Kika Hadjikakou
Ministry of Education and Culture
Nicosia, Cyprus

Deaf identity construction: a case study

Introduction

Identity is a very complicated issue. Its development involves an interactive process, closely connected with each person's experiences, and originates from interpersonal processes as well as the language used to understand and reflect upon these experiences (Ohna, 2003).

For deaf people, the concept of identity is socially constructed and influenced by factors such as the individual's characteristics, as well as situational, social, and societal conditions (Foster and Kinuthia, 2003; Leigh, Marcus, Domosh and Allen, 1998; Parasnis, 1998). Kannapell (1994) suggests that the definition of cultural identity among deaf people should be based on how the deaf identify themselves in terms of language, personal, and social identity; and that these three major types of identity are strongly interrelated.

It is well established in the literature that deaf people mainly develop four kinds of identities. First, culturally Deaf people are those who are proud of being Deaf, identify with the Deaf culture, and primarily socialize with Deaf adults. Culturally Deaf people view Deaf Culture as encompassing companionship, language, folklore, art and common history. Then, there are those that identify with culturally hearing people and hearing culture and prefer to form close relationships with hearing adults. These deaf people speak in favour of speech and lip reading capabilities for a deaf person's success and generally view deafness from a medical perspective. Biculturally deaf people immerse themselves both in the Deaf and the hearing culture. Finally, deaf people may develop a marginal identity (including those that feel ambivalent about being deaf), search for a reference point (hearing or Deaf), and do not integrate within the hearing or the Deaf community (Bat-Chava, 2000; Foster and Kinuthia, 2003; Israelite, Ower and Goldstein, 2002; Kannapell, 1994; Leigh et al., 1998).

A number of factors, such as growing-up in certain family environments (deaf/hearing parents), an experience of acceptance in the family, the school--environment, past and present structures of communication, and participation in the Deaf Community influence the development of identity (Bat-Chava, 2000;

Maxwell-McCaw, 2001). Historically, research studies in the field of deaf identity indicate that the school environment and family background are the primary agents for children's eventual development of identity (Maxwell-McCaw, 2001; Padden and Humphries 1988).

As far as the effect of family background is concerned, research findings suggest that parents have a significant influence on identity, with the majority of deaf and hard of hearing children of hearing parents having a marginal or hearing identity. On the other hand, deaf children with Deaf parents are most likely to develop a culturally Deaf identity (Bat-Chava, 2000; Leigh et al., 1998; Maxwell-McCaw, 2001). However, taking under consideration that only 5–10% of deaf children are born in Deaf families (Shein, 1989), it is worth investigating how various school backgrounds impact the ultimate development of their identities. Bat-Chava (2000) found that deaf children attending deaf schools are most likely to have a culturally Deaf identity. Similarly, in a study carried out by Maxwell-McCaw (2001), participants with a hearing identity largely attended mainstream programmes, while those with a Deaf identity were more likely to have attended residential programmes.

However, there is not enough research on how deaf people whose characteristics do not match those of the general deaf population, cope with identity construction. Thus, the aim of this study is to provide inside information on different routes of identity construction within the deaf population.

Methodology

Method

A case study was carried out with an adult Cypriot Deaf individual. The pseudonym John will be used for the participant in order to protect his anonymity. John's story was deliberately chosen because his family (one oral deaf and one hearing parent) and educational background (his required education was not fulfilled) did not match the family and educational background of the majority of the deaf population.

Procedure

In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather data for this study (Borg and Gall, 1983). The general issues that were to be investigated were formulated as an interview guide. This interview guide was developed based on a current review of literature on the development of deaf identity (Hadjikakou and Nikolaraizi, 2007).

Three interviews were carried out, averaging two hours per interview. For the interviews, places were chosen where the respondent felt comfortable in expressing his thoughts (e.g. at his home, at his favourite cafe etc), as a non-threatening environment ensures and strengthens confidentiality (Oppenheim, 1997). The interview was carried out in Cypriot Sign Language (CSL), since the researcher is a fluent user of CSL. Each interview was videotaped to keep a record of the obtained information. Ethical issues regarding anonymity, confidentiality and access to the research findings were discussed with the participant, who gave informed consent prior to data collection.

A qualitative approach, which relies on direct quotations from the interviews, was applied to analyze the collected data (Knodel, 1993). Three steps were followed in the analysis of the interviews: a) text transcription – the first step in the analysis of the interviews was to arrange a transcription of the detailed notes and audio/video tapes of the interviews, b) code procedures – when a printed document of all interviews was produced the researchers studied the transcript and identified those sections that were relevant to the research questions of the study; the interview topics served as a general guide for developing code categories (Foster and Kinuthia, 2003; Hadjikakou and Nikolaraizi, 2007); a set of four primary code categories was created: family experiences, educational experiences, identity, and identity construction; and finally c) search procedures – once the code categories were assigned and noted in the margins of the interviews, the data was copied, cut and pasted, and sorted into separate code folders; a printout was produced, which was used as supporting material in an interpretative analysis.

Results

This paper briefly describes John's historical path and highlights in detail his family and educational experiences, as well as his identity construction. John is 48 years old and audiologically hard of hearing. He is happily married with a Deaf signing wife and has three hearing children. He works in the private sector and is an active member of the Deaf community[1].

Family experiences

John's family background consists of a deaf oral father and a hearing mother. However, this parental type is rare, since there is evidence that the Deaf community is inter-married – 80–92% of married Deaf people are married to another Deaf person (Kyle and Allsop, 1982; Schein and Delk, 1974). John does not have any other brothers or sisters.

My mother is hearing and my father is deaf. In the past, I used to communicate exclusively orally with my father because he is hard of hearing. My daddy did not know how to sign, because he is old and at that time, there was no School for the Deaf in Cyprus. Since there were no Deaf women, he found a hearing woman …. my mother and he got married to her. They communicated exclusively orally with no signs.

John describes himself as being closer to his father, who is deaf, than to his hearing mother. He describes the communication difficulties his father encountered with hearing relatives and how he was often isolated and not in a position to follow their discussions.

My mum has a sister, uncles, aunts who used to pay us a visit. My mother was hearing and she could talk with them. My father couldn't hear and he mostly communicated with me. He couldn't understand what they were saying, so he mostly communicated with me. Thus, I feel closer to my father. Because he is deaf, we could communicate better.

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[1] Note: In this paper, the lower case "d" is used to refer to those deaf people who do not sign, are oral, and do not belong to the Deaf community, whereas the upper "D" is used to refer to Deaf adults who belong to the Deaf community, are signing Deaf and are considered culturally Deaf. The term ''deaf'' also refers in general to the condition of not hearing (e.g. deaf-parented families).

Similarly, previous studies revealed that deaf people felt isolated from their wider hearing family environment mostly because of a lack of communication (Foster, 1988; Hadjikakou and Nikoloraizi, 2008), as happened with John's father. Participants in previous studies (Breivik, 2005; Hurwitz and Hurwitz, 1995) who were raised in families with other deaf members described the ease of communication between them, as well as the positive experiences they derived from it. Similarly, John emphasizes that he could communicate better with his deaf father.

Educational experiences

John attended a general school. Despite the fact that his parents took him to the school for the deaf, the headmaster did not accept him, because he had good speech.

> *I remember that when I was young my parents wanted me to attend the school for the Deaf in Morphou. I went there, but the headmaster said, 'He talks, and he should not stay at the School for the Deaf. He may lose his good speech. He has to go to the general school to learn how to speak and become stronger.' My parents accepted his suggestion.*

Someone could argue that things might have been different for John if he had attended the school for the deaf. He might have developed a Deaf identity from an early age, through contacts with other deaf children and through extracurricular activities at the residential school (Hadjikakou and Nikolaraizi, 2007). However, John's experiences at the general school were very negative. No support services were available at that time in general schools in Cyprus, and he struggled on his own in the classroom without learning anything throughout the years.

> *I attended the 'hearing schools.' The teachers didn't know how to sign. I watched the teachers talking and talking, but I could not hear. I was sitting and watching them, and I was wondering about what they were talking about. I didn't know, and I could not hear. I tried to be patient. I was watching and watching from the first till the final grade of primary school. Sometimes, the teacher came close to me and tried to help me with the lessons. I could not write. I was just drawing and she told me, 'Well done.' Throughout the classes, I learnt nothing, just the same. I was sitting alone and I was just drawing. Then my parents asked me if I wanted to go to the Gymnasium, and I told them, 'No,' because the same thing would continue. That would mean hearing people talking and me not understanding anything. I decided to get a job.*

In previous studies, the negative experiences of deaf people who had attended general schools were also reported (Hadjikakou and Nikoloraizi, 2007). Access to communication in general classrooms was extremely difficult because participants had to cope alone, with no support services, amongst the rest of their hearing classmates (Foster, 1988; Leigh et al., 1998; Nikolaraizi and Hadjikakou, 2006). John and other similar-aged deaf children were the first to be integrated in Cyprus' schools. In those times neither had sophisticated support services been developed nor were Cypriots' attitudes towards deaf people positive (Thoma, Hadjikakou, Petridou and Stylianou, 2004).

John mentioned that he used to play with hearing children during the breaks. He noted that they were mostly hanging around with him because they felt pity for him,

as has been similarly suggested by other researchers (Nikoloraizi and Hadjikakou, 2006).

> *During the breaks I used to play with the hearing children. They were all together and they watched me be alone. They said, 'He is deaf … pity,' and they would call me to play football with them. When we went for excursions they used to help me.*

Construction of deaf identity

When John was young, he did not have any contacts with Deaf people and would communicate exclusively orally with them. He also emphasized that when he was young (before he met the Deaf) he did not feel comfortable with his deafness. Similar feelings have been identified by deaf participants in previous studies (Israelite et al., 2002; Kent, 2003; Stinson and Liu, 1999).

> *When I was young, I felt very much ashamed for being deaf. I didn't know what to do.*

It was only when he was 17 years old that he accidentally met a Deaf person. It was then that he started wondering about the hearing/marginal identity that he had had developed at that time.

> *Before the age of 17 I was socializing and communicating exclusively orally with the hearing. It was only after the age of 17 that I met Deaf persons, and I asked my parents, 'Why haven't you told me anything about the Deaf? I should have met the Deaf before.' And they told me, 'But we took you to the School for the Deaf, but they did not accept you because you were hearing. You want to meet the Deaf again? Let it be so.'*

John also noted that after he had met the Deaf, he started feeling more comfortable with his Deaf identity.

> *When I was young, I felt very much ashamed for being deaf. I didn't know what to do. After I had met the Deaf (at seventeen), I felt OK; I didn't have any problem with this. I did not feel ashamed for my deafness. I have made slow progress.*

John also stressed that despite the fact that in the past he felt closer to the hearing, he now feels closer to the Deaf.

> *In the past [before the age of 17], I used to feel closer to the hearing. Now, I feel closer to the Deaf. I can communicate with the Deaf if I face a problem. I feel close to hearing people but closer to the Deaf.*

Participants in previous studies (Hadjikakou and Nikoloraizi, 2007), who attended general schools, also stressed that their first meetings with adult Deaf people, as well as the learning of CSL in their adolescence and in their early adulthood, were crucial for the development of their deaf or bicultural identity.

John's mother was a bit reluctant in the beginning to let him meet other Deaf people, and John made an effort to persuade her to allow him to do so. In the current literature, other deaf people expressed gratitude to their parents for not opposing learning CSL when they asked for it in adolescence (Hadjikakou and Nikoloraizi, 2007).

I told them, 'I am deaf and I was locked up at home all day.' Now I feel better that I have met all these people. My mother was a bit scared at the beginning. She asked me if I could communicate with the Deaf, and I told her, 'Yes I can!' Then I decided to invite home my Deaf friend one day so as to prove to my mother that I could communicate well. My mother was really moved when she saw me communicating in sign language. She told me, 'Well done that you can communicate so well! You can go to the Deaf clubs from now on.'

Meeting adult Deaf signing people was crucial for the development of John's Deaf identity. He describes his first experiences with Deaf adults and Cypriot Sign Language (CSL).

I met adult Deaf persons when I was 17 years old. I went to the racecourse and I met accidentally 4–5 Deaf people signing with each other. I saw for the first time Deaf people signing with each other. I was wondering what that was. Until then I only spoke. I tried to do some signs and I asked them, 'Why do you sign?' I told them that I was deaf, but I spoke and I couldn't sign. They told me, 'If you are deaf you need to sign.' Then, one of those Deaf people helped me and taught me how to sign. The first time we had a sign language class, I felt rather dizzy. It was a completely different way of communicating for me. Slowly-slowly, I learned to sign. It took me about six months to learn to sign well. I liked the communication with the Deaf, so I wanted to learn quickly how to sign. I was a bit patient, and in six months I could sign well.

John also described how his father slowly learned the signs and became a member of the Deaf community through his son's contacts. Thus, John was so thrilled with his contacts with Deaf people and with CSL that he introduced his father to the Deaf Community and to CSL when his father was rather old.

My father had only hearing friends. No Deaf friends. When I was seventeen I met the Deaf and I learned how to sign. I told my father, 'Why don't you come to the Deaf club? There are a lot of Deaf people there and it's really nice. You can communicate more easily with signs.' My father came and he liked it. And he used to come often to the Deaf club. I played football with the Deaf, and my father used to come and watch me play with the Deaf, and he liked it. Slowly-slowly he learned how to sign. Just before he died he lost his sight. He could only communicate with me through tactile signs.

Identity
John considers himself as Deaf, despite being audiologically hard of hearing.

I am Deaf. I am not hard of hearing, because I do not wear a hearing aid. People who are hard of hearing communicate better than the Deaf. The Deaf cannot…. they sign and watch the speaker's lips.

John can communicate both orally with hearing relatives and other hearing people and in CSL with his Deaf wife and friends.

With my wife who is Deaf, I communicate in CSL. I communicate with my Deaf friends in CSL. With the hearing I communicate orally. Sometimes, I use some signs with my speech so as to teach them. But they do not know how to sign. I can speak quite clearly. I lip read rather well. If a speaker speaks too fast, I can't follow the discussion. They have to speak

slowly. (…) With my young children I try to speak because they are hearing. I try. Of course, I use both signs and speech. It's easier for me to communicate in CSL with my Deaf friends.

Despite the fact that John communicates well with the hearing (through speech and lip reading), he acknowledges that communication with the Deaf in CSL is much easier. Deaf participants in previous studies with good oral skills also spoke in favour of CSL, stressing that it is a very relaxed mode of communication (Hadjikakou and Nikolaraizi, 2007).

With the hearing I can communicate well. Once, a hearing person asked me something because he thought that I was listening. I told him, 'Sorry, I cannot follow you, I am Deaf." He felt uncomfortable and he asked me, 'How am I supposed to communicate with you?' I told him, 'Don't worry and speak slowly and I will lip read.' Then he spoke fast, but I told him, 'Slowly-slowly so as to lip read.' I had a similar experience with another hearing person. I explain to them, and slowly-slowly we can communicate. It's easier to communicate in CSL. I like it. I realized ever since I was 17 that it's easier to have Deaf friends and to communicate with them. Communication with the hearing is difficult. If I am with the hearing, I just close my mouth and I don't understand anything. Whom am I supposed to speak with if I hang around only with hearing people? It's very difficult."

Despite the fact that John socializes with the hearing, he feels closer to the Deaf than to the hearing.

I have some hearing friends, but most of them are Deaf. Because I speak, I can socialize with the hearing. Three to four times a weak, I meet the Deaf. Once a week I meet the hearing. These hearing people are not my relatives.

He believes that the Deaf should not only speak but use CSL as well. Corresponding views were expressed by participants in similar studies (Hadjikakou and Nikolaraizi, 2007).

The Deaf should speak and also use CSL. If a deaf child faces difficulties in speaking, he/ she should use signs. If he can speak, let him/her speak. Of course, CSL is better than the first language.

John stressed that he chose a Deaf wife for various reasons, the main one being ease of communication compared to the difficulties faced when communicating with a hearing partner, as his father experienced with his hearing wife. In previous studies (Hadjikakou and Nikoloraizi, 2007; Nikolaraizi and Hadjikakou, 2006), both bicultural and Deaf participants stressed that they would only get married to Deaf spouses, mainly due to the ease of communication between them. They also emphasized their similarity with each other.

When I was young and I watched my deaf father with my hearing mother, I could see that they couldn't get along well, and that they faced various difficulties. Sometimes, my mum would speak on the phone, and my dad would ask her, 'Who are you talking with?' Sometimes, she wouldn't respond, and I realized that they faced a huge problem. In some other cases, two or three people would come home for a visit. These were my mum's friends. My father used to ask my mum, 'What are you talking about?' She used to say "Mind your

own business!' I thought that if I got married with a hearing wife in the future, I would face similar difficulties. I thought that it would be better with a deaf girl, since we would be the same. I guessed that we wouldn't face any difficulties, since the communication would be better. That's why I got married to a Deaf wife."

He also mentioned that sometimes he faces difficulties in his interaction with the hearing, probably due to communication difficulties.

There are some hearing people who behave well to me whilst some others who don't. For instance, I remember that once a hearing colleague asked me something about the job. I didn't understand and I made a mistake. He shouted at me. I tried to explain to him, but he got even angrier and I closed my mouth. I tried to be patient. Some Deaf envy me but most of them don't. Maybe they feel jealous of me because of my good job or because I sign well and I am smart. The rest of the Deaf don't sign well and they feel jealous of me.

John is an active member of the Deaf community, elected on the board of one of the clubs.

The Deaf clubs must be in place. They are vital for the entertainment of the Deaf and for their communication as well. When I stay at home, I see the same things; I don't learn anything new. I think that it's better to go to the Deaf club, to meet my friends, to hang around, to discuss about my problems and family. We need to discuss with each other because the same things can happen to us. However, if we constantly stay at home, we are not informed about the news. We do not learn things. The Deaf clubs should thrive.

In previous studies, it has been reported that Deaf clubs worldwide have a multidimensional role and many functions (Hadjikakou and Nikoloraizi, 2011; Hall, 1994; Romeo and Renery, 1994; Padden, 1996).

Discussion

This study reveals the route to identity construction followed by deaf persons who come from backgrounds that are different than those of other deaf people. Only 5% of signing Deaf or oral deaf people get married to hearing persons. Of those, only a few give birth to deaf children. John comes from such a family environment; he is deaf with a hearing mother and oral deaf father. He was raised in a hearing environment and had attended a general primary school. This study has shown that in early adulthood John developed a Deaf identity. Nowadays, he primarily communicates in CSL, identifies himself as Deaf, and socializes mostly with Deaf people.

Identity construction is a dynamic process, which emerges through present and past experiences, interactions between oneself and the surrounding social environment (Nikolaraizi and Hadjikakou, 2006). Certain factors were fundamental for the construction of John's Deaf identity, since he had had a hearing or marginal identity when he was young. The most crucial element was his first contact with Deaf signing adults in his adolescence (when he was 17). As similarly reported in previous studies (e.g., Hadjikakou and Nikolaraizi, 2007; Nikolaraizi and Hadjikakou, 2006) in which orally educated adolescents met Deaf signing adults for the first time, John initially experienced feelings of surprise, then joy and relief when he

could finally communicate with people who were like him (Deaf) in a relaxed and accepting way (through sign language, i.e. CSL). Similarly, Breivik (2005:22) stresses "the sense of liberation when introduced to a signing community and experiencing the 'companionship' and 'sharing' that introduces a positive cultural flavour to the difference of deafness."

Another crucial factor in the development of John's Deaf identity was the family environment in which he grew up in, and more specifically, the communication difficulties he observed between his hearing mother and oral deaf father. As stressed by him, those difficulties made him choose a Deaf wife so as to communicate easily with her in CSL.

Another fundamental factor in the development of his Deaf identity, were his very negative educational experiences. When attending primary school, John spent most of his day alone without having learnt anything, due to the lack of support services and lack of deaf awareness among his teachers. At that time, he did not have any real friends, because of the communication difficulties he encountered with his hearing peers. Those who approached him were motivated by feelings of pity rather than real love. In his adult life, he chose to socialize mostly with Deaf people rather than with hearing people, since he could communicate easily with them in CSL. John is well accepted by the Deaf, is a member of the Deaf community, and has been elected on its different boards. In John's case, it is important to stress the way in which he introduced his oral deaf father to the Deaf community and gave him the opportunity to meet other Deaf people for the first time, as well as the chance to socialize with them in CSL.

In this study, other important issues have been raised as well. For instance, current functions of Deaf clubs have been described, as has been similarly done by previous studies (Hadjikakou and Nikoloraizi, 2011; Hall, 1994; Romeo and Renery, 1994; Padden, 1996). Specifically, Deaf clubs offer a place to meet, to discuss matters of mutual interest, and to provide recreation while using a relaxed mode of communication, i.e. sign language. Deaf clubs organize different social and sports events and offer the Deaf the opportunity to participate in them. Deaf clubs have also been described as information centres where Deaf participants can get informed about various issues, given that access to information is not easy for them. Finally, the role of Deaf clubs in Deaf people's lives, their unity, and future progress were stressed as well.

This study revealed communication difficulties that were present between deaf and hearing people, even for those deaf people who have obtained good oral and lip reading skills, as has been similarly reported elsewhere (Hadjikakou and Nikolaraizi, 2007). Sometimes, deaf people feel isolated and cut off from the hearing world because they are not in a position to follow their discussions (Hadjikakou and Nikolaraizi, 2008). In this study, John often referred to such feelings when describing communication difficulties he encountered with hearing peers at school, hearing adults at work or during everyday activities, as well as when recalling the communication barriers between his deaf father and his hearing mother and hearing relatives.

The above is also related to the fact that the Deaf community tends to be an inter-married one (Kyle and Allsop, 1982; Schein and Delk, 1974) – deaf people tend

to get married with each other, mainly due to the ease of communication between them (Hadjikakou and Nikolaraizi, 2007). In this way, personal frustrations and intra-familial conflicts are prevented.

This study highlights different routes to identity construction and has implications for the provision of effective support services and deaf awareness courses within general schools where hearing teachers instruct deaf children. It also emphasizes the need for exposing oral deaf children (regardless of their family background) to Deaf adult role models, which may gradually lead to the construction of "healthy" deaf identities.

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Deaf identity construction: a case study

Abstract

The aim of the current study was to provide inside information on the different ways of constructing identities within the deaf population. To obtain relevant information, a case study was carried out with a Deaf Cypriot adult whose family and educational background did not match those of the general deaf population. The findings indicated that his family experiences, initial contacts with the Deaf and with Cypriot Sign Language (CSL), as well as academic and social experiences shared at school between the participant and his classmates and teachers played a crucial role in his identity development. The findings of this study entail implications for the provision of effective support services and deaf awareness courses within general schools, as well as for oral deaf children's contacts with Deaf adults in order to develop "healthy" identities.

Budowanie tożsamości u głuchych: analiza przypadku

Streszczenie

Celem prezentowanego badania była analiza introspektywnych danych dotyczących różnych sposobów budowania tożsamości w populacji osób głuchych. W celu uzyskania istotnych informacji, przeprowadzono analizę przypadku z udziałem dorosłej cypryjskiej osoby Głuchej, której środowisko rodzinne i społeczne nie pasowało do ogółu populacji głuchych. Wyniki pokazały, że doświadczenia rodzinne Johna, jego początkowe kontakty z cypryjskim językiem migowym (CSL), jak również doświadczenia akademickie i społeczne związane z udziałem kolegów z klasy oraz nauczycieli odegrały znaczącą rolę w rozwoju jego tożsamości. Wyniki badania pociągają za sobą sugestie dotyczące zapewnienia skutecznych metod wsparcia oraz kursów świadomości dla głuchych w szkołach masowych, jak również kontaktów oralnych głuchych dzieci z dorosłymi osobami Głuchymi w celu rozwoju „zdrowej" tożsamości.

Address for correspondence:
Kika Hadjikakou
P.O. Box 20653, Nicosia 1661, Cyprus
kikaha@cytanet.com.cy