How Did I Find My Deaf Identity?

Photo by Anu Pehkonen
The common project

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*Photo by Dawn Jani Birley*

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*Photo by Johan Hagström*
Purpose

Auto-ethnographic study of Juhana’s life

Focus: a Deaf person who suffered from severe psychological problems in his youth

Socio-cultural angle
- Deaf identity
- Deafhood
- Sign Language

Medical angle
- Well-being
- Social-emotional functioning
- Mental health
Method

• Auto-ethnography (qualitative) includes the interconnectivity of the self and others (Chang 2008)

• The data consists of:
  – Personal memories
  – Self-observation
  – Self-reflection
  – External material (diaries, interviews and documents)

• Analysis of individual and communal discourses
  => experience of being Deaf and social relations (family + neighbourhood)
Juvenile development challenges

• Adolescence begins with the onset of puberty => physical and mental changes
  o Young people often experience this period as confusing
  o A young person asks “Who am I?” and “What will I be?”

• A young person growing up and developing physically and mentally
  o The young person must withdraw from her/his parents
  o Friends (peers) are very important for normal development, especially in early adolescence

• The aim to build up an intact identity / Erik H. Erikson’s psychosocial development theory:
  o Ego identity (awareness of being distinct from others)
  o Personal identity (personality)
  o Social identity (social roles)
What is the IDENTITY exactly?

1) Selfhood is a holistic concept about a self, one’s own physical, psychological and social features

2) It is a space where there are different elements: e.g. identity of gender, occupation, culture

3) Identity is a conception:

We start to discuss identity while feeling, ‘Who am I?’ or ‘Where do I belong?’ in situations where we share common experiences.

Vilkko-Riihelä 1999 (by Salo 2004)
Hall 2002/2003
A Deaf person often has an identity in Deaf Culture and the Deaf Community.

However, many Deaf people are bilingual or multilingual in society => they can have many different identities.

**IDENTITY with Deaf people?**

DEAF IDENTITY ⇔ IDENTITY OF DEAF PEOPLE

OWN PERSONAL ⇔ VALUES & NORMS OF THE DEAF COMMUNITY

Jokinen 2002
Salo 2004
Disruption of development in adolescence

Young people must face the challenges of development

- 20% of young people suffer from some mental disorder
- Deficiencies in any part of identity => identity crisis
- Different symptoms of anxiety and depression

• Social pressure can result in anxiety
• Self-esteem problems
• Independence is increasing => fears

Normal development process
When is it no longer normal??

**Strong and uncontrollable anxiety**
- Different physical symptoms
- Obsessive compulsive anxiety disorder
- Long-term: Anxiety can be exhausting physically and psychically

**Depression**
- The joy of life and interest lost
- Multiple physical symptoms
- A young person withdraws from contacts
- Suicidal thoughts, even a plan to commit suicide
My life story and how I found my Deaf identity
My early childhood (in the 80s)
Finnish Sign Language
Signed speech, support signs...
My family + friends + school + environment

My puberty + youth (in the 90s)
Who am I?
What is my identity?
Depression
Which is my mother tongue?

AWAKENING!

Finding identity (in the 21st century)
Awareness of my identity
Conception of language
Self-esteem
Empowerment

Awareness of my identity
Finding identity (in the 21st century)
Conception of language
Self-esteem
Empowerment
COLONIALISM

Oralism

Cued speech, total communication

Negative attitude to Deaf persons

Oppression

ANXIETY

No awareness of Deaf culture

Weak self-esteem

Being Deaf has no importance

Accepting of being subsidiary than hearing people

AWAKENING!

DEAFHOOD

Deaf culture is valuable

Sign language is wonderful

Deaf pride and respect of Deaf history

Being Deaf (experience) is positive & unique

Ladd 2003
How did I build my language identity?

My first experience was:

For example:
Many signed stories made so strong an impression that I felt I was watching a 3D movie... =>
WHAT IS UNDER THE
SEA? HOW CAN THE
ICEBERG SURVIVE?
???????????????????????
I had to explore under the surface
UNDER THE SURFACE

VALUES, NORMS, BELIEFS

DEAF HISTORY (TRADITIONS)

DEAFHOOD

MORE ?????

DEAF PRIDE

TRANSNATIONAL COMMONALITY

DEAF POLITICS (HUMAN RIGHTS)

POSITIVE DEAF EXPERIENCE

DEAF AWARENESS AND EDUCATION

DEAF IDENTITY
The book project

Auto-ethnographic study of Juhana´s life

- Personal memories
- Interviews
- Self-observation
- Diaries
- Documents
- Self-reflection
- Visual Arts Project

*I exist when I am using sign language*
Visual Arts Project (by Jussi Rinta-Hoiska)
Conclusions

• The role of parents and the environment in the development of a Deaf child
  => input sign language and Deaf culture

• Ways of combining the sociocultural and medical angles
  => many studies witness how useful bilingualism is

• The importance of prevention work for building identity and social-emotional skills
  => mental health
References: