Family Communication Experiences of Deaf Australians

by

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TASA 2008, the annual conference of
The Australian Sociology Association 2008

December 2008
Growing Up Deaf: 
Family Communication Experiences of Deaf Australians

Abstract

Focusing on Australians who were born deaf or who acquired a hearing loss in early childhood, this paper compares the communication experiences of deaf people born to hearing parents with those born to deaf parents. Drawing from a socio-cultural study involving in-depth interviews and participant observation in Melbourne’s deaf community, I suggest the communication experiences and socialisation processes are fundamentally different for these two groups. In an environment where Auslan has seldom or never been used, deaf people born to hearing families often experience very restricted communication with their families and inadequate socialisation through poor access to the auditory language of spoken English. In striking contrast, those born into deaf families and exposed to sign language since birth enjoy full and unfettered communication with their parents and siblings in a manner similar to any other family sharing the same language. These experiences powerfully shape the vastly different trajectories of identity development taken by each of these groups.

Key words: deafness, family, language/communication, identity development

Word count: 3755 (including references)

TASA theme: family, or difference and diversity
Introduction

This paper focuses on Australians who were born deaf or acquired a hearing loss during childhood. Such individuals are young enough for the hearing loss to have affected their spoken language development or their identity as a deaf or hearing person. In contrast, those who acquired a hearing loss as adults due to the ageing process, an industrial accident, or a medical condition, i.e. those for whom English is a first language, are outside the scope of analysis. Not surprisingly, late-deafened individuals see themselves essentially as hearing people who have lost their hearing, whilst those with early onset deafness tend to identify with others like them (Johnston 1989: 470). People who were born deaf or acquired a hearing loss during childhood are more likely to use a sign language to communicate. All of the discussion of deaf people that follows refers specifically to this group.

Sign languages are now accepted by linguists as natural languages with their own grammatical systems and all of the core ingredients common to other human languages (Klima and Bellugi 1979; Senghas and Monaghan 2002), although the public misconception that sign languages are merely pantomime or pictorial gestures has remained powerful. Sign languages exist everywhere in the world where there are deaf communities, and a myriad of different sign languages are used throughout the globe, including French Sign Language, Chinese Sign Language and American Sign Language. The sign language used by most deaf people in Australia is called Auslan (Australian Sign Language).
Less than five per cent of deaf children in the United States have one or more parents who are also deaf (Mitchell and Karchmer 2004: 157). Although no comparable demographic studies have been conducted in Australia, the proportion of deaf children with deaf parents is likely to be similar. The overwhelming majority of deaf children, then, are born to hearing families where a spoken language such as English is the language of the home. These circumstances are significant because communication experiences are fundamentally different for deaf children born to hearing parents compared with those born to parents who are also deaf, as we shall see.

Some readers of this paper may at first expect, or look for, a conceptualisation of deaf people as a disability group. A key topic explored in my broader study is the various ways in which deaf people identify, as discussed in Slegers (2007). I found that most deaf people do not the use the terms ‘disability’ or ‘disabled’ as a primary form of identification (2007: 106-115). On the contrary, like Padden and Humphries (1988: 44), I found that “when deaf people discuss their deafness, they use terms deeply related to their language, their past and their community”. However, deaf people do recognise that the term ‘disability’ is widely used among government agencies and providers of essential services such as sign language interpreting and accessible communication technologies. Disassociating from such terms could mean denying themselves funding and provision of essential services. Thus deaf people do engage with these terms for pragmatic reasons.

**Methods**

Drawn from a broader sociological investigation of deaf Australians who use sign language (Slegers 2007), this study involved the following forms of data collection:
• Semi-structured interviews with 31 people, comprising: 23 deaf people, 4 (hearing) Auslan interpreters and 4 (hearing) colleagues of deaf people

• Participant observation at two deaf community organisations and at numerous deaf community social events

Melbourne was chosen as the site for the study because it is one of the two most populous Australian cities with a large, active deaf community, and it is most accessible to myself as a resident. In the absence of statistical information on social characteristics of Australia’s deaf-born and early-deafened population (for example gender and age), I aimed for a sample comprising a broad cross-section of deaf people according to such characteristics. Given that approximately 95 per cent of deaf children have hearing parents (Mitchell and Karchmer 2004) 20 of the 23 participants (87% – a comparable percentage) were from this group. A snowball technique for interviewee recruitment was used, starting with my own professional and personal networks. I also interviewed deaf people I met at two deaf community organisations where I conducted participant observation.

The interview sample also included four Auslan interpreters. Having worked with interpreters during my earlier work amongst deaf people, I felt it would be beneficial to interview them because they have insight into the world of deaf people through their work, sign language fluency, and comparative perspective as hearing individuals. I also interviewed four hearing colleagues of deaf people because I felt their experiences and insights would also be beneficial. All names used in this paper are pseudonyms.
I conducted participant observation through attendance at numerous deaf social events including sporting events, ‘culture nights’ of deaf story telling and anecdotes, and socialising at hotels and parties. I also carried out participant observation through volunteer clerical work at two deaf community organisations for a period of 22 months where communication between staff was often exclusively in Auslan.

I analysed the qualitative data yielded using a combination of grounded theory and thematic analysis. As part of this process, I used a software package for the management and analysis of qualitative data, called Nvivo2.0.

**Communication experiences with hearing family members**

As has been the case in many Western countries in past decades, Australian health and educational professionals have routinely advised parents of deaf children to use speech with their child and to encourage the child to lip read; use of sign language has been discouraged. However, educational research indicates that a large portion of deaf children struggle to make sense of spoken language (e.g. English) when it is introduced as the child’s primary language: learning any language requires ongoing exposure and immersion, and for children who cannot hear, immersion cannot occur. The deaf child is therefore always trying to catch up to its hearing peers who have constant reinforcement of English through family, television, radio and the multitude of conversations going on around them. (Johnson, Liddell, and Erting 1989; Komesaroff 1996; Pearce 2002). In contrast, sign language satisfies deaf children’s need for a fully accessible language and provides them with a strong language base through which they can gain world knowledge and thereby become literate in a
second language such as English. In this way the sign language can work like a ‘spring board’ to learning to read and write English (Komesaroff 1996: 41, 1994; Branson and Miller 1993; Llewellyn-Jones 1987).

Sign language use has been discouraged because of the misconception that it would interfere with the child’s learning of speech (Baynton 1996). Thus, parents of deaf children have rarely acquired the sign language skills or the information necessary to provide these children with an accessible context for acquisition of a language, in this case a sign language (Johnson, Liddell, and Erting 1989). All of the deaf people from hearing families whom I interviewed grew up in homes in which their parents did not learn Auslan or use it with them. Some deaf children who were taught to lip read and speak were able to follow particular conversations around them, under specific conditions (for example, if people faced them and took turns speaking). The parents of interviewee Alan, tried to communicate with him by speaking to him as Alan tried to lip read, which he described as difficult and often unsuccessful. He recalled:

   It’s stressful when … people mouth the words very slowly so that you can think about them. It feels very – what’s the word? – denigrating, that you had to watch somebody sp-e-e-e-eak ve-e-e-e-r-ry slowly sort of thing.
   
   You feel like a bit of a numbskull … because you can’t understand.

Moreover, communication barriers between deaf and hearing people are not, American educator Foster (1998: 117-118) reminds us, merely those associated with differences in language (i.e., when the deaf person is using Auslan or British Sign Language and the hearing person is using English). In fact, deaf people who demonstrate good knowledge of English grammar, vocabulary and syntax may still
have problems in the *mode* most often used by hearing people for informal communication, the mode of speaking and listening:

Even with superb speech and speechreading skills, the inability to hear often interferes with expression and reception in a speaking and listening mode: cues go unnoticed, subtle meanings associated with voice tone are not properly conveyed, comments made while a back is turned or the television is on are missed completely (Foster 1998: 117-118).

Some families with a deaf child were even less accommodating than those in Alan’s story described earlier. Jen, now aged in her forties, was born into a hearing family, and she began to lose her hearing when she was about five years of age. Jen recalled her parents’ attitude toward deafness was one of intolerance which led to communicative, and social, exclusion: “In my family if … you didn’t hear, then it was your fault. And if you couldn’t [get involved], well, that was just tough luck. You missed out”. If Jen missed a joke at the dinner table, she remembered, then family members did not have the patience to repeat it again for her. The sense of exclusion that Jen described is consistent with Foster’s American study (1998) of communication experiences of deaf people in hearing families. She found that,

Many of the deaf people interviewed said their worst memories were of conversations around the dinner table, when family members would share the events of the day and discuss local news. The fast-paced and often overlapping nature of these spoken exchanges made them almost impossible to follow through speechreading. As a result, the deaf person was usually excluded (1998: 120).
Deaf people born to hearing parents have thus typically grown up in a home environment where communication with their family was severely restricted. Such communication environments can lead, not only to communicative isolation for deaf children, but also difficulties with their socialisation and development of identity. In ordinary society, people learn about the ideas, customs and values of their family and society from their parents, friends, teachers and others. This process of socialisation requires complex communication, usually in a language in which speaking and listening are the norm. But the communication and content so crucial for the socialisation process has often been severely limited for deaf people (Emerton 1998).

Foster explains that occasions traditionally associated with family closeness and camaraderie, such as holiday celebrations or Christmas, are frequently the most difficult for deaf people. This is because lip reading and any residual hearing are rendered much more difficult when several people are conversing in a group, or when there is background noise. This is supported by the observations of Terri, an Auslan interpreter I interviewed, who commented that the isolation deaf people routinely feel at these events often leads them to seek out other deaf people at Christmas time:

I see deaf people having special get togethers around Christmas time because after spending a day with their hearing families through obligation, they sort of come together to be deaf! Because being in those hearing family situations is so hard unless the family has made a commitment to sign language [communication] as well, and not so many families do.
In the past decade or so, there has been an increasing trend of encouraging family members of deaf children to learn some Auslan. For example, Melbourne-based service organisation Deaf Children Australia runs an Auslan home tutoring program in which hearing parents and siblings are taught Auslan by deaf people, who either visit their homes, or if they live in remote areas of Victoria, via video conferencing technology. In 2006, twenty families in Victoria were receiving home tutoring. Parents can follow up the tutoring program by attending ‘Auslan coffee shops’ where further tuition is provided (Personal communication, Brian Bernal, Deaf Children Australia, 18 December 2006). Some parents also attend Auslan classes at colleges for further education, such as Kangan Batman TAFE in Richmond. A number of younger people aged in their 20s and 30s whom I interviewed reported that their parents had started to learn Auslan in recent years, though the children are now adults.

**Communication experiences with deaf family members**

The above stories make a startling contrast with those of deaf people born into deaf families. Surrounded by other deaf people and sign language from the time they were born, these people were easily able to communicate with other family members, using sign language. Descriptions of communication within such families appear no different from those within any other family sharing the same language. Dan was born into a large deaf family where his parent, siblings, and even his grandparents were deaf. Now aged in his late 40’s, Dan recalled:

> When my father was [finished] reading the newspaper – at the time we didn’t have a TV – we’d talk about it. .... We had very full communication in my family. So that’s the difference between me and a deaf person with a hearing family. … My father was forever telling us what was going on in
the news. And so a lot of deaf people have seen me as a role model and it’s because I grew up in a deaf environment.

Dan remembered that some aspects of the furniture and layout of the family home were arranged to help facilitate sign language communication, given its visual nature. For example, the chairs in the lounge and dining room were set up in an O shape so that family members and visitors could always see everyone else when seated. When he was fifteen, Dan’s parents installed special lights that would flash inside the home when the door bell was rung, to alert family members of a visitor.

Evan, a deaf man now aged in his 50’s, was also born into a deaf family. He recalled:

Because I was born to deaf parents, I actually saw deafness as perfectly normal. [My parents] signed, they had friends and family who are deaf. It was wonderful. … I grew up in a very happy family who all use the same language and I didn’t miss anything.

The experiences of deaf people from deaf families are of real importance in studying the development of deaf identity, Carty (1994) explains, because they are the only deaf people who have learnt language, culture and the beginnings of (deaf) identity from their parents. Deaf people of deaf families are routinely afforded an esteemed place in deaf communities, as they are seen as carriers of deaf cultural knowledge, history and the language of their communities. Dan was only half-joking when he described himself to me as “deaf royalty”:

I’m actually part of an elite that’s seen as the true deaf. I’m truly, seriously in the core of the deaf community because my home is completely deaf, I
went to a deaf school, I work in a deaf environment. Every part of my life, every aspect, is deaf.

Many such individuals of deaf families are seen by the deaf community and linguists as excellent sign language models, having learned their language from their parents and grandparents from birth. They are often consulted and employed in the development of sign language dictionaries, videos and DVDs depicting signed stories, and for public presentations in sign language. More informally, they are routinely called upon by other deaf people and interpreters when seeking expert clarification of sign language vocabulary and grammar.

**Implications for identity development amongst deaf people**

How do the early communication experiences of deaf people relate to their socialisation and identity development? The necessarily narrow scope of this paper allows for only a cursory consideration of these issues, which are discussed in detail in Slegers (2007: 75-97). Hearing parents’ reactions to discovering their child is deaf or has a hearing impairment are characterised by shock and grief over what they perceive might have been. The child they have been joyfully expecting is found to be unlike themselves, and they try to find advice on what to do (Emerton 1998: 138; Spradley and Spradley 1985). Auslan interpreter Yvonne observed, “They just wanted to have a baby. [Deafness] was not in the whole grand plan. There’s a lot of anger and frustration and grief associated with finding out they’ve got a deaf baby”.

Perhaps not surprisingly, identity development is fundamentally different among those born to hearing parents compared with those born to deaf parents. Many deaf
children of hearing parents, not exposed to other deaf people in their early years because of mainstreamed education, have grown up feeling abnormal, one of a kind, even though they might have known of the existence of other deaf people (Carty 1994: 41). Such findings concur with the case-studies of American linguist Padden and educator Humphries, who point out that, to the deaf child of hearing parents, “being deaf meant being set apart from [one’s] family and friends; [one] was ‘deaf’ and had an ‘illness’” (1988: 20).

Accounts of the deaf people of hearing families I interviewed, particularly when describing their confused childhood and teenage years, resonate with what American psychologist Neil S. Glickman (1996) calls a ‘culturally marginal’ stage of deaf identity development involving difficulty establishing and maintaining intimate relationships with either deaf or hearing communities, shifting loyalties at various times, and poor communication skills in both English and sign language. Glickman argues that most deaf children born into hearing families first develop marginal identities, and these identities are reinforced by educational programs involving mainstreaming deaf students with the broader student population.

Glickman’s theory sees this culturally marginal stage as one stage (Stage 2) among a number of stages that deaf people may proceed through in the process of identity development. Stage 1 is ‘culturally hearing’ (characterised, for example, by understanding deafness solely as a medical pathology, assuming hearing people to be more healthy and capable than deaf people); Stage 3 is ‘immersion in the deaf world’, and involves idealisation of all things deaf and disparagement of the hearing world; Stage 4 is ‘bicultural’ and involves cultural pride as a deaf person whilst recognising
that both deaf and hearing people have strengths and weaknesses, some feeling of comfort and skill in both deaf and hearing settings, and an appreciation and respect for both spoken and signed languages. Glickman points out that several beginning points are possible depending on the circumstances in which one is deaf. For example, the vast majority of deaf people with deaf parents first develop bicultural identities.

The identity development of deaf people from deaf families contrasts strongly with the above stories of isolation. Surrounded by other deaf people from birth, these people took for granted the existence of other deaf people, and saw deafness as commonplace. Evan recalls that his father’s two deaf brothers and his mother, who were heavily involved in deaf community organisations, were particular role models for him. Similarly, Dan explains that he did not have to contend with the uncertainty or discomfort over his identity felt by his deaf counterparts from hearing families:

I never had any of that depression or anxiety about being deaf. Never had any of that self-doubt about my identity as a deaf person. I was always involved in the deaf club and I relied on my friendships with other deaf people [so] I was able to look after myself and be very independent.

In conclusion, we have seen how the diverse communication environments of deaf people powerfully shape their identity formation. The small minority of the deaf population who are born to deaf parents tend to grow up in socially and linguistically rich home environments and enjoy healthy self-esteem, whilst those born to hearing parents have typically experienced significant communicative isolation, inadequate social skills, and confusion about their identity. However, the scope of this paper permits only an introductory consideration of identity formation amongst deaf people.
Other contributing aspects include level and onset of hearing loss, educational experiences, and personal and family attitudes. These are explored extensively in Slegers (2007). Moreover, further research focusing specifically on the contemporary experiences of deaf children and young people, including the various socio-cultural, medical, educational and technological factors shaping their identity formation would be beneficial.

References


