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The role of the intellectual in minority group studies: reflections on Deaf Studies in social and  
political context

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Bio

Dai O'Brien recently completed his PhD studies in the School for Policy Studies in the University of Bristol. He holds MSc degrees in Deaf Studies and Sociology, and his PhD research focused on the transitional experiences of young d/Deaf people from mainstream schools, using visual research methods. He is currently taking a break from academia to travel the world.

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Bio

Steven Emery's research work focuses on minority group rights and the impacts of genetics on the Deaf community. He received his PhD on Citizenship and the Deaf Community in 2007 from the University of Central Lancashire and is currently training to run a marathon.

### Abstract

The role and position of minority group intellectuals in the social sciences has been the subject of some research and debate, but not, until recently, within the field of Deaf studies. In this article we will explore the role of the Deaf intellectual in their relations to the academic field and the Deaf community. We offer a critique of the prevailing theoretical framework of postmodernism and an alternative approach based upon critical theory and Bourdieusian frameworks. There is a dearth of literature in the area and this article is intended to initiate a much needed discussion, including scholars within disciplines such as sociology, political science, cultural studies and critical theory.

*Keywords:* Bourdieu, Postmodernism, Deaf studies, minority studies, the intellectual

### Introduction

The number of Deaf academics is very small, but they have been creating ripples amongst some of their hearing peers who have begun to ask: what happens to *us* in these new emerging historical developments? The subject was raised by Sutton-Spence and West (2011) in a recent edition of *Qualitative Inquiry*. This article raised contentious issues not only of relevance to Deaf and hearing scholars who work within Deaf studies<sup>1</sup>, but also questions regarding the political and sociological impact and context of a minority group striving to make its voice heard (sic), so to speak (sic), within the field of academia. Sutton-Spence and West's thesis, while discussing the position of hearing academics within the field of Deaf studies, failed to address the issue of the relationship of the Deaf academic to academia in general. This failure obfuscates the power relations between Deaf and hearing academics that we argue are present in the field. We further suggest that by theorising about the place of hearing academics within Deaf studies in English in a peer reviewed journal, Sutton-Spence and West are moving the debate into an arena in which only a few privileged Deaf people can participate. They are re-affirming divisions within academia on d/Deaf-hearing lines and arguably push a 'hearing' agenda within Deaf studies. However, rather than offer an in-depth critique of Sutton-Spence and West's (2011) article, we will use it as a platform to launch our own framework through which to explore the relations of d/Deaf and hearing researchers in the field of Deaf studies in which we will suggest the importance of placing Deaf studies in a much *broader* social-political context. We will conclude by unpacking the problems of the use of postmodernism to understand the power imbalances within the field of Deaf studies and offer a Bourdieusian alternative, which can assist academics, Deaf and hearing, to reflect on the power imbalances within Deaf studies.

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<sup>1</sup> Deaf Studies is the study of the language, community and culture of deaf people; we believe it is an emancipatory discipline, with the aims of not just finding 'knowledge', but actively making a positive contribution to d/Deaf people's lives.

We use the capital D to refer to people whose first or preferred language is a visual sign language (British Sign Language [BSL] in the case of the UK), and who identify in some way with a Deaf community that takes pride in its culture and language. Both authors are in this respect Deaf. We use the lower case d to indicate those people who prefer to communicate in a spoken language and/or refer to their being deaf as a hearing loss or deafness. The use of the upper/lower case D/d, we hasten to add, is not used to indicate a superiority of one over the other, but is simply the recognised convention in Deaf studies: so for want of better terms we employ them throughout this article (see Woodward, 1972). When the distinction between these traditional categories of deaf and Deaf are unclear, we use the term d/Deaf to flag up the overlap that can exist between these terms.

### **What is Deaf studies and why is it so important to Deaf people**

It is difficult to imagine Deaf studies as an apolitical development or a completely neutral 'project'. The very nature of a Deaf studies discipline is political, although we recognise the field covers many wider disciplines such as linguistics, cultural studies, anthropology, psychology, sociology and many more (Bauman, 2008a; Monaghan et al., 2003). By the nature of its existence within academia, and by employing discourses which challenge the negative norms of 'deafness', Deaf studies sets up political relationships with the community and dominant medical professions which it has yet to adequately problematise.

Our concern is with Deaf studies within mainstream universities. A brief outline of the history of the most recent developments of an International network of Deaf scholars is relevant to properly contextualise the background to the article. 'Deaf Academics Organisation' ([www.deafacademics.org](http://www.deafacademics.org)) is an internationally recognised group that has been meeting regularly since its inception in Texas in 1999. Following that first gathering, the group has held biennial

meetings at Washington DC (2004), Stockholm (2006), Dublin (2008), and Florianopolis (2010). Despite this growth and self-organisation, the group remains small. Internationally, it numbers only around 400 members, including hearing people and academics who do not work within Deaf studies departments, or universities (Vogler, personal communication, July 4, 2012). The organisation has an affiliated email group which provides an opportunity for d/Deaf members to partake in informal ‘water cooler’ chats and discussion. Whereas the email group enables hearing members to partake in, or ‘listen’ in on d/Deaf casual academic chat, d/Deaf people still miss out when hearing people engage in their equivalent ‘real world’ water cooler dialogues.

This background is crucial for several reasons. Firstly, it provides a context for the evidence of the growth and self-organisation of Deaf people working within academia with an increasing number of Deaf people achieving PhDs. In this respect, we have come far since Jones and Pullen’s (1992) study which suggested that the then dominant role of the d/Deaf person was as a research assistant, cultural guide or language model for hearing academics. However, there is an intrinsic imbalance of power in this relationship between d/Deaf and hearing academics, recognised by Jones and Pullen when it was noted that “the hearing culture is the dominant one – the funding, dissemination and supervision may well be largely hearing” (1992, p. 196). This is an important point to make, and one which is still largely true today (Nunn, Emery & Lilley, 2006)<sup>2</sup>.

Secondly, we believe it will assist the reader unfamiliar to Deaf studies to be aware of the restricted nature of this growth (see Bauman, 2008b, for a brief outline), as it indicates Deaf people are, despite structural restrictions within the field, increasingly making valuable and valid

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<sup>2</sup> The authors are aware this reference is a ‘non-peer reviewed’ one, but this demonstrates the lack of accessible peer-reviewed publication or resources that we can refer to, within Deaf studies, in which journals are reviewed by d/Deaf peers. To highlight the apparent emerging status of Deaf studies, the only scholarly journal published in sign language remains the Deaf Studies Digital Journal, which has been produced annually only since 2009 (see <http://dsdj.gallaudet.edu/>, accessed October 2012)

contributions to knowledge, not as research objects/subjects but as academics in their own right. Our objective is to address the political and sociological implications of this expansion.

Thirdly, our argument will not be to deny that there has been an increase in the production of *knowledge* in this field, and with it an increase in the influence of Deaf people working within the discipline. We do dispute, however, that this influence has brought Deaf academics equal academic capital to their hearing peers, or the negative, oppressive *power* within the field of Deaf studies that Sutton-Spence and West allude to, when they state:

As people who can hear, we are members of a powerful majority, but within Deaf Studies the balance is tipped and we find ourselves the minority, working with and within an intrinsically powerful group of Deaf people and Deaf cultural practices. (p.429)

### **The ‘legacy of hearingness’ in socio-political context**

Sutton-Spence and West (2011) claim to interrogate their “hearing identities in order to embrace, come to terms with, and trouble the legacy of Hearingness” within the field of Deaf studies (p. 422). This is an admirable aim, however, we have issues with the lack of context that they provide in their article. We suggest that a *broader* socio-political context is needed. While there is a growing Deaf academic ‘movement’ across the world, in a wider context it is a position that is far from the ‘powerful’ one that Sutton-Spence and West refer to. In musing as to how the Deaf community might react to their article, they state “Perhaps also, many in the small (but powerful) *academic* Deaf community will not consider it a priority.” (p.430, italics in original). We take their points very seriously indeed, because they potentially impact on how the wider academic community perceive d/Deaf academics. Sutton-Spence and West do not elaborate on what they perceive as ‘power’ or ‘powerful’, so we can only guess at what they are hinting at.

Coming together across nations the number of Deaf academics adds up, but the number of Deaf people holding a PhD *and who work within universities in the UK* is barely a handful.

Furthermore, the number of those who are eligible to apply for research grants as Principle Investigators (PI's) is miniscule.

The number of Deaf people working in the field of Deaf studies is vastly outweighed by the number of their hearing counterparts, all of whom work in Deaf studies “by choice” (Sutton-Spence and West, 2011, p. 423). Of all the universities in the world, only in Gallaudet University in Washington D.C is the culture of the staff and students largely Deaf. While there are many hearing people in influential positions in Gallaudet, the ethos of the University is centred on sign language and Deaf culture; staff and students are immersed in a visual, sign-language rich environment. Just as it would be odd for the English language to dominate in a French University in Paris, thus the same principle applies to a Deaf University. Indeed, the last three presidents of this university have been Deaf. In the UK, we have yet to see any Deaf academic reach these heights. Most Deaf studies departments in the UK are controlled by hearing staff and have a majority of hearing students (Trowler and Turner, 2002, p. 236). Of these, one of the largest, the Centre for Deaf Studies (CDS) in the University of Bristol, has been subject to cuts, whereby the entire BSc programme in Deaf Studies has been scrapped (Swinbourne, 2011). It is somewhat ironic that the CDS is under threat; such a fact illustrates just how powerless the Deaf-led Centre is in light of cutbacks. Additionally, the ‘expert’ professionals who work in any capacity involving Deaf or deaf people (for example, teachers, audiologists, cochlear implant scientists, geneticists, psychologists) have traditionally been, and still are, dominated almost entirely by hearing people. While the numbers of Deaf academics are



increasing, their influence, cultural or otherwise, over the fields in which they work remains miniscule.

Sutton-Spence and West (2011) suggest that hearing people are “deliberately” cast as “ignorant, benevolent, philanthropic, cruel, powerful, controlling or pathetic” (p. 424) within the field of Deaf studies. We reject that such castings are “deliberate” or contrived. All evidence in the literature indicates that d/Deaf young people are being failed in schools by teachers and policy makers, resulting in school achievements that are several years behind their hearing peers (Conrad, 1979; Harris and Terlektsi, 2011; Kyle and Harris, 2010; Powers, 2003; Wauters et al., 2006). Only 25 per cent of d/Deaf students graduate from university in the USA (Lang 2002, p. 268) compared to an average graduation rate of 63 per cent (Radford et al., 2010, p.7) and, as already discussed, the number of these graduates who continue working in academia is tiny. All of this takes place within a system and society that is both hearing controlled (i.e. Audist<sup>3</sup>) and phonocentric. It should come as no surprise that hearing people are cast as oppressors given we are operating in a system in which: (i) the hearing majority control the (discriminatory) teaching policy; (ii) the benefits and allowances that pay for communication support for higher education are largely inadequate, and (iii) the UK research-funding awarding bodies at higher education fail to recognise Deaf studies as a discipline in its own right and therefore make it difficult for d/Deaf academics to apply for research funding. Thus our argument is that before we can productively move on to an equal d/Deaf-hearing relationship, it is vital that hearing academics face up to the context within which Deaf studies operates; i.e. a socio-cultural-political society in which d/Deaf people do not enjoy equality.

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<sup>3</sup> Audism is: “The notion that one is superior based on one's ability to hear or to behave in the manner of one who hears.” (Humphries, 1977)

Sutton-Spence and West seek to find ‘space(s)’ within Deaf studies to construct a Hearing studies discourse, a space in which what they might term the ‘social construction of Hearingness’ can be explored. They draw comparisons with White studies and critical whiteness studies (Sutton-Spence and West 2011, p. 423), which emerged from the desire to examine the positions of advantage and privilege held by white people (Back, 2010; Garner, 2007; Johnson, 1999). However, this discourse emerged from and in reaction to Black cultural studies (Bonnett, 2000; Johnson, 1999), which has become an established and accepted part of the academic institution. The Black cultural studies discourse was thus able to resist the threat of neo-colonialism by white scholars pushing a white research agenda. Deaf studies, on the other hand, remains in its infancy, still not fully accepted by the academy, still lacking a cohesive theoretical grounding and, arguably, lacking a secure and recognised leadership from its Deaf academics. It is thus less able to resist the threat of neo-colonialism by hearing researchers pushing a hearing agenda. It is therefore at risk of losing its radical, emancipatory focus and becoming another branch of mainstream, hearing-centric social science in which the Deaf person is the object of research and has no control over the nature and direction of the research that is relevant to their language, community and culture, something we believe is incompatible with the emancipatory roots of Deaf studies (see Cameron et al., 1992, for an outline of emancipatory research issues).

We believe that it is essential to develop a framework through which to explore the relationships between d/Deaf and hearing people in the field of Deaf studies and the field of academia itself, something that Sutton-Spence and West have failed to do. As a first step, it is critical to explore the literature on the role of the academic in general.

### **Understanding Deaf studies as a minority study**

The role of the intellectual is a contested one, so our aim is not to attempt to address all perspectives, but to offer a study from within the critical theory tradition. This approach is chosen because it enables us to observe Deaf studies in a broader social and political context. Our initial focus is to develop a holistic perspective of the intellectual in relation to Deaf studies, provide a critique of undertaking an exploration through a postmodern lens, and offer instead a Bourdieusian critique of the hearing scholars in relation to Deaf scholars.

### **From Gramsci onwards: the role of the intellectual**

Gramsci (1971) suggested that the intellectual held a social role, which was part of an elaborate structure that reflected dominant groups' (in this case a ruling class) ideology, and therefore the intelligentsia itself was a political construct. By holding a recognised role in society, they were part of the process of assisting the State to perpetuate its dominant ideas. Gramsci gave examples throughout: the priest, philosopher, doctor, teacher, lawyer, creators of 'high' art and culture. The intellectual, in this sense, cannot be seen as separate from ideas that abound in society, for part of their role is to maintain the hegemony of the dominant group. The intellectual is therefore part of a structure by which the dominant power rules by acquiescence and consent, rather than brute force.

Gramsci, however, made a distinction between this 'traditional intellectual', and an 'organic intellectual', whose role was more complex. This distinction between the traditional and organic intellectual is a helpful and useful one for Deaf studies. The organic intellectual is influenced by the 'subordinate' (or subaltern) group in society, and their theories about minority or oppressed groups tend to make their way into the echelon of general ideology. The organic intellectual believes that their research is advantageous and progressive, aimed at changing

circumstances (Said, 1996). They challenge and contest the *prevailing* thoughts and ideologies about society, and thus part of their role can be, arguably, engaging with pursuing social justice.

We want to suggest there is a divide between the traditional and organic intellectuals when it involves research on deafness or within Deaf communities, and this division can only be seen if we broaden our lens to include other fields, for example, medicine, biology, genetics, and others. This type of research does not stand alone from the dominant ideology and ideas about d/Deaf people and the concept of 'deafness'. For example, genetic scientists have been heavily engaged in the last 15 years trying to discover genes for deafness, with the underlying assumption that deafness can be cured. This kind of thinking about deafness is not new; for example, cochlear implants, other hearing aid technology and oral education methods in schools all carry the idea (and myth) that these devices effectively enable the d/Deaf person to speak and hear like a hearing person. Research projects that develop and reinforce these deficit notions of deafness, d/Deaf people and their communities, perpetuate these dominant ideas. We believe the scholar working within this framework to be 'traditional'. They carry the status, the prestige and the recognition of the academy and therefore gain the vast bulk of research funding to study the 'ear'; their focus is on trying to 'defeat deafness', to 'take action on hearing loss' and develop technology to 'overcome' deafness. They do not form into a body of Deaf studies, and while there may be deaf people working within these areas of science, we suggest they are termed traditional intellectuals.

The organic intellectual, on the other hand, is the person who challenges and (often) strives to change the prevailing or dominant perceptions and discourses of Deaf culture and sign language. Deaf studies was initiated by hearing people, particularly within linguistics in which they remain a strong presence, but they were organic intellectuals in the sense that they

maintained close links with the Deaf (Sign Language) community. We recognise that the lines between the traditional and organic intellectual can sometimes be blurred within a particular discipline: for example, there are genetic counsellors who strive to educate their profession about the cultural-linguistic nature of the Deaf community (Middleton, 2010).

One of the key issues for the radical intellectual, Deaf or hearing, is the risk of diverting their efforts away from emancipatory-type research studies, usually because trying to secure funding to challenge the dominant ideas about deafness proves to be so difficult. For these reasons it is understandable why Said and others often write about the responsibilities of the intellectual in a political and social context, rather than as a conscientious individual liberal one. We would share these critical perspectives, as although Deaf academics may be closely organically connected to their communities, they may become resigned to working uncritically within academia. This process can end up with their co-option into the ranks of the 'respectable'. Indeed, Chomsky (1967) states that the political academic often opts out of this environment, precisely because it is so heavily political. Battling to create alternative knowledge takes place within powerful institutions. They discover, as Foucault did, that truth, far from being universal, is a process that different people and groups struggle over, that evolves and is maintained and developed by the structures of power (Foucault, 1980). Ultimately there is always a political struggle for control over knowledge and discourse. These perspectives on the role and nature of the intellectual reflect on the nature of the academic in general terms, which is missing from the Deaf studies literature. One exception is Ladd's use of theories of postcolonialism within Deaf studies, particularly around Deafhood (Ladd, 2003), which may positively encourage the development of a new hegemony in which a paradigm shift is the implicit normative aim. In turn, this could lead to a discourse, in society as well as academia, whereby sign language is

accepted as a natural language of Deaf people, and the development of a number of cultural norms is part of that process (Padden and Humphries 1988, 2005). Desires for a new hegemony would necessitate a huge shift or rebalancing of resources and require a transformation of the traditional ways of seeing Deaf people and sign language throughout society.

### **Towards a Deafhood framework**

With regards to the formation of Deaf studies as a discipline, Ladd has identified similarities between Deaf people and indigenous peoples who had been subject to colonisation (Ladd, 2003; see also Lane, 1999). Ladd suggests a key historical difference with Deaf studies is that whereas Black studies and Women's studies arose from and by the oppressed minority, Deaf studies was pioneered by the majority Other, that is, hearing people (albeit a radical and eccentric group, see Maher, 1996). While there has been little work addressing the role of hearing people within the field of Deaf studies beyond Sutton-Spence and West (2011) (Baker-Shenk and Kyle, 1990, is one of the few previous attempts to do so), there has been even less on the role of Deaf academics in the field.

Arguing from a postcolonial perspective, Ladd contends that Deaf communities can be restructured via a process of self-determination and reconstruction: it is a process that involves many aspects that space here does not permit us to address. Building on Ladd's comments for the future of Deaf Studies, we suggest this process can help us to develop an understanding of the role of the *hearing* academic in Deaf studies (Ladd 2008, p. 53-55). If we position hearing academics within a wider liberal individualist framework, we see they are not working in a vacuum or only with Deaf communities; i.e. they are also within an environment that encourages the independent individual, values their research publication output, and hence provides them with the opportunity to 'escape' Deaf studies if they wish to do so, by virtue of their cultural

capital (see later). The radical Deaf academic is also subject to tensions and temptations away from a critical pathway. Deaf academics, Ladd posits, face a major hindrance of lack of access to specific Deaf studies focused agency research funding, but he also hints that Deaf academics are at risk of being co-opted into the system unless they consciously take on the responsibility to channel funding towards self-emancipatory projects (Ladd 2008, p. 55-57). The domination of the deficit discourse throughout all levels of society – and one that peer reviewers, research funding reviewers and non-Deaf academics will be influenced by – means that research funding for radical projects often faces the barrier of being measured by those with little experience of Deaf studies issues. It is tempting, therefore, for Deaf people who work within academia to remain as a researcher, working to train hearing people as professionals in fields such as linguistics, psychology or community development. This risks, we suggest, the upshots of a new group of ‘universal organic intellectuals’ who operate within the framework of liberal society. That is not necessarily a bad thing in itself, but we posit that this development will lead to the individual intellectual to seek a space to co-exist within academia rather than challenging the existing hegemony. Hence as part of any rebuilding we would suggest addressing the following question: *Does the Deaf community wish for its resources and capital to be invested within the academia so as to consciously and collectively challenge (or change) the existing hegemony?*

Given that the onus is on D/deaf researchers to individually obtain doctorates and then, in turn, apply for research funding in competition with their peers, the focus is inevitably on the individual. Such researchers may consult with the community to some extent, but ultimately the onus is on the individual rather than a community. For example, one of the current authors, along with Ladd, submitted a research project to explore genetic developments<sup>4</sup>. The proposal was drawn up by Ladd and Emery, two Deaf scholars, who are deeply concerned for the future

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<sup>4</sup> See [www.deafhoodgenetics.com](http://www.deafhoodgenetics.com) <accessed 18/07/12>

of the community in light of these ‘advances’, and are aware many people share the same concerns. An alternative would be to develop academic spaces in which research projects with communitarian-inclined ethos, which have been formally agreed upon within by local Deaf communities, are valued above individualist ones (see Ladd 2003, p. 449-453). These spaces do not have to begin from within academia; they can just as well arise outside of it and press academics to pursue projects in a way similar to, for example, Kaupapa Maori research (Pere and Barnes, 2009; Walker, Eketone and Gibbs, 2006). The focus is on developing principles which transcend the very framework of existing academic structures, and strive towards the positive development of a ‘Deaf power’ (see, for example, Foucault, 1980 with regards to the way ‘power’ does not automatically have to be a negative construct).

By situating Deaf academics within this wider context, we are in a stronger position to explore the role of the hearing academic in relation to the Deaf. The current literature, however, hardly even tentatively addresses these issues of relative status and power of Deaf and hearing academics, and that is due to the weakness of the frameworks that have so far been attempted. Bourdieu’s theories on habitus, capital and field provide us with some strong reference points on which to understand how the Deaf academic is at a particular disadvantage in relation to their hearing peers. Before we elaborate in detail on Bourdieu, however, we explore the problems with the prevailing postmodern approach.

### **The problems of the postmodern**

As a field, Deaf studies has been a relative latecomer to the postmodern turn. It is only within the last ten years that exploration of postmodernism and what it could mean for the identity and community of d/Deaf people and the field of Deaf studies has begun. Ladd (2003, p. 80) warned that the anti-grand narrative approach of postmodernism threatens the ability of



minority groups to present their own versions of their history and culture. Rather than being able to provide a standpoint or a 'more true' vision of the oppression and exclusion they have felt, the stories that these minority groups can tell, when viewed through a postmodern lens, are simply taken at face value, before the postmodern attention span moves quickly on. Despite this, some researchers in the field of Deaf studies, both Deaf and hearing, have attempted to engage with postmodern thought (see Bauman, 2008b; Davis, 2008; McIlroy & Storbeck, 2011 for examples, as well as Sutton Spence & West, 2011).

Postmodernism has been seen as a movement of freedom, of throwing off the chains of supposed progress and the metanarratives of modernity in favour of recognition of a fragmented, decentralised vision of the world. This results in a view of the world in which there is "simply a more or less random, directionless flux across all sectors of society" (Kumar 2005, p. 124). Truth, or authenticity, becomes something that individuals can pick and choose, creating their own histories and identities. Identity in postmodernism is "fluid and shifting, fed by multiple sources and taking multiple forms" (Kumar 2005, p. 143) and depends more on personal choice than external influences, in which "what you choose defines your identity" (Nash 2001, p.205). This 'personal choice' approach could be seen as especially attractive to a group as seemingly imprecisely defined as the Deaf community, where a specific unifying feature seems to be difficult to identify.

It has been suggested that using a "postmodern lens" reveals that the separation of Deaf and hearing people is a "convenient fiction" (Sutton-Spence and West, 2011, p. 422) in the discourse of Deaf studies. This is a confusion of the theoretical postmodern perception of freedom and a barrier-free society with the objective reality of the Deaf experience. To imply that the barriers and divisions experienced every day by Deaf people working and living within

hearing environments can be theorised away in this way is to ignore the objective reality of oppression and exclusion d/Deaf people face in hearing society. To dismiss the “grand narratives” of discrimination and oppression in this way “does not eliminate their impact” on the oppressed (Pescosolido and Rubin 2000, p. 61). While we share the dream of the field of academic endeavour being a truly collaborative, free environment for both Deaf and hearing scholars, attempting to appeal to a theoretical vision of the world is to ignore the actual empirical realities of the world Deaf people inhabit.

Indeed, postmodernism has been criticised as “serving white and male-dominated elites in the advanced countries” (Jameson 1991, p. 318), to which list, in this context, we could add “the hearing-dominated elite”. Elites with money and power can afford to take such a globalized view of the world, but poverty (whether economic, cultural or linguistic poverty) leaves oppressed groups firmly fixed in localism (Eagleton 2003, p. 22). While the “place-bound identities” of the less privileged (Harvey 1990, p. 303) describe traditional (“modern”) Deaf culture very well, a culture which was centred around Deaf clubs and residential Deaf schools, it has yet to be shown that Deaf people have been able to move beyond these localisms into a brave new postmodern world.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> By talking about power and status, we recognise that we must be more explicit about our own status in relationship to the Deaf community. Steve is one of the few Deaf people in the UK who has obtained a doctorate in a social-science related discipline, and hence one of an elite who is in a position to apply for research funding. There is no onus on him (or any other d/Deaf academic) to base a proposal on consultation with the Deaf community. Dai is also d/Deaf and is, at the time of writing, coming towards the end of completing his PhD, and hence close to joining this elite. We are also white men, so our power stands in contrast not just to Deaf women, but also hearing women and, indeed, hearing men and people of other ethnic groups. We are also only too aware that we were educated in a mainstreamed education setting and have a level of English that enables us to access academic discourse. This stands in contrast to Deaf adults educated in Deaf schools, many of whom did not receive a level of education that enabled them to enjoy access to English, a situation we maintain is socially unjust, and not one that is inevitable due to ‘deafness’. We are both at the early stages of our academic careers, and it remains to be seen if we are able to unite collectively with other academics (d/Deaf and hearing) to pursue community-based proposals we advocate here. Whether we are able to do this will depend on the current system enabling us space within academia to do so.

However, rejecting postmodernism does not mean that we reject the diversity of identities that are unarguably present within the Deaf community and among d/Deaf people. By harking back to modernist views of identity, we could be accused of essentialism: however, “essentialism does not mean uniformity” (Eagleton 2003, p. 121). Having an essentialist view on what makes someone Deaf, or a woman, or Black, does not mean that differences and variation between and within individuals cannot be appreciated. It is not necessary to embrace the ideology of postmodernism to appreciate difference. While it could still be argued that essentialism has its risks, it is also true that what unites is just as marked and as important as what divides (Bradley 2007, p. 184).

Postmodernism advocates the rejection of the overarching metanarratives of society in favour of a more relative, individual focus, a focus that allows ‘playful’ or ‘mischievous’ subverting of cultural norms and expectations. However, such an approach stands in an uneasy, if not paradoxical, relationship to the emancipatory principles of the field of Deaf studies (Hutcheon, 2002). For a field, and a community, that is still under-represented and disadvantaged in mainstream society and academia, this engagement with postmodernism clashes with everything that we believe Deaf studies should stand for. To borrow from another’s critique of postmodernism:

The contemporary world, to my mind, in spite of patches of surface civilisation, remains too ravaged by oppression, ignorance and malnutrition for privileged Western intellectuals to trade in seriousness for the sparkling interplay of language games.

*(McLennan 1992, p. 17).*

**Bourdieu**

As an alternative to postmodernism, we suggest engaging with Bourdieu's theoretical framework. Bourdieu's philosophies resonate with critical theory since they are concerned with an analysis that identifies and recognises social and political context, and also explores the potential for social transformation. Bourdieu's theoretical triumvirate of habitus, capital and field are interlocking 'tools for thinking' that allow us to theorise about how people interact with their environment and other people. These concepts have been used both by Bourdieu himself and other researchers to explore many different social relations, from class relations (Bourdieu 1984) to school and the university (Bourdieu 1988, 1996). In order to fully appreciate how Bourdieu's theoretical concepts can be useful for understanding the role of the Deaf academic in the university, it is necessary to expand a little on each. Our concern is to seek to explore ways of understanding; we do not have space to expand on the different ways transformation can follow but we hope to explore these in a future paper.

Habitus is defined as a structure that both structures agents' responses to their surroundings, or field, and is structured by these surroundings in turn (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, p. 139). Habitus is picked up unconsciously "through observation and *listening*, the child internalizes the "proper" ways of looking at the world... and ways of acting" (Reed-Danahay 2005, p. 46, our emphasis) and thus early experiences in school and amongst the family carry a "disproportionate weight" in the development of an individuals' habitus (Bourdieu 1977, p. 78), although it continues to alter and adapt to surroundings throughout the lifespan. These later adaptations, however, generally do not fundamentally alter the agent's habitus, which is considered to be very durable.

We emphasise the importance placed on “listening” because the prevailing method of education of deaf children in the UK is the oral approach, and most d/Deaf people are born to hearing families in which spoken English is the main means of communication. Deaf people could thus be argued to develop a very different habitus from their hearing family and peers, simply because the sensory landscape which they inhabit is so different, whether through lack of auditory input or higher/more reliance on visual input. This would be the case whether the deaf person grew up in a Deaf school, within the Deaf community or in a mainstream ‘hearing’ environment. In each of these three cases, the sensory input would be different, although it could be argued that in the mainstream/oral environment this difference would be due to a lack of input due to communication difficulties, and in the Deaf/signing environment it would be due to an increase of (visual) input. Whatever the difference in sensory landscape, this would have a huge impact on the development/acquisition of a habitus, and hence a deaf person’s ‘fit’ into a mainstream, hearing field, such as the field of academia. This lack of fit can result in behaviours, values and practices that are inappropriate or not suited to the field in question, which can lead to conflict between an individual and their colleagues within a field, or a simple lack of conformity to the expected rules and behaviours inherent to the field.

Behaviours, practices and strategies are defined by the interaction of the habitus with the field in which it exists. Practices therefore depend on the relation between a habitus and the “conditions in which this habitus is operating” (Bourdieu 1977, p. 78). As a result of this interaction, habitus can be a perfect fit to the field in which it exists if the agent concerned remains within the same field in which their habitus developed. Where this matching occurs, the individual in question is a “fish in water” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, p. 127). However, when the habitus does not match the field, the agent can no longer make sense of the world in

such a natural, unconscious way, and a mismatch between their behaviour and the structures of the field occurs. This often happens in cases when abrupt social change affects an individual's life, and they are forced, through choice or circumstance, to attempt to adapt to unfamiliar surroundings. An example might be the organic nature of many d/Deaf academics, which may lead to conflict with the traditional intellectual field of institutional academia. The nature of their political beliefs could cause them to, for example, "take a strong stand against hearing academics becoming involved in the teaching of BSL or researching Deaf culture" due to their resistance to what they see as the "exploitative nature of the hearing-Deaf oppressive relationship" (Trowler and Turner 2002, p. 246). This could well be interpreted through a framework of a habitus that has been formed through community action and minority status meeting a field which places emphasis on very different values.

The third interlocking thinking tool we can utilise in our discussion is that of capital. Bourdieu considers three main types of capital, economic capital, cultural capital and social capital in his work. Cultural and social capital could be considered to be of greatest importance here. Cultural capital can take three forms: the embodied state, in the form of long-lasting dispositions of mind and body; the objectified state in the form of cultural goods; and the institutionalized state in the form of academic qualifications (Bourdieu 1997, p. 47). Simply put, embodied cultural capital is accrued from a young age through the transmission of attitudes and knowledge from parent to child. This capital is then recognised during schooling by the award of qualifications (cultural capital in its institutionalized form) to those with high reserves of cultural capital, which can then lead to privileged jobs in later life, such as a job in academia. Without these reserves of cultural capital, or the qualifications that reflect them, an individual will struggle to achieve in academia. This is particularly relevant when the educational

background of many d/Deaf people in the UK is taken into account. As explained earlier in this paper, research has shown that a gap between d/Deaf and hearing educational achievement persists.

Social capital relies on an “unceasing effort of sociability, a continuous series of exchanges in which recognition is endlessly affirmed and reaffirmed” (Bourdieu 1997, p. 52). The reward of social capital is that high reserves of social capital are associated with being able to form and maintain a network of influence, the reserves of which an individual can utilise for their own gain. Much like the development of a field-appropriate habitus, accumulation of these forms of capital relies on individuals being able to communicate easily and effectively. The domestic transmission of cultural capital from parent to child relies on the parent and child being able to understand one another. Without this mutual comprehension, lessons and knowledge cannot be passed on and cultural lessons from the parents cannot be internalised by the child. In order to form and maintain social contacts throughout the life span, a person must be able to communicate easily and effectively with their peers. Without a common or easily accessible language, the investment needed to form these bonds far outweighs the potential return in social capital, and so d/Deaf people, or others who face communication barriers, face exclusion from social or professional networks.

Therefore, for d/Deaf people attempting to enter the field of academia, these theoretical concepts can help to explain many of the barriers that are faced. Lack of effective communication at home or in the school can be interpreted as a lack of cultural capital and hence a difficulty in achieving the appropriate qualifications for engagement in the academic field. Difficulty in socialising with colleagues at work or at conferences due to communication barriers can be interpreted as a difficulty in maintaining a network with high social capital, with the result

that finding co-workers for research projects, invitations to referee journals, articles, or similar ways to progress in an academic career can be few and far between outside the specific field of Deaf studies.

Another type of capital, which is of great importance here, is linguistic capital. It is defined as an understanding and mastery over language, an ability to use language in an effective way. Bourdieu himself has explored this concept in education and class (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990). The official language of a “linguistic community” (Bourdieu 1991, p. 46) is that which is a product of the “the political domination that is endlessly reproduced by institutions capable of imposing universal recognition of the dominant language”, that is, for example, schools and universities. In order to fully engage with and succeed within these institutions, it is essential that an agent has an unfailing and fluent grasp of the official language. Deaf people whose preferred language is BSL rather than speech will suffer in this case as they would be deficient in linguistic capital in the official language of the institution, irrespective of their linguistic skill and ability in BSL. Deaf people who can speak also suffer from low cultural capital in academic institutions due to difficulties in communication. It must be remembered that linguistic capital does not only refer to the language that is used, but also to the individual skill of the user, the practical mastery of the language in question and their ability to both utilise and understand the “secret code” of tones of voice and subtle emphasis (Bourdieu 1991, p. 51). A lack of linguistic capital in this respect cannot, or can only partially, be overcome by provision of communication support, such as BSL/English interpreters, note-takers or lip-speakers and each of these measures themselves come with costs, typically requiring sizable investment of economic capital on the part of either the d/Deaf individual themselves, or the institution at which they work. These actions of interpreting or transferring spoken communication to one form or another could also



affect the linguistic content of the message; linguistic capital does not rely on simple communication, but at mastery and fluency of nuances and details within the language, things that can quickly be lost in translation.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

This brief outline of the three main interlocking thinking tools of Bourdieu should give an insight into how they can offer a useful framework with which to think about Deaf people's experiences. This approach is more usually utilised in the UK to explore class relations and the conflict between habitus and field that can result from these relations, for example, working class boys who are in conflict with the values or expectations of their social class by succeeding in school (see, for example, Ingram, 2011). However, in these studies, the different individuals, no matter what their class or habitus, share a common language. For d/Deaf people who have limited access to spoken English and may have access to a sign language that very few hearing people can understand or use fluently, the effect of mismatch between habitus and field is greater.

The combination of habitus, field and capital could be used to explore why many deaf people who work in academia chose to work in the field of Deaf Studies. In this field, it may be that they have the linguistic capital that comes with mastery of BSL to succeed, either as teachers or as researchers who can appreciate the nuances of the language that can arise from research interviews or in linguistic analysis of the language. The 'd/Deaf habitus' could also confer benefits, possibly making d/Deaf researchers more empathic to their d/Deaf informants in research interviews, or better able to interpret research findings due to their social proximity to research participants. Hearing researchers, in contrast, can use the strength of their institutionalized cultural capital (i.e. academic degrees and qualifications) and linguistic capital

in the official language of the institution to justify their involvement or claim on the field of Deaf studies, advantages which, for reasons discussed above, Deaf people may not have.

The suggestions on how to utilise these concepts in this section are just that, suggestions. We cannot offer references to published research in support of these hypotheses (although we have years of personal experiences, observations and anecdotes to draw on), simply because the research has not yet been performed. We put these suggestions forward as pointers towards possible future research and as illustrations of how these concepts could aid us in thinking how we might build more constructive and respectful relations between d/Deaf and hearing academics in the future, and we invite other, both d/Deaf and hearing, researchers within the field of Deaf studies to offer critical reflections on their experiences through this framework..

To conclude: we have highlighted the limits of Deaf studies due to the nature and role of the intellectual. Deaf studies has slowly eased itself into becoming a part of the university curriculum, and so to whatever extent the individual intellectual desires a complete and radical transformation of the deficit medical perspective of 'deafness', the spaces they occupy are not by themselves automatically or ultimately neutral, or radical. It would be a mistake to consider the intellectual as a universal entity: in Deaf studies, it is not only those who work as academics who have views and thoughts about their language, community and culture, but also Deaf people whose first language is a minority one and whose culture differs from the one that is common to academia. Deaf studies, however, as a minority study, was started and has been dominated by the Other: we reject the postmodern framework as being inadequate to understand this relationship, but argue that a Bourdieusian framework enables us to see how the Other has not only been able to dominate within the spaces of Deaf studies, but how they continue to do so. We hope that this article will contribute towards a much needed debate.

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