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OUTSIDER IN THE DEAF WORLD¹: REFLECTIONS OF AN ETHNOGRAPHIC RESEARCHER

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Abstract

In this paper, the question of whether a hearing researcher can conduct research about the experiences and perspectives of deaf persons is examined. The author (a hearing researcher) argues that it is possible for hearing persons to do responsible and high quality research in the area of deafness, provided that steps are taken to include deaf persons in the design and/or review of the work. The author then describes the strategies she uses to insure that her work is not dominated by the hearing perspective.

Introduction

The topic we are addressing in this issue of JADARA is difficult and sensitive, bound up in concepts of what is politically correct, as well as what is good research. At the heart of the matter is the question of whether one can do research "in someone else's backyard." I am using the term "backyard" in the sense of "a way of knowing, understanding, and interpreting the world," including concepts of culture, frames of reference, and personal or group identity.

As a hearing researcher working at Rochester Institute of Technology's National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID), I must regularly consider, and try to adjust for, the ways in which

my hearing status affects my interactions with deaf informants². For example, one might reasonably question whether it is appropriate for a hearing person to design and conduct research which focuses on the experience of deaf people. Without an insider's understanding of Deaf culture³, can I even select the right questions for study? If I do, can I design a study and interview informants without alienating them? Can I establish enough of a rapport that they will describe their experiences, perspectives and feelings to me? If I can and they do, will I be able to analyze the data without imposing my world view on the process? Will the results reported truly reflect the experience of those I interviewed, or will they be a reprocessed version, interpreted and framed within the perspective of the hearing, and not insignificantly, dominant culture?

As an ethnographer, my entire research approach rests in part on the premise that I *can* get at the perspectives of people who are (in varying ways and degrees) unlike me. The related field of anthropology depends on the ability of the researcher to enter a field setting (most often someone else's backyard) with as few assumptions as possible, prepared to learn about another culture from a point of relative naivete, curiosity, and respect. While few ethnographers or anthropologists would propose that one can enter a field setting free of assumptions and "baggage," the goal is to minimize the effect of these

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assumptions by constantly documenting and confronting them. In this sense, it is often thought to be easier to study a culture different than one's own, since the researcher's assumptions will become readily evident and constantly challenged through daily contact and interaction with informants. Some might even say that it is unwise for researchers to study their own backyards, especially when they have a stake in the outcomes. For example, it may be more difficult to study one's own school system than it is to study a system in which one does not work; instead of being recognized and challenged, assumptions are likely to be perceived as "reality," and results interpreted from the perspective of one's own role and needs as a member of the school community.

Of course, we all have a stake in what we research, and cautions regarding working in one's backyard may be less a reflection of genuine issues and concerns, than they are a form of self-protection and rationalization on the part of researchers who depend for their livelihood on access to and support for studying people who are unlike themselves. Certainly when one does research in someone else's backyard there is the potential for bias associated with a lack of understanding of, or respect for, the perspectives of those one is studying. In some cases the implications are far reaching. For example, it has been argued that one reason so much research on deafness has defined deaf people as having a pathological condition requiring remediation (as opposed to a members of a minority language group or culture) is that the research agendas, funding sources, and professional associations in this field have historically been controlled by hearing people (Lane, 1992; Baker-Shenk and Kyle, 1990).

So, what is the answer? Can a researcher study in someone else's backyard? More specifically, can a hearing person study issues in deafness? In thinking through these questions, it occurred to me that they are not new. In fact, they

have been vigorously debated in other areas of study. As a result, I would like to turn for a moment to recent discussions in the field of women's studies, in the hope that they can provide a framework for addressing similar questions raised by scholars in deafness.

Learning From the Debate in Women's Studies

It has been suggested that much of the female experience has been interpreted within a male dominated world view, in which it is assumed that the environment "emits the same signals for women and men, has the same bearing on women's and men's lives and that the answers it elicits in women are comparable to the answers it elicits in men... answers from and about women are evaluated against male standards" (Duelli Klein, 1983, p.90). Certainly, recent revelations in the field of medical research suggest that many male researchers cannot be trusted to go about their work with consideration for the perspectives, interests, physical differences and welfare of women. In fact, such has been the pervasiveness of their world view that they found no problem simply extending findings of research conducted exclusively with men to women, despite the fact that women's physiology renders such generalizations incorrect, and often dangerous for the women to whom they are applied.

Some scholars have begun to call for a feminist methodology, one in which the androcentric frame of reference is replaced by a feminist one, and within which research on women is done exclusively by women (Duelli Klein, 1983; Mies, 1983). These feminist thinkers argue that women are more qualified to do research on women because they can draw on their own experience of oppression and discrimination, integrating it into the research process. This quality, which Mies refers to as a "double consciousness" in women social scientists, then informs their work:

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"This extra quality consists mainly in the fact that women and other oppressed groups, out of their subjective experience, are better sensitized toward psychological mechanisms of dominance. As objects of oppression they are forced out of self-preservation to know the motives of their oppressors. At the same time they have experienced in their own psyche and bodies how oppression and exploitation feel to the victims, who must constantly respond to demands made on them. Due to this "inner view of the oppressed" (Nash, 1974), women social scientists are better equipped than their male counterparts to make a comprehensive study of the exploited groups. Men often do not have this experiential knowledge, and therefore lack empathy, the ability for identification and because of this they also lack social and sociological imagination." (Mies, 1983, pp. 121-122.)

It is not a great stretch to replace the concept of androcentric with "hearing," or, to borrow one of Harlan Lane's terms, "audist" (Lane, 1992). Similarly, the idea that experiential knowledge enables female researchers to better empathize with female informants can be extended to deaf researchers and informants. In fact, there has been a growing demand within the Deaf culture and community that deaf social scientists assume positions of leadership and control in research involving deaf people.

On the other hand, there are also feminist thinkers (i.e. Epstein, 1988) who do not believe that one must be female in order to study women's issues or apply feminist methodologies. These scholars would argue that what counts is not one's gender, but one's way of thinking about women and women's studies, and that there are women who do not approach women's studies from a feminist framework, just as there are men who do. They would point out that the feminist methodologies—which are generally qualitative and ethnographic—have been developed and used equally by men. Applying this thinking to deaf

studies, it might be argued that a hearing person is capable of studying and learning about the experiences of deaf people if she or he is able to set aside or somehow adjust for the influence of the hearing perspective on their work.

I believe that the perspectives of deaf people, and to a great extent deaf people themselves, have been excluded from studies about deaf people, and that as a result research in deafness has frequently been conceived, conducted, and reported from the perspective of hearing people. I further believe that this bias has resulted in a significant body of research which neither fully reflects nor improves the experience of deaf people. Clearly, there is a need for more deaf researchers and scholars in deaf studies. The question I am left with is whether there is any place for hearing researchers within the field of deaf studies.

The ongoing debate in women's studies provides us with at least two ways of responding to this question. The first answer would have to be, "No, they can't do the research unless they are themselves deaf. Without the shared experiences of oppression by hearing people and the insiders' understanding of what it means to be constantly evaluated against a hearing norm, their research will inevitably be framed within a hearing world view." The second answer would be, "Yes, they can. It depends on how they approach their work, the methods they select for conducting the research, and the safeguards they employ to ensure that their research is not simply a reflection of the hearing perspective."

Strategies for Working in Someone Else's Backyard

Given that I have been working as a researcher at NTID for 9 years, it must be obvious that I believe a hearing person can do good research in the field of deaf studies. But I also concede that I labor under the weight of my own personal

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experience, one in which the norm is hearing, and the world is a hearing world. As a hearing person who conducts research with deaf people, I routinely employ a host of strategies in an attempt to mitigate against bias in my work. Below, I briefly describe some of these strategies.

Choice of Methodology

The decision to use predominantly qualitative research methods is in itself a strategy for getting beyond one's own world view. Grounded in symbolic interactionist theory, qualitative methods approach a topic with the understanding that people act towards the objects and people in their environment on the basis of the meaning those objects and people have for them (Bogdan and Taylor, 1975). It therefore becomes critical to understand the perspectives of those one is studying, to see the world through their eyes, to know what it might be like "to walk in their shoes." Such a belief requires, in turn, that the researcher assume a stance of learner, and place the informant in a role of teacher, mentor, and guide.

When I interview people I always begin by explaining that, in the areas we will be discussing, they are the expert. I also explain that I am hoping to learn from them, that their experiences, opinions, ideas, and feelings are important to me, and that I will do my best to accurately reflect their perspectives in my report. Finally, I emphasize that one of the central goals of my research is to effect change, and that it is my intention that the findings of my work be used to improve the quality of the educational, employment, and community experiences of deaf people. In short, I introduce the interview by ensuring the informant's position as expert, and I emphasize the applied nature of my work as well as the control which they have within the context of the interview to open or close topics, raise issues which they feel are critical to an understanding of

their experience, and extend our conversation or bring it to an early conclusion.

A related methodological strategy involves describing and exploring the influence of my world view on my research through journals, short written reflections (which I call memos), and conversations with others. For example, when I came to NTID from the field of special education. My orientation in this field was strongly supportive of full integration and mainstreaming of school age children in public schools. As I learned more about deafness, I was required to rethink this philosophy, in light of the experiences of mainstreamed deaf students for whom school is often a silent, lonely world, one without communication, friendships or social interaction with peers. Memos in which I explore my special education background and mainstream philosophy form the basis for an ongoing re-examination of the benefits of integration for deaf students, and the ways in which commonly accepted definitions of concepts such as "least restrictive environment" are challenged by the experiences of deaf people.

Advisory Groups

Much of my research is done in response to concerns raised by NTID faculty, staff, and administrators about the quality of deaf students' experiences at our college and their achievements after graduation in the workplace and community. In designing these projects, I routinely establish an advisory group which then is given the charge to offer guidance and feedback to me at all phases of the project. Advisory groups generally include people who have a direct interest in the study, either because they asked the question(s) which gave birth to the project and/or because they will be working with the final report. Always, these groups include deaf people. Feedback from advisory groups includes reviews of research design, strategies for facilitating access to field sites, discussions regarding interpretation of

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findings, and collaboration in dissemination and implementation of the results.

For example, several years ago I was involved in a study of residence hall life at RIT (Foster and DeCaro, 1991). Advisory group members included deaf and hearing faculty and staff who work in the NID Department of Human Development and RIT Department of Residence Life. One of the findings of the study was that, while there are special interest houses focusing on international students, African American culture, art majors, and other groups, there is no residence option focusing on Deaf culture (despite the fact that there are over a thousand deaf students on campus). Upon discussing this finding, the Advisory Group decided to pursue the establishment of such an option. Today, there is a special interest residence hall (open to both deaf and hearing students) where the focus is on ASL and Deaf culture.

Review by Deaf Colleagues

In addition to advisory groups, I often depend on collegial review as a strategy for gaining feedback on my work. Deaf colleagues have been very generous with their time in this regard, and often have had a central role in shaping the final product or report. For example, I was in the process of preparing a book manuscript, based on interviews with hearing supervisors of deaf employees (Foster, 1992). Areas to be covered included hiring, training, and evaluating the job performance of deaf employees, as well as chapters on communication, promotion, and strategies for successful interaction between deaf and hearing people in the workplace.

I asked a deaf colleague to read the first draft. In one of his general comments he observed that the book was one-sided, and suggested that it would be enriched if I could find a way to include the perspectives of deaf employees. In response to his suggestion, I formed a discussion group of three deaf professionals. This group met once a month and discussed each chapter in turn, focusing

on their experiences with hearing supervisors and co-workers as well as their reactions to the ideas raised in the chapter. These discussions were recorded and transcribed, and became an integral part of the final manuscript. As a result of my colleague's suggestion, the book became more well-rounded and reflective of both deaf and hearing people's concerns regarding access and accommodation in the workplace.

Collaboration

One of the best ways to ensure a more balanced perspective in research is to collaborate with deaf colleagues. I have collaborated on research and writing projects with deaf colleagues on several occasions. One such project involved ethnographic interviews with deaf people about the impact of technology on their work (Emerton, Foster and Royer, 1987); certainly this research was influenced by the range of perspectives represented on the research team (two hearing females, one deaf male). Another project involved writing an article about the communication challenges faced by deaf people in the workplace (Foster and Eisenberg, 1989). A third project provides teachers in mainstream classrooms with models and strategies for insuring full access and participation for deaf students (Foster and Holcomb, 1990; Holcomb and Foster, 1992). In every instance, good communication, mutual respect, and shared control and responsibility are central to successful collaboration.

Contact

Some hearing researchers have opportunities for daily interaction with deaf people. For example, I work in the classroom with deaf students, sit on committees with deaf colleagues, and develop friendships with deaf people. From deaf students, colleagues, and friends, I learn about the experience of being deaf. This understanding informs everything I do, including my research. For example, sometimes I arrive at

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meetings early and observe the deaf people conversing at one end of the table in sign language and the hearing people conversing at the other end in voice. Once the meeting begins, everyone signs. Through this experience, I learn about the culture of meetings, formal versus informal communication, and the different meanings that people attach to concepts such as "accessibility" and "accommodation." Similarly, it took me a long time to learn that it is not necessarily rude to walk between two deaf people conversing in sign language, and an even longer time to be able to do it. My experience proved a valuable lesson in Deaf culture, the protocols of sign language communication, and the difficulties one can experience when trying to change old habits and beliefs.

Not everyone who is doing research in deafness works in an environment where there are opportunities for contact with deaf people. If interaction is not possible, one should find other means to learn. Subscribe to the *Silent News*, the *NAD Broadcaster*, and *Deaf Life*. Read books which describe deaf history and culture, as well as autobiographies of deaf people. Take out a captioned movie and watch it on the VCR. Try using a TDD (Telecommunication Device for the Deaf) to converse with a friend. Use a masker during different times of the day (at home, at work, at the mall, etc.), and keep a journal about your experiences. Attend a conference on Deaf culture (the Deaf Way conference, held in Washington D.C. in 1989, had a major impact on my professional development).

Communication

Almost all the strategies described so far require that the researcher know at least basic sign language. Clear and comfortable communication is prerequisite for discussion at meetings as well as during one on one conversations. Perhaps equally important, the willingness to communicate with deaf informants in sign language is an important

gesture of respect for and commitment to Deaf culture and language. Where opportunities for classes in sign language exist, one should take advantage of them.

However, even the most dedicated student of sign language may fall short of the fluency required to conduct an in depth interview in sign language. I have attained the advanced level on the Sign Communication Proficiency Interview (SCPI)⁴, yet I always request a comprehensively skilled interpreter for interviews, because I never know what language or mode the informant will use (American Sign Language, Total Communication, Signed English, speech, lipreading, writing). I need to be prepared to work in any situation, and my own skills are often inadequate for fluent conversation in sign language. The key is to adapt to the preference of the informant.

Sometimes, researchers do not have opportunities to learn sign language. Minimally, researchers must provide skilled interpreters for interviews and other interactions with deaf participants in research projects. It is helpful if the researcher knows enough sign language to introduce him or herself, since this is yet another sign of respect for the language of the informant. The researcher should also be clear that the interpreter is necessary because the researcher does not know sign language, not because the informant is unable to speak; that is, the "deficiency," if there is one, resides with the researcher, not with the informant.

Whose Backyard is This, Anyway?

Thus far, the discussion has focused on the question of whether a hearing researcher can study the experience of being deaf, and strategies for ensuring that research conducted by hearing researchers with deaf people is not overwhelmed by the world view of the researcher. My position

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has been that by applying a range of strategies to one's work it is possible to overcome differences of culture, in this case, differences between hearing and Deaf cultures. However, I would now like to propose that there is a larger question here, one that has to do with definitions of the concept of "backyard" and the degree to which people's backyards may overlap.

Most people do not have one individual or group identity, nor do they have a single frame of reference for interpreting the world around them. Instead, as Lather (1991) suggests, reality is socially constructed within specific local sites and contexts. I have found this to be true in my research. Some examples:

Example #1. About five years ago, I scheduled an interview with a deaf woman. My regular interpreter, a male, hearing child of deaf parents, (considered native/fluient in both American Sign Language and Deaf culture) was unable to come. I scheduled in his place another comprehensively skilled interpreter who is female. When we arrived at the informant's house, she greeted us at the door with her newborn son in her arms. She explained that, while she would be happy to go ahead with the interview, she would have to spend much of the time nursing her son. Both the interpreter and I are mothers, and we had both nursed our babies. The three of us talked casually for a few minutes about breast feeding, then proceeded with the interview. In this instance, the identity of "mother" and the shared experience of nursing were critical to the comfort of the informant and, relatedly, to the success of the interview.

Example #2. A deaf Hispanic NTID student observed that he does not think of himself as Hispanic except when he is at home with his family. In further discussion, he noted that there are few Hispanic deaf students at college—instead, for him, the common bond is deafness.

As he put it, "we are all the same," (e.g., all deaf).

Example #3. A black deaf student who is also a single parent said that the only campus organization she has joined is a group for single mothers. She is the only black person in this group, but still she finds more connection there than she does in Ebony Club (a deaf student organization focusing on African American culture). Her explanation is that for now, her central and organizing role is that of single mother. On a college campus designed for young adults without parenting responsibilities, she finds it very difficult to engage in typical social activities and student organizations. Her interests are her studies, being a good mother, and finding ways to survive on campus with a two year old.

Example #4. Upon arriving at my office for an interview, a student explains that he is very oral, does not sign or use interpreters, and in fact finds signing to be distracting. He prefers to communicate through lipreading and spoken English. The interpreter is thanked and asked to leave. Throughout the interview I suppress the almost reflexive behavior of signing, using alternative strategies such as repeating the phrase, gesturing, or writing when we do not understand each other. A year later I bump into the student on campus. I say hello in spoken English. The student responds in sign language, without voice.

These examples illustrate the point that identity and frame of reference are both situational and temporal. Imagine for a minute that identity is something like a jigsaw puzzle, a picture comprised of many pieces. However, this puzzle is very special, in that the full picture is constantly evolving, and pieces can be reshaped or added in response to new experiences and impressions. Some pieces are larger or more colorful than others, and thus more central to the full picture. However, the overall complexity and size of the

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puzzle reflects a tremendous potential for re-configuration and addition of individual pieces. Identity, perspectives, and personal frames of reference are in a constant state of growth and adaptation, reflected in a continuous shifting of patterns, colors, and images within the larger picture. We highlight one or more pieces, integrate new pieces, and reshape old pieces according to the demands of the situation and in response to new circumstances.

Movement from one situation to another places different demands on the individual, creating a need for emphasis on one or another element of identity. Thus, a deaf Hispanic NTID student highlights his deaf identity at NTID, but at home he draws on that part of him which is Hispanic. Both pieces are part of the student's total identity, but the deaf part is drawn out in response to the college environment, while the Hispanic part is shaped by interactions with family members. Similarly, my female interpreter and I drew on our experience and identities as mothers who had nursed our babies in order to establish rapport and comfort between us and the deaf mother we had come to interview.

Just as some pieces of the puzzle are highlighted during specific interactions, others are created or reshaped in response to new circumstances. A deaf oral student who has been mainstreamed through high school and never met other deaf people may arrive at NTID with an aversion to sign language and Deaf culture. After a year or two on a campus with 1200 deaf students, he may identify strongly with Deaf culture and become fluent in ASL.

Some aspects of one's identity are a permanent part of the picture, but the impact they exert waxes and wanes over a lifetime. The child and parent roles are one example. A black deaf college student finds her school experience overwhelmed by her role as single parent. She will continue to be a parent long after graduation, but the barriers she faces to participation and success in college as

a single mother make this a dominant identity during her years at NTID.

A Case of "Negotiated Rapport" and the Search for Common Ground

Just as informants have many identities and social realities, so do researchers. I am a woman, caucasian, mother, researcher, wife, daughter, and teacher (the list could be much longer). Depending on the context within which I find myself, I draw on one or more of these identities as a frame of reference and point of interaction. At my daughter's school concert, my frame of reference is that of mother. At work, I am more the researcher. But no matter what the situation, each of these identities contributes to the larger picture of who I am, how I see myself, and the ways in which I interpret the people and events in my life.

Individuals may experience either non-synchrony or synchrony of viewpoints, depending on whether their particular combination of identities, or, to use Lather's term, "truths," overlaps with those of the other person(s). The key for the ethnographic researcher is to find areas of overlap and shared realities with those she studies and to acknowledge that there are areas in which there is no common frame of reference. I am not black, but as a working mother I have experienced the frustration of trying to juggle roles that often conflict. I am no longer a full-time student, but I understand that I am one kind of a person at home (wife, mother) and another at work (researcher, teacher). I am not deaf, but I as a woman I know the negative impact of stereotypes and unequal treatment.

It has been argued that there are critical experiences and characteristics which shape all interactions, including those between researchers and their informants. These experiences are said to provide a master identity for the individual. Because these experiences dominate identity, it is

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argued that they are more relevant to interaction than other experiences, roles and characteristics. Indeed, this is at the heart of the ongoing debate we have come here to discuss; the goal then becomes determination of which master identity – gender, culture, race, language, class, religion – should prevail, with each group claiming their version of master identity as the basis for insider status and rapport.

I would argue that this position, when taken to the extreme, involves stereotyping the individual by fitting him or her into a predetermined category of master identity and then interacting with the individual on the basis of expectations, beliefs, and understandings of that master identity. In its most benign form, the assignation of master identity is a reflection of the search for common ground. For example, Mies (1983) proposes that the bond of gender—and relatedly—of shared oppression, is great enough to overcome barriers of class and culture. In describing a project involving women in India, she attributes her acceptance by the women of the village to the fact that they shared the social category of “women,” and the fact that she and her co-investigators (to varying degrees) were outsiders:

“Given the general sex-segregation and oppression of women in India, the women very soon came to tell us about their private problems with their husbands, their mothers-in-law, the quarrels in the village, etc. This ‘womens’ gossip’ was obviously encouraged by the fact that we were women, belonging to the same social category, and were also outsiders and researchers who were ready to listen to their stories. This general feeling of ‘being on the same side’ helped to overcome the usual barrier between people from different classes and cultures” (Mies, 1983, pp. 137-138).

One might debate with Mies whether gender-related oppression is more a master identity than the Indian culture(s) of the women of the village.

Certainly, she is using gender and the related experiences of political, social and economic oppression as way of explaining the apparently high level of rapport that she developed with her informants. I would propose another explanation, one less ambitious and perhaps less confining—that Mies was simply applying the strategies of a good ethnographer—finding points of shared experience, acknowledging her role as an outsider, and building on genuine interest in and respect for the experiences of her informants.

Conclusion

Learning about the ways in which people structure and interpret their experience is one of the major goals of the research enterprise. If we are restricted to the study of people like ourselves, surely our knowledge would be drastically reduced, as would our ability to see the world from the perspectives of others. Perhaps the worst aspect of such an approach is that it is grounded in a rather pessimistic and narrow vision of the human imagination—one in which people cannot learn how to recognize and adapt in response to their own bias. If such a world view is taken to its logical conclusion, I should only study white middle class professional women, Asian Americans should restrict their field of research to other Asian Americans, deaf researchers should not study the experience of hearing people, and black scholars should not tackle issues which face Caucasian people. What a boring research agenda for all of us!

This is not to say that the activity of studying in someone else’s backyard is easy. With any research, there exists the potential for researcher bias. When the researcher is a member of the culture studied, the danger is that perspectives which might be questioned or probed by an outsider will be viewed as “taken for granted reality” by the insider. When the researcher does

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not share the culture of those she or he studies, there is the danger that the research will be conceived, conducted and reported within a world view that seriously distorts the experience of informants. Strategies that require researchers to document and reflect on their own assumptions, as well as efforts to enhance the potential for collaboration, feedback, and empowerment of

research informants, may help both insider and outsider researchers reduce distortion of findings and discover the perspectives of those they study.

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Endnotes

1. The title for this article is derived, in part, from the work *Outsiders in a Hearing World*, by Paul Higgins (1980).
2. I am using the term "informant" here in the sense expressed by Spradley (1979), "a source of information; literally they [informants] become teachers for the researcher."
3. The use of the uppercase "Deaf" is used to refer to a group of deaf people who share a language—American Sign Language (ASL) and a culture, while the lowercase "deaf" refers to the audiological condition of not hearing (Padden & Humphries, 1988; Woodward, 1972). Not all deaf people consider themselves culturally Deaf, but for those who do, the insider's understanding of the culture may play a critical role in the design and conduct of research.
4. A sign communication evaluation tool used at NTID to assess the sign skill of faculty and professional staff. The tool involves a videotaped, one-to-one conversation between a trained interviewer and candidate/interviewee, which is then independently rated by three trained raters (Newell et al, 1983). The six ratings range from "0" (no functional sign skills) to "Superior" (conversation natural and shared; native-like signer). A rating of "Advanced" falls one level below "Superior."