

Boiled Eggs and Baked Beans—a personal account of a hearing researcher's journey through Deaf Culture

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ABSTRACT *This article forms a reflexive account of the trials, pains and joys of the launch of a hearing researcher into 'Deaf Culture'—the unique world of British Sign Language (BSL) users. Three resources of reflexive data are utilised; the researcher's experiences of learning BSL with other hearing signers; participant observation data from a Unit for Deaf people with psychiatric problems and finally, experiences of interviewing members of a national organisation of Deaf people. These experiences reflect the assumptions and preconceptions the hearing world holds concerning Deaf people and the remarkable ways in which the latter rationalise them and attempt to subvert them. The intellectual issues addressed here concern the role and status of researchers within foreign settings, the problems of enculturisation and the physical and social effects experienced whilst undertaking this type of research.*

Introduction

This article was compiled from my field notes in three settings. The first of these was my participation in sign language courses, during intensive periods of British Sign Language learning. The second set are from my participant observation study at a Rehabilitation Unit for Deaf people with psychiatric problems. The final set are drawn from reflexive notes during participant observation with members of a large national organisation of Deaf people.

The material below is presented within a framework of an exploration of the methodology of participant observation. In this respect, it is intended to present an ethnographic description of a 'hidden culture'—Deaf Culture and to explore its features. The main focus of the paper is reflected in the subtitle; a hearing researcher's journey through Deaf Culture. As such, the material is subjective—it is an account of my time in the Deaf World, often drawn directly from reflexive field note diaries.

The subject matter of this paper being somewhat unusual to some readers necessitates further contextual explanation here. The title of my (PhD) research

project is 'The Cultural Meaning of Deafness'. When I began the project I was interested primarily in Deaf people, their language—British Sign Language (BSL) and New Social Movements. I decided to draw the main sample from the national organisation's membership for the following reasons. Firstly, it is entirely controlled and run by Deaf people who use British Sign Language. Secondly, they have an explicit campaigning stance within which they fight for the rights of Deaf people in Great Britain. Thirdly, according to Oliver (1990, p. 117), these features mean that the organisation conforms to the criteria of an 'organisation OF' Deaf people—making it a New Social Movement.

To give context and background to the ideas presented below I now want to explain some of the claims that the members made to me over the course of the project. Firstly, 'deafness is not a disability'. Deaf people tell me they feel an 'affinity' with disabled people, particularly campaigning groups, yet they have always felt separate and this distinction is important to them. Secondly, 'Deaf people form a linguistic minority'. This assertion owes a lot to the central place of BSL within Deaf ideology as a whole, but its importance as a claim lies in its implication that the members require the hearing majority to view them in a certain way. The final claim I would like to explain is this; 'Deaf people have their own unique culture'. This sign 'CULTURE' [1] is a positive assertion of identity and Deaf group cohesion which could be seen to have affiliations in usage to other minority group terms such as 'Black power'. Deaf people assert this positive identity by using a capital D whenever they refer to Deaf people.

Within the structure of the organisation itself, the ordinary members are referred to as 'GRASSROOTS'. These Deaf members typically are non-political and attend local Deaf Clubs for purely social purposes. There are also Regional Committees (or there were when I undertook the fieldwork) and these members are responsible for acting as mediators between GRASSROOTS and Executive Committee members and generally disseminating decisions. Finally, there is an Executive Committee which is composed of approximately 20 Deaf people, one from each (large) region of Great Britain and who are responsible for all the policy formation and political campaigning decisions. The sample was drawn from the membership from each of the three distinct groups.

Having designed my project I was beset by several technical difficulties. In order to adhere to the principles of ethnography, I realised that I would have to improve my rudimentary BSL skills to at least pre-interpreter level and to do this quickly! I decided to 'kill several birds with one stone' and to go off to live within a signing community for nine months. This enabled me to improve my signing skills to Level 2 (Intermediate) and to undertake participant observation of both Deaf people and sign language use. I was fortunate to have contacts at a rehabilitation centre for Deaf people which also doubles as a sign language training centre. Since I trained as a social worker before entering research, they were keen to have me there—which helped enormously.

I want here to make some preliminary observations concerning my initiation into the world of Deaf people and their language—British Sign Language. During the final year of my degree and CQSW course. I undertook a placement with the

Social workers for Deaf in a North West town. Whilst there I realised that there was a whole other world—a Deaf World to which we as hearing people have little or no access, and which revolves around British Sign Language (BSL) use. It was initially fascination with the language which stimulated the research proposal.

BSL is a visual gestural language. Most hearing people have seen a sign language interpreter on TV in a little box—of course, very few would understand what is being conveyed. The interpreter is transmitting in BSL basically the same information as the English voice. However, many hearing people do not appreciate that the sign language interpreter is *not* following the word order of English. BSL has its own grammar which does not conform to that of the English language, (cf. Stokoe *et al.*, 1965; Kyle & Woll, 1985). In practical terms, this means that when a hearing person like myself learns BSL it is necessary to restructure English communication. This causes hearing sign language learners major problems which I refer to later. The difference of the language is in terms of sign concept/word order and structure. To learn BSL is therefore, not merely to learn the sign equivalents for English words—it in fact requires a completely different conceptual process—a radical rethink of ways and means of communication. As ‘second language learners’ hearing people do not attain the natural affinity with BSL accorded to pre-lingually profoundly Deaf people, but they are often quite skilled in this respect. BSL is also very quick, brief and vivid with layers of graphical complexity in modulation—in other words the *way* you sign something shows the degree of emphasis you intend in the communication.

One other brief point to note is that within the Deaf world, many political Deaf people choose to use BSL in preference to using their voices, even though many of them have voices which are perfectly intelligible to hearing people. Using BSL in this way is intended to convey a strong sense of cultural identity and separateness from other (particularly hearing) cultures. Therefore, this causes problems when you start to learn BSL because you cannot, or should not, resort to using your voice as it is considered ‘bad form’. Many Deaf people have an intense dislike of anything that is too ‘hearing’. In fact ‘hearing’ is sometimes used as a derogatory term. Coupled with the problem of converting English into BSL in your head (‘sending’ a communication) and then converting it back again (‘receiving’ a communication) and the necessity of doing this ‘on your feet’ as it were—hearing people in the Deaf World do not get an easy ride!

Learning Sign Language

My immersion into Deaf culture for the purposes of the research began when I undertook a two month crash course in British Sign Language (BSL) improvement. I had not signed for over a year and was very rusty. The sign language courses were run from a newly opened Deaf Centre on a site which had previously been a School for the Deaf. The Centre has multiple functions: sign language training of hearing people in the various levels, rehabilitation of Deaf people who suffer from psychiatric problems and as a Deaf Club—a social centre for all Deaf people in the area.

Sign language courses are strange events. A group of hearing people are thrown

together in a residential centre for several days, all are unknown to each other and the course takes on the flavour of an endurance test. The format never alters. Firstly, we are all assembled in a large room and instructed in *Rule Number One; No Speaking Allowed*. The reasons for this are twofold. Firstly, if you speak you are not using sign and therefore missing an opportunity to learn. Secondly, the Deaf tutors, who are in charge, do not know what you are saying. It is therefore considered an offence against etiquette since the aim is to provide a 'sign language environment'.

Astute persons will immediately notice a problem here; if the tutors are Deaf—how do they know we are talking? This is a major problem in controlling the hearing students and it is solved by two means; 'ratting' by hearing tutors and heavy fines for offenders, (as well as public humiliation). As skill increases with subsequent courses the problems which Rule Number One engenders decrease of course. Initially it's a nightmare. On my first course I remember the awful silence at meal times—it felt like we were in a monastery. Students avoided each others' eyes as otherwise they might have to communicate. Even SALT PLEASE was a problem. For a long time, I just pointed at things and signed PLEASE and put on my most hopeful expression, I didn't get away with that for long! After a while we were admonished for being 'lazy' by the tutors and forced into communication. People managed Rule Number One in different ways. Some would sneak off to the toilets for a quick conversation, others made excuses such as requiring cigarettes from the local shop having a chat on the way. I found it very arduous indeed because I talk a lot and my sign language skills were such that I could not express myself. There is also something a little disarming about being in a totally silent environment—when it all got too much for me I would retire early and sing in the bath.

I found the process of learning sign totally exasperating. BSL is a wonderful language to watch, the ease of flowing movements and the expression given by Deaf people is really fascinating. Watching *hearing* people attempt to emulate it is rather like listening to Les Dawson playing Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. Since we are all supposed to learn from each other as well as absorb BSL from the tutors, the process becomes even more farcical. The temptation to just say what it is you require grows by the minute.

When in the early stages of sign language learning it is necessary to translate sign into English in the head before it makes sense. Then comes the problem of translating the answer from English into sign! If the command of the language is such that the sum total of sign language knowledge is about ten signs, there is a real problem. In these circumstances most of the students resorted to 'finger-spelling'. This tedious process comprises sign-spelling each letter of the words. Not only is this a nightmare to practice, it is even worse than BSL to receive, (and beginner students generally make endless mistakes). Loud groans generally accompanied the announcement 'finger-spelling practice'. When we made the inevitable copious mistakes our Deaf tutor would exclaim 'I'm Deaf—I'm not bloody blind!'

Videos are used quite a lot in teaching—no sound of course. The aim is to get students used to translation. In practice a lot of 'cheating' goes on as we are generally left alone with the TV. Whispers grow into words when Deaf people are not about—one course even devised a look-out system at the door.

The main problem with learning to sign is that you have to overcome quite a lot of natural 'hearing' type behaviour. For example Deaf people stare at your face and upper body. This is actually quite uncomfortable for hearing people. We have natural periods where communication continues when we look away; we drop our eyes from the other's face. These body language signs are embodied in such expressions as 'she couldn't look me in the face' and 'he hung his head in shame'. Apart from these 'extreme' times of embarrassment and shame, we have natural breaks in eye-contact/gaze. Deaf people don't have these. If you behave in a 'hearing' way and drop your eyes they think you have finished and walk off! To overcome this problem which is very exasperating, you have to learn *not* to drop your eyes. This means they get sore because you end up staring at everyone in case you miss something. Basically, in this situation, you just overuse them. This is a constant problem and it does not diminish. All the hearing students seem to get eye strain to varying degrees. Mine felt like two hard boiled eggs.

The process of learning BSL is a two-way experience—you must learn to sign yourself (GIVE) and to translate (RECEIVE). Although this process is the same in any foreign language it is rather more problematic in BSL. The differences are as follows. Firstly, learning, say French, does not involve waving your hands about and gesturing at people to whom you have barely been introduced. Inhibition concerning doing this is a great problem for hearing BSL students. To counteract this ('breaking down the barriers') the Deaf people invent a variety of silly games. Participation is not a voluntary matter. The theory goes something like this; let's all be silly and make complete twits of ourselves and then we won't feel embarrassed about what we are doing. It did not seem to work in my case. I sat next to a Vicar with protruding teeth. I had a very strict Christian upbringing and, as a result, become very nervous when confronted with Vicars. The Deaf people decided the silly game would be 'RABBITS'—an eye-contact improvement game. Basically, you catch someone's eye and 'throw' the ears (your hands) to them. The other students seemed to be enjoying this. I did not. Try as I might, I could not throw the ears to the Vicar.

The epitome of silly gamism comes on the final night of the course—Gala night, when the students have to devise sign sketches and entertain the Deaf audience invited from the local club. The best performances, and those most appreciated by the Deaf audience, are those with a highly visual content and message—not necessarily in sign. I was involved in one production with three male students. The scene opened to reveal myself, dressed as a 'housewife' reading a book and my 'husband' watching the television. Two ghosts entered behind us and began making 'woo woo' noises—no response. Puzzled, they retreated, then reentered with louder noises but no response again. They brought in a large dustbin and hit it with a stick. (The noise was deafening) no response. Finally, they signed:

(THEY ARE) BLOODY DEAF (PEOPLE)

and came round to the front. We acted suitably terrified. I was worried about how the Deaf audience would react to this—maybe they would think it was making fun of Deafness? To my amazement they loved it. I asked one why. She explained that

it illustrated a very common problem for Deaf people that they face every day from hearing people and it was done in an amusing way.

One young man was wonderful at signing the words to pop songs. His favourite was one by Madonna. Unfortunately the words were very explicit. I did not previously realise that sign was such a literal language. It is not possible to depict in English what 'Love me baby' looks like in sign language. It is very rude indeed. The man noticed I was embarrassed and said 'They don't call it a visual/*gestural* language for nothing you know!'

There are no half-measures with sign learning—it is an interactive process. It does not equate to learning French or any other spoken language because of the above difficulties. Firstly, you have got to really want to learn it. It is not easy. My Course Director stated that hundreds of people go on the basic course and then drop out every season. At Level One there are usually 30/40 participants. Of these about 15 go on to Level 2. After that, Level 3 courses are amalgamations of several courses and usually contain about 10 people when they are (infrequently) run. Those who get beyond this and become Interpreters are very few indeed, (evidenced by the current total of only 170 in Great Britain). Secondly, you have to be prepared to stop thinking about yourself, stop being embarrassed, stop thinking in English and roll up your sleeves and get to work, (as the Deaf people sign).

Sometimes the Deaf people poke fun at the hearing. This usually takes the form of teasing. One young man who was related to the Course Director was noted by the Deaf people as being PUFFED UP (big for his boots). He was the archetypal know-all, even though he had had little experience with Deaf people. When we were practising for Level One examination he asked a Deaf man what the sign was for UNDERSTAND [2]. The Deaf man showed him the signs UNDER (one hand slides below the other) and STAND (two fingers are made into legs and perch on the other hand). This is a classic way for Deaf people to tease hearing people—they call it 'signs out of context' and it is thought to be caused by 'thinking in English' and translating English literally, (BSL is based on *meaning*). These blunders are seized upon with great delight by Deaf people. Of course, when the hearing man attempted to use UNDERSTAND the Deaf people thought it was hilarious.

Participant Observation

At the same time as attending all three levels of sign language course, I was also undertaking participant observation at the Rehabilitation Unit. (The Centre Organiser had encouraged me to get as much contact with BSL users as possible during the periods when courses were not running. Since the Deaf Club operates on only two evenings per week, this was obviously not going to suffice either). So I was placed as a volunteer at the Unit on site. The young Deaf people there had recently been moved from a large institution which had closed down. The aim of the centre was to rehabilitate these Deaf people, who had all suffered from psychiatric problems and resettle them in the community. When I joined, they had been there only three months.

I was curious to meet Deaf people who had psychological problems and

wondered how this would manifest itself in a signed medium. I had previously had experience of hearing people with such problems when I had undertaken my CQSW training. These were mostly elderly women who confused their cookers with their fridges though. Other people had been very concerned for their welfare, but they were really quite harmless.

I was taken into the Unit by a Deaf member of staff. The room we entered was a large classroom with blackboard, several sewing machines and a kitchen area. Three young Deaf people were sitting round a large table. They did not look up. The staff member strode over to the centre of the table, at which they all appeared to be staring and banged on it very loudly. She then waved her hands in front of their faces to get their attention. Pointing at me she introduced me thus:

THIS JENNY HARRIS—CLEVER HER CLEVER ... BIG HEAD ...
CLEVER LISTEN HER YOU

I felt rather like Elizabeth Taylor about to receive an Oscar. I was acutely embarrassed and didn't know what to do. I was also rather angry about the way in which this was done. (I later found it was standard practice to be so direct). I always find my sign deserts me completely when I get embarrassed and it made no exception this time. So I just smiled at the Deaf people. They did not smile back. They were not interested in BIG HEAD (their sign for University)—in fact they looked positively hostile. One woman rocked back and forth constantly and gave me some very 'dirty looks'. Another woman, the only black person there, would not meet me eyes at all, whilst the third person, a young man, stared out of the window. It was not a propitious beginning.

I was introduced to 'The Programme'. This had been devised by the hearing staff to deinstitutionalise these Deaf people and enable them to manage in the community. They are taught to cook on the school cookers, to sew on the school sewing machines and to do woodwork in the old school workshops on site. The Programme is conducted in sign language with the assistance of Deaf staff. Some of the residents had actually used this equipment before, as it was their old school prior to becoming the Unit.

The residents appeared totally disillusioned with The Programme. The 'goals' were never actually explained to them. In fact I never observed a resident receiving an explanation for any activity they undertook. When I asked them much later about this, they signed that they had been ill but as time goes on they hope to IMPROVE. If they IMPROVE all will be well, everything will fall into place. This sign IMPROVE was used by staff as an enticement to the residents. Its function was to motivate them to achieve. Thus:

WORK GOOD IMPROVE YOU

was considered a matter for some rejoicing and flushes of embarrassment. It worried me that the residents did not seem to have any clear idea about what would happen to them after they had IMPROVED—no idea of the future at all, in fact. The hearing staff took a very paternal attitude to all this; they justified this as 'care'. The Programme, it appeared to me, seems to have been devised to utilise the school

equipment. I found myself wondering if the building could somehow impose its own purpose upon the people in the Unit. The Programme did not alter from one week to the next—it was exactly like a school timetable. On Monday mornings, the residents had to go to the town to buy ingredients for the cookery session in the afternoon. Every week they bought the same ingredients. In the afternoon they baked raspberry buns, it was always raspberry buns. When I asked the Deaf people they said no-one actually liked raspberry buns!

Although I was aware of non-interference in the research setting, I could not resist asking one of the Deaf male staff about this when we were alone. ‘What’s wrong with it?’ he wanted to know. I explained that, if time was short (the rehabilitation period was scheduled to last 9 months) why were the residents taught how to make cakes which they didn’t like when they needed to know so many basic things? Surely, I argued, when they are in the community they will buy a cake like the hearing if they want one? He explained that no-one ever questioned the judgement of the hearing people who had devised The Programme even though he knew quite a few of the residents thought the activities were odd. I had visions of the Deaf people in their flats making raspberry buns instead of dinners, it disturbed me deeply.

The ‘Computer Session’ was held on Tuesdays. The residents played ‘educational’ games on the school computers. The motivation was to improve their numeracy. The games were designed for 5 to 9 year olds. Some also were designed to improve literacy—typing in words from a given example. The residents hated them. I asked them why. It was always the same reply;

BORING THIS COMPUTERS SAME (LIKE) CHILD STUPID

Temper tantrums increased considerably on Tuesdays. The week I finished participant observation, they disbanded computer sessions—the residents had revolted.

Some days were designated WASHING DAY. Each resident was told when to do their washing regardless of the amount they had to do. I asked how they were taught to do the washing. I was told that there are Launderette washers on site to enable the residents to learn about doing their washing in the community. They were given exactly the right amount of money and I went along with them. When we arrived, they were instructed to put the money in the slots. In case they forgot exactly where to put it, someone had taped plastic coins to the top of the machines in the correct order. At first I thought this was actually rather inventive—after all it is a visual representation of what to do. However, after a while I began to doubt that the Deaf people would know what to do in the Launderette in the community. If everything is given to them, how can they learn?

Friday afternoon was SPORTS. I thought, this is good, I can join in with this and the Deaf people will enjoy it. I was wrong. They hated it. There was a brand new sports hall with badminton facilities and an ancient swimming pool. Two residents elected to play TENNIS. (It was actually badminton but no-one bothered about the distinction). They stood stock still on the court and batted the shuttlecock to each other, stooping occasionally to pick it up, and looking totally bored.

Another woman elected to go swimming. I eagerly joined her. However, when

we got in she became convinced that she was going to drown so it was rather traumatic. Two women residents sat at the pool side on chairs, looking bored.

SWIM IN HERE WHY NOT?

I signed to them. BLEEDING they signed back. (It was later explained to me that the women residents were only allowed external sanitary protection). They sat and watched us for half an hour. They were not allowed to go elsewhere.

After a while, it occurred to me that the Deaf people had very little choice. The goal may be rehabilitation but what was missing was choice. The meals were provided at set times in a set place. Special meals were provided only for special dietary requirements. They went on special trips in a special bus. They looked around the market once a week but were not given enough money to buy anything more than the odd banana. Most had their money supply controlled in case they squandered it all in one go. This is especially thought to be necessary with smokers. On The Programme all decisions were taken by the hearing staff. The residents were effectively powerless. Had the 'total institution' merely changed site?

The powerlessness of the residents worried and upset me. I could go home to my comfortable house and choose to behave as I liked. The contrast in our life-styles was stark. I began to feel uncomfortable about my privileges, the fact that my clothes were expensive compared to theirs, and at specific times such as when they asked if I drove a car. The 'monetary' side of this did not upset me greatly as I do not covet material possessions greatly, but the lack of power and choice the Deaf people had made me uncomfortable about my privileges.

I began to look out for ways in which the Deaf people might try to 'get round the system'. I hypothesised that this was going to be difficult since the lack of power and choice was so acute. Basically, every minute was accounted for. One day a new woman came to join the residents. She had previously been a resident before but had been sent home for bad behaviour. There was a noticeable rise in tension concerning this woman's imminent arrival. The Deaf people kept signing the initials of her name (say, AB) and making worried gestures with anxious faces. AB had a sign name which looked like BOMB. When I met her I began to understand why. When angered, and quite often when not, she would suddenly go very red in the face, sign rudely very fast and depart. AB had worked out a way to play the system however. When she refused to participate in The Programme, which was often, she was informed that her pocket money would be stopped. She was not letting it stop there however. She informed the hearing Officer in Charge that they had no right to do this and she would be telling her social worker. After this, she only participated when she wanted and her money remained the same. I did not observe any other Deaf people using this technique. Basically, if they were not being told to do some task they 'turned off'. At such times, their faces would assume a far-away look. The staff had sometimes to shake them out of it. I deduced that this may be a way of playing the system—a way of saying 'I am here in body but not in spirit'.

I encountered AB myself after the hearing Officer in Charge asked if I could take the hobbies session. It was decided that the activity would be making dried flower arrangements of which I had some experience. The Deaf people named this

FLOWER POKING which hardly did it justice as an art form. I was not informed of AB's reputation for violence, I had merely deduced this from the expressions of the residents. The group consisted of myself, AB and two other female residents. I began to show them what to do. Suddenly, AB shot up from her chair and signed:

FUCK OFF (YOU) STUPID BASTARD

threw all the flowers up in the air and departed at top speed. I sat there looking embarrassed and wondered what the other women would think of my failure to exert control. The flowers were tiny dried ones—we were all covered in them. Suddenly they started to laugh. Then one woman reached over and started to take them out of my hair. It was a nice moment. We cleared up and did not mention the incident to the Officer when she returned. There seemed no need. I felt I had been 'initiated'. The Deaf women accepted me more after this. It seemed that I was a 'fellow sufferer' of AB's behaviour—this gave us a sense of camaraderie. AB was supposedly schizophrenic. She could often look very menacing. Strangely, she was addicted to knitting—a peaceful sort of occupation for someone so volatile. I often worried about her knitting needles and their potential uses (cf. Lawrinson & Harris, 1994).

One resident was always signing that he was fed up and wanted to return to his home. I asked him about this and he said he liked hearing people and wanted to live 'outside' (signed THERE with gusto). In the past he had had a job as a builder's labourer until he fell ill and was admitted to the psychiatric hospital. He kept on about this all one afternoon. Finally, the exasperated Deaf woman staff member signed to him:

PROBLEM WHAT? DEAF (YOU) MENTAL. ... HOSPITAL (IN THERE) ... MANAGE OUT THERE? (phew) SPEAK YOU?

NO, (WHEN) CHILD—NOW NOTHING

STUPID (YOU) OUTSIDE FORGET (IT)

He was very downcast after this of course. I wanted to cheer him up but couldn't think of what to sign.

Every day those residents not deemed suitable for The Programme, (or who had upset the Officer), hung around in the Hostel where the residents' bedrooms were. One young man had a deteriorating sight problem as well as being Deaf. Losing your sight when you rely on BSL is a tragedy, equivalent to losing the use of your hands. This man (CD) had been moved from the institutions but had been unable to understand the layout of the site. It was so spread out. Even having meals in another part of the building was a nightmare for him. He constantly fell over. While I was there, he was always covered in cuts and bruises. The reactions of the residents was complete indifference to this. They did not appear to sympathise with him and were frequently admonished for not helping him. As his sight diminished he became more and more demanding, playing on staff sympathy to get attention, and often inventing spurious reasons for their help. They did not like him. He often 'missed' the toilet and they had to clean up the mess. They called this 'babyish behaviour', (although it was clear that he could not help it). His mother appeared

from time to time and showered him with expensive presents. This had the effect of exacerbating his selfishness and further isolating him from the other residents, who were very envious of his gadgets and smart clothes.

After a while, the residents stopped calling me **BIG HEAD** and started to sign **HANDBAG** for my name. The gesture was similar to that of the Chancellor on Budget Day. The reason for the innovation was that they had been learning about political parties at one session and I had attended with my handbag, which does bear some resemblance to the budget bag. When the Deaf staff member explained about who lives at number 11, he picked up my bag by way of illustration. The sign-name was forged thus.

I was a source of some amusement and discussion to the Deaf residents. They often signed about my clothes; good natured teasing about this took place so often that I came to expect it every day. One day I wore dungarees. A heated discussion took place conducted mainly by one woman resident who claimed they are for gardening and women do not wear such clothes from choice. I begged to differ and hoped to open up the debate, perhaps touching upon correct behaviour norms for men and women. (The Programme was very sexist in operation—cooking and sewing for women, woodwork for men). However, she refused to be persuaded and to my surprise, all the others agreed with her.

Deaf people are frequently very blunt. One man I had just met signed to me;

HAIR SHORT LIKE BOY STUPID WHY?

Unfortunately, at that time my command of BSL was such that I could not think of an appropriate answer, covert it to BSL and sign back quickly. While I stood there, totally exasperated, he got bored and walked away.

One young man was always hanging about in the Hostel. I asked the staff why he was not on The Programme and was told he had upset the Officer and had 'caused trouble'. I was unable to establish exactly what he had done. He was often to be found cleaning the miles of glass in the covered ways. He persistently flirted with me even though he knew I was twice his age and married. He took to following me about and whistling at me. He was always asking me why I wear trousers:

FUNNY LEGS YOU?

and asking me why I didn't get dressed up for him like a **BEAUTIFUL WOMAN**. He pronounced this with great emphasis upon stereotypical female 'curves'. I had an intense desire to run off whenever I saw him. He had a habit of making a bee line for me whenever he saw me in the Deaf Club, often telling the people that I was his girlfriend. This usually happened when I was in the middle of an interesting discussion with the residents and staff.

It was very difficult to gauge the hearing staff's feelings about the residents. I was sure the Deaf people must irritate them sometimes, (they certainly irritated me!), but they were very guarded about saying anything to me in this line. On occasions I saw the hearing Officer proclaim **HEARING CULTURE** when she was sick of the Deaf equivalent being given as an excuse for 'bad behaviour' (usually laziness). One hearing officer told me once that there is really no such thing as 'Deaf

Culture’ and it is just ‘an excuse for rudeness’. I asked how he had come to this conclusion and he said that sometimes the Deaf people would burp (or worse) very loudly and then proclaim DEAF CULTURE!

Interviewing the Executive Members

The time had finally come to use my sign language skills in interviewing the Deaf Executive Council members. This was to take place at their annual Conference. I had arranged to interview four members, two on each evening of the Conference. The following is an extract from the research fieldnote diary:

Tuesday: terrible, terrible day. Arrived early—could not find any Deaf people anywhere. Finally found their meeting room and blundered in not realising that it was private—blundered out again. What a start! Finally chummed up with two Deaf from Bluetown. Then WAIT WAIT WAIT. Went to find some dinner—no food for miles, only McDonalds ugh! Meeting scheduled to finish at 6 pm—finally did at 10 pm. All Deaf people exhausted, they have been in there since 8.30 am. Finally found Q (the Administration Assistant who had helped set up the interviews). Suddenly there were hundreds of Deaf people in the room, all signing at each other. I was the only hearing person there. I suddenly felt very strange, like a visitor from another planet. Signed with one man, seemed OK. Suddenly he signed SIGNS YOURS FUNNY—HEARING YOU?—‘YES’. Loud protestations. He wanted me ejected and kept on signing HEARING NOT ALLOWED HERE. Oh dear! Felt very uncomfortable indeed and started to wonder what I was doing there. Finally Q got a room sorted out and we arranged that I would interview all four members tomorrow. Got my ‘chum’ from Bluetown to point out who the Executive members are and went round with a piece of paper with the times on it, from 7 to 11 pm with no break for me. God I will be worn out. Met ‘Fred’, ‘James’ and ‘Bill’ who all agreed times. Asked the last, ‘Bert’, and received a very strange reaction. He suddenly ‘flashed’ a communication at me very fast in pure BSL. I had absolutely no idea what he had signed and he made no attempt to help me. Felt extremely uncomfortable. Finally did what Deaf people are known to do when they don’t understand the hearing,—looked at the faces of the people watching for clues as to how to react. They all looked quite cheerful so I smiled and nodded. I had no way of knowing if that was the correct response. I knew instantly that it was a ‘test’ and a statement by Bert. He is attacking my BSL and status as a hearing researcher! Anyway he seemed satisfied with the result, (me being upset). I showed him the list—the only time left was 10–11 pm. He signed DRUNK (BY) THEN ME and walked off. Got ‘Alastair’ to have the time instead. Finally went to bed feeling demoralised and wrecked. Why do the Deaf people have to behave like that? I’m not personally responsible for all the oppression they have suffered! Maybe they should be careful not to alienate all the hearing—

maybe people like me could help gain hearing acceptance of them. Maybe I'm just worn out.

As the excerpt shows, some radical Deaf people can, at times, be exasperating. The experience did not completely ruin my confidence however. In fact it made me more determined to succeed. Besides there are good and bad in the hearing population too and the vast majority of the Deaf people had actually been extremely accommodating. Why let one man capsize the boat?

Whilst at the conference I was wandering around the stalls put up in the foyer of the hotel by the Deaf Organisations. Suddenly one Deaf man (a Regional member, and an old tutor from sign language courses) shot out from behind a display board and let the air from a balloon into my face. DEAF CULTURE! he proclaimed and scuttled off. I thought 'What on earth does that mean?' Is it a way of 'teasing' hearing people? I will probably never know.

On the final day of the Conference I was having breakfast and was in the queue as it was a 'help yourself' affair. Bert (of the anti-hearing fame) was next to me. I offered him some mushrooms. He looked disdainfully at me.

NO NO BAKED BEANS WANT ME. BAKED BEANS GOOD FOOD
BAKED BEANS—DEAF CULTURE!

Baked Beans are part of Deaf Culture are they? What does that mean? Is he saying they are a good cheap food—working class food or what? Curiouser and curiouser.

Conclusion

Following these experiences I have reflected upon my time in the field and it seems to me that there are several important lessons to be learned concerning Deaf and hearing interaction.

Firstly, hearing people are in general outside the Deaf world (cf. Harris, 1995). This is because they have no access to the visual language—it acts as a 'secret code'. Deaf people exploit this fact and frequently use it to their advantage. Hearing signers like myself present them with more of a problem. They cannot exclude us, they sometimes resent our presence, yet they also realise how 'useful' we can be in providing a modicum of access to the hearing world. People like myself therefore have a very strange status within the Deaf community. We are repeatedly questioned about our motives. This can be tiresome, especially when you realise that a Deaf person would not receive this treatment. We also have to endure quite a lot of bad treatment at the hands of Deaf people and this leaves scars. Some prominent researchers have left the field in disgust. Secondly, Deaf people, perhaps more so than any other 'hidden' British group, fear being used as 'guinea pigs' by researchers. This treatment has, they claim, often been extended to them by psychologists, who publish results showing only Deaf people's deficiencies in relation to hearing people. In the 'new wave' of claims that Deaf people have their own distinct culture based upon their own language use, they see little need to participate in hearing peoples' research.

This historical legacy follows hearing people into the field when attempting research with Deaf people and must not be underestimated as my experience demonstrates. The way forward is surely for hearing researchers to acknowledge the impact of the past upon the present social relations between ourselves and Deaf people in the hope of facilitating (mutually) anti-oppressive research.

NOTES

Throughout the text I have used the term 'Deaf' to refer to those people who use BSL as their first language, some of whom also have a positive (political) sense of Deaf Identity as part of Deaf Culture.

- [1] Capital letters throughout denote signed concepts. BSL signs sometimes bear strong relation to the English gloss, although not always. The sign 'CULTURE', for example, was observed to have many meanings to Deaf people including, 'sameness' (through language use), 'group feeling' (cohesion) and 'positive difference' (to majority hearing society).
- [2] The sign we were taught is actually a combination of THINK and HAVE, which equates with the English concept of 'information retention'.

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