# Sense of Community: The Irish Deaf Community

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## Abstract

There is a strong perception among members of the Irish deaf community that the community is in gradual decline, with dwindling traditional bases for producing Irish Sign Language (ISL) users. For instance, enrolments in residential schools for the deaf have been declining steadily, and the numbers involved in social, sports and cultural activities in the community have been falling. Technological advances, consolidation of educational policies for deaf children in mainstream education, and individualisation and increased social mobility have also had an impact on how this community operates. However, there is paltry research on how such changes have affected deaf community cohesion, especially in the Irish context. Therefore, this ongoing research entitled Sense of Community – the Irish Deaf Community, seeks to explore the notion and strength of community belonging amongst the deaf community in Ireland. This project report presents the results of one element of this research, i.e. an online survey study conducted in June 2020. Initial analysis of the results of this survey indicate that ISL is one of the primary bonds holding the Irish deaf community together and that issues that divide the community include trustworthiness, feelings of exclusion, and the notion of leadership.

## Background and Context

This research, entitled Sense of Community: The Irish Deaf Community seeks to explore the notion and strength of community belonging within the deaf community in Ireland. Community members perceive that the community is gradually declining because its traditional bases for producing ISL users and sustaining the community over the decades have been dwindling. For instance, enrolment at deaf residential schools has declined, as has the level of social, sports and cultural activism in the community. This perception is supported by international studies in other Western countries such as New Zealand and Canada (McKee, 2017; Snoddon & de Meulder, 2020).

Prior to the online survey conducted in June 2020 and presented in this report the most recent wide-ranging piece of research on the Irish deaf community was carried out in 1996 (Matthews, 1996). Thus, this survey was long overdue, particularly as significant

changes have emerged in the Irish deaf community since Matthews' survey. Changes such as technological advances (Leigh, Andrews, Harris, & Ávila, 2020), the consolidation of educational policies for deaf children in mainstream education (Mathews, 2018), and an increase in individualisation and social mobility (de Meulder & Murray, 2017) have been documented as having affected members of the community. However, there is scant research on how these changes have affected community cohesion, at least in an Irish context.

Academic discussions are taking place within Deaf Studies arising from the increasing awareness of the effects of intersectionality, technological advances, and the decline of traditional sites like deaf-only schools. These changes imply that the community may have been weakened in terms of solidarity and connectedness (Kusters, De Meulder, & O'Brien, 2017).

## Theoretical Framework

As stated by McMillan and Chavis (1986, p. 9), the theoretical concept of "sense of community" is:

> a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to being together.

According to the Sense of Community theoretical framework, a strong, cohesive community will enhance the intense feeling of belonging that will increase the likelihood of long-term emotional relationships and pride in community heritage. The community's opportunities will enable its members to increase their influence on policies and outlooks and to hone their skills in administrative, organisational and volunteering roles; otherwise, the community's opportunities may not be available outside the community. This issue is also one of well-being and welfare, not only for deaf people, but also for the state, as it has been revealed in

the UK and the US that there has been a dramatic increase in the numbers of such people seeking help from the mental health services (Leigh & Andrews, 2016; Kuenburg, Fellinger, & Fellinger, 2016; Leigh et al., 2020).

## Methodology

The survey instrument designed for this project begins with the question "How important is it to you to feel a sense of community with other community members?" This central question is followed by 23 statements taken from the Sense of Community Index (McMillan & Chavis, 1986) covering a wide range of issues, including trust; fitting in; interdependence; and leadership. Respondents rated these statements as 'extremely important', 'very important', 'somewhat important', 'slightly important', 'not at all important', or prefer not to be part of this community'. The demographic variables included in the analysis were: level of fluency in ISL; gender; age groups; educational attainments; geographical location; sexual orientation; and socio-economic class. In addition, after reviewing the statements and articles critiquing the Index, six additional statements concerning ISL status within the community were also added. The survey, which used Qualtrics software, was live for the month of June 2020. Social media channels were used to inform potential members of the deaf community of its existence and to encourage participation.

Finally, in order to gain greater insights into the issues raised in the survey, initial summary results were shared with members of the deaf community via three community dialogues conducted using Zoom. Ethical approval was obtained from the university's Research Ethics Committee (TT48 School of Linguistic, Speech and Communication Sciences, Trinity College Dublin).

## Preliminary Analysis and Findings

A total of 399 responses were received of which 265 were complete and capable of being analysed. Eighty one percent of these respondents identified themselves as deaf, with the remaining 19% identifying themselves as hard of hearing, CoDAs (Children of Deaf Adults), and hearing. The vast majority of respondents maintained that they were fluent in ISL. Sixty three percent of the respondents were female and 86% self-identified as heterosexuals. Those aged under 30 and over 65 were significantly underrepresented, compared to other age groups. A total of 42% of all respondents were based in Dublin, with 26% in Leinster, 18% in Munster, and the rest coming from Connacht/Ulster/outside Ireland. Finally, the socio-economic and educational attainment variables were dominated by ABC1 groups and those with third-level qualifications.

In answer to the central question, "How important is it to you to feel a sense of community with other community members?", 84% percent responded that it was extremely important or very important for them. For those who self-identified themselves as fluent or reasonably fluent in using ISL, the response to that question remains the same. Females were slightly ahead of males in answering "extremely important" or "very important" to this question. Heterosexuals were also ahead of LGBTQI+ in strongly affirming the importance of having a sense of the community. Geographically, respondents based in Munster and Connacht/Ulster felt that it was extremely or very important more strongly in having a sense of community than those based in Leinster and Dublin. Educational attainment displayed no significant relationship with the participants' responses to this question.

Furthermore, the majority of respondents to the online survey strongly agreed with the statement: "Irish Sign Language (ISL) is the key that holds the community together". Seventy percent of the respondents fully agreed with this statement, a further 20% mostly agreed with the statement, and seven per cent somewhat agreed. The robust agreement sends an

unambiguous signal beyond the deaf community that ISL is valued very highly by the respondents, and it is clear to them that it is a glue to bind the community together. It is evident that their affection for ISL underpins their strong sense of community.

The remaining six statements concerning ISL, and twenty-three general questions are currently being analysed although some initial insights into the provisional results are revealed through the community dialogues (Sections 4.1, 5). It is hoped to publish a full set of results in Autumn/Winter 2021.


**Issues from Zoom Community Dialogues**

During the dialogues, several themes and issues emerged and were discussed by participants. There was a tacit acceptance among the participants that the community cohesion has been gradually weakening over time. In addition to the gradual decline in enrolment at deaf schools (Ryan 2006, Mathews 2018) and, as a consequence, in membership of related social, cultural and sports activities, other possible reasons for weakening cohesion were discussed. These were individualism; technological advances; cultural changes; social mobility; and the emergence of identity politics, each of which is now discussed in turn.

Individualism is firmly rooted in the Western ideological outlook on life and the emergence of neoliberalist influences on the economy. It was inevitable for potential community members to look elsewhere to fulfil their needs. One participant said that young people have begun to regard deaf clubs as a public forum for older people. Such fora do not meet young people's needs, in terms of a lack of common interest in social and cultural issues, and generational differences in cultural entertainment tastes. With the globalisation of the economy and its related neoliberalist impact on societies, especially with technological advances (smartphones, etc.), potential members felt it was possible to lead "independent" lives without any obligation to the deaf community. This raises a possible topic for further

research. Some participants argued that cultural changes were at the root of weakening community cohesion. Others mentioned ease of travel and communication; a societally imposed need to own property and a car; and long commutes necessitated by high property prices.

Social mobility was also identified as a possible cause of weakening community cohesion, as there were apparent changes in the socio-economic profile of the community. Some members moved on to professional jobs due to university education, while others were 'stuck in the welfare trap'. Such a divergence in social mobility led to a breakdown in community solidarity. Others noted the emergence of identity politics as giving some members the confidence to request specific inclusion policies in the community. For example, LBQTI+ members have felt excluded from the community but have recently become more active in the community, demanding a more visible presence within it.

**Types of Community**

Such discussions led to further investigation as to the extent to which the respondents viewed their community as real or imagined. While some studies argue that viewing one's community can be regarded as hermeneutical (Blackshaw, 2010), others claim that the community seems real if one can avail of its benefits (e.g., Cohen, 1985). Some respondents suggested that, due to cultural changes and the emergence of individualism and technological advances, there was a significant shift in terms of perception of a community from being physical to virtual. For example, a respondent noted the rise of social media outlets and their privately created groups, which can count thousands of followers. There were discussions about the community being modernised by external factors and the dangers of nostalgia in recalling traditional versions of the deaf community. This initial survey demonstrates considerable potential for further research on the issues raised above and, in particular, on

how a sense of community among the Irish deaf community has evolved and developed over time.

## Next Steps

A Trinity College's Arts Humanities and Social Science Benefactions Award will enable continuation of this research over the next two years. In particular, the next phase of this research will:

- Involve the completion of the analysis of the rest of the online survey and its publication in Autumn / Winter 2021

- Draw on direct experiences from crucial community leaders through qualitative interviews.

- Benefit from a series of focus groups of various representatives in the community, to discuss key themes and findings emerging from the initial survey.

- Explore the type of community that the respondents envision and aspire to.

- Develop a clear understanding of what can help those who wish to develop or strengthen their community cohesion.

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