Seeing the Deaf in “Deafness”

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This article draws on some of the existing literature on the politics of identity and representation as related to minority group formation. It applies this to constructions of Deaf identity from a cultural and linguistic perspective and contrasts this with dominant constructions of Deaf people as disabled. It highlights a number of ways in which Deaf identity differs from disabled identity, demonstrating that the cultural and linguistic construction of Deaf people is a more useful tool for analysis. It raises questions aimed to examine the discourse on deafness and seeks further debate on how best the discourse can be progressed. The article raises issues related to the use of terminology and labeling in the field of deafness. It contends that the continued use of the word deafness is unworkable and should be more widely recognized as a social construct, which has current usage beyond the paradigm in which it was originally intended. The article concludes by recognizing the importance of diversity in identity formation, while simultaneously calling for an appreciation of the need to incorporate this diversity within wider theorizing, focused on commonality and cohesion in identity as a source of collective expression and political mobilization.

“One hears today of identity and its problems more often than ever before in modern times” (Bauman, 1996, p. 18). This statement is still true more than a decade later. Identity and the right to define one’s own identity have unanimously risen up the political agenda in all parts of the world. Identity has formed the basis for bloody wars and acts of terrorism both within and between countries. Take for example the politics of Northern Ireland, Kashmir, Basque Spain, Kosovo, and Cyprus that have all been identified as sights of ethnic conflict (Wolff, 2006). An important part of these conflicts is the right for self-definition and the claim for recognition within a particular identity under debate. The aim of this paper is to add to academic and substantive debates around Deaf identity and representation.

Yet there is also a growing body of academic discourse that throws into question the very validity of reconstructing universalizing identities, regardless of the attempts being made to create liberatory theories. Attempts at reconstructing identity attract postmodern criticisms of essentialism which call for recognition of the diversity within all identities. The issue of diversity within race and the establishment of a Black identity has been considered in some depth by Alexander (2002), Collins (2000), Hall (1992), hooks (1990a), Modood (2003), and Pilkington (2003), all of whom point to the practical and ontological limits of trying to work within an all encompassing term “Black” which bears no reflection of the ethnic and cultural diversities this incorporates. In relation to feminism, Begum (1992), Butler (1999), Grossberg (1996), hooks (1990b), and Morris (1993) all point to the need to focus not on feminism but feminisms in recognition of the limits of an overarching definition of feminism that fails in its representation of a multitude of experiences of different groups of women. Begum (1992), Morris (1993), and Vernon (1999) too have argued for a disability agenda that is more representative of the diversity it encompasses, rather than one which privileges the white, male, or heterosexual disabled experience as the dominant foundation for developing theory and research in disability.
Cuff et al. (2006) in their coverage of emancipatory discourses identify three phases through which emancipatory theorizing passes. The first phase is an inclusionist phase, which is mainly concerned with correcting the dominant ideological inaccuracies that have been presented by the mainstream narratives. Further development then moves on to a more radical separatist movement and later on to a transgressive phase where more diversity and flexibility in approach is encouraged. They point out that it was in the initial collective phase that much of the distinctions were made in terms of the terminology and definitions that went to shape future discourse in feminist theory. In relation to Deaf discourse, it seems that the initial corrective phase has been under way for decades (for a more comprehensive review, see Senghas & Monaghan, 2002), but perhaps, still further debate is required in relation to definition and terminology in order to aid further progress.

Looking at the stages outlined above through which other emancipatory theories have passed, it might be worth evaluating which stage the Deaf discourse is at. There is certainly a significant amount of resources out there that challenge the dominant ideologies and inaccuracies from mainstream narratives, but is there still need for further debate about language and terminology that could further progress future Deaf discourse? Or should Deaf people take comfort in recognizing that the inadequacies of distinction lie not in their own signed languages but in the language of the oppressors? Or is there a need to push for change in terminology that might help to penetrate those doors of power from which Deaf people have been excluded for so long?

Deaf Cultural Discourse and the Politics of Identity

Calls for the recognition of a distinct Deaf identity may also therefore come under much criticism. Indeed in her paper entitled “Do we want one or multiple Deaf Nations?” Lillian Lawson (2002) reveals a great many of the tensions that exist in attempts to establish a culturally Deaf identity and highlights some of the exclusion and hurt that has been felt by some people as a result of this quest. So where in lies the answer? Issues of Deaf identity may well prove no less complicated to theorize than those that have proceeded on race and gender for example.

What also needs to be remembered, however, is the historical significance of the development of racial and feminist theories, a significant part of which were developed as a product of resistance to oppressive theories about women and Black people. The subsequent critiques of these generic theories have developed over time, but are critiques that have evolved at a time when the theorizing around these identities is secure enough to withstand such challenge and to resist the threat of nihilism in outcome. The question lies open as to whether Deaf identity or identities are in an equally safeguarded position.

Some important dimensions to identity discourse are those of power, powerlessness, identity as a source of power, and the intersection between the three. Minority or subaltern identities have for a long time been constructed in a negative way by the powerful wider majority. Political identity formation has often involved reconstruction through resistance and challenge. The politics of identity therefore is very often conjoined with the politics of difference, resistance, and representation (Grossberg, 1996; Hall, 1996; Rutherford, 1990).

Hall (1992), when writing about the developments in discourses around race and ethnicity, has spoken about the struggle for representation, which proved to be a unifying force of resistance against constructions of a Black identity which fitted only the hegemonic ideals of the majority Eurocentric constructionists. In the case of “deafness,” hegemonic ideals around the construction of “deafness,” and Deaf people have more recently been challenged in terms of Deaf people’s own self-narrated accounts of Deaf culture and identity, Deaf pride, and a Deaf history that acknowledges the atrocities that have historically and currently been carried out by hearing professionals in the name of advancing the deaf cause.

It must be recognized that Deaf cultural emancipatory discourse has been developed and progressed over the past few decades (see for example, Bauman, 2008; Dimmock, 1993; Ladd, 2003; Lane, 1984, 1992; Padden and Humphries, 1988, 2005; Woodward, 1982), but this does not seem to have been embraced within the wider emancipatory movements let alone more mainstream social theories. Developing on from Foucault’s stance that “every form of power creates its
own form of resistance” (Foucault cited in Cuff et al., 2006). The particularities of this power and resistance deserve some examination here.

The first step is to make clear the distinctions employed in this article. The distinctions I make are between deaf people who have lived most of their life as hearing people and have subsequently lost their hearing (usually later in life) but still communicate through speech. There are also deaf individuals who have sought to communicate orally because of the education choices that have been made on their behalf. These deaf people face a number of different issues including the problems of finding a system of navigation within the hearing society which they seek to embrace or emulate. For them, the level of hearing loss will be a crucial factor in enabling or disabling them in this pursuit. It is not these individuals I have in mind when I write this article.

I write instead about the distinct Deaf communities who refer to themselves not as a disabled group as is the dominant hearing articulation, rather their own lived reality is that of members of a cultural and linguistic minority who share a pride in their signed language and cultural norms that are distinct and in some cases in opposition to that of the hearing society (Ladd, 2003; Lane, 1992). Ladd (2003) himself a Deaf academic has written extensively about the collective identity of Deaf people and the need to interact with each other. Schein (1993) in his book entitled “At home amongst strangers” also draws on the innate need of the Deaf collective and highlights the lengths that some Deaf people will go in order to accomplish this ambition. Deaf pride in their culture and the efforts made to maintain and nurture it are absent from the dominant constructions of Deaf people as disabled. Such constructions have been written into legislation and form the foundations of social policy to such an extent that it has become entwined in dominant hegemonic representations of Deaf people.

The Social Construction of Deaf People as Disabled

I wish to make clear here that in attempting to disassociate Deaf people from the social construction of disability, it is not in any way an attempt to impose any superior or inferior status on either Deaf or disabled people, rather it is from the premise of equal but different. Many Deaf people reject the disabled label in favor of the cultural and linguistic minority construction (Ladd, 2003; Ladd et al., 2003; Lane, 1995; Padden and Humphries, 1988, 2005). This is an attempt to show how the latter is a more accurate construction.

In terms of minority/majority group relations, the oppressor of Deaf people has been hearing people. Deaf people’s language has been willfully suppressed in favor of speech. Education through speech has been imposed on Deaf people across the world at an unacceptably high premium (Ladd, 2003). On this level, disabled people on the whole form part of the dominant hearing and speaking majority. Within the social model of disability, Deaf people are constructed as having an impairment and are therefore seen as disabled (Finkelstein, 1990; Oliver, 1990). If we are to examine the relationship in terms of minority/majority group relations, then this is the only instance in which the expectation is that the majority is also part of the minority and vice versa.

This construction is maintained even in the face of the objections of Deaf people and their own demands for self-definition. The fact that the disability movement is complicit in the construction of Deaf people as disabled also carries weight in maintaining this label in the legal, political, and social arenas of the wider society. It adds a valuable contribution to hegemonic depictions of Deaf people as disabled. It cements the allegiance of the hearing disabled and nondisabled majority that excludes the Deaf cultural discourse. This raises a number of issues. Hall (1996), in his examination of identity discourse, acknowledges the importance of a recognition that identities can emerge within the play of specific modalities of power, with the result that they become a product of exclusion. In the case of deafness therefore, the disability movement’s contribution to Deaf people’s exclusion should not be overlooked.

The positions highlighted above also exposes the duplicitious position of the social model articulations, which on the one hand call for the right to self-definition for disabled people (Oliver, 1990, 1993)
but on the other hand seek to deny this to Deaf people whom they claim as their members.

Emancipatory social theory is nurturing of allegiances between different minority groups in relation to their own specific struggles for deconstructive or reconstructive theorizing. More recent reflections on early feminist discourses have been critical of the way in which feminist theory failed to maximize its strong connection with queer theory and the comparable links between sexual freedom and gender freedom (Butler, 1999; Cuff et al., 2006). Such allegiances can have positive impacts for all concerned. What has occurred in reality in the case of culturally Deaf people is that their distinct identity has been subsumed under that of disability (Lane, 1995, 1996, 2005).

The dominant construction of Deaf people as disabled centers solely around their audiological position, which is measured in relation to the hearing majority. This is a negative construction that stubbornly refuses to engage with the construction from Deaf people themselves who focus not on the level of hearing but on the value in the language, culture, and collective identity that they acquire as a result (Ladd, 2003). “A deaf person by medical standards is one who is ‘severely to profoundly deaf’, or who attains a certain score on a test of hearing. A Deaf person is one who knows the language and knows the ways of the group” (Padden, 1996, p. 87). Padden here typifies the process of minority group identity formation by replacing the negative with the positive in an attempt to uncover that original content of identity (Grossberg, 1996). Within the social model of disability, the medically defined hearing impairment is given significance above that which it is given by Deaf people themselves. However, if we take the position of Atherton et al. (2001) that Deaf people see their deafness as “a characteristic they have rather than something which is missing or has been lost” (Atherton et al., p. 36 emphasis added) or as in the situation in Martha’s vineyard that deafness was seen as a variation similar to right-handed or left-handed use (Bahan & Nash, 1996), it becomes easy to see that a disability-orientated perspective presents a construction of Deaf people within a very narrow frame, one which is totally focused on audiology. The myopia of this perspective prevents us from looking beyond audiology to see the fuller picture of visual and linguistic plentitude identified from within Deaf cultural theorizing (for a fuller analysis, see Bauman, 2008).

Even when the Deaf as disabled issue is articulated as Deaf people being disabled due to the failure of society to use sign language (Finkelstein, 1993; Oliver, 1990), the position is not adequately justified. The claim that Deaf people are disabled because they would have their access restricted without the availability of sign language interpreters (Race Equality Unit, 1996) conceals at least two fundamental flaws: first, other language minorities working through interpreters would not be classed as disabled (Lane, 1995), and secondly, assumptions that Deaf people are disabled because of their reliance on sign language interpreters, is a short sighted view that pays no regard to the fact that hearing people need sign language interpreters in some situations too. In a situation where it is the Deaf person who is for example the provider of a service or presenter of information, in the absence of an interpreter there is no automatic assumption that the hearing person is then disabled. Sign language interpreters like any spoken language interpreters have the role of facilitating communication between two parties where neither has an understanding of the other’s language. However, Deaf people are the only language minority groups who have traditionally been provided interpreters on the grounds of “personal assistance” (Lane, 1995). Finkelstein (1993) bases his analysis of Deaf people as disabled on society’s decision to suppress sign language. However, there are other language minorities whose language has been suppressed but who are not classed as disabled. Take for example Irish people and the historical suppression of the Gaelic language.

There is the issue of a genuine alliance between Deaf and disabled people and the reciprocal benefits to be experienced. If this is done on the basis of equality, this alliance could indeed prove very productive. However, this is also true of potential alliances that could be formed with other cultural and linguistic minority groups with which Deaf identity may hold closer connection. Lane (2005) has demonstrated effectively the ways in which current misinterpretations have lead to disastrous consequences for Deaf people. The fact that the needs of disabled people are often so different and
at times in opposition to those of Deaf people does
mean that alliances are complicated. For example, the
education of Deaf and disabled children is perhaps the
clearest example of opposing needs and where this
misrepresentation of Deaf as disabled has been most
damaging to Deaf people. In terms of the education of
disabled children, mainstreaming is something that
the disability movement has been campaigning for
some years. For many disabled children, it is easy to
see the benefits of this approach. However, main-
streaming Deaf children has had profoundly damaging
effects on both their education and identity. Residen-
tial Deaf schools have traditionally been one of the
roots of Deaf culture (Ladd, 2003) and the place where
many Deaf children of hearing parents became encul-
turated into their heritage. The demise of Deaf schools
internationally has proved to be a real threat to this
heritage.

In addition, historical developments in relation to
the negative experiences of disabled people caused by
industrialization and introduction of machinery in
factories (Oliver, 1989) highlights such complexities
of positioning. Rather than being a negative experience,
Deaf people often benefited from working in noisy
environments where reliance on spoken conversations
was reduced and the use of gestures more widely used.

Susan Peters (2000), in her article about disability
and the way that disabled people share a culture of
their own, talks about the disabled equivalent of
Martha’s Vineyard being Berkeley in America where
she grew up with other disabled people. The fact is
that if a culturally Deaf sign language user was to live
among other disabled people in Berkeley, she or he
would face exactly the same language barriers as in
any other hearing culture. The title of Peter’s paper
asks “Is there a disability culture?” The point I make
here is that even if there is a disability culture it is one
that is vastly different from Deaf culture.

Many Deaf people, like many other cultural and
linguistic minority groups, hope themselves to have
Deaf children and see the birth of every Deaf child
as a precious gift (Ladd [1989], cited in Lane, 1995).
Although this position cannot be claimed as absolute
and has rightly now been challenged for its universal-
izing inaccuracies (Johnston, 2005), for those who do
subscribe to this position, the problem lies not with
the Deaf people themselves but with the representa-
tives from the wider society that fail to recognize this
as a valid position to hold. An illustration of this is the
international condemnations received in response to
the well-publicized decision of a Deaf lesbian couple
who actively sought to improve their chances of having
a Deaf child by seeking out a Deaf sperm donor
(Anstey, 2002; Johnston, 2005; Levy, 2002; Spriggs,
2002).

Lane (2005) lists a number of risks to Deaf
children if the current depiction of Deaf people as
disabled is continued, particularly the threats from
genetic researchers. Johnston (2005) in his analysis
of the controversial birth above provides an alarming
illustration of just how legitimate Lane’s fears are.
Based on the Deaf as disabled premise, Johnston goes
to some length to try to persuade his readers that
defarness is potentially a defensible reason for fetal
abortion and definitely a justification for screening
out through genetic counseling. The implication here
is that one should not intentionally go through with
the birth of a Deaf child if detected early enough, all of
which is based on the premise of culturally Deaf peo-
ple as in some way deficient.

Even where deafness is seen as a disability and at the
same time the cultural and linguistic aspects of the com-
munity are recognized (Johnston, 2005; Shakespeare,
2006), it is still the deficit model that prevails. Deaf
people are seen as a community of disabled people
who share a common language and culture but who
are disabled nonetheless. It is the disproportionate sig-
nificance that the dominant society places on the differ-
ential capabilities of the function of hearing that labels
all Deaf people in this way and is therefore a social
construct.

One must question whether this is a case of history
repeating itself if we examine the example of homo-
sexuality which until as recently as 1992 was still
classified as a mental illness by the World Health
Organization (Stonewall, 2007), despite the protesta-
tions of those who were so diagnosed. The fact that
some Gay people did willingly participate in the “re-
parative therapy” on offer proves not that one form
of sexuality is a disability and the other a normal
function but is more a testament to the moral and
social powers within society which often cause some
members of a minority group to internalize the oppression invoked upon them. This then has the potential to produce in some a desire for social conformity, which knows no bounds. Although it is still recognized that there is a difference between heterosexuality and homosexuality, the significance of this difference has fallen (at least in theory) from the “moral conscience” of most of western society, where it is no longer considered a disability.

A common argument in opposition to the Deaf cultural identity construction is that Deaf people claim disability benefits and in so doing are implicitly accepting of the disability label. Perhaps this view necessitates further analysis. Another perspective worth considering is that this is not evidence that deafness is a disability, rather it is evidence of the way that social oppression can be further compounded through state legislation that offers no alternative choice. An important element of anti-oppressive discourse is access to and ability to make choices. If Deaf people are faced with the choice of either accepting the payment on the grounds of disability (to which they do not subscribe) or to forgo the resources for which they have legitimate need, the question arises as to whether this is any real choice at all. This predicament also extends to disabled activists and theorists who have for decades campaigned for a “rejection of the medical model as the foundation for any effective understanding of impairment or disability” (Williams, 2001, p. 124).

In the United Kingdom, the legal definition of disability is founded on the medical model. Disability Living Allowance and all other state disability benefits have an eligibility criteria that is built on the medical model of disability. If we were therefore to apply the same logic as that which is laid at Deaf people, then the assumption would have to be that disabled people claiming their own benefits also implicitly subscribe to the medical model definitions that have been imposed on them.

Within the disability movement, commentators have demonstrated the different ontological stances within Deaf and disabled discourses. Tom Shakespeare (2006) in his critique of the social model of disability argues convincingly that some parts of the disability movement would welcome medical intervention in a quest for a cure. Finkelstein goes even further and states that “Every (!) disabled person would welcome such an operation … which guaranteed successful elimination of the impairment” (1990, p. 265 emphasis in original). Yet, it is well documented that medical intervention in the form of cochlear implantation is opposed by Deaf people (Anderson, 1994; Dimmock and Lee, 1995; King, 2004; Lane, 1994, 2005; Roots, 1999) and is seen as ideologically, politically, and ethically offensive.

Colin Barnes and Geoff Mercer when comparing disability with other social movements, which have proclaimed their identity as a source of pride, state that “What had been a source of exclusion and marginalisation is translated into a source of pride (as in ‘glad to be gay’). Yet this application to people with impairments is typically regarded as more contentious, with the notion of ‘glad to be impaired’ far less accepted as a unifying theme for disabled people” (Barnes and Mercer, 2001, p. 526). Positive approaches to Deaf identity, on the other hand, are already taking shape as identified by Shakespeare (2006) in his recognition of terms such as “Deaf power” and “Deaf pride” as slogans for political mobilization within the Deaf community. Applied in much the same way as other positive identifications, like “Black is beautiful,” “Delighted to be Deaf,” “Determined to be Deaf,” or “Defiantly Deaf,” might easily find a comfortable home in the hands of Deaf activists.

On Emancipatory Terminology and Labeling

The power of language in identity formation has been recognized for its importance by many academics (Grossberg, 1996; Gunaratnam, 2003; Hall, 1996; Rutherford, 1990), including the contention by Grossberg that identity can be viewed as an entirely linguistic construction. Questions of Deaf identity are no less complex than in any other approach to identity formation. Linguistic struggles are important in the contributions they make to social discourse, perhaps more so in the Deaf arena because of the significance of the role of language. This section of the paper will illustrate some of the linguistic considerations around terminology relating to deafness and Deaf people as well as to raise some questions for further debate.

“Power relations and historical forces have organised meaning into polar opposites that language
becomes a site of struggle” (Rutherford, 1990, p. 22). In relation to the struggles of terminology and definitions that are common to minority/majority group relations, the Deaf–hearing relationship does share some commonalities with other emancipatory struggles. For example, just as women acknowledge that there are biological differences between women and men, there also needs to be an acknowledgment of the audiological difference between Deaf and hearing people. However, it is the meaning that is deliberately ascribed to this difference that needs to be challenged. There is now the commonly understood difference between the terms “sex” and “gender,” sex being based on genuine biological differences and gender which is now recognized as a social construct resulting from different forms of socialization from birth. However, there was a time when the totality of the differences between the sexes (both real and ascribed) was articulated in the same word of “sex,” making it difficult to distinguish between those real differences that were attributable to biology and those socially constructed differences that we now recognize as gender differences. It is my contention that the word “deafness” holds this very same unworkable position. It is an all-embracing term that is often attributed to both the audiological difference and the socially constructed differences with the inferred inferior status to Deaf people. Further, the single word “deafness” also stubbornly refuses to allow distinction between those deaf people whose meaning of deafness is centered around hearing loss and speech and those Deaf people who see value of investment in a Deaf cultural identity that they share with others in the Deaf collective (Ladd, 2003).

When writing about the term race, which is also widely recognized as a social construct, Gunaratnam (2003) builds on the work of Derrida (1981) and Hall (1996) and describes race as a term that is operating “under erasure” and calls for “a deconstructive approach that recognizes our relation to concepts that have passed their analytical sell-by date, that are no longer ‘good to think with,’ but which have yet to be replaced.” (Gunaratnam, 2003, p. 31 emphases in original). This I would contend is the position that we are also in with the term “deafness” under its current use. It is now being recognized as a social construct in academia (Senghas & Monaghan, 2002), but there is little evidence of this recognition elsewhere. Although the word originally referred only to a limitation in audiological function, it seems ironic that the limitation of the word deafness itself is not more widely recognized. It is limited in providing the differentiations mentioned above, limited in distinguishing social constructs from physiological differences, and the word deafness fails miserably in any attempt to give meaning to the cultural and linguistic aspects of membership of a Deaf community and culture. Even in the field of Deaf Studies where the social construct is now being discussed, it is a word that is still used in common parlance to mean all things to all men (and women). Like race, even though the limitations are recognized, the discourse is not yet fulfilled in finding an alternative replacement. It should therefore be recognized as being under erasure and limited in its potential for analysis.

Terminology around Deaf and deaf identities may also benefit from further debate. Ben Bahan when addressing the first Deaf Nations Symposium in 1997 provided clear examples of how the word “deaf” in its current form can cause genuine confusions in the wider society. The example he gave was of a request from a museum to include information about the history of “deaf” people in America. This was provided from a culturally Deaf perspective; however there were then protestations from deaf people who did not identify themselves in this way. A problem then arose as to what was the correct depiction of Deaf or deaf history. Bahan proposed a number of solutions to be debated, including the renaming of Deaf people as “seeing people,” as this focuses on one of the positives of the community, but perhaps one could argue that deaf people too rely more on their vision than hearing people, so this could muddy the water in terms of distinction.

“Signing people” was another solution offered, and discourse on this has developed over the last 10 years to the extent that the British Deaf Association, the largest organization for and of Deaf people in the United Kingdom, has now rebranded itself and its magazine as “Sign Community.” On an organizational level, this is less problematic as there are many people who work for the organization, who whether Deaf or hearing are sign language users. In terms of identity
formation, however, this label is more complicated as it brings into question the position of hearing signing relatives of Deaf people who may be irrefutably part of the signing community, and are also signing people, but are not actually Deaf. In addition, the moves towards professionalization of interpreting as well as the general shift in emphasis from teaching sign language in the community to teaching it in educational establishments (Cokely, 2005) also mean that there will be hearing signing people that are not necessarily part of the Deaf community but sign purely and simply as part of their professional role. These professionals could claim membership of the signing people label whether or not that was the original intention. The area is complicated even further given the historical significance of the missionaries who were also well versed in sign language but many of whom went some way to contribute to the oppression of Deaf people (Ladd, 2003). Perhaps a viable but cumbersome alternative would be to make a distinction between “Deaf signing people” and “hearing signing people”?

Another suggestion was the term ASLian or ASLer or BSLian or BSLer LSFian etc. linking the terminology to the signed language of the country in which it is used. This was Bahan’s preferred option at the time and indeed seems more concrete than merely being able to use the language.

The final alternative Bahan presented at the symposium was for culturally Deaf people to reclaim the term “Deaf Mute” which is a term that would not create any confusion with deaf people who choose to speak. They would have no desire to identify in this way. The comparison he made was the way that parts of the Gay community have reclaimed the word “Queer” as a positive term of defiance which was previously a negative slight imposed on them by a heterosexual majority (Bahan, 1997). Such acts of reclamation bring to life the slogan by the disabled activist Tom Shakespeare “To be an activist … is to make the label into a badge” (Shakespeare, 2006, p. 79). Bahan (1997) also points out the fact that the shift in terminology from “deaf mute” to “deaf” was as a result of the demands from the oralists who wanted to demonstrate that all deaf people could talk. Hall (1996) highlights the need to raise awareness of history and the significance it has on identity which can be place and time specific “identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not ‘who we are’ or ‘where we came from’, so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves” (Hall, 1996, p. 4). Perhaps, Bahan’s ideas provide a useful catalyst for further debate.

However that said there is also another side to the argument that needs to be addressed. Although I would agree that “The most well-known terminological quirk associated with Deaf studies is a distinction no one can hear uttered: Deaf/deaf” (Senghas and Monaghan, 2002, p. 71), it is also true that Deaf people can and do make these distinctions through sign language. These terminological struggles are ones of the spoken and written word, an arena that does not offer easy access to many Deaf people outside of the academic sphere. Ladd also makes a similar point in his ascertain that “There are few opportunities for colonised peoples to present accounts of their own cultural experiences; moreover in order for them even to do so, they must often use a language other than their own” (Ladd, 2003, p. 12). If it is accepted that it is a debate to be had within the Deaf community, then surely it is also to be done in such a way that maximizes contributions from Deaf people themselves.

Gunaratnam (2003), writing on race and ethnicity, talks of the importance of recognizing poststructuralist critiques of essentialism while also seeking to legitimate everyday “situated voices” and experiences as grounded for political action. So too in Deaf theorizing, there is a need to recognize that the meaning of deafness has been developed “through social discourse and through subjective investment of individuals … social discourses are enmeshed in lived experience and institutional and social power relations that have emotional material and embodied consequences for individuals and groups … social discourse and lived experience are co-constituted—they intermingle and inhabit one another” (Gunaratnam, 2003, p. 7).

Concluding Remarks

In addressing the questions of Deaf cultural identity, it is important to incorporate issues of diversity within
the Deaf community, who like any other group will be made up of people from a range of backgrounds, which will all affect their experience as a Deaf person. Issues of multiple identities will be important in any Deaf cultural discourse. “We can no longer assume singular bounded and fixed identities or experiences” (Gunaratnam, 2003, p. 110). As with race and ethnicity, this is an underdeveloped area in the field of Deaf studies. Like any other group, Deaf cultural identity must also be inclusive of the diversity of identities within it. Grossberg (1996), on the other hand, not only recognizes the need for a shared common collective across diversity at some level but also recognizes the fact that each individual who claims membership to that group is not necessarily then automatically representative of a single definition of the collective.

Theorists developing identity discourse in the current climate have more to contend with than in previous times. The current postmodern emphasis on fluid identities undermines political cohesion (Barnes and Mercer, 2001). This is not to say that identity politics is no longer relevant. The development of discourse that provides a unifying force, which galvanizes around commonality while at the same time recognizing and respecting diversity, can go some way toward satisfying the need to rework the moral perspective around normalcy that automatically assumes Deaf people are disabled (Bauman, 2005). If Deaf Studies was born out of the desire to distance itself from the disability label (Bauman, 2008), then it is Deaf Studies that has a significant contribution to make in terms of refocusing the visual frame in which Deaf people are viewed by the wider majority. Debates around terminology that defines Deaf identity will need to remain a central focus of engagement as the discourse progresses.

Lane (1996) highlights the fact that resources on Deaf history are growing on an international level, as are resources on Deaf culture, community, sign linguistics, a growth in the number of Deaf-related courses, as well as a growing political awareness among Deaf people themselves, all which he describes as a renaissance, but a renaissance which is limited in impact because of the way that these resources have been refused entry to the offices of power and influence over Deaf people’s lives. The question that needs to be answered is whether Deaf people are happy to continue with the status quo safe in the knowledge that these issues are under constant debate within the Deaf community and Deaf academia or whether the time is ripe to take control and disseminate wider discussion on these issues, the conclusions of which can be used as political leverage in an attempt to burst open the doors of power and enforce change.

Notes

1. The word “deafness” has been placed in double quotation marks in recognition of its status as a social construct that identifies Deaf people solely in relation to audiological ability and therefore constructs them as disabled. This pays no regard to their status as members of a cultural and linguistic minority group (Obasi, 2007). Double quotation marks will not be used however when referring only to the physiological state of deafness.

2. Deaf is used here with a capitalized D (also commonly known as Big D Deaf) as a way to distinguish culturally Deaf people who share a pride in their identity with the wider Deaf community and culture. This is a convention that was first introduced by Woodward (1982).

References


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