

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Deafhood: A concept stressing possibilities, not deficits¹

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Abstract

Born-deaf, sign-language-using people have for the past two centuries been placed within a succession of externally constructed models, notably the traditional “medical” or pathological model. This perceives them primarily as biologically deficient beings in need of cures or charity in order to be successfully assimilated into society. This paper proposes that the concept of colonialism is the one that most appropriately describes the “existential” reality of deaf communities, and offers instead a deaf-constructed model. Utilizing recent confirmation of the existence of bona-fide deaf cultures, it highlights the extent to which these communities have resisted such models, maintaining their own beliefs concerning their validity and quality of their existence, and what they offer to non-deaf societies. This “vulnerability as strength” is manifested through the concept of deafhood, which is presented as the first move towards a formal narrative of decolonizing and liberatory possibilities.

Traditional constructions

Western deaf communities have existed since at least the fifteenth century, but it was not until the first deaf schools were established in the late eighteenth century that large numbers of deaf people were able to congregate, educate each other, develop their own cultures, and form urban communities around such schools. During the Enlightenment period, with its intense interest in the relationship between humanity and language, deaf communities and their sign languages were more positively regarded [1]. This interrelationship between deaf and non-deaf peoples was rooted in beliefs about *Nature*, a crucial and positive concept prior to the Industrial Revolution.

However, during the nineteenth century, through the rise and reification of science and medicine, the development of Social Darwinism and the rapid growth of colonialism, the concept of *Progress* gained hegemony. Unpicking this concept reveals an assumption of the “Manifest Destiny” of the Nordic races – that Man’s increasing subordination of Nature to science was both an inevitable stage of human evolution and a virtually unqualified good. Thus Nature itself, its connotations, and, by

extension, most non-Nordic peoples, were constructed as “backwards” or retarded on an evolutionary scale, and deaf people’s previous association with Nature resulted in their submersion within this category [2].

As a consequence, an intricate medical-educational administrative nexus was established as the means by which deaf communities should be categorized and ruled. This process required the development of a *medical model* of deafness, which stressed that the only way for deaf people to attain full humanity was to integrate with the majority population and forsake contact with their own languages and peoples [3]. Although deaf communities vigorously resisted these policies, it was not until the late twentieth century that their views were heeded, and some changes initiated.

As the twentieth century moved on, the administrators of the medical model adopted the term *disability*, which for the first time placed deaf peoples in an administrative category that included all other “physically impaired” people. This had both positive and negative effects for deaf communities, who were unhappy about such a categorization primarily because of the disability movement’s insistence that

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all disabled children be mainstreamed, which led to the closure of hundreds of deaf schools across the West [4]. By removing deaf children from their much-needed contact with deaf adults and other deaf children, mainstreaming thereby severely damaging deaf people's cultures. Despite numerous worldwide protests, they have been unable to reverse the trend.

The social model and the deaf culturo-linguistic model

By the 1990s disabled people's organizations developed an alternative to the medical model – the *social model* – in which they asserted that the roots of disability lay not within themselves but in the societies that denied them citizenship, and thus “disabled” them [5].

In my book “Understanding deaf culture” [6] I explain deaf people's conception of themselves as a linguistic and cultural minority, and outline how the social model as applied to deaf people contains internal contradictions and how it fails to take on board several key differences in the quality of deaf cultural lives compared with those of persons with disabilities. I emerge with a new *culturo-linguistic model* that enables the deaf experience to be more properly understood, not only as a cultural experience. This model also enables a beginning to the investigation to locate administrative placement with more appropriate groups of oppressed Others. This model offers the term *deafhood*, not only as a refutation of the medical term *deafness*, but as a means by which to capture and set down the historically transmitted value systems by which deaf peoples, as uniquely visuo-gesturo-tactile biological entities, believe they offer a different and positive perspective on what it means to be human.

Deafhood, deafness, and oralism as colonialism

These values can be traced back through over 200 years of deaf communities (see later section) and stand in (largely unrecognized) opposition to the deafness models that gained hegemonic control of the administration of those communities. Various concepts and strategies have been attempted in order to overturn those models. The most recent constructs deaf communities as being the victims of a *colonization* process, proposed by Lane [7], then Wrigley [8], but not formalized until Ladd [6]. The essential features of this form of colonization are policies actively intending to eradicate or marginalize

sign languages and deaf cultures. The name given to such policies is *oralism*, whose central tenets are described below.

Prior to the hegemony of oralism, which began in the 1880s, sign languages were used in deaf education, deaf schools were founded by deaf people themselves, and deaf teachers and professionals abounded [9]. In the last 120 years oralism has proscribed the use of sign language in deaf education, and removed deaf teachers and deaf adults from the education system in order to try and prevent them from passing down deaf culture to the next generations of deaf children. This policy still continues in most countries today, although in the last 20 years a movement towards reinstating sign language, known as *bilingual deaf education*, and which began in Scandinavia, has made some inroads in other countries. (It would be instructive to understand why Scandinavian policies are much more enlightened than those elsewhere, but this subject unfortunately – and significantly – has not been researched.)

Oralism disguises its intent under the rubric of education, claiming that if sign languages and deaf teachers were removed from the system, and deaf children were isolated from each other where possible and taught only by lip-reading, speech, and auditory input, then they would be assimilated into majority societies. This ideology claims that speech can *only* be developed by the removal of those languages and cultures from the deaf child's environment. In order to administer such a system, it denies the existence of the concept of a “deaf child”, replacing it by the terms *deafness* and *hearing-impaired*, which focuses on what the child lacks rather than the qualities he or she possesses in potentia. Ultimately it claims that a deaf child is “simply a hearing child who cannot hear” [5].

The consequences of oralism have been severe. Deaf school-leavers worldwide have a reading age of 8³/₄, sufficient for the headlines of a tabloid newspaper, yet their speech is still almost incomprehensible [10]. This not only affects their ability to gain appropriate employment or further education but deprives them of meaningful relationships with their parents. It instils in them a range of internalized oppressions, from a simple lack of self-confidence or self-belief, through identity crises and self-hatred, to a rate of acquired mental illness double that of non-deaf populations [11].

Inevitably, oralism has also seriously affected the quality of deaf individuals' collective lives in their signing communities. This has been manifested in damage to their traditional cultures [6] and artforms [1], and in their ability to run their own clubs and

organizations, which were subsequently taken over by non-deaf peoples and administered, in effect, as deaf colonies [12], with subsequent community divisions which are characteristic of the colonization process [6].

Crucially for students of public health policies, by removing sign languages from the public eye, oralism also resulted in the exclusion of deaf peoples from the twentieth-century's liberal or radical discourses, so that these important avenues of social change were no longer available to them.

Deafhood covertly maintained

Although driven “underground” in this way, deaf communities nevertheless refused to stop using their own languages and continued to maintain their own existence and culture through deaf clubs, national and international organizations, and the successful raising of hundreds of thousands of non-deaf children in those cultures. The cultural cornerstones of the communities are the 10% of deaf children born to deaf parents who have passed the pre-oralist deafhood inheritance down as many as nine generations, dating back to the 1820s, when records first began [13].

It is a testimony to the determination of deaf people that those local, regional, national, and international communities have continued to exist throughout the oralist century, and re-emerged to win some changes from 1975 onwards (the *deaf Resurgence*) – notably a greater visibility in the media, and a consequent explosion of the numbers of non-deaf people wishing to learn sign languages. It is because of these successes that the contemporary reader has any awareness of sign languages and deaf people, to whatever degree.

Nevertheless, given the exponential increase in academic discourses in the twentieth century, this removal of deaf people has led to the creation of a particularly large “discourse distance” between their own discourses and even the most radical non-deaf discourses. Given the importance of liberal/radical forces in achieving social reform, one can understand why the arguably child-abusive practice of oralism [6] has been allowed to continue without appropriate scrutiny.

The deafhood concept and postcolonial cultures

In order, therefore, to create a space in English-language discourses to even begin to bridge this distance, one in which the positive, collective,

worldwide deaf experience can be situated, a term other than “*deafness*” is needed. Thus, *deafhood*. There are deaf sign-language terms that capture aspects of the concept. But the primary challenge at this historical moment is to disrupt these powerful deafness discourses in order to be able to enable the beginnings of a deaf counter-narrative.

Given that human beings have a tendency to seek fixity, it is important to state from the outset that deafhood is a process, not a fixed state, a checklist of characteristics that can be used to police whichever ideologies arise to attempt hegemony. Like any other group of humans, deaf children and adults undergo enculturation. One learns to become a member of a culture, and in a similar way a child born deaf, even to deaf parents, has to learn to become “deaf”, that is, to become a responsible sign-language-using member of a national community.

There is one crucial difference between this process and majority society enculturation. One can become “English” (for example) over a period of years, and Englishness is then established. The arguments as to what that Englishness might be are contested anew by every generation, and the culture evolves when members of that society seek to extend what Englishness might mean in a future that they imagine for their communities.

But the state of being “English” itself is rarely brought into question, except in times of war when one's behaviour or beliefs can be attacked as “un-English”. In intensely ideological states such as the USA, the concept of behaving in an “un-American” way can be used by the military-industrial complex to enforce conformity. But, generally, majority Western society's membership of its own cultures has not been seriously questioned until the rapid rise of concepts of ethnicity following the end of the Cold War.

Minority cultures and *postcolonial cultures*, on the other hand, are constantly challenged to validate their status, not just by external forces but by internal forces also. For example, being “Black” or “Native American”, for example, is a state of existence that is continually called into question, hence the derogatory terms “Uncle Tom”, “oreo”, or “apple” applied to members of those societies who are perceived to side with those external forces. There are few such equivalent pressures for majority cultures.

Moreover, the temptations to try and leave behind one's origins by merging with majority society continue throughout one's life. Maintaining one's “Blackness”, therefore, can become a lifetime's struggle. And so it is with deafhood: one not only has to become “deaf”, but to maintain that “deaf”

identity in the face of decades of daily negations. Precisely what “deaf” means for each group within each generation will vary – but the first criteria of deafhood is that it is a *process* through which each deaf man, woman, and child implicitly explains his/her existence as a deaf being in the world to him/herself and to each other. It is the next step that becomes especially interesting – namely the precise epistemological or ontological “content” of those explanations.

Deafhood and deaf possibilities

Deafhood as a concept is utilized as a way by which to measure *deaf possibilities*. Majority cultures do not have to measure their culture in such ways – they are implicit within their own definitions of “cultural change”. But minority cultures that have undergone oppression, especially Black or postcolonial societies, are forced to create and re-create their cultures, often by reference to whatever aspects of their pre-colonized cultures they still retain, in order to identify a “larger” self which once existed.

After 120 years of oppression of sign languages and their users, and the consequent internalized oppression and self-shame, we no longer know very much about whatever larger deaf self existed. Yet to simply proceed from the present historical moment is to limit our understanding of deaf possibilities. One must therefore seek out evidence of pre-oralist deaf selfhood, although very few data presently exist, not least because sign languages have no written form. Perhaps the most important data currently accessible are the writings of French deaf people from Desloges [14] through Massieu and Clerc [15] to the deaf Parisian Banquets held between 1834 and 1880 [16].

Such writings, which span a century, can be regarded as the “tip of the iceberg”, since new historical data continue to emerge. In them, seven epistemological principles of deafhood can presently be identified. Briefly summarized, these include the belief that sign languages were not only the equal of spoken languages *but even arguably “superior” in their ability to communicate across national boundaries*. (This ability has much to do with the tremendous grammatical similarities across sign languages.) Deaf people believed that these languages were a gift from God/Nature, and that they were deliberately placed on earth to manifest the beauty, power, and usefulness of those languages. They regarded non-signing people as “sign-impaired”, incomplete beings and offered their languages as a gift to those people to help them become “completed beings” [6].

The extent to which these principles seem remarkable or incredible to the reader can actually be rendered as an indication of the extent to which he or she has “bought into” the medical model that constructs deaf people as incomplete beings who can be helped – but not at any time learned from. In fact evidence is beginning to emerge that communicating with non-deaf babies through signing can enhance their cognitive development and speed up the acquisition of their spoken language [17]. One might ask therefore just what other powerful gains for humanity might be achieved through utilizing the skills of deaf communities.

Deafhood principles in contemporary research

I then used these deafhood principles as a basis from which to examine UK deaf culture during the twentieth century, and this approach proved to be fruitful. By mid-century few of those tenets still remained within overt deaf discourses during that time. But in researching the lives of deaf children in residential schools and the lives of deaf adults within deaf clubs during that century, it was possible to identify aspects of deaf belief and behaviour that could nevertheless be described as attempts to maintain deafhood identity [6]. Numbers of these examples operated on a daily, localised level – such as the concept of “1,001 [small] Victories” [6] – where deaf children attempted to subvert the ban on sign languages in numerous “small acts”. On reaching adulthood, deaf adults asserted themselves similarly in response to the everyday discrimination of hearing-speaking (*audist*) societies.

However, I also located what can be called “class” divisions within deaf communities, where a deaf “middle class” ran the communities by attributing negative meanings to the term “deaf”. Similar patterns can be observed in other colonized and minority cultures, where the striving to be as “white” as possible by a Black bourgeoisie operated in tandem with a derogation (or subsequent rebellious adoption) of the concept of “Nigger”, to give one example [18].

In one respect, then, deafhood represents the sum of all the self-explanations of “deaf” presently available to deaf communities. In another – and this is one of the most difficult points to resolve this early in the deafhood decolonization process – there is the impulse towards larger deaf possibilities, which suggests that the process of becoming and maintaining “deaf” could lead to deafhood being used by one group or another to validate ideas about being “more” or less “deaf” at any one point in time. This

could for instance become limited by narrow concepts of “deaf nationalism”, a problem faced by other decolonizing societies.

To minimize this danger, I suggest a stress on the “deepening” of one’s deafhood whilst acknowledging that there is no obvious end to that process. I also stress that the “deaf Nation” concept can, following Berthier [cf. 16], be recognized as essentially an *international* concept, so that individual deaf countries and communities form branches of a global entity. This belief is already widespread, being embodied in the practices (if not the overt discourses) of the 50-year-old World Federation of the Deaf.

Another strategy for avoiding deaf nationalism is to use the deaf culture term in a certain way. By describing what deaf culture has enclosed over the last century, it is possible to view the diminished postcolonial readings as “*deaf cultural traditions*”, and to identify the strivings to go beyond these as “*deafhood*”. This enables us to make an epistemological break with whatever negative cultural features one considers to have been internalized, and thus to create space for decolonizing praxis – thoughts, beliefs, and actions that interrupt older patterns and aspire towards concepts of a larger deaf self, able to extend the boundaries of what being “deaf” might mean.

A few simple examples may be useful. Deaf cultures are notorious for their members being critical of each other rather than praising (the “horizontal violence” found in other minority cultures). It is possible to demonstrate that this feature is learned from an oralist upbringing, and that deafhood could enclose the possibility of change to a more positive mode of being [6]. The profound devaluation of sign-language skills and deaf arts in some deaf communities can be shown to be similarly learned. By reference to the deafhood concept, a climate of positive valuation of the range and beauty of the language can be encouraged, together with a reorienting of (for example) deaf theatre, so that instead of simply translating non-deaf plays into sign, deaf life and community can become a valid subject for deaf dramatists [6].

In external domains one can demonstrate that deaf ways of thinking and being have long been excluded from deaf education, so that in this present age when deaf people are once more beginning to be admitted to their rightful role in respect of deaf children, there begins a search of the myriad ways in which deafhood might be used to completely reform deaf education. A similar dynamic can be located within deaf mental health services, deaf television and deaf organizations [6].

The concept is also useful when we come to examine other national deaf cultures. Ladd (forthcoming) illustrates that ideas about being “STRONG-DEAF” were constructed differently between the UK and the USA. In the latter, there is a strong valorizing of one’s ASL (American Sign Language) skills, on sign-play and creativity, and election of deaf leaders can depend on their ASL rhetorical skills. By contrast in the UK, emphasis on BSL skills and appreciation of BSL aesthetics is little valorized. There is, however, greater emphasis in the UK than in the USA on service to one’s community, and to political activity as a manifestation of that service. On the international scene, moreover, American deaf people are seen as notoriously unwilling to socialize with other nations, and it can be argued that this too is a legacy of their own form of American colonialism. In each example, the absence of one or other of these features usually leads one deaf grouping to assert that the other is either “NOT-DEAF” or “LESS-DEAF”. The deafhood concept, by contrast, enables us to read across those cultures, to say that deafhood is simply constructed differently in each country.

Finally, although the seven principles of French Victorian deafhood have been described as epistemological, it seems probable that they may be ontological principles [19], relating to (as yet unexplored) aspects of existentialism and phenomenology, since many versions of deafhood require the deaf person to answer the question “*Why have I been created deaf in this world? Is there merely a ‘negative’, biological answer, or is this biological state simply a manifestation of a larger, possibly spiritual dimension of human existence?*” After all, one can refute scientific arguments that a person is born deaf because of defective features in the body, by pointing out that if any Supreme Being decided to create a sign-language-using race, it would be necessary also to create the biological conditions that would render such developments possible.

Deafhood, deaf culture, and public health

Importantly, deafhood also asserts that attitudes towards deaf by *lay* non-deaf people, that is, hearing people situated *outside* the colonialist administration, and in whose name the system is operated, can be positively influenced, once deaf communities are able to bring their own discourses to public notice, so that they can become allies in the decolonization process.

However, decolonization cannot proceed unless deaf societies clarify for themselves and others what

“deaf Culture” is, and how it might operate across the colonized domains, especially deaf education systems. If this is not speedily accomplished – to give but one example – not only will teachers and parents become frustrated, but the admission of deaf people to major positions in education will be greatly slowed, and deaf children consequently negatively affected.

In turn this could lead to oralism regaining hegemony with the next generation of parents of deaf children, especially in view of the vast sums of money from the military-industrial complex (hundreds of millions of dollars worldwide) being invested in “new oralism” via the search for “miracle cures” as is currently manifested in the spread of cochlear implantation of deaf children [7].

Likewise the recent rise of genetic engineering and the concerted attempts to remove deaf genes from human existence poses another major ontological challenge, which cannot be met unless the deaf culturo-linguistic model is properly understood by those wielding power and influence. Were this to be understood, then it could be recognized that such attempts would result in the eventual eradication of over 250 of the world’s languages, and thus be in direct contravention of both United Nations and European Union charters of rights.

Conclusions and implications

Thus, although the deafhood decolonizing process is still in its infancy, it offers great potential for serving as a counter-narrative, able to disrupt hegemonic medical and social models. With its potential to embody its “vulnerability as a strength” by informing the academy and society of the benefits of understanding and absorbing some of the cultural features of tactile, visuo-gesturally skilled deaf communities, the biodiversity of human experience can be positively valorized in the coming years.

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