Deaf Epistemology: The Ways of Knowing of the Deaf

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December 2, 2013
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Until 25 years ago, the academic literature on deafness focused on its medical aspects and pathology, including cures for or mitigation of the perceived handicap. Correspondingly, many scholars believed that deaf individuals should learn spoken and written language to follow the mainstream of the society (Senghas & Monaghan, 2002). However, changing sociocultural conditions over the course of U.S. history have influenced studies of deafness as well as descriptions of the deaf community. Studies of deafness have shifted from pathological perspectives to more complex sociocultural perspectives, such as issues of community identity, formation, and maintenance, and language ideology (Senghas & Monaghan, 2002). As a result, deaf individuals have come to be considered a cultural and linguistic minority group.

Historical Perspectives and Paradigm Shifts

There were three major epistemes from 1830 to 2000, and each caused changes in descriptions of the American deaf community. The different epistemes of the deaf community were produced by different sets of social theorists. The changes in epistemes do not continue in a linear fashion nor refer to beginning or end points (Rosen, 2008). The epistemes can be arranged historically, from romanticism to modernism to postmodernism (Rosen, 2008).

Romanticism: The First Half of the 19th Century

Deaf people in the United States were isolated from society prior to the foundation of schools for the deaf in the early 19th century (Rosen, 2008). The first American school for the deaf, the Connecticut Asylum for the Deaf and Dumb (later named the American School for the Deaf), was founded in 1817, and other schools for the deaf were opened in the United States at around this time. The founding of schools for deaf people provided them opportunities to meet each other, form contacts and friendships, receive an education, and learn sign language and led
to the creation of a modern deaf community with its own language, organizations, and cultural
traditions (Rosen, 2008). This phenomenon produced social theorists who were already affiliated
with the leading political, social, and cultural institutions and who had developed an episteme of
romanticism by uniting Protestantism and federalism with a prior episteme—enlightenment—
that was concerned with notions of individuality, rationality, and social conscience (Rosen,
2008). Social theorists who were affiliated with the schools for the deaf supported this episteme
in their reasoning regarding the deaf community. They described the process of how deaf people
had become educated and had formed a well-endowed community after their previous isolation.
The social theorists utilized religious words such as “divine providence” and “benevolence,” and
referred to deaf individuals as “unfortunates” when they talked about the influence of this
education on deaf people (Rosen, 2008).

**Modernism: The Second Half of the 19th Century to the First Half of the 20th Century**

Social changes and cultural developments in the United States from the late 19th century
to the mid-20th century challenged the romanticist episteme. During this period, immigration
increased, and nationalists called for a unified people, language, and culture and for public
policies that excluded social, cultural, and language differences (Rosen, 2008). In addition,
significant developments in the field of science caused the increased industrialization and
standardization of manufacturing practices in the U.S. economy (Rosen, 2008). These events had
significant influences on the deaf community. In the 1860s, oralism became a popular pedagogy
in schools, and deaf students received an education that utilized speech and hearing
communication methods; using sign language was prohibited (Rosen, 2008).

These political and scientific changes spawned psychometric and behaviorist social
theories in the fields of biology, psychology, history, and sociology. According to Rosen (2008),
“they constructed Darwinism, psychometrics, behaviorism, social conditioning, and conformity as leading paradigms, and devised modernism as the new episteme” (p. 133). These developments led to the emergence of new social theorists of the deaf community and professors and specialists in the fields of psychology, education, and sociology who followed the modernist episteme (Rosen, 2008). In their views, deaf people hoped to join hearing society but were prevented from doing so by hearing people. Hearing people established a dialectical relationship with deaf people according to which speaking and hearing were the affirmation of hearing while deafness was the object of denial. (Gillin, 1944; Rosen, 2008).

In addition, deaf individuals were forced to attend separate schools, seek other deaf people for communication, develop a community of their own, and endure the negative, outsider roles assigned to them by the hearing community. In the context of communication issues between the deaf and the hearing, the deaf community was created to provide its people with an interpretive framework that allowed the deaf to acquire a distinctive linguistic and social knowledge and to adapt to the hindering effects of dishonor and marginalization (Rosen, 2008).

These politico-educational transformations did not result in the disappearance of the language, society, and culture of the deaf community. The deaf culture went undercover and was “preserved despite pressure to conform with hearing society” (Rosen, 2008, p. 135). In 1864, the first American college for deaf and hard-of-hearing students, Gallaudet College, was established, a national form of American sign language (ASL) was articulated, and educational and employment issues for the deaf were nationalized. In addition, the National Association of the Deaf (NAD) was founded in 1880. In order to fight against discrimination against the deaf in society, the NAD built a network of clubs, associations, and social service organizations and also promoted the talents and aspirations of deaf individuals (Rosen, 2008).
Postmodernism: Since the Mid-20th Century

Since the mid-20th century, there have been social and cultural changes caused by increased resistance to American political, social, and cultural colonialism. This movement resulted in the escalation of social movements and civil rights legislation in the United States (Rosen, 2008). These developments had an impact on the deaf community. Laws such as the Americans with Disabilities Act were enacted to provide civil rights protections to deaf individuals and to encourage their mainstreaming in American society and culture. In addition, the recognition of ASL as a language increased in education, research, and public policy, at the academic level (including secondary and post-secondary programs), and in deaf studies (Rosen, 2008). As a result, the language, community, and culture of deaf individuals entered the mainstream of American society. According to Rosen (2008), this period was characterized by the development of communication technologies that reduced out-of-date social associations such as deaf clubs and forced people to seek non-deaf spaces. This period is also recognized as a time when the deaf community became more diverse as deaf individuals from different scholastic, social, economic, ethnic, and religious backgrounds broke from national organizations and created their own special-interest associations (Rosen, 2008).

These developments produced the new social science theorists, whose research interests lay in “socio-cultural differences, power relations, resistance to societal hegemony and the persistence of minority groups” (Rosen, 2008, p. 135). The new social theorists came mainly from the fields of linguistics, anthropology, and sociology; they challenged the modernist episteme and changed the emphasis in social science research from psychometric studies to language and cultural studies. They altered the focus from the study of society to the study of culture, the diversity of humanity, and the heterogeneity and plurality of cultures, languages, and
histories of communities (Rosen, 2008). They considered these new research fields to be the elements of the creation, legitimization, and ethnographies of social and cultural groups. The changes in social theories had significant impacts on the new social theorists who were focusing on the study of the deaf community (Rosen, 2008). They studied the language and culture of the deaf and theorized that they were the explanatory model for the formation and nourishment of the deaf community (Rosen, 2008). The postmodernist episteme includes heterogeneity, language identity, sociolinguistics, and attitudinal and cultural models. Sign language teachers and teachers of the deaf often promulgated these postmodernist views of the deaf (Rosen, 2008). Indeed, some scholars legitimized ASL as a genuine language (De Clerck, 2010).

Many scholarly studies started to utilize notions of the minority group, community, and culture, with the result that deaf individuals became recognized as a cultural and linguistic minority group (De Clerck, 2010; Jankowski, 1997). This new perspective led to a paradigm shift in the field of deaf studies. Sociocultural and anthropological studies employing qualitative and ethnographic research methods articulated the lives of deaf people from an emic perspective. New concepts emerged of deaf ways of knowing and deaf ways of seeing and being (De Clerck, 2012). In addition, during the postmodern era, not only did different concepts of the deaf and of deafness emerge, the public visibility of the deaf community also increased, and terms such as “Deaf culture,” “Deafhood,” and “Deaf epistemology” grew out of the fields of deaf study and deaf education (De Clerck, 2010; Rosen, 2008; Wang, 2012).

**Definition of Deaf/deaf, Deafhood, and Deaf Culture**

There are many concepts of “deaf” and “Deaf,” but there is a broad consensus among Deaf/deaf individuals and in D/deaf studies. “Deaf” is usually linked to a social construction of identity, involvement with a Deaf community, a concept of a Deaf culture, and the use of sign
language (Skelton & Valentine, 2003). On the other hand, “deaf” tends to be used by some academics and the medical profession to imply a definition based on medical descriptions of deafness based on the norm of hearing (Skelton & Valentine, 2003). The term “deaf” is often used to describe people who tend not to present a strong Deaf identity, do not use sign language as their first language, rely on oral styles of communication such as lip-reading, and identify themselves as disabled (Skelton & Valentine, 2003).

Padden (1980 as cited in Wang, 2010) defined for the first time the culture of deaf individuals as a series of learned behaviors of a group of people who share their language, values, rules for behavior, and traditions. She also mentioned that members of the Deaf culture behave as Deaf people do, use sign language, and share the beliefs of Deaf people toward themselves and those who are not Deaf. In addition, Ladd (2003) explained the term “Deafhood” as a very broad concept that includes Deaf ontologies and Deaf epistemologies as well as empowering the Deaf and providing a counter-narrative that challenged predominant structures and discourses. The Deafhood concept is intended to disrupt medically oriented and oppressive discourses about deafness by offering a deaf-constructed model that focuses on positive, experience-oriented views of deaf people as well as on deaf peoples’ possibilities. In addition, the Deafhood concept is a strategy to raise awareness through which those who use sign language can examine their own experiences and empower themselves (Kusters & Meulder, 2013).

**Deaf Epistemology and Underlying Assumptions**

Deaf epistemologies are similar to the epistemologies of ethnic and cultural minority groups such as Asian American epistemology and disability epistemology (Ladd, 2003; Wang, 2010). There are two different approaches toward Deaf epistemologies: positivism as the
adversary of Deaf epistemologies and constructivism as the strongest support of Deaf epistemologies (Ladd, 2003; Wang, 2010).

Positivists take the stance that external reality is composed of facts and that one acquires knowledge through appropriate methods (Wang, 2010). Positivists recognize epistemologies as the foundation of knowledge that goes beyond time, locations, and cultures (Wang, 2010). They also believe that subjectivity should be controlled or reduced through scientific methods such as hypothesis confirmation, although knowledge can be subjective (Wang, 2010). Regarding Deaf epistemologies, extreme positivists do not recognize the existence of Deaf culture or even accept the idea that a sign language can be a genuine language, although many moderate positivists do acknowledge the validity of Deaf culture and recognize sign languages as genuine languages (Wang, 2010). In addition, according to Wang (2012), most positivists disagree with the claim that the legitimacy of Deaf culture consequently leads to Deaf ways of knowing. They consider that the development of knowledge in the human race and the development of knowledge exhibited in individuals are not idiosyncratic; rather, they have a parallel relationship (Noddings, 2012). Therefore, positivists believe that the ways of knowing of the deaf are similar to the ways of knowing of hearing people, and that both the deaf and hearing people gain knowledge, including the literacy skills of reading and writing, through appropriate methods (Wang, 2010).

According to Miller (2010), constructivists view “knowledge as coming from the person who has come to know something” (p. 480). It is constructed through the eyes of the person himself or herself, which influences interpretation (Sexton, 1997, as cited by Miller, 2010). Constructivists emphasize that there is no universal truth because all truth is individually constructed and relative to the perspectives, interpretations, and views of that one person (Miller, 2010; Wang, 2010). They also assert that reality is composed socially through human interaction.
and that one can only understand how that reality is represented internally and symbolically, especially through language (Miller, 2010; Wang, 2010).

Constructivists think that the Deaf way of constructing reality is different from that of hearing individuals because Deaf individuals have a different language and culture (Wang, 2010).

Indeed, according to Paul and Moores (2012), the employment of phrases such as Deafhood acknowledges the contributions of vision and the use of a sign language, in conjunction with other social and cultural factors that foster cognitive and sociocultural development.

In addition, most constructivists from Deaf culture are advocates of ASL literacy and contend that d/Deaf individuals are visual learners (Wang, 2010). Thus, the literacy theories for hearing people and studies of the phonology of English are not applicable to d/Deaf individuals. According to Padden and Humphries (2005), “Deaf people’s practices of ‘seeing’ are not necessarily natural or logical, in the sense that they have a heightened visual sense, but their ways of ‘seeing’ follow from a long history of interacting with the world in certain ways—in cultural ways” (p. 2). In other words, they make meanings in order to know something based on their history such as the schools they attended, the communities that they have been a part of, the jobs they have or have had, and the vocabularies they have given themselves to express what they know. Furthermore, some constructivists argue that primarily Deaf teachers should teach d/Deaf students and that Deaf history and Deaf culture should be considered as essential aspects of curricula for d/Deaf students throughout the U.S. school system (Humphries, 2008).

Research Implications

When positivists study their views of deaf epistemologies, they use qualitative methods. As they think that ways of knowing for the deaf are similar to the ways of knowing for hearing people, and that both deaf and hearing people gain knowledge through appropriate methods,
some positivist studies focus on the academic achievement of deaf people. For example, in “Academic Status and Progress of Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing Students in General Education Classrooms” Antia, Jones, Reed, and Kreimeyer (2009) examined the normative academic status, classroom academic status, and academic progress of 197 deaf and hard-of-hearing (DHH) students in general education classrooms over a 5-year period. Their research began with a comparison of academic statuses between DHH students and hearing students. They obtained math, reading, and language/writing standardized test scores and standardized teacher’s ratings of academic competence annually for 5 years along with other demographic and communication data (Antia et al., 2009). However, constructivists from deaf culture dispute these types of studies, claiming that such studies are based on the positivists’ premise that D/deaf people tend to have problems with academic achievement compared to the hearing individuals. Furthermore, research methods applied by positivist researchers might subconsciously challenge the abilities DHH people (Ladd, 2003).

Constructivists seek to advocate Deaf people as part of larger social entities, and this is seen in many studies (Senghas & Monaghan, 2002). Constructivists have the opinion that Deaf individuals are part of a different culture. Social and cultural factors of Deaf people—including identity—lead to their cognitive and sociocultural development. They utilize qualitative and ethnographic methods to study these aspects. For example, in “Development of Deaf Identity: An Ethnographic Study”, McIlroy and Storbeck (2011) explored the identity development of nine deaf participants throughout the narrative of deaf participants’ educational experiences. They proposed a bicultural dialogue model. Their research findings show that deaf identity is a complex continuing quest for belonging as well as a quest that ties up the acceptance of being deaf with finding themselves in a hearing-dominant society (McIlroy & Storbeck, 2011).
Through the use of dialogue and narrative tools, this study encouraged educators, parents, and researchers to broaden their understanding of how the deaf identity, and the dignity associated with being a deaf person is constructed (McIlroy & Storbeck, 2011).

**New Ways of Knowing**

Deaf ways of knowing are a new way of knowing for me. As an international student from Japan, I have gained new knowledge and modified old knowledge throughout the experience of negotiating between these two cultures. However, regarding cultural and ethnic minorities, I tend to focus on race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation, but by researching deaf epistemologies, I realized that I had never considered Deaf people as a cultural minority.

Learning about this way of knowing has opened my eyes to the fact that there are different concepts of deaf in the United States, and these different concepts have impacted Deaf epistemologies as well as the studies of Deaf/deaf. Due to the structure of the Japanese language, the deaf and the Deaf cannot be distinguished as in Japanese, there are not uppercase and lowercase forms of letters (De Clerck, 2010). Therefore, I learned that, depending on the beliefs or opinions that scholars have toward Deaf/deaf, they take two different approaches—the positivistic or constructivist approach—to Deaf epistemologies.

My perceptions of Deaf epistemologies were similar to those of the positivistic stance. Although I did not think that ways of knowing for Deaf and hearing people were the same, my assumption was that Deaf people gain knowledge by using sign language and through their vision, but these methods were somehow modified to follow the methods of knowing from hearing people. In other words, my assumption was based on mainstream American society and culture. I had not considered Deaf people as a cultural and linguistic minority group. Rather, I considered them individuals with disabilities. In my opinion, studies on the Deaf in Japan are
behind the times compared to studies in the United States. Deaf people tend to be hidden from mainstream Japanese society. This is probably similar to the situation of LGBTQ individuals in Japan. In other words, due to the nature of homogeneous society in Japan, the issues of minorities, including those who are Deaf and who are LGBTQ, still lie under the surface. This fact probably has influenced my perception of Deaf people.

Correspondingly, another important lesson for me has been the idea that Deaf people’s ways of seeing are due to a long history of interacting with the world in certain cultural ways. My ways of knowing include using my vision to capture something in systematic and logical ways. When I read that Deaf people were visual learners, I thought that they applied their visual sense in the same way I do. I used to think that they used their visual sense to know something in a logical way, but I have since learned that their ways of comprehending something through their vision are much deeper.

Last, I have perceived that my ways of knowing are similar to some ways of knowing of Deaf individuals. My ways of knowing are largely based on culture. I live, think, gain knowledge, make decisions, and judge something based on the cultural norms that I have internalized from living in both Japan and the United States. In this sense, I believe that my ways of knowing are similar to those of the Deaf. However, as Bruner (1996) says, culture is a toolkit for making, organizing, and understanding our world in communicable ways. In this sense, the ways I make meaning might be different from the ways used by Deaf individuals because of our different communication methods.

Aoi, this is an excellent paper. You followed the assignment to the letter and developed a cohesive analysis that opened new doors for you on how some people, including you, come to
know. In addition, your attention to APA citations and your reference list are perfect. I don’t see that very often in a first course. A
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doi: 1 0.1146/annurev.anthro.31.020402.101302


