known to the deaf or hard of hearing individual. The phrase, “Everybody knows that” reflects cultural knowledge that is transmitted through incidental learning (Beck & Flexer, 2011).

The participants noted that they were missing out on information during conversations with their families. This inability to “overhear” is unlike the lived experiences of hearing individuals who may wish that they would “unhear” some hurtful comments (Beck & Flexer, 2011). Carmen mentioned that she did not know her family tree. Her parents were confused as to why she did not know. Carmen realized that this topic was sometimes discussed at the dinner table and she missed out on the conversation regarding her family history. Carmen’s comments reflect the themes of “Communication and Language and Realization of Missing Out.” While hearing individuals have full access to this type of information (Hauser et al., 2010), this information was hidden from Carmen.

Deaf individuals often violate rules of (hearing) etiquette. For example, Hauser (2008) discussed not understanding why his father told him to “pick up [his] feet” when walking. He did not realize that dragging his feet made a noise and his father’s exhortations did not go far toward explaining it to him. He offered this story as an example of the mismatch between the communication strategies between his hearing father and himself. This mismatch between a hearing father and a deaf son embodies the theme of “Conversational Belonging and Sense of Exclusion.” Hauser continued to explain that if they had had shared knowledge and language, his father would have been able to explain to him that he understood that his child could not hear how loud he was, but that others would be bothered by his noisily dragging his feet. Others deaf individuals discuss that they were criticized for loud chewing noises or being loud when using the bathroom; these are implicit rules that tend to be learned through incidental learning when you hear others being criticized.

All of the participants admitted to asking questions during family discussions. These participants were actively trying to engage themselves in conversations and were attempting to use spoken language strategies to obtain information (Zernovoj, 2008). Unfortunately, many

were unable to get the requested information, as noted in the section on “Conversational Belonging and Sense of Exclusion.” This exclusion teaches deaf children not to ask questions, a strategy that impacts their academic performance. This passive disengagement tends to develop after repeated requests for information results in less than satisfactory answers or being rebuffed by family members. Here, participants related that they had adopted a strategy of eating and simply ignoring ongoing conversations.

The participants who attended a residential school for the deaf gained the “Realization of Missing Out” earlier than those who did not attend a school for the deaf. Though they may not have expressed the realization explicitly while in school, their actions betrayed this understanding. For example, they often preferred to stay at school, where they had full access to discussions of politics and other topics, than to go home, where they were often excluded from information about “Current News and Events.” At the residential school, they had access to academic language that could convey these more abstract ideas through an accessible visual language; at home, this was sadly lacking.

Incidental learning contributes critically to daily acquisition of knowledge. It is an invaluable learning tool for individuals to learn about what is going on around them. Deaf individuals must overcome the access challenge in other ways in order to understand the world. Zernovoj (2008) noted this passive behavior as a teacher in a school for the deaf and developed a strategy called Guided Viewing to teach deaf individuals to actively engage with materials by requesting information that they did not know. Here, Zernovoj’s students “unlearned” their early behaviors and understood that they could ask questions and get in-depth answers. As discussed above, those at the residential school gained this understanding much earlier, while those who attended mainstream programs required additional time and maybe never overcame this passive response. As noted, this problem has at its root the language deprivation to which a deaf child in a hearing world is often subject (Hutchens, 2010).

Much world knowledge is acquired through incidental learning (Convertino et al., 2014; Powers, Gregory, & Thoutenhoofd, 1998). However, these deaf participants felt that they did not receive their world knowledge through family conversations using spoken language. Convertino et al. (2014) noted that even with a cochlear implant that gives deaf students more access to spoken language, the students had lower levels of both vocabulary and world knowledge. At this point in their lives, these participants did not seem aware of the impact that this gap has had or potentially will have in their lives. They understood that “Communication and Language” was difficult, but they did not appear to understand the deep-rooted issues that resulted from this lack of “overhearing.”

These participants frequently did not understand the importance of overhearing information and being part of a reciprocal and contingent conversation (Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2015). This lack of conversational turn taking is noted in the section about “Conversational Belonging and Sense of Exclusion,” where they noted disconnection from family conversations. We do know that deaf students do organize their mental lexicon in similar ways to hearing individuals (Clark, Schwanenflugel, Everhart & Bartini, 1996; Marschark, Convertino, McEvoy & Masteller, 2004), and they have many overlapping themes in their life scripts (Clark & Daggett, 2015; Wolsey, Clark, van der Mark, & Suggs, 2017). Therefore, some world knowledge is acquired both informally and formally. These gaps tend to develop because of a lack of contingent and reciprocal dialogue early in linguistics and academic development.

Thwarted language development “sets the table” for “dinner table syndrome” because parents, siblings, and other family cannot interact with their deaf members. As a whole, individuals will need to consider what happens at the dinner table in order to best understand this syndrome. All of these interactions at the dinner table are opportunities to teach language and behaviors, including social etiquette. This interaction among family members is where a child first learns how to interact with people. It is a journey worth taking.

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