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**Benevolent Paternalism and Eugenics:
A Historical Analysis of its Impact on the Deaf Community in 19th and 20th Century
America**

In America, during the 19th century, there was a prevalent existence of: benevolent paternalism, which had a profound influence on the Deaf community, significantly impeding their progress in gaining traction on an even playing field in life. We must analyze how this concept has sequential link to eugenics. Essentially this theory of “benevolent paternalism”, in context, is that those who are hearing, have a skewed perspective of someone’s Deafness. Their point of view on Deafness, psychologically tells them that they, as a hearing individual, have the *obligation or responsibility* to take care of Deaf people, as if they are children. The American population had the perception that those who could not hear and speak were so incompetent to an extent of not being able to contribute to society. So, we saw hearing people treat their Deaf counterparts as such, with that motivating of “helping”. And because of this elementary way of thinking, a period of oppression from hearing people formed, ultimately feeding directly into the eugenics movement, specifically of Deaf people, that gained momentum in the early 20th century. This movement, while more prevalent in other historical events, it is an underlying way of thinking, which many figure heads of this time subconsciously subscribed to when regarding those who were Deaf.

Benevolent paternalism primarily stems from what some may see as a hearing pioneer in the deaf community, Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet. On his journey to help educate Deaf individuals, he believed it would be best if students were treated as if they were his children. Yet this was not a definite answer to how we should educate Deaf individuals. At this time, it was more of a *preferred* method of educating by Gallaudet. We see he wrote to his longtime friend, Dr. Mason Cogswell, commenting, “I long to be in the midst of my deaf and dumb children...” (Van/Valentine 1993). He further exclaims that he believed as if he were the father of what is now, the American School for the Deaf; and that all its pupils were his children. As a result, he thought he has a responsibility for their progress, education, and overall well-being. Gallaudet saw it as his obligation to be a parent-figure for these children as they were away from home in the residential school. This was simply Gallaudet’s general view of Deaf people, and it was quite common amongst political figures as well. In fact, presidential candidate, Henry Clay, stated with conviction that, “the entire American people are entitled to the care of a paternal government” (Van/Valentine 1993). Alongside other government officials, Clay’s way of thinking was a normal attribute to be involved with relationships during this time. Making it seem like a normal attribute of American society at the time. There was this notion that those in higher positions in life, hearing, had a responsibility for those below them, Deaf. And because of American’s perspective of general but structured social ranking, Deaf people were seen as heavily dependent on others; so, they were prone to being the ones “taken care of”.

One of the most prolific examples we see in history of this concept is how hearing government official William Henry Seward, alongside his wife, Frances Miller Seward, interacted with their friend, well-known Deaf artist, and poet John Carlin. William Seward was a

major figure head in the New York State government at the time. Because of his importance, him and his wife Frances were very wealthy, allowing him to leave for his governmental duties, while she stayed back to tend the home. The couple eventually became good friends with John Carlin, a deaf-mute man, with an honorary master's degree from Gallaudet University, a handful of published poems, many popular pieces of art (specifically portraits), and a well-established family man himself. Frances and John's relationship was very casual, and before he married, Carlin spent a lot of his time at the Seward's estate in New York. While at their home, he and Frances would write back and forth in real time. Having lengthy conversations with one another, there is proof of what was thought to be a healthy friendship between the two. But it was later discovered that in a letter to her sister, Frances said she, "...always felt as one does on looking at an infant that a smile would afford him [John Carlin] pleasure" (Seward 1842). Essentially what she is saying here, is that she admittedly perceived Carlin as a helpless infant. He was a child to her. She also admits her guiltiness to having some responsibility to patronize him. By saying a "smile would afford him pleasure" makes it seem like if she hadn't done so he would be unhappy. Yet, there is no proof of John Carlin *needing* the assistance of a hearing person, especially Frances Seward, to function in society. Furthermore, this perspective provided evidence that the friendly affection was only traveling in a singular direction. Carlin genuinely believed they were friends and socially level with one another, considering his extensive resume of success as an independent Deaf man. So, the fact that Frances felt the *needed* to tend to as if he were her offspring, exudes a sense internalized benevolent paternalism. She "felt obligated" to help him, but why? He was Deaf of course! From her point of view, he was this helpless Deaf man that just lobbied around their home because he was lonely without a hearing person by his side. Meanwhile, he was a self-built popular figure, creating art on his own accord. And not to

mention, a year after Frances' letter to her sister, Carlin married a Deaf woman whom he would eventually have five hearing children with (Spencer).

Because of this relatively universal feeling towards Deaf individuals by the majority hearing population in America, there was an uphill battle as the 20th century came around. At this time, there were many major developments across the nation, but the most notable being the invention of the telephone by Alexander Graham Bell. This revolutionary technology allowed Bell to put his name on the map, making himself an influential force to the American people. With a Deaf mother and eventually Deaf wife, Bell was arguably involved with the Deaf community more than the average hearing person. Primarily, he interested himself in the education of Deaf children, but as they arrived at adulthood, Bell had strong opinions on their romantic decisions. In an address to the Members of the Literary Society of Kendall Green, in Washington, D.C. on March 6th, 1891, Bell broadly stated that the intermarrying of Deaf individuals is, " ...a means of increasing and intensifying the defect where a tendency to deafness already exists" (Bell 1891). Not only does he explicitly show his belief that Deafness is a *defect*, but he also expresses his antipathy towards marriage between two Deaf people. Proposing that while their intermarrying isn't necessarily a cause of Deafness, it is a major contributing factor to the opportunity of increasing birthrates of Deaf children. Directly tying himself to the eugenics methodology at the time; controlling genetics to attempt an erasure of the "bad traits". Now, this raises a question of why Bell believed *this* audience, would benefit from his suggestion. We see earlier in his speech he stated, "I claim the right to advise you as I would advise my own children..." (Bell 1891). This "claim" directly calls back to the concept of benevolent paternalism. We see a hearing man, Bell, feel obligated to advise the Deaf population. As if they

cannot gather information themselves and act upon that collection of knowledge. Bell clearly believed without the advisement of a hearing person, even *educated* Deaf individuals, would steer themselves in the wrong direction, of marrying someone like themselves. Ultimately, showing his, and the public's, fear of Deaf people's autonomy resulting in increasing the number Deaf children being born.

The development of this mindset sparked Bell's self-motivated initiative to find a way to bring more speaking, hearing children into this world. His argument relied heavily on oralist values. Meaning, he thought to be a functioning member of society you would need to speak; and to speak with articulation, you must be hearing. Alexander Graham Bell made it clear to his peers and the public, he firmly believes that "...speech skills [are] essential to social and economic success" (Greenwald 2015). We see here Bell explicitly rejected the notion that Deaf individuals could succeed without learning to speak. Put simply, in the eyes of Bell, if a person cannot speak, they cannot function independently; therefore, deaf individuals who choose a manualist education, signing, cannot blossom into an operational human in society. This implies, a non-speaking American would propose a *burden* to the rest. A progression of thinking becomes clear with this statement. Bell thought he had a responsibility to ensure Deaf individuals received an education, or else they would be helpless, and if they were helpless – then others would feel obligated to help them since, as previously stated, there was a common perception of Deaf people being child-like during this time. So, there was efforts to say, if Deafness was not being looked at under a magnifying lens in the grand scheme of society, this hereditary "defect" would only increase. As a person of importance in America, Bell believed the best thought-out plan to avoid such sequence of events, would be to utilize the rising movement that was eugenics. We

see that, “A major goal of the eugenics movement... was to control the menace and thus save the nation from its burden of defective genes” (Haller 2015). Showing that, it would have been best to avoid the *burden* that was Deafness, that it was seen as a *menace* to society. Consequently, creating further reason to control what genes were being passed down. Hence why, Alexander Graham Bell tried persuading those with some form of family history of Deafness, to not marry one another in any combination. Because intermarriage would only result in more Deaf children, increasing the obligation on the hearing population because of the driving motive that was benevolent paternalism.

Jumping off this, even though he was addressing Deaf people specifically, Bell had such a major following that it was borderline impossible for Americans to ignore his way of thinking. His influence was extremely prevalent during this time due to his popularity gained from the telephone. So, people were tuning in to his philosophy. America was hearing what he had to say and agreed. Because of this subscription to radical thinking, it showed how society collectively was fueled by paternalistic thinking. Therefore, continuously holding Deaf individuals in a specific lens, regardless of any other contributing factors. To underscore the nature of this perception, it is imperative to spotlight Junius Wilson. His story sparks in 1925 when he, as a black Deaf man, was admitted to the Cherry Hospital, or Asylum for the Colored Insane, for being accused of attempted rape of a relative. Essentially, we see an extreme pipeline from being accused, to being mentally ill/insane, as he was “...incarcerated in an insane asylum merely because he was deaf and black; bureaucratic inertia and staff paternalism helped keep him there for sixty-five years” (Joyner 2007). First, he not only was sent to a mental institution for his accusation even though, if it were proven true, he should have been sentenced to jail time. But

because of his race and inability to hear, he was sent to a facility in which discounted him as medically insane. Because of this terribly skewed point of view on individuals, to treat them as children if didn't fit the status quo of "normalcy", Wilson experienced a paternalistic treatment for majority of his lifetime. In addition to this, in 1970 the claims against Wilson had been dropped as it was believed to be false accusations, but "the Goldsboro institution held Wilson for more than twenty additional years on the grounds that it was the most benevolent course of action" (Joyner 2007). This furthers the argument that even years after the height of the eugenics movement, hearing individuals were making decisions for Deaf folks because of their internalized way of thinking. Outsiders believed they had the responsibility to do what is right for them, even though there is evidence that their hearing capabilities are unnecessary. Junius Wilson had the opportunity to be a functioning member of society if he was perceived in a different light. His story exemplifies the strong continuation of a benevolent paternalistic belief for years to come. Wilson's experience, while on different levels of severity, was a common storyline for many Deaf individuals in the 20th century. Showcasing how the ideologies in which were birthed in the height of the 19th century, connected themselves to horrific internalized ways of controlling other's lives, and obstructed the path to equality for the Deaf community.

Ultimately the way Junius Wilson was treated, alongside many other Deaf individuals at the time, was a result of the development in thinking by society that derived from benevolent paternalism. Those outside of the community felt as if they had an obligation to help those that were "less fortunate" or "defected". And because figure heads had a major impact on perpetuating this, time that could have been used to establish and grow Deaf culture, was wasted. Deaf people were treated like children, essentially told who they should fall in love with and

seen as mentally ill because of the horrendous ideologies floating around during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Providing that, this paternalistic concept evolved into utilizing the arguments from the eugenics movement to transform how Deaf people were perceived for generations.

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