

Name: Paul Michaels

Institution: Durham University

Proposition: Presentation

Topic for discussion: Engaging Young Deaf Gay Men In Research.

Abstract:

The closure of many residential schools for the Deaf recently, have affected the cultural identity of many younger Deaf people. Additionally, Deaf people's differences are marked by political, historical or geographical separation (Padden & Humphries 1988 p3).

Strong and openly gay identities are prevalent in many parts of the world and Fulcher and Scott (2011 p182) argue that gay cultures have given 'gays a voice, and identity, a positive image, and a collective organisation that could provide mutual support and campaign on their behalf to demand an end to discrimination against them'.

So, consider when a person is young, Deaf *and* gay. What is their identity and culture? Who gives them a voice? Do they have a positive image? The lack of empirical research into the subject means that these and many other questions are yet to be answered in order to provide us with insight and understanding of this community.

My current research in the Department of Modern Languages and Cultures at Durham University is focusing on the *Identity and Culture of the Deaf Gay Community* and has included engagement with young Deaf gay people. I will give an insight into my findings and what form the engagement with this group took.

References:

Fulcher, J., and Scott, J. Sociology. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2011.

Padden, C., and Humphries, T. Deaf in America: Voices from a Culture. USA: Harvard University Press, 1988

Extended Abstract

What is the Deaf Community?

The deaf community is a linguistic and cultural minority made up of people who are generally profoundly Deaf and use sign language as a first or preferred language. It is a collectivist culture who generally loyal and share a strong sense of identity, engage in activities together and behave in such a way as not to embarrass or betray members of the group and promote the welfare of the group.

There are estimated to be 50-70,000 Deaf people in Britain with a majority of these people not joining the Deaf community at birth because of the fact that 90% of deaf children are born to hearing parents. This geographically separated community shares the experience of not being able to hear and will often fight for the end to discrimination against Deaf people.

What is the Gay Community?

The gay community encompasses sexual attraction, behaviour and identity and the Office for National Statistics estimated that in 2010, there were 695,000 lesbian, gay or bisexual people in the UK. This equates to 1.4% of the total population. Often, gay people centre their social scene, political activation and services around 'gay villages' in major cities and towns. London, Manchester, Brighton and Glasgow are among such cities.

Because of the perceived discrimination of the LGBT community by traditional businesses, the 1990s saw the emergence of companies and services targeted specifically toward the LGBT community. The buying power of the community became known as the 'Pink Pound' in the UK and the Dorothy Dollar in the USA. There are now many influential characters within the community which provides positive role models for younger LGBT people.

What is the Deaf Gay Community?

The Deaf gay community is a sub culture of the Deaf community and the gay community. This can result in feelings of exclusion from one of the other communities at any given time resulting in people needing to adopt multiple identities to feel included.

The community may use Gay sign variation which is a variation of British Sign Language used by gay people, but primarily gay men, as a means of communicating through a variant of sign language not recognised by a majority of users of the language. Parallel to this can be drawn to the spoken language of Polari, which was popular with gay men in London in the 1950s.

Recruitment of research participants.

One major thing to consider when recruiting the young Deaf gay people was how that particular activity was to be done. There were three main ways:

- * Word of mouth - deaf gay community is small enough for people to recommend contacts to interview. I needed to approach these people with sensitivity because of the risk of assumptions about a their sexuality and also with regard to the fact that there was the possibility that people may not be comfortable with having been 'outed' to me or them revealing their sexuality.

- * Existing contacts - I know a lot of deaf gay people through my work as an interpreter and socially, so I could start initial conversations with people about the research with to find out if they or people they knew would be interested in participation.

- * Social Media - (FB, Twitter & LinkedIn) These forms of social media were used to be able to make contact with both people I knew and those not known to me and it meant I could tell them about the research and they could think about it before committing, so that they didn't feel pressured into taking part.

All of these methods needed to be undertaken sensitively and although there may have been an existing level of trust with the people I knew, it needed to be established with the people who were new to me.

Meeting with research participants.

The interviews were scheduled to take place in many different locations which included my home, their home and public spaces. This caused some issues with regards to vulnerability and confidentiality. Firstly, there is the issue of client and researcher safety when alone in a private residence. All of my young participants were over the age of 18 and were all consenting to the research and only one of the interviews was conducted in a persons home. There was one that took place in my home and the rest were in public spaces. Because of the fact that all participants were anonymous, I was not able to reveal who I was interviewing and when. However, this is something that I would reconsider in future and if the research participants were under the age of 18.

Confidentiality when meeting in a public space was an issue because of the fact that sign language is a visual language and people around us may have been able to understand sign language. However, locations were chosen which were quiet spaces but this also caused an issue regarding the recording of the interviews. A video camera was needed to be set up to be able to record the interviews as I was not able to use a voice recording device which would have been much more discrete. Some venues would not allow a camera to be set up. The participants were aware that these recordings were only to be used for the purpose of translation at a later date and would not be viewed by any other person.

All participants had a project permission letter translated into sign language so that they were aware of what would be happening and how the data would be used. Copies of these letters were signed and kept by me as proof of consent to participate.

Follow-up after the interview.

I was aware that because of the nature of the discussions and the potential sensitivity of the topics that would take place within the interviews, there could be the need for follow-up discussion, off-loading or 'counselling' to take place. Unfortunately, there is no formal counselling service offered by my University but my supervisor, being a Deaf BSL user herself, was happy to provide informal counselling should a participant request it.

I was prepared to offer a signposting 'service' after the interviews with the participants should anything come up that I felt I could let them know about but the need for this didn't actually happen. Similarly, I was aware that throughout the discussions, there was the possibility that a safeguarding disclosure may have taken place, so I needed to consider that I would do if this actually happened. I'm happy to say that there was no need as no disclosure took place.