

Deaf Studies and Disability Studies: An Epistemic Conundrum

Mairian Corker

University of Central Lancashire, UK

Introduction

At the 1999 Society for Disability Studies Annual Conference in Washington D.C., Lois Bragg of Gallaudet University presented a plenary entitled 'Deaf Studies as a Precursor of Disability Studies?' I am not convinced that Bragg actually answered her own question, but this concerns me rather less than a concern about what I see to be the deeply flawed epistemological and ontological basis of such a question. Hence, I will leave it to others to write their rebuttals and to present their analyses of disability culture (see, for example, Peters, 2000, forthcoming), and will instead attempt to present the reasoning behind these concerns. In doing so, I hope to suggest alternative ways of viewing the relationship between Deaf Studies¹ and Disability Studies - which I will argue have very little in common in their current conceptualisations and, in some circumstances, are directly competitive - that will enable both to flourish without compromising each others' deeply held world-views.

In this analysis, and drawing upon the frameworks I introduced in earlier work (Corker, 1996, 1998, 1999b), I intend to represent Deaf Studies and Disability Studies as 'communities of social practice.' That is, academic work is a social process that is constituted in and through the social practices of academics *and those whom they research and write about* - both discursive practice ('saying') and material activity ('doing') - and all elements of practice are mutually constitutive of the 'knowledge' of the community, all are equally 'real.' And, because academic work is often collective, at least in the sense that people within disciplines tend to adhere to a loosely defined set of common ideas and goals, disciplines can be described as communities. To explore these issues further, I will focus mainly on *the texts* of Deaf Studies and Disability Studies, both theoretical and research-based texts, as these represent the part of the practice of the two communities that is in the public domain and accessible to me as a deaf activist and academic.

Deaf Studies and Disability Studies - Discourses Apart?

In an age of individualism and its accompanying propensity for increasing individual isolation, people certainly feel the need to belong to some kind of community with which they can identify but this must surely depend at least in part on how we resolve questions about who is 'like' and 'not like' ourselves. In spite of the fact that both Deaf people and disabled people place considerable importance on a 'politics of visibility,' there is a marked *invisibility* of Deaf people in the Disability Studies community and vice versa, except from the point of view of textual representations. It therefore seems reasonable to initially present the two disciplines as discrete in terms of the social space that they occupy. The next question then becomes focused on the nature of the boundaries of social practice in these two spaces, and to this effect, Table 1 represents an attempt to summarise the key discourses that are central to the two disciplines. I will not, in the interests of space, cite all of the texts that have been reviewed in order to construct this table, but this research has covered between 30 and 40 widely used European, North American, Canadian and Australasian texts from each discipline.²

In interpreting Table 1, it is worth noting Foucault's notion of 'power/knowledge' (1980: 83). That is, Deaf and disability 'knowledges' can in no way be dissociated from the exercise of power. *Access to knowledge* about the DEAF-WAY³ is restricted in a three main directions that reflect the hierarchical organisation of the Deaf community in terms of power. First, the Deaf elite are the custodians of the public face of the DEAF-WAY, and they police the boundaries of the Deaf

community. Second, the vast majority of Deaf Studies texts are written in English language (or written versions of another spoken language) by hearing scholars, not always in collaboration with Deaf scholars, and are therefore *cross-cultural* representations of the DEAF-WAY. Third, the subordination of the majority of the Deaf public is exacerbated by their (generally) lower class position in the social hierarchy and the inconsistency of educational practice and standards in deaf education. Their access to the academy that constructs 'Deaf knowledge' - along with access to other crucial communicative contexts such as government and legislative discourses of information, persuasion and legitimation - is restricted by their status as 'poorly educated.' Therefore, those who are subjected in Deaf Studies texts are not generally enabled to comment on the accuracy of the representations. Indeed, it is something of an irony that in British Sign Language (BSL), the signs DEAF-PROFESSIONAL (which includes many Deaf academics) and DEAF-GRASS-ROOTS, whilst using the same handshapes⁴ are articulated in an oppositional fashion.⁵ These barriers to access suggest that a knowledge of the Deaf public does not necessarily entail a knowledge of Deaf Studies, and vice versa.

One might of course draw a similar parallel relating to the division between Disability Studies scholars and the disabled people who are the 'subjects' of disability theory and practice. For example, Mike Oliver (1999: 188) writes:

Research, no matter how radical, committed or emancipatory, has continued to be based upon the investigatory discourse - my recently completed research (Campbell & Oliver, 1996) was based upon my own assumption that I was investigating the disability movement. It is only now that I recognise that I wasn't, even if consciously, I already knew that...when Jane Campbell and I researched the collective political experience of disabled people, we were engaged in an act of production, not investigation We were producing ourselves collectively as a coherent, strong and articulate political movement, and individually as proud and committed political actors.

To this we might add the ontological problem of impairment that leads to research and theory that, for example, produces the 'physically impaired' subject as representative of all impairments.

What is striking about Table 1 itself, however, is the extent of the social distance between the two disciplines. Indeed, apart from our status within hegemonic discourse, where Deaf and disabled people are viewed as people with impairments, the only point of commonality is that both Deaf studies and Disability Studies exoticise Deafness as an essential identity' that epitomises a 'politics of visibility' and is part of the collective re-reproduction of 'a coherent, strong, articulate, proud and committed political movement' (for recent examples from Disability Studies, see Campbell & Oliver, 1996; Barnes et al, 1999; Davis, 1995, 1997; Brueggemann, 1999; Ree, 1999).

There is no evidence within Disability Studies to support Deaf people's claim that disabled people are among their oppressors. On the contrary, there is very considerable evidence that Disability Studies is prepared to pursue its inclusive agenda, even to the point of embracing the blatantly prejudicial elements of the DEAF-WAY. However, Disability Studies uncritical acceptance of the Deaf construction is not reciprocated in the knowledge of disability that pervades the social practice of Deaf Studies, and it has been suggested that alternative views have been actively suppressed through particular social practices. For example, Tom Bertling, a Deaf scholar,⁸ writes: 'A much honoured and regarded female deaf instructor at Gallaudet University has been subject to verbal abuse, character assassination and even was physically assaulted by militant culturally deaf persons for simply having views contrary from those held by most leaders of the deaf community.' (1994: 98).

An essentialised Deaf identity, in its social relation to disability, gains much strength from the unquestioned privileging of its exotic status. This is symbolised, for me, by the caption of a photograph of a flight of stairs which appeared in *A Journey into the DEAF-WORLD* (Lane et al., 1996: 9). It reads: 'Entering the San Francisco Club for the Deaf. Stairs to the second floor are a hallmark of Deaf clubs in the United States.' The reason it is symbolic is because of a statement made by the authors at the very beginning of the book:

Table 1
Social Practice in Deaf Studies
and Disability Studies

	Deaf Studies	Disability Studies
Language	Sign	Speech/text
Lexicon of disability related terms	Prejudice, sickness, deviance, impairment, incompetence, inarticulateness, social distance	Difference, power, oppression, social proximity, articulate, inequality, pride
Discourses on the body (self)	The body beautiful The fit, healthy body (Deaf)	Freakery, enfreakment (disabled)
Discourses on the body (other)	The sick, broken, unattractive body (disabled)	The exotic /exoticised body (Deaf)
Community structure ⁶	Relational collectivism	Aggregate individualism
Community boundaries	Fixed	Fluid
Community beliefs, values, attitudes	Socio-cultural	Political
Cultural	Visual-spatial written	Auditory, oral, production
Relationship to 'society'	Social co-existence	Social inclusion
Political agenda ⁷	Language rights, Deaf identity rights, inter-politics	Civil rights, human rights and sectional identity politics
Ontology	Linguistic minority	Social category
Epistemology	Nature	Society

In order to tell the story of a culture that remains too little known and poorly understood we have abstained from exploring the lives and concerns of people with hearing-impairments who do not use the language and have not internalized the culture of the DEAF-WORLD. Readers with an interest in people with hearing impairments can call on a very large clinical literature, summarized in many text books, as well as compelling and illuminating first-person accounts....

The Dilemma of 'Visual' Culture

Prejudice, along with the social practices of stereotyping and scapegoating are socially constructed. But *how* they are constructed in the Deaf community needs to be understood at a much deeper level, in particular by looking at the experience of those who are subjected in Deaf and Disability Studies discourses. This is important because of the inherent inequality between the subjects of discourse and those who are involved in documenting the experience of the subjected, and in the construction of elite knowledges about Deafness and disability. It may be useful, then, to look at the experience of 'articulate' Deaf and disabled people who are removed from the academy for all the reasons given above, and who are therefore likely to be relatively untouched by the work of the academy. For this purpose, I turn to deaf⁹ and disabled children, beginning with this dialogue with a 15 year old deaf girl, Linda:

Transcript C7, translation of video-taped interview conducted in sign language¹⁰

77. MC: So what do you think about disabled people?

78. Linda: About disabled people..... I like them. It must be horrible to be disabled but there is nothing wrong in it. I certainly wouldn't think or say what Glenn Hoddle said, I wouldn't do that. It's horrible and the teasing, it's not nice.

79. MC: Do you think you're disabled?

80. Linda: No!

81. MC: No?

82. Linda: Someone did say to me that deaf is disabled, is that true or not?

83. MC: I'm asking you...what do you think?

84. Linda: No.

85. MC: You don't think so?

86. Linda: No...what about you?

87. MC: Disabled has many meanings and maybe when I use the word disabled, I mean something different from you. So I would say yes, I think I am disabled.

88. Linda: (laughs) Why, you don't look disabled. You can walk naturally. Disabled people have funny walks, you know like KG here. They have a funny walk and they are disabled and you are deaf and are not disabled. Other people have said that you are deaf so that means that you are disabled but I think I am deaf but I'm not disabled. If you have a funny walk then you are and I am not. If I was disabled that would really upset me I think I would always wish that I could walk properly. So not being able to walk or see is disability - not me.

Linda shows a recognition of and an aversion to disabling practice in relation to *other* disabled people (turn 78), coupled with a rejection of the label 'disabled' when applied to the deaf self (turns 80, 88), deaf people as a group (turns 84 and 86) *and to me* as a deaf person (turn 88). In the latter example, it is interesting that 'disability' is associated with how someone 'looks' ('You don't look disabled'), with a lack of 'natural' performance ('You can walk naturally') and with 'tragedy' ('If I was disabled that would really upset me I think I would always wish I could walk properly'). These discourses on disability are internalised to such an extent that, when I suggest I *am* disabled, they are used to contest my self-perception. This kind of exchange can be interpreted in two main ways.

In the field of Deaf Studies it would be seen to indicate that Deaf people are not disabled because deafness is conceptually distinct from disability linguistically, socially and ideologically. This

becomes the basis of the dominant Deaf Studies view of the Deaf community as a semiotic representation in ideological discourses that construct and naturalise very large groupings, in particular those that link languages with peoples (Gal & Irvine, 1995), often through the institutionalisation of things like nation-states - hence, the increasingly used term DEAF-NATION - and 'pure' or 'proper' languages. However, Linda's *negotiation* of the meaning of 'disability' suggests an alternative and more nuanced interpretation - one that indicates that particular forms of disability are displaced within the experience of deafness not just because of their 'negative' connotations with discourses of tragedy and dysfunction, but also because *they are at odds with an experience of the world that is predominantly visual and spatial, and is not supplemented with oral/auditory information*. In other words, though hearing people, which for our purposes includes most disabled people, do not generally question what they see in everyday discourse ('seeing is believing,' 'seeing is knowing') (Corker, 1999a), they often do question what they hear ('I couldn't believe my ears'), but Deaf people 'can do anything - except hear' (I. King Jordan, quoted in Christiansen & Barnartt, 1995)

This becomes critical when we ask whether Deaf people can step outside of a visual-spatial experience that tells them that disabled people are 'freaks'? Audists (by which I mean professionals and others who actively employ phonocentrism in oppressive social practice, *not* deaf people who use spoken language) would have us believe that technology and rehabilitation can achieve this. I would suggest, however, that this belief is constructed by ideological discourses of 'normalcy' rather than by Deaf people's experience of what is 'real.' To understand this, we only have to look to the experience of *blind* people, as this wonderful example from Rod Michalko's book *The Mystery of the Eye and the Shadow of Blindness* (1998: 79) shows:

I spent some time speaking with a three year old blind boy, Mark, at his home. We sat on the floor, legs spread in front of us, rolling a ball back and forth. At one point, the ball hit Mark's foot and bounced away from us. Mark immediately began trying to locate the ball. He began 'looking' for the ball by stretching his arms out very quickly in as many directions as he could.

After a short time, Mark stopped 'looking' and said, 'My mommy could find the ball.' 'Really?' I replied. 'Yeah,' Mark said, 'cause she can see.' I asked, 'How do you know that?' Without any hesitation, Mark answered, 'Cause she's got really, really, really long arms!'

Michalko suggests that Mark's final remark evokes a mixture of 'cuteness' and 'pathos,' but whereas the 'cuteness' may mature into an adult experience that is 'truly blind,' rehabilitation hears only the pathos - 'the privatizing nature of blindness created by an exclusion from the world known through sight' (ibid, 80), and thus blind children must have 'the opportunity to understand their privatizing experience *as illusion.*' (ibid, 80-81, my italics).

Linda comes to the conclusion that 'disabled' is 'not like me,' and Mark that 'sightedness' is 'not like me,' but what needs to be grasped here, is that both Linda and Mark are describing ontological dissonance as it is restrained by hegemonic epistemologies that privilege the 'normalcy' of hearing and sight.

Can We Have Dialogue?

I have focused on deafness and blindness because they are configured conceptually as opposites in hegemonic discourse that is based on both a cultural denial of the 'real' experiences and ontologies of blind and Deaf people and on the need to identify them as social 'problems' that have to be socially managed. Social management is achieved by constructing difference along arbitrary epistemological dimensions that necessitate the separation of Deaf and blind people into different 'specialisms' - *and that bear no relation to ontological difference*. To drive a wedge between ontology and epistemology is the ultimate factor in the manufacture of disempowerment. However, I would argue that Deaf Studies and Disability Studies have also placed themselves in an epistemic trap in that

both, in the interests of political expediency, need to produce an autonomous 'collective reality' - an epistemic authority - but neither can immunise themselves against 'realities' produced by ontological discourses, whatever their origin. Both try to 'claim' and make visible some totalising and essentialist concept of 'identity' that suppresses significant ontological differences and is woven into epistemic (mis)representations. As a result, neither are able to adequately resolve the conflicts between them, nor with issues raised by deaf people who are not Deaf (and seemingly not disabled either), but nevertheless perceive themselves as ontologically different from hearing, because to do so would threaten epistemic authority.

The above examples are significant because they demonstrate that though blindness and deafness are in many ways ontologically distinct, they do in fact have a commonality across their difference in *embodied* social practice - both are struggling to liberate their versions of reality. Further, we see this time and time again in the 'what about me?' comments that abound on the UK disability-research mailbox, for example. What these comments are warning of is that academic and activist agendas are in danger of creating a situation where epistemic authority drives ontology, rather than the other way around. What they are asking is whether we can talk about difference on the grounds of impairment and/or disability without suppressing difference through the privileging of 'special' or 'exoticised' exceptions. So, for example, at the most basic level we might say that the translation of an experience that is visual-spatial into an experience that is auditory-oral is a daunting task, but Mark's reference to 'really, really, really long arms' reminds us that Deaf people and blind people have touch in common. This form of commonality gives a different interpretation to the slogan "Nothing about us without us" (Charlton, 1998), one that reflects the contemporary significance of *dialogue across difference* in late-modern or post-modern society that is highlighted by many authors as an antidote for relativist chaos (Benhabib, 1992; Giddens, 1994; Fraser 1992, 1997; Harvey, 1996).

However, even if we accept ontological pluralism, it remains the case that in order to act together as a community, or even to co-exist as ontologically distinct communities, we have to have a common purpose in dialogue. The least problematic concept of dialogue is one that does not presuppose consensus: dialogue involves both space for voicing difference (including polemically) and a search without guarantees for alliances across difference - for a voice that *does not* suppress difference in the name of essential identities, but emerges as a voice in common on specific issues. I have tried to show that though Deaf and disabled people do have 'a voice in common,' dialogue between Deaf Studies and Disability Studies is more problematic because of social barriers created by conflicting and prejudicial ideologies.

Though the close marriage of experience, ontology and epistemology within the DEAF-WAY does make for a relatively autonomous and authoritative episteme, it does not address questions posed from within Deaf Studies about how we *know* who is or will become deaf or Deaf. It may well be unsurprising that everyone 'spoke' sign language on an isolated island community, Martha's Vineyard, where some very unusual configuration of the gene pool resulted in large numbers of Deaf people (Groce, 1985) or as a result of the 'physical warehousing' to which Deaf people have been subjected throughout history (Wrigley, 1998). But in the context of today's highly individualistic and chaotic network societies, and given that, in such societies, the roots of language inequality listed in the early part of this article will apply as much to disabled people as to Deaf people, dreams of a common (sign) language as a *condition* for dialogue seem worrying. It is conveniently forgotten that the ability to learn a language is, like any ability, distributed unevenly throughout the population irrespective of gender, race, age, impairment and so on, but that the ability to learn Sign language depends not only on the cognitive ability to assimilate the rules, structures and vocabulary of the language, but also on vision, mobility and manual dexterity. To make Sign a condition of dialogue, and to suggest that the absence of it amounts to audism, is therefore tantamount to insisting on a judgmental relativism (Bhaskar, 1979), based on the view that the DEAF-WAY is somehow better than disabled people's way. Judgmental relativism breeds distributive social justice. I would therefore argue that there are inherent difficulties in maintaining Deaf *authority* in a Disability Studies that is committed to inclusion, equal rights and citizenship for all disabled people, and whose legitimacy among those

whom it subjects is dependent on its ability to liberate and maintain the voices of a multiplicity of competing epistememes under the banner of this common purpose.

In Conclusion

Not very long ago, a Deaf activist expressed to me what seemed to me to be an existential concern - one that was in this instance, being used to justify my exclusion from the DEAF-WORLD: 'We're worried that you want to make us disabled.' It's not true of course, because, like Linda, this woman did not interpret disability in the same way as I did, and was very resistant to my explanation of what I meant by disability. But, unlike Linda, she came from a Deaf family and had grown up steeped in the DEAF-WAY. It seems - to use the analogy of the Berlin wall - that the wall around the Deaf community may well have some bricks missing that enables a spectator to glance at the inside, but the 'wall in the head' that says 'We are not disabled - you are' (Finkelstein, 1991) will take much longer to be dismantled. The debate, of course, remains open - and I would suggest that Linda and Mark point to ways in which it could be continued - but however much we desire dialogue, Disability Studies should think long and hard about developing its social practice on the model of Deafness. To do so would be to re-write disability on an ontological and epistemological conundrum.

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Endnotes

1. By Deaf Studies, I mean the study of Deaf people as a linguistic minority whose lives revolve around Sign language and Deaf social life. Although many Deaf people also have hearing impairments, this is not, in fact, the main criterion for membership of the community. In this context it is important to note that Deaf people form only a tiny minority (around 4%) of the total population of people with significant hearing impairments.

2. A copy of all texts used in this research, which includes those cited, can be obtained from the author.

3. I use this term in preference to Deaf culture, because I would argue the concept of Deaf culture is an elitist construct. Deaf people outside of the academy and organisation of Deaf people do not recognise the term 'culture,' but frequently use DEAF-WAY.

4. Handshapes are to Sign language what words are to spoken language - they are the building blocks of Sign language.

5. These are the signs I was taught by a prominent Deaf grass roots activist in 1995, but it must be emphasised that Sign is a rich and varied language and there will be other signs with different meanings in use.

6. These different forms of community structure are adapted from the work of Kim (1994) which focused on the Majority World. Aggregate individualism distinct and independent individuals are bound together by normative and ethical principles, rules and norms, not by family, community and other ascribed relationships. Relational collectivism implies that relationships between in-group members are founded on common factors and these are transmitted to and shared by all people in a community. Children who grow up in such communities are expected to transfer 'appropriate' social values of interdependency, identification and loyalty to all those they come into contact with in

different contexts. However, community structures can change from one form to another over time (see Corker, 1996 for further discussion in relation to deaf people).

7. The Deaf Studies political agenda is concentrated solely on Deaf people. The Disability Studies political agenda claims to be intersectional in the sense that it includes all impairments and other dimensions of difference in the disabled population. There are however disagreements on the 'truth' of these claims; e.g. some argue in the UK that the disability studies agenda is concerned primarily with the experience of people with physical impairments.

8. I am aware that Tom Bertling's work is seen in some sectors of Deaf Studies as being little more than over-zealous polemic (see, for example, Ellie Rosenfield's review of his 1997 book *No Dignity for Joshua* in *Disability Studies Quarterly*, Spring 1998 issue). However, for me, this work is imbued with Deafculture, epitomising how ordinary Deaf people talk about their lives privately, and their widespread use of polemic in interaction with each other. Further, having experienced the kind of personal attacks he describes here myself, and in the public domain, I find it hard to dismiss what he says as polemic, and am well aware of the damage that such attacks cause, not least to the principle of academic freedom.

9. There is some disagreement about the capitalisation of 'Deaf' when used to refer to children who are deaf. Lane et al. (1996: x) 'take it that a child who has not acquired spoken language and culture because of limited hearing is a culturally Deaf child, even if that child has not yet had the opportunity to learn DEAF-WORLD language and culture.' However, this appears to reflect the conceptual pair of socialization and development that has long been the 'dominant and dominating' paradigm of childhood studies. This paradigm is now challenged by those working in the 'new sociology of childhood' as representing children as 'natural, passive, incompetent and incomplete' (James & Prout, 1999: x). Further, many deaf children are *not* born to white, middle class, well-educated families, and so such a model excludes the influence of 'other' languages and cultures and socio-economic status on the path to adulthood.

10. Abridged from field data from the *Life as a Disabled Child Project*, funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and co-ordinated by staff from the Universities of Leeds and Edinburgh.