Disability Studies Quarterly
Fall 2001, Volume 21, No. 4
pages 42-52 <www.cds.hawaii.edu>
Copyright 2001 by the Society
for Disability Studies

Language barriers: Exploring the Worlds of the d/Deaf[1]

Ruth Butler, Ph.D.
Sara McNamee, Ph.D.
University of Hull
Tracey Skelton, Ph.D.
Nottingham Trent University
Gill Valentine, Ph.D.
University of Sheffield

> I am always sorry when any language is lost, because languages are the pedigree of nations. (Samuel Johnson, as quoted in Boswell 1785)

Despite d/Deaf studies' ability to demonstrate how a `different [sensory] experience of the world can forge a completely different approach to life, which is expressed through a separate and unique language and culture' (Corker 1994: 150), there has been a notable absence of research with d/Deaf people amongst the growing literature on geographies of (dis)ability.

The significance and value of Deaf culture to the Deaf community is made clear by Paddy Ladd, a UK Deaf consciousness promoter (quoted in Campbell and Oliver 1996: 120), when he explains:

> Basically deaf people whose first language is BSL [British Sign Language] should be seen as a linguistic minority. It helps if you think of us as parallel to, say, an Asian community. Deaf people have been joyfully getting together since time began, and our schools go back to the 1790s and our clubs to the 1820s. Our language is much older. Deaf people marry each other 90 per cent of the time, 10 per cent have deaf children. Our customs and traditions have been passed down the ages and these, together with our values and beliefs, constitute our culture.

As Ladd makes clear sign language is at the core of Deaf culture. In the UK approximately 70,000 d/Deaf people consider BSL to be their preferred, first language (Baxter 1999). It is the only one through which they feel able to express themselves and attain fluent, two way communication. It is not simply a mimed form of English (Baxter 1999). Rather, it is a language in its own right, with its own symbols and structures. However, as this paper illustrates, the lack of recognition of it as such can mean social, political and economic marginalisation for

those who depend upon it.

The research reported here is part of an ongoing project funded by the United Kingdom's Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Youth, Citizenship and Social Change programme. Its aims are, firstly, to shed light on some of the processes that result in the social, economic and political marginalisation and exclusion of young people from various minority social groups including the d/Deaf. Secondly, it explores the choices and risks these youths take in order to overcome such processes. The research is being conducted in two UK cities; one predominantly white and working class, the other more cosmopolitan.

Biographical interviews with d/Deaf youths and retrospective interviews with older d/Deaf people are still being conducted. The material reported here from interviews with a wide range of professionals who work with d/Deaf youths, are not intended to speak for their clients, but rather should be taken at face value. They are reflections of rarely heard, professionals' concerns about the exclusionary policies and broader social processes that they and the youths they work with currently have to face. The professionals are drawn from a range of occupations in both the public and private sectors, covering the fields of education, social work, housing, health and crime.

The paper falls into three main sections. Firstly, the different political philosophies on the integration of d/Deaf people and their relationships with the use of sign language are outlined. The importance of communication systems that allow everyone to interact with ease is stressed. In this context the paper then moves on to consider the nature and implications of inadequate sign language related service provisions. This second section falls into three parts considering the lack of interpreters: the conflicting roles of social workers for the d/Deaf; the implications for home and family life; and the divisions which exist in the Deaf community due to differing political stances. Finally, the paper concludes by asserting the importance of increased d/Deaf awareness and sign language tuition for hearing and d/Deaf people alike.

Sign language and policies of integration

Approaches to the education of d/Deaf people have generally fallen into two broad categories, those of oralism (lip reading and spoken English) and manualism (sign language). From the late 19th century to as recently as the 1970s oralism dominated schooling policies and practices in the Western world (Baynton 1997, Gregory et al. 1995). In the US in 1918, for example, 80% of d/Deaf people were taught without the use of sign language (Baynton 1997).

Policies of oralism fall in to line with right wing thinking on integration (Corker 1994, Northway 1997). In accordance with the medical model of disability the `different' and `inferior' are expected to fit into what is considered a `superior,' hearing, speaking world (Oliver 1990, Barnes 1991). Speech and/or lip reading is seen as preferable to signing as it is the norm, part of a more socially acceptable, able-bodied, pattern of behaviour to which all should aspire (Butler and Bowlby 1997). Assisting students to speak and communicate orally is seen as aiding their participation in society and hence to be of benefit to them.

In contrast, however, advocates of the social model of disability have stressed the importance of the broad economic structures of society in creating disability (Oliver 1990, Barnes 1991, Butler and Bowlby 1997). Such writings have raised awareness that right wing, normalisation philosophies place little if any emphasis on society's need to adapt to the d/Deaf individual's needs or the value of Deaf culture, including sign language.

More left wing ideologies talk of human rights and equal opportunities (Corker 1994). Deaf culture, including its languages,[2] should be respected like those of any ethnic group. An individual's preferred language and methods of coping with daily tasks should be respected and work harmoniously alongside other alternative strategies. The recognition of the cultural value of sign language in this way has been reflected by the return of manualism to teaching policies in the last thirty years (Baynton 1997).

An increased ability to communicate offers much potential. However, with the lack of recognition from the British Government of BSL as a language (Disability Now 2000a, 2001) and the limited use of the language outside the Deaf community, the right to choose to sign does not necessarily result in integration, but can rather in many instances lead to segregation. As one university's Disability Support Officer put it:

> I'd say yes segregation fundamentally is wrong, however if the kids that you've got involved in the education are using a different language to everybody else in the school then any kind of integration is going to be segregated anyway if that makes sense.

For any form of communication to be effective it must operate efficiently for both the informant and the recipient. If a speaker or signer has a limited vocabulary, or if someone cannot understand, or even access, the fluent signs or words they express, the interaction of the two has little value. Information must be available in a range of forms that all can comprehend regardless of sensory impairment, a `total information environment' (Hurst 1996: 135). In relation to education of d/Deaf youths Corker (1994: 150) argues:

> The location of the environment is immaterial compared with the language environment, the breadth of knowledge of teaching staff and the peer group, and the fluency of communication.

Her sentiments could be applied to any space a d/Deaf individual may enter. It makes clear the need for understanding of Deaf culture including its language by the hearing population with whom the d/Deaf are expected to integrate. Total education policies of bilingualism (oralism and manualism) are now seen as the way forward by many professionals, not just for d/Deaf children, but their peers as well (Gregory et al 1995).

With an international market place in mind, much emphasis has been placed on the teaching of foreign languages to children from an early age. The potential value of teaching sign language, in a similar manner, was explained by one Communication Support Worker who said:

> I remember the example of [a mainstream school] where they have a total communication unit there - I mean there's little totlets, 5, 6, 7 years, running round signing. [...] I saw kids in the playground signing at each other - you couldn't tell which was deaf, which was hearing, because they'd learnt to sign with the other kids.

This type of situation is, however, still rare. It is more common for sign language speakers to be in a segregated minority in their places of education, work and leisure.

The lack of general awareness about d/Deaf issues, and in particular the lack of sign

language users in every day public spaces create the biggest barriers to d/Deaf youths integration into society. Restricted numbers of professionals who can sign limits their ability to communicate with and develop improved understandings of the Deaf community. It also has serious implications for the assistance youths receive from public and private sector, service providers.

A lack of interpreters

The professionals interviewed reported a lack of qualified interpreters for formal settings such as training workshops or business appointments. Where interpreters are required they usually have to be booked at least two weeks in advance, and often are cancelled at the last moment if the interpreter is called to an emergency. There can be particular problems where advanced levels of sign are required to deal with technical or legal language. As one university's Disability Support Officer explained:

> Interpreters are rare and interpreters who can interpret for mechanical engineering and computing and graphic design and business studies. I mean that isn't me being flippant, those are the areas that we've got d/Deaf students in at the moment and one interpreter came to me and said `look I can't do this mechanical engineering any more, it's going right over my head, I really don't understand it, you need to get someone in who's got mechanical engineering experience and is an interpreter' - well there just isn't [such] a beast you know.

The limited numbers of signers and the cost of them, as well as the undesirability of having to have a third party with you at all times, creates further problems in more informal, social settings. For example, however successful their early schooling, many young people drop out of college or university because while they have signing support from interpreters in lectures they are socially isolated. Few fellow students sign and communicate easily with them in social contexts. One city's Director of Deaf Education Services explained that many individuals will consider moving or travelling large distances to specialist colleges to avoid such situations. This can lead to self-perpetuation of segregation of the d/Deaf from their hearing peers.

Even for students in specialist colleges, there are inevitably times when interpreters are needed to assist them. Often this can be a role filled by a social worker. Apart from the general stigmatism that can be attached to having a social worker there are further problems relating specifically to social workers for the d/Deaf.

The conflicting roles of social workers for the d/Deaf

As Paratt (1995) found, social workers for the d/Deaf often have to be jack-of-all-trades. This means their work is sometimes seen as low status within the profession. The lack of social workers who can sign adequately means it is hard to fill job vacancies. The working class city that this research was conducted in is currently without a social worker for the d/Deaf for this very reason. What is more, where once the Local Authorities used to pay for and provide time out for BSL courses, staff now have to fund their own language training (Paratt 1995). All of this can mean a high turn over of personnel, at times reducing the consistency of service provided.

Another finding of this research supported by Paratt's (1995) study is that other local

authority providers (e.g. housing or health departments) often refuse to pay for interpreters (to save budgets) and try to make the social workers for the d/Deaf interpret for the young people. The social workers are caught in a trap: they do not want to act in this role as this is not their job and blurs the boundaries of their responsibilities, but if they do not the young people have no voice and cannot follow the proceedings of meetings.

A further factor is that, where a social worker does stay in post, they often follow d/Deaf young people from birth to adulthood. This is positive in that they can develop relationships, continuity and confidence with them. But it can have negative consequences because the social workers have to fulfill roles as both agents of control (e.g. child protection) and support (e.g. transition planning). Inevitably sometimes these roles clash (Paratt 1995). For hearing young people these twin roles would actually be provided by different social workers. As one member of a County Deaf Team put it.

> Once we start getting involved we usually are the only consistent thing in a deaf person's life and they have to come back to us to make sure they get the rest of everything else they can. And it shouldn't be that way, they shouldn't have to rely on Social Services because they're deaf - you know, it's nothing else, and the rest of society don't have to rely on Social Services to get what they need - from - but deaf people do. And it's really, really difficult to try and break that cycle, to make sure that the agencies out there are doing what they should be doing for deaf people, like they do for everybody else, so that deaf people don't consistently have to keep coming back to us and saying: `What about this, what about that?'

The need for people other than their social worker to interpret for the d/Deaf youths at times is clear. This is true not least in the home.

Home and the family

Social workers for the d/Deaf argue that educating hearing parents about Deaf culture and in particular teaching them to sign is one of the most effective ways of providing support and countering marginalisation for young d/Deaf people.

> ... A lot of parents in the past didn't learn to sign with their children, therefore they couldn't communicate with their children - but the schools could. So they'd go home and they'd no communication, so they had behaviour problems and they [the parents] couldn't understand why. And they didn't realise that this child has a personality, he has a nature, he can show you it, but he needs to be able to sign to you for you to understand him. (Communication Support Officer)

Members of ethnic minorities whose families first spoken language is not English can have further problems due to the lack of interpreters who can either translate for such families or indeed teach them to sign themselves. In general, service provisions for d/Deaf members of ethnic minorities have been found to be lacking, resulting in relatively low take up rates of services in these communities (Taylor 1999).

Asian deaf youths often have no way of developing a sense of Asian identity. Unable to

communicate with their parents they can find it difficult to attend the Mosque and understand religious teachings or other cultural events. As a result professionals believe they often have no sense of their `Asian' identity and a negative understanding of their d/Deaf identity.

One Learning Support Co-ordinator explained the difficulties she had faced in attempting to run a signing course for Asian Mothers of d/Deaf youths.

> ... At least half of them didn't have any English at all and the other half just had a smatter of English. I had no Urdu, Punjabi, and no knowledge of Asian cultures whatsoever....

She went on to explain how the cultural intolerance of eye contact or physical contact between such a group of women meant that she had to reconsider her usual teaching methods.

The sense of isolation and frustration in the home for d/Deaf youths with hearing parents who do not sign can be extreme (Gregory et al. 1995). The realisation, often during the late teens that they are d/Deaf and that this is not `normal' can be difficult to deal with. This process of self-recognition, coming out, has been noted of disabled people more broadly (Shakespeare et al. 1996). Often in mainstream schools with no or few other d/Deaf youths they have no knowledge or ready access to, what may be expected to be, the supportive space of the Deaf community and its culture. However, even for d/Deaf young people with d/Deaf parents the Deaf community is not always the supportive group of people that it may be perceived or expected to be.

Divisions in the 'Deaf community'

Wooley (1994) describes finding a welcoming and supportive Deaf community upon experiencing hearing loss, but many of the professionals we spoke with raised concerns about what they saw as the marked political divisions in the d/Deaf population as a whole (see also Weale 1999). One explained that:

> [T]here are some people who have been so rejected by the Deaf community that they subconsciously are rejecting sign language so much so that they say they can't learn it which does seem a bit crazy to me because when I learnt sign language as a result of losing my hearing it was like going home, it was like oh God, thank God for that you know now I'm home, now I'm comfortable. People are different I know but I think the stresses that there are around are such that - the impression that exists is such that you can completely reject your own culture and the people that are in it because of the way you're viewed. (University's Disability Support Officer)

In line with the social model of disability, this comment draws attention to the impact negative social constructions of d/Deafness can have upon d/Deaf people. The lack of d/Deaf awareness in society and the images of inferiority, weakness and incapability that are linked to the majority of disabled people (Oliver 1990, Barnes 1991), mean that d/Deaf youths have to make certain choices about the methods they will use to cope with the marginalisation they experience. It is the various political beliefs related to these choices that create many of the divisions within the Deaf community and most notably between deaf and Deaf people.

Social pressures can either be complied with or fought against (Butler 1998). At one extreme deaf youths may internalise social constructs, have low opinions of themselves as deaf,

and attempt to `pass' as `normal.' They may have cochlea implants, choose oralist schooling and form relationships with hearing partners in line with the right wing normalisation philosophies outlined above.[3]

The more left wing extreme is to reject negative social constructs, take pride in a Deaf identity, Deaf culture and sign language, as Ladd's quote made clear. Drawing attention and understanding to their culture, including their language, is a key aim of many Deaf people and those who work with them. Making their voices heard, however, can be difficult, both politically and practically. The police and other service providers are not immune to a lack of d/Deaf awareness in Britain (Disability Now 2000b). When protesting their cases d/Deaf young people sometimes end up in trouble at school or with the police because vigorous signing or shouting in frustration is misunderstood as aggressive or threatening behaviour. As a member of a County Deaf Team explained:

> Yeah, if a deaf person is actually finding communicating with another person very difficult, and say they raise their voice or they're shouting 'cos they're trying to make themselves understood, or - of course, that's misinterpreted.... [I]f the deaf young people are aggressive, or appear to be aggressive and then they're handcuffed, how are you gonna communicate, you know - it's a real problem.

The impact of the current lack of understanding of d/Deaf culture and sign language is again made clear.

Conclusion: The way forward

If d/Deaf people are ever to be fully integrated into British society rather than normalised or tolerated as a marginalised `ethnic' group, there has to be increased understanding and awareness of Deaf culture and not least its language. Only then will d/Deaf people themselves be able to have a positive self-image and be free to choose the first language that suits them as individuals best without political pressures from the Deaf community or beyond

The Disability Discrimination Act (1995) has opened up new legislative routes to access to different spaces and provision of services within them. The media, including the magazine programmes, See Hear (BBC2) and VEE-TV (Channel 4), and the Independent Television Commission's promise of increased levels of subtitles and signing on programmes (Disability Now 1999) are, arguably, slowly raising public awareness, but there is still a long way to go.

For full integration to become a reality there needs to be an increased number of signers in all walks of life, not least amongst social workers and other service providers. There needs to be a greater support and awareness training for families from all ethnic backgrounds. There needs to be total education policies in schools teaching BSL alongside other languages in the curriculum. Perhaps of most significance, however, there firstly needs to be recognition of BSL as a language by the British parliament. This is something that the Disability Rights Commission[4] has recently called for in line with the Council of Europe's Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (Disability Now 2001).

This paper started by noting the sorrow caused by the loss of a language. It is time we considered how much greater the sorrow when a language widely used fails to be acknowledged as part of a nation's rich tapestry of cultures.

Notes

1. Throughout this paper the terms `deaf' and `Deaf' are used to distinguish between the two dominant constructions of deafness that influence deaf peoples' lives. The lower case is used to construe a category of disability, people with medically defined hearing impairments. The upper case is used more politically to construe membership of a linguistic minority who find themselves disabled by social structures and institutions (see Lane 1997). We note that many d/Deaf people do not consider themselves to be `disabled.'

2. The plural `languages' is used in acknowledgement of the differences between BSL and other forms, such as American Sign Language (ASL) and Australian Sign Language (AUSIan).

3. We acknowledge and respect that some deaf people believe a spoken language to be their preferred first language.

4. This is an advisory body to the Secretary of State in Britain set up as part of the Disability Discrimination Act 1995.

Acknowledgements

We are extremely grateful to all our interviewees who have given up their time to share their experiences with us. The research is funded by ESRC grant number L134 251 032.

About the authors

Ruth Butler is a Lecturer in Applied Social Research at the University of Hull. Her research interests include: disability, sexuality, social identities, and social exclusion. She is the co-editor of Mind and Body Spaces (Routledge) and has published several articles on the geography of disability.

Sara McNamee is a Research Assistant on the ESRC funded Constructing Children's Welfare project at the University of Bradford. Her research interests lie in the areas of childhood, youth, gender, sexuality and children's use of the media and communications technologies. She has published a number of articles on the sociology of childhood.

Tracey Skelton is a lecturer in the department of geography at Loughborough University. Her current research focuses on young people in the UK and issues of identity and senses of place in the Caribbean. She is the co-editor of Cool Places and Culture and Global Change (both published by Routledge).

Gill Valentine is Professor of Geography at the University of Sheffield. Her research interests include: children, youth, parenting and sexuality. She is author/editor of five books and has published widely within the areas of social, cultural and feminist geography.

References

Barnes, C. (1991) *Disabled People in Britain and Discrimination*, London: Hurst.

Baxter, S. (1999) "Should deaf people be forced to communicate in `spoken' language?" *The Guardian*, November 24, reproduced at <http://www.guardianunlimited.co.uk/Archive /Article/0,4273,3933897,00.html>.

Baynton, D. (1997) "A silent exile on this earth," in Davis, L. J. (Ed) *The Disability Studies Reader*, London & New York: Routledge, pp. 128-150.

Boswell, J. (1785) *The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides, with Samuel Johnson, LL.D.*, London: Printed by Henry Baldwin, for Charles Dilly. See entry for September 18, 1773.

Butler, R. (1998) "Rehabilitating the images of disabled youths," in Skelton, T. and Valentine, G. (Eds) *Cool Places: Geographies of Youth Culture*, London & New York: Routledge, pp. 83-100.

Butler, R. and Bowlby, S. (1997) "Bodies and spaces: An exploration of disabled people's experiences of public space," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 15: 411-433

Campbell, J. and Oliver, M. (1996) *Disability Politics: Understanding Our Past, Changing Our Future*, London & New York: Routledge.

Corker, M. (1994) "Integration and deaf people: The policy and power of enabling environments," in Swain, K., Finkelstein, V., French, S. and Oliver, M. (Ed) *Disabling Barriers - Enabling Environments*, London: Sage, pp.145-154.

Disability Now (1999) *Sign quota*, October, p. 5.

Disability Now (2000a) *Scots leading way on BSL*, March, p. 1.

Disability Now (2000b) *Police fail on deaf awareness*, January, p. 5.

Disability Now (2001) *DRC makes BSL demand*, February, p. 7.

Gregory, S., Bishop, J. and Sheldon, L. (1995) *Deaf Young People and Their Families: Developing understanding*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hurst, A. (1996) "Reflecting on researching disability and higher education," in Barton, L. (Ed) *Disability and Society: Emerging Issues and Insights*, London: Longman, pp. 123-143.

Lane, H. (1997) "Constructions of Deafness," in Davis, L. J. (Ed) *The Disability Studies Reader*, London & New York: Routledge, pp. 153-171.

Northway, R. (1997) "Integration and inclusion: Illusion or progress in services for disabled people," *Social Policy and Administration* 31(2): 157-172.

Oliver, M. (1990) *The Politics of Disablement*, London: MacMillan.

Paratt, D. (1995) "Working with deaf people," *Disability and Society* 10(4): 501-519.

Shakespeare, T., Gillespie-Sells, K. and Davies, D. (1996) *The Sexual Politics of Disability*, London: Cassell.

Taylor, G. (1999) "Empowerment, identity and participatory research: Using social action research to challenge isolation for deaf and hard of hearing people from minority ethnic communities," *Disability and Society* 14(3): 369-384.

Weale, S. (1999) "Hearing both sides: Why would parents deny a deaf child the right to hear?" *The Guardian*, October 6, reproduced at <http://www.guardianunlimited.co.uk/Archive/Article /0,4273,3909587,00.html>.

Wooley, M. (1994) "Acquired hearing loss: Acquired oppression," in Swain, K., Finkelstein, V., French, S. and Oliver, M. (Eds) *Disabling Barriers - Enabling Environments*, London: Sage, pp. 78-84.