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## **FINDING AN IDENTITY AND SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL SKILLS**

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### **Abstract**

In this article the researchers present an auto-ethnographic study of the first presenter's life. Salonen is a Deaf person who suffered severe psychological problems in his youth because of uncertainty about his identity and a lack of social-emotional skills. Syväoja is a hearing psychiatrist and she is also Salonen's mother. The purpose of this research is to discuss openly Salonen's life. An auto-ethnographic approach allows a cross-cultural combination of socio-cultural and medical views, and the researchers, reporting their experiences from their personal perspectives, consider Salonen's life from these two main angles: the socio-cultural (Deaf identity, Deafhood, sign language) and the medical (well-being, social-emotional functioning, mental health). Auto-ethnography as a qualitative research method includes the interconnectivity of the self and others. The data consists of personal memories, self-observation, self-reflection and external material collected in the form of interviews, diaries and other documents. The research shows how important it is for society as a whole to examine closely the personal narrative of a Deaf person and of people who have followed his life intimately. Salonen experienced severe crises in his social-emotional functioning and mental health during puberty. After much effort he succeeded in finding his identity and developing his social-emotional skills, helped in this process by a thorough understanding and awareness of sign language and Deaf culture. More detailed discussion is needed of how identity and social-emotional skills can be developed. They have the same goal – the welfare of a Deaf child.

### **Introduction**

Salonen and Syväoja have witnessed at first hand what serious psychological problems a young Deaf person can suffer from in her/his adolescence. Salonen had a difficult puberty due to his unawareness of his identity as a Deaf person. This had a significant effect on his mental health and social-emotional skills. Salonen has finally, after a long process, managed to find meaning and balance in his life. The researchers begin by considering Salonen's childhood and go on to explore what it was that made his life so complicated and difficult when he was in his teens. Auto-ethnography as a method makes it possible to understand why Salonen had to experience such a serious identity crisis in his adolescence. The researchers observed Salonen's life from two main angles: the socio-cultural (Deaf identity,

Deafhood, sign language) and the medical (well-being, social-emotional functioning, mental health).

## **Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to approach Salonen's life from two main angles: the socio-cultural and the medical. This joint research project has been divided between the researchers in such a way that Salonen focuses more on the socio-cultural angle and Syväoja on the medical angle. Salonen has studied sign language linguistics and Deaf culture, and he has now adopted Finnish Sign Language (FinSL) as his mother tongue. As a result, he is able to bring out his views on the above-mentioned points. The socio-cultural angle includes examining certain key elements: Deaf identity, Deafhood and sign language. Syväoja has qualifications and long experience in psychiatry and somatic medicine. This know-how allows her to handle the medical angle, which is concerned with well-being, social-emotional functioning and mental health. The aim of the researchers is to combine these two angles which, unfortunately, were often in conflict. After the pooling of these resources it is now possible to present an honest picture of what kind of life a young Deaf person may have when faced with a serious identity crisis during puberty. Both of these angles help to throw light on Salonen's life and to provide answers to how young Deaf people should be supported so that they make appropriate choices in their life and find a balance within it. Salonen and Syväoja talk from their personal viewpoints and share their experiences.

## **Method**

Salonen and Syväoja use auto-ethnography as a research method, which includes the idea of the interconnectivity of the self and others. The main objective of the auto-ethnographic method is to explore how others have experienced and seen the life of the self. The researchers have brought together a variety of interviews, diaries and other documents, with the help of which Salonen has had the chance to create personal memories, do some self-observation and self-reflection, and look at his adolescence from a new viewpoint. This personal process is here combined with Syväoja's contribution. Her role has been as mother and psychiatrist to observe Salonen's juvenile development. Syväoja has in particular studied the identity crisis of a young Deaf person from the perspective of psychosocial development theory. The normal trajectory of adolescence contains the healthy psychological development of a young person. What does this require? What kind of symptoms occur if this development is disrupted?

Juvenile development includes several challenges. Adolescence begins with the onset of puberty, which means severe physical and mental changes: the young person is growing up and developing physically and mentally. Young people often experience this period as confusing. They ask "Who am I?" and "What will I be?". At this point in their life the young person must also withdraw from her/his parents. Friends (peers) are very important for normal development, especially in early adolescence. The aim is to build

up an intact identity (Erikson 1994). Erikson divides identity into three parts: firstly, ego identity, which means an awareness of being distinct from others; secondly, personal identity, consisting of personality; and thirdly, social identity, which is concerned with social roles in social relationships.

Identity can, however, be seen in a much broader sense than this. Identity is comprised of selfhood, which is a holistic concept about a self, one's own physical, psychological and social features. It is a space in which there are different elements, e.g. an identity of gender, occupation, culture etc. Identity is a conception of oneself in relation to one's society and culture (Vilkko-Riihelä 1999, according to Salo 2004.). Hall (2002/2003) emphasized that the identity is always connected to culture and language: these three concepts are closely linked to each other, so that none of them can ever stand alone. Hall stated that we start to discuss identity while wondering "Who am I?" or "Where do I belong?" in situations where we share common experiences. He adds that a postmodern subject takes many identities at different times (the identification process is happening now and will develop later, too). According to Jokinen (2002) a Deaf person often has an identity in Deaf Culture and the Deaf Community. However, many Deaf people are bilingual or multilingual in society, so they too can have many different identities. Building up a Deaf identity is an individual and personal process for a Deaf person, but an identity as a Deaf person also involves a collective process in which the values and norms of the Deaf community are displayed and absorbed. (Salo 2004.) Language is an important part of human identity. Language is a significant factor in social situations and it helps people connect or stand out. (Lehtonen 2000, according to Salo 2004.)

On the basis of the above we can understand what the identity really means to a young person and her/his development. The physical and mental developments that take place in adolescence are a challenge that they have to face. Twenty percent of young people suffer from some form of mental disorder. Problems in any part of one's identity may lead to an identity crisis which manifests itself in different symptoms of anxiety and depression (and the disruption of development in adolescence). Firstly, anxiety and problems of self-esteem are often the result of social pressure. The increased independence that young people are given and often welcome can also be frightening. All this is part of the normal course of development in adolescence, but at some point it may cease to be normal. It is no longer normal if the young person starts to feel strong and uncontrollable anxiety, often accompanied by a range of physical symptoms. Obsessive-compulsive anxiety disorder is also common in young people. Anxiety can be exhausting both physically and psychologically. Secondly, a young person can fall ill with depression, when the joy of life and interest in it are lost. He/she withdraws from social contacts and also suffers from multiple physical symptoms. Suicidal thoughts, even a plan to commit suicide, may also occur during a period of depression.

We decided to apply the concept of Deafhood (Ladd 2003) to explore Salonen's identity crisis during his adolescence. Deafhood here refers to the individual's process of finding her/his own personal awareness of being Deaf and its meaning. Deafhood is concerned with different experiences of life, which besides the anxiety mentioned above might include language colonialism. In this colonialism the Deaf child can suffer from language

oppression, when he/she does not get adequate input from and contact with sign language and Deaf culture. For instance, it may be that he/she is exposed only to a spoken language instead of to bilingualism (sign language and spoken language together) or Signed Speech instead of full sign language (as was the case with Salonen). In this way a Deaf child might develop a negative attitude to Deaf people and therefore prefer to use other languages rather than sign language. A Deaf person who has no contact with Deaf culture may develop low self-esteem. After finding Deafhood, he/she will understand how valuable Deaf culture and sign language are, and will realize that being Deaf can be a positive experience, without shame.

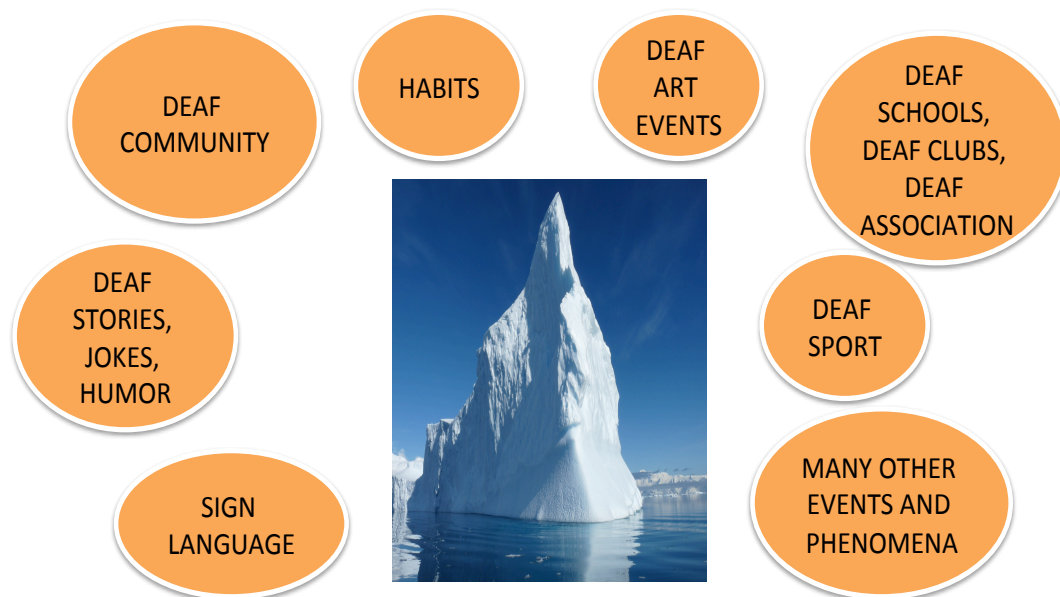
## **Results**

The research makes clear how important it is to examine closely the personal narratives of a Deaf person and of people who have seen his life from nearby. This auto-ethnographic study reveals that Salonen underwent language and culture colonialism during his adolescence. He started to learn FinSL as his first language and to that he gradually added Finnish as his second language. However, the environment where Salonen lived was not sufficiently aware of sign language and Deaf culture, and Salonen did not get an adequate supply of these elements. He adopted the attitude that being Deaf was not a relevant part of his identity because he felt that being a Deaf person was less important than being a hearing person. Salonen experienced a severe identity crisis during his puberty; he did not know who he was and where he belonged. His capacity for language and culture was very low: he could communicate fully in neither FinSL nor Finnish. As a result, he started to withdraw from contact with the surrounding society, and this in turn resulted in a lack of social-emotional functioning. The worst thing was that his mental health was severely affected. During puberty Salonen lost his motivation to live and suffered from depression and obsessive-compulsive anxiety disorder. The situation was really serious.

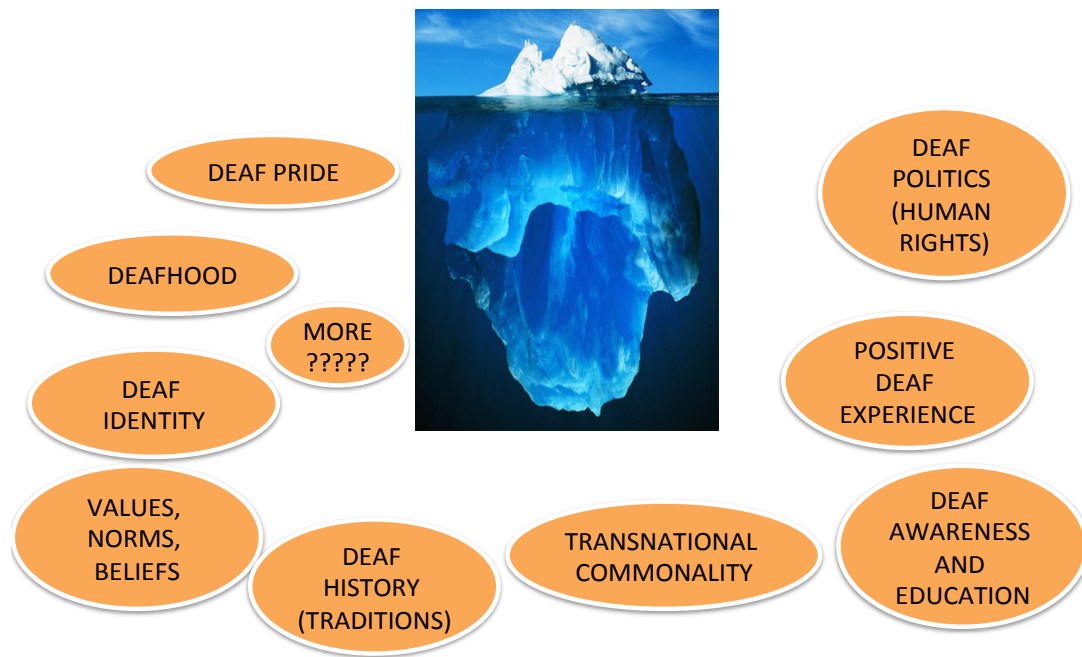
Salonen succeeded in setting out on a new and curative process after much effort and strong support from his family and close environment (he feels especially grateful for this to his mother and the Deaf community). During this process he sought to find his true identity and develop his social-emotional skills. His developing awareness of sign language and Deaf culture were key to this. Salonen became able to stand back and observe himself and reflect on the previous stages of his life with the help of these elements. He found a new way of dealing with his sensitive feelings, the vicious cycle of fear and weak self-esteem. He managed finally to accept that he could be a proud Deaf person, able to use FinSL every day without shame or insecurity. This was a turning point in Salonen's life: he no longer needed to suffer from the hearing/Deaf dilemma and the mental struggle that had entailed for him.

Using sign language and adopting Deaf culture gave Salonen efficient tools to understand what identity and especially language really mean. The most important thing for a young person in his situation is that the family and environment recognize, accept and support the needs of the growing Deaf child. The Deaf child can be strongly influenced by a positive attitude toward sign language and Deaf culture while, conversely, failing to appreciate the

importance of sign language and failing to use it with the growing child and adolescent can undermine and destroy the essential development of both language and identity. The consequences may not be detected until later, but there is a high risk of running into serious difficulties, at the latest during puberty, as happened to Salonen. It is very important to allow a Deaf person to get plenty of input of sign language and Deaf culture at as early an age as possible. Although it is not always possible to meet all of the needs of a Deaf child (e.g. he/she may not be growing up in an environment which uses sign language), there is no reason to give up; it is never too late. It is always possible to find new solutions for a Deaf child (e.g. helping her/him to find friends (peers) and especially a role model to follow). Personally Salonen believes that he became aware of his identity and language only after he was more than twenty years of age. The two figures below illustrate Salonen's identity-building process. They show the metaphor of an iceberg, above and below the ocean's surface. The first figure explains how we can see and understand our identity in a superficial way. The second figure shows the deeper level in the identity-building process.



**Fig. 1. The metaphor of the iceberg: above the surface.**



**Fig. 2. The metaphor of the iceberg: beneath the surface.**

## Conclusions

We definitely need much more open discussion about how the identity of a Deaf person and her/his social-emotional skills can be developed. Auto-ethnography is an efficient approach, which allows a cross-cultural combination of the socio-cultural and medical aspects of the issue. Salonen and Syväoja have decided to start work on a book that will include a variety of materials (diaries, interviews and documents), following the auto-ethnographic method. The aim of the book is to openly discuss Salonen's life from his birth until the present. It is a fact that many Deaf people live in a language and culture minority in their society. Inevitably they discuss many aspects of life, including and perhaps especially identity, comparing themselves to the majority group for whom many issues are not so pressing. The role of parents and the environment becomes particularly significant in the development of a Deaf child: they must ensure that he/she has adequate access to and contact with sign language and Deaf culture. Prevention, they say, is better than cure, and care should be taken to build up a Deaf person's identity and social-emotional skills, to try to sustain their mental balance, before any problems arise. There is a need for much more open discussion on a whole range of relevant topics. The researchers decided to produce a book on the subject because in a book sensitive topics can be approached from many angles and with many different kinds of evidence, from self-observation to documentation. The book will be shared with anyone who is interested, whether they live near or far from the Deaf community. The book will provide peer support and ideas

for how the identity of a Deaf child can be supported in a meaningful way. For example, studies show that bilingualism (in signing and spoken language together) develops the cognitive skills of a Deaf child (Bauman & Murray 2014). Cognitive skills in turn help one to find one's true identity and develop one's social-emotional functioning skills. And most important of all is the combination of the socio-cultural and medical views: they must be brought together to serve the same goal – the welfare of a Deaf child.

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