Deaf not Dumb: Perceptions of the d/Deaf Community in Dundee

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d/Deaf people live in a world without sound, yet it is the same world that we all inhabit. They have a language that reflects the national language and their own culture and traditions, adapted to their needs and lifestyle. I am 'hearing', but out of personal interest have been learning British sign language for five years. I visit the local Deaf Club in Dundee regularly for my Sign Language level 2 course and exams. Deaf people from all over Fife gather here on a daily basis for a range of activities and purposes, from Bingo nights or film screenings to fitness classes. But above all they gather to chat, to communicate, and to be integrated, for once, fully into the crowd around them, in which they make good friends. According to the Norwegian Social Anthropologist Jan-Kåre Breivik in his revolutionary book *Deaf Identities in the Making* (2005), and from what I experienced in the Dundee Deaf Hub, d/Deaf people tend to gravitate towards each other, creating tight communities in which they can share as equals. In these communities they feel a sense of integration being listened to and understood; whilst "integration" in the outside world tends to make them feel lonely, often being misunderstood and made to feel "dumb".

My hypothesis is that the majority of deaf people are most fulfilled in life when surrounded by deaf friends and a deaf community that manifests a deaf culture. In my ethnographic research project I intend to examine the deaf culture through the notions of the Deaf identity, relationships, and by investigating hearing people's perceptions of Deaf people and Deaf people's perceptions of hearing people. I thus hope to dissect the tension between isolation versus integration of Deaf people in society. All these areas will cover the importance of language both as a tool for ethnography as well as a tool to decipher a culture. I will be looking at why deaf people form such tight knit social groups, the culture that this manifests, and the extent to which hearing people, such as myself, are able to partake in and become part of the "deaf culture".

According to Malinowski "Language is the ethnographers most important tool" (1935:4), thus, I took advantage of knowing British sign language and attempted to integrate with the people in Dundee Tayside Deaf Club. During my weekly two hour BSL course that takes place in the club, there is a twenty-minute break where I went to the cafeteria and "signed" with some of the people sitting there, obviously most of whom were deaf. After the break I took a moment to write notes, but kept my notebook away during the conversation. Not only is it rude in BSL to hold any thing that might obstruct your hand signs such as a pen (the equivalent to talking with your mouth full I suppose), but I also wanted to keep the conversation flowing, keeping the informant at ease. Therefore I did not use a standardized questionnaire, as I wanted to keep the conversation spontaneous in order to gather as much information as naturally as possible. I also used some online research through the alldeaf.com chat forum and various d/Deaf Facebook groups.

However, I had more success in gaining insight into the deaf culture from the face-to-face, signed conversations and participant observation in the Deaf Club than the chats and browsing I did online with faceless informants. It became quickly clear to me how the Deaf culture is mostly conveyed in the physical attributes of the language and behavioral action; though some online written opinions were useful. My informants responded less enthusiastically when I initially tried a structured interview, introducing the conversation formally with the fact that I was doing research into the Deaf culture for a Social Anthropology essay. I now understand why this may have come across as strange or tedious. I will explore the reasons for this later on. Thus I used an unstructured method of research in order to try and integrate with, rather than investigate, their culture, as well as participant observations from the cafeteria that I noted down. I had a signed conversation with my deaf BSL teacher David and other members of the Deaf club including Donald the deaf porter. Though I did not commit to a structured questionnaire, I asked all my informants similar questions such as 'How do you interact with the hearing world?' 'Do you have many hearing friends?' 'Would you rather marry a deaf person or a hearing person?' I also noted the ways in which they socialize with one another

compared to a hearing community. The focus therefore is what makes the Deaf culture so rich, while resting on the periphery of hearing society, in an overwhelmingly aural world, and to what extent hearing people can become part of the Deaf culture.

Deaf Relationships

As I enter the bustling cafeteria there is a sense of energy in the room, more notable to me due to there being less noise. Hands are waving everywhere, and faces are engrossed in conversations. The people there seem to be great friends with one another; hugs, kisses, patting on backs and laughing. In my notebook, under the heading "Behavioral Observations" I commented how the deaf people are more tactile with one another, whether it is to grab each other's attention or just to share hugs and kisses. I had to get used to my Deaf teacher David hugging me goodbye at the end of every class. According to scientists (Levaen, Hamdorf 2001) congenitally deaf humans have enhanced tactile sensitivity. Thus I noticed the overt joy and family like way in which the people in the deaf club socialized with each other. I also saw that hearing people who can sign, often actual family members or workers in the d/Deaf community, were engaged in this community spirit. However, there was no one there who could not sign.

From my research it became apparent that relationships amongst deaf people could only be fully successful by a shared experience of using sign language. I learnt that the most fulfilling deaf relationships are when both individuals are culturally Deaf. I talked to David about his marital relationships. In a signed conversation before the evening BSL course started and everyone had arrived, I chatted with him about life in general. His wife had been sick so I asked about that, and about his wife. This led him to tell me about his two marriages. He used to be married to a hearing woman; they had a child, but then they divorced. They couldn't communicate well. He never went with her to the pub or socialised together. They had not much to talk about. But now he is happily married to a deaf woman. They talk all day, and enjoy going out for dinners and to the pub together. He was very

expressive about how much he hated his first marriage with the hearing woman but was now happy to be married with a Deaf woman.

This "sameness" is what transcends their 'disability' and enables the deaf to be normal and socially at ease. According to Carrier (1999:21) friendship is "based on spontaneous and unconstrained sentiments" and communication with one another. However Carrier attempts to remove the physical difference "utility" from the picture of perfect friendship, whereas, in my view this is essential to the cohesion of the deaf community and its friendships. It is their deafness that brings them together. This loss of this faculty of difference can be found once integrated in the Deaf Culture. About 90% of deaf people are born into hearing families, and therefore do not experience a sense of normality or equality at home amongst their own kinship. The Deaf Club enables people who share deafness to transcend their disability and therefore find new identity, rather than feel forever defined by their deafness. This corresponds to Simmel's theory expressed in 'The Metroplis and Mental Life (1964) in regard to the density of the city. He notes that increasing specialization of behaviour and needs tend to limit individual self-expression (subjective culture) and the ability to differentiate oneself from others. Thus without community a tension arises between the will toward, and the drowning of, individuality.

According to Breivik, *"Deaf people, as other minority members, live on the edge of traditional society and employ peripheral vision/wisdom to function in the worlds in which they live. As such they have arrived at a highly comparative outlook on life and their self-identities, which are emerging and less than settled. They thus exemplify the late modern outlook that takes no fixed position for granted, and they engage in a pervasive self-reflection. Deaf identities are thus very much in the making and in the process of "becoming"* (2005:18).

Thus, Simmel and Breivik convey the importance of finding ones identity within a community that shares the same experiences, whereas in the hearing world relations are often defined by biological or territorial co-presence. Deaf people may find "equals" in foreign places, according to mutual experience rather than place.

Breivik says that it is natural for deaf people to find themselves "being at home among strangers" (2005:1), something I saw among the people in the Dundee Deaf Club.

In order to find out more about the extent to which mutual lack of hearing was so crucial to successful relationships of deaf people I opted to direct my question to a range of deaf individuals from different ages and genders. So I turned to my cyber Deaf informants with a question on an open deaf chat-room called Alldeaf.com: "*I would love to know your thoughts on relationships. Are you open to marrying a hearing person who knows BSL, or would you rather marry someone who is deaf?*" I received twenty-nine responses. Fourteen said that they would rather marry another deaf person, two were indifferent, and three agreed with an informants comment that she would rather marry a "*culturally deaf whether he can hear or not*".

I appreciated this comment as it revealed something to me that hearing people can also be integrated into the deaf community and become an equal as long as they behave in a way that is "culturally deaf". Culturally deaf is to be part of the Deaf community that integrates with deaf people and uses sign language. Rather than being just deaf (defined by a lower case 'd' rather than a capital) which is a person that wants to integrate with the hearing world and not with the deaf community. Sign Language was a key part of my 'immersion' into the Deaf Club. Similarly Simmel states that by meeting an individual through shared experience of, in his case the city, we overcome the barriers and "blasé" feelings that he describes in 'The Metropolis and Mental Life (1964).

Perceptions of d/Deafness

During the tea break in the canteen a conversation about government benefits came up. I asked Susan, a middle aged deaf woman, what sort of disability benefits she received for being deaf. Her response conveyed great pride, as she took no hesitation to respond in sign:

"Being deaf isn't a disability. It was never a disability. We just get benefits"

Her grinning facial expression conveyed her witticism. I replied *"But you can't hear! How do you communicate with hearing people that can't sign on a daily basis?"*

With a straight face she said *"It's hard to talk to hearing people because they don't make the effort most of the time"* (Her sign for 'don't make the effort' was the same sign as 'ignore').

Our conversation continued and led onto the things she hates that hearing people do or say to deaf people. *"I totally hate the 'I'll pray for you'—I've had that numerous times. Pray for what? Nothing's wrong with me, ma'am or sir!"*

In mainstream hearing society we see deafness as a defect. By defining the Deaf community as a "culture" deaf people are no longer a disabled group but rather a minority. Weber (1978:26) discussed the importance of individuals being part of a community to evoke emotion and reactions amongst each other and thus a greater sense of personal identity. This corresponds to Breivik's theory (2005) that deaf people find their identity in tight knit deaf communities. Deaf people are proud of their community, calling themselves a minority and upholding their unique language as one of the key factors that makes their culture, and what distinguishes deafness from other disabilities such as blindness and physical disabilities. As David told me *"I am happy and proud to be Deaf. I got meningitis when I was two. I could be brain damaged or blind, but I'm only deaf"*.

As I was walking into the Club, I had just hung up from a phone call, I was approached by a traffic warden who told me that the cars parked outside were in the wrong place, but she didn't want to approach the Deaf Club to warn them of their illegally parked cars out of fear of a communication barrier. Silverstein (2004:643) speaks of the 'fashion of speaking' in regard to wine tasting, however here the same risk of embarrassment of getting the 'fashion of speaking'

misunderstood creates the social divide between the hearing and deaf. The warden, realising I was hearing from my phone conversation, asked me to translate the problem to the Deaf Club. Donald, the porter to whom I translated the situation to later said to me *"some hearing people don't even try to speak to us!"* If the warden were to be aware of the fact that most deaf people can lip-read, then she could potentially integrate with the deaf, just as the wine taster integrates with his group of wine connoisseurs if he just knows the way to talk about wine.

Helen Keller, a famous deaf, dumb and eventually blind author, was alleged to have said, "Blindness cuts people off from things, deafness cuts people off from people" (Halpern 1995). Communication barriers are not the only reason, but so too are cultural differences in a hearing world as hearing people tend to treat deafness as pathology. Sign language is often seen as an inferior substitute for spoken communication (Underwood Pinborough 1991). Many well-meaning hearing professionals work passionately to make the deaf "un-deaf". Audiologists and doctors work on medical developments such as the cochlear implants that are signs of a 'hopeful' future that will one day eradicate deafness altogether. Although these methods are positive in trying to help a deaf person have the most fulfilling life, by integrating them into the hearing world, they can also undermine their rich Deaf culture.

Back in the cafeteria I managed to veer our conversation onto how deaf people perceive hearing people. Not only did my informants see hearing people as often "ignorant" they also laughed and said they were "boring". I asked why, and they said "their conversations look boring because they have no facial expressions". Another interesting stereotype came up that was deemed to be a cause of the great culture difference. The phrase "deaf and dumb" has come to stereotype deaf people as automatically "dumb". Not only is this a derogatory term for idiot, but also a misconception of all deaf people being mute and therefore completely incapable of communicating with hearing people. I asked Rachel, the middle aged deaf woman I had struck up conversation with, what she thought about the use of the terms "mute" or "dumb":

She said, "*I don't like the word 'mute'… it makes it seem like Deaf people cannot converse at all… Hearing people assume that 'mute' is 'dumb'… if only hearing people knew just how intelligent and capable we deafies really are…. *". The word "dumb" is given as the equivalent of "mute" as "mute" is the meaning of "dumb". As a matter of fact, this is an inadequate expression of the real conditions. It is true that the word "dumb" is used for a person who is unable to speak due to deafness, while "mute" is someone who refrains themselves from speech[1]. Rivers discusses this problem of language in his work in the Melanesian culture. Here the word "mate" had similar misusages and ambiguities (1997:211). He discusses how a word has a different meaning within context of the culture it belongs to, such as a primitive Melanesian one, compared to an outsider's interpretation of it.

Conclusion

Walking into the Deaf Club as a hearing person, previously unaware of the existence of such an integrated deaf community, I discovered a whole other culture that lies on the periphery of our hearing world. I became more aware of their joyfulness and pride as my pity for their handicap turned into awe and interest. Their disability seemed to me so pertinent in the silence of the cafeteria that bustled with life. The more confident I became in sign language the more I began to penetrate the deaf culture and become a part of it somehow. "Language is not just about communication, it has a definite relation to the life of those who speak it and to their mental habits and attitudes" (Malinowski 1935:6). Sign Language is not only a method of communication but also a way of behaving that is different to any other language. It involves gestures of touching, pointing, facial expressions and actions that are not used in spoken languages. For example deaf people don't clap; they wave both hands in the air instead. However once this action is known by any hearing or deaf person, it is understood and can become integrated. Thus, the dichotomy of deaf and hearing can be overcome by sharing of experience and language. Wrigley (1996:104) states, *"While deaf people hold experiences in common*

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[1] Definitions from the online Oxford Dictionary.

and Deaf identity is by the physical register of sign language, the sense of "citizenship" inheres in a process, in social relations. This citizenship is not a static commodity of deafness or of sign language as a modality: It lies in the social exchange of recognition produced through signing. It is the immersion in the exchange that produces this sense of citizenship that needs no place" (Wrigley 1996:104).

Thus through exploring Deaf relationships, perceptions of deafness, how Deaf people are perceived and vice versa, the importance of community has become clear to the joy that I witnessed in the Dundee Tayside Deaf Club. Experiencing "sameness" brings people together and isolates others, enabling individuals to find their own identity through "unconstrained" relationships and a common cultural language within the life and familiarity of their community.

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