

Deaf Identity

email : r.mcdade@ntlworld.com

History has borne witness to a multiplicity of changes in policies and attitudes towards members of the BSL Using Deaf Communities. One of the factors I have observed as being significant is the use of language, which has come to carry cultural weight within these communities. One such instance is the language that is used around identity. It is the hope of the author that this article will begin an exploration into the way language shapes the thinking and behaviour of community members, which in turn contributes to the manipulation they experience from external parties with hidden agendas. This would have bearing on the theory of mental programming as posited by G. Hofstede and G.J. Hofstede (2005) – *the need to unlearn before we can learn*.

What is Deaf identity?

The concept of Deaf identity is not inherently problematic, though a certain caution should be noted when considering the comprehension of the concept by those whom it is supposed to describe. Do BSL-using Deaf people really understand what the concept of Deaf identity means? It would appear there are conditions attached to how and when the label is used, as well as the issue of who chooses to use the label, therefore it may be fruitful to further study these. A small sample was invited to participate in a small research study with the age range of respondents restricted to between 30 years and 50 years old, a

restriction imposed for a variety of reasons. The mid-1970s saw an increase in a category of worker known as the Deaf Professional, also known as BSL Deaf users appointed to professional posts, and it was presumed that participants in this age range would have been aware of the changes in language which took place at that time. The earliest appointments of BSL Deaf users to professional posts saw the first fracturing of the seemingly insurmountable walls that had kept them in a low-paid, low-status employment ghetto. Included in the sample was an even spread of educational experiences including those who had attended residential school, mainstream school and those who had moved through a variety of educational settings. The research also took into consideration the need to engage with people who had a background in an 'oral' education and those who came from BSL- using Deaf families.

The introduction of an idea

The universal answer to one of the primary questions was '*My identity is that of a Deaf person.*' This very powerful response was interesting on many levels, and throughout the questioning it became clear that identity was being confused with other concepts. Indeed, it seemed that Deaf identity was being perceived as a synonym for the 'Deaf card', a politically motivated strategy quite distinct from the more neutral idea of identity. A sense of threat or oppression, a need to respond in some unique way, emerged as one of the reasons to use 'Deaf identity':, a politically motivated retaliatory tool that highlights the issue of

a person's deafness in order to gain an advantage.

Another prime question asked, '*Where and when did you learn about Deaf Identity?*' many described their first encounter with the idea took place upon entering the world of professional work with or for the BSL-using Deaf community, and stated this was a concept of which they were not aware in their previous workplaces or lives. To further the understanding of these concepts, it raised another question: the manner in which Deaf identity is introduced and initially explained to BSL users.

When asked whether they felt the concept of Deaf identity was fully or only partially explained to them, most answered that the explanation had been brief, although some said there had been some attempt to unpack the concept a little more. What seemed clear though was that the concept had not been explored fully, even as it was assumed it would become part of the person's work vocabulary. When asked who had been responsible for the description of or promotion of the concept, all responded that the information had come from a BSL-using Deaf Professional and that he himself had seemed less than fully informed regarding the concept. In answering the question, 'Do you believe that BSL-using Deaf Professionals themselves were responsible for developing the idea of Deaf Identity?', many of the respondents expressed the view that the concept had been imported by 'hearing' people, indicating non-natives to the community. It may therefore be possible that non-natives who work with the

BSL-using Deaf Community were responsible for the introduction of the phrase 'Deaf Identity' and for the conjoining of the dual concepts of deafness and identity. Anecdotally, the experience of BSL Deaf users who take on professional posts and find themselves pressed into using the label Deaf identity without it being necessarily understood is not an uncommon one.

A mixed picture

The overwhelming conclusion of the data was that Deaf identity could have both positive and negative values. The negative impact of the propagation of the term is not to be underestimated, since it draws within its bounds the exclusion of non-natives from the community. Non-natives are classed as not only those who do not use or understand BSL, but those who are not Deaf – including family members. Throughout the research, it became clear that there was a lack of independent thought regarding some cherished political labels.

Much of the research and literature written about the BSL-using Deaf communities is produced by those who are non-native. Alternatively it is written by those who 'shift' into the community over time ie a person raised in a non-native culture who chooses to align himself with the community in adulthood or who is accepted by the community.

The author notes that little, if anything, has changed over the last 25 years. One caveat to that rather bald statement is that it is noticeable that BSL Deaf users are now beginning to genuinely consider such fundamental concepts as identity

with more depth and with less willingness to simply accept what is offered to them. It could also be argued that the concept as it is currently understood relates mainly to social aspects and use of a shared language, which, though important elements, are not the entirety of an individual's identity. Indeed, when asked if they would remain active in the Deaf community should they live in a world where use of BSL was ubiquitous among the non- native community, many participants replied that such an equitable world would obviate the need. This suggests that the reason for being active as a community member at the moment is to facilitate a social network, though there may be some political motivations too. This would be consistent with the behaviour of other interest groups, which form based on commonalities such as gender or a shared political allegiance. The difference between membership of the BSL-using Deaf community and these aforementioned interest groups seems to be that membership of the former excludes or curtails participation and membership of a wider society.

Individual identity emerging

More than ever, BSL Deaf users are beginning to attend to the notion of the individual as a member of the community rather than collective community identity. The institutional nature of residential education experienced by many members of the community left a lasting legacy of the value of collective rather than individual identity. This is evident in the generational inheritance of such

values among those from BSL-using Deaf families resulting in little or no change in decades-old attitudes. Whilst this phenomenon is not unique to the Sign Language community and can be seen in any number of communities and social groupings, it is prevalent and should bear further scrutiny.

It seems self-evident that, more complete information should be available to a BSL Deaf user from his earliest years, thus facilitating him to consider all options rather than allow himself to be locked into using the only political response available to him: the Deaf Card.

Further research

The examination of the concept of Deaf identity could benefit from comparing the views of those in this sample group, aged 30 years to 50, with the views of those from subsequent generations of BSL Deaf users who experienced mainstream rather than specialist education provision. Indeed, it would be beneficial also to seek the views of those who have Cochlear Implants or who are DeafBlind, gaining more insight into their perception of a Deaf identity. The narrow scope of the definition of Deaf Identity thus far could usefully be further researched, and many meanings of Identity should be offered to those for whom Deaf identity is often a useful but rather meaningless label.

It is often anticipated by trainers and service users that non-native BSL learners and those functioning as interpreters will already have some understanding of the concept of identity from further or higher education or from their workplace.

It is possible, therefore, that the community choose a definition, albeit a narrow one, because it is comprehensible or because it has a political aspect to it that is useful.

This political 'Deaf Card' has been used for generations but, as times change and the social versus medical versus disability model throw up more questions, the anomaly of aligning oneself with the linguistic minority model yet simultaneously using the Deaf card becomes more pronounced. The distinctions between models are blurring, where previously there was clarity and greater societal awareness, though not full understanding, of BSL and the culture from which it springs may well be responsible for this. Even less is being written with an honest, critical approach that dares to highlight some of the more negative aspects of the community. We do, however, need to think about the implications of this as on parallel fields, for example pedagogic practices. Some of these more problematic issues have become evident, not least where BSL users challenge the need to teach certain parts of the culture, the manner and content of teaching and the act of 'telling the secrets' of the community. We have, been prone to giving more weight in our teaching to the positive aspects of our culture, even though the negative, difficult experiences of BSL users, such as our school and education experience, are precisely that which we should be teaching. While the job of teaching will not change, it is acknowledged that this is a contentious point, and it is appropriate to begin the

process of acknowledging our own responsibility in our traditions as they have been formed.

Self-discovery

The identity claimed by BSL-using Deaf people is usually that of a positive collective identity defined by membership of the community. In comparison, an individual identity is usually defined through familial relationships and this brings us to the concept of identity destruction. This concept helps us understand the way in which the identity of an individual can be acknowledged or dismissed by a family structure, thus leading to destruction. If we take the example of those working as interpreters, it may be that some degree of identity destruction has left them with troublesome issues, a sense of 'wrongness' that is unidentifiable. It is imperative that there is a relationship between Interpreters and the community, but it is equally important that individuals take time to examine their essential self, asking such fundamental questions as "who am I?", 'what am I?', 'what can I do?', 'what do I want?'. Leaving these questions unanswered seems to be the norm in our current tradition, and the ease with which the notion of Deaf identity is taken up suggests that it offers some kind of safe haven for BSL users who would rather not do such difficult self-questioning. Acceptance of the label 'Deaf identity' is therefore a badge, an end point rather than an ongoing journey of discovery. Such passivity finds its roots in the historical oppression of the BSL user and the community beginning

with a poor educational experience and compounded by both negative societal attitudes and perception of BSL as a low-status language. The fact that this research throws up a lack of comprehension of a fundamental concept such as Identity only serves to suggest there is more knowledge which still eludes us. It was noticeable that 'Deaf power' was a term used by others, although not by the author. This was not because of any antipathy towards the notion or a sense that it was unimportant, but more because the clamour associated with it seemed unnecessary when other routes to achieving the same end could be feasibly explored. This is obviously an issue that provokes a variety of responses from people, but it has been noticeable over the past 25 years that the political connotations surrounding the label 'Deaf identity' have become more pronounced. The emotional response from those who took part in the research was also quite profound with some commenting that they had begun to question their 'sheep-like passive acceptance due to their participation.

Conclusion

In closing, it can be said that current usage of the concept of Deaf identity may well be less about what you know and more about who you know through the world of work. This issue has come to the fore in the BSL-using community in recent times resulting in a narrowing of previously rather wider options for work for BSL users. We are also seeing more selection of individuals, handpicked to fulfil roles which propagate the political implications of Deaf identity. These

implications effect not only BSL Deaf users but also those who join BSL classes, those who work as BSL / ENG interpreters, teachers of Deaf people or social workers. In essence, all para-professionals risk the accusation of being unsupportive of the community should they attempt to question the notion of Deaf identity. Despite a growing body of literature surrounding the community regarding its language and traditions, the opportunity has yet to be offered to BSL users to truly understand such complex concepts. In 25 years, we still have no real and lasting progress in broaching such difficult topics, and this strongly suggests that we have reached the moment when we should return to the community and ask the appropriate questions.

Notes

1. British Sign Language (BSL) is the first or preferred language of members of Deaf Communities based in the UK.
2. Oral education was the dominant education system for Deaf children for many years, a system which eschewed the use of BSL and promoted/insisted upon the teaching and using of English only in the school environment.
- 3 Cochlear Implants are electrical devices which can be implanted surgically to allow direct electrical stimulation of the nerve of hearing – (auditory nerve) to give a sensation of hearing. Their use has attracted a great deal of controversy.
4. Deafblind – is a combination of sight and hearing loss - also known as dual sensory impaired
5. British Sign Language / English – sometimes known as Sign Language Interpreter

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