

Queer as Deaf Intersections

MJ Bienvenu

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- Born into Deaf family in Baton Rouge, LA
- Louisiana State School for the Deaf
- Gallaudet College
 - BA - English
 - MA - Linguistics
- PhD in Linguistics from Union Institute and University
- Chair and Associate Professor of American Sign Language and Deaf Studies at Gallaudet
- Teaches and presents on English, Politics of Oppression, and the Bilingual-Bicultural approach
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LGBTQ+ Signs

- Lesbian
- Gay
- Bisexual
- Transgender
- Queer

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Figure 16.1. Negative sign for LESBIAN.





Figure 16.1. Politically correct sign for LESBIAN.



The image shows a side-by-side comparison of two hand signs. On the left, labeled 'Figure 16.1. Negative sign for LESBIAN.', a person is shown from the chest up, wearing a dark t-shirt with a small white logo. They are making a hand sign with their right hand, where the index and middle fingers are extended and the thumb is tucked. On the right, labeled 'Figure 16.1. Politically correct sign for LESBIAN.', the same person is shown in the same pose, but their hand sign is different: the index and middle fingers are extended, and the thumb is also extended, pointing upwards. The background is a plain, light-colored wall.

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“Can a Deaf person identify as
Lesbian or Gay and not as Deaf?
Can we be one or the other and not
both?” (pg 264)

Identity

“Which are you first: black or
deaf?” (pg 264)

“Do you feel more Deaf or more
Lesbian?” (pg 264)

Historical View on Multiple Identities

- Deaf community - you must choose to be one or the other
 - One must be dominant and come first
- Asserting L/G identity may compromise Deaf identity
 - Deaf Lesbians and Gay men needed to form their own groups
 - Rainbow Alliance of the Deaf - founded in 1977

Deaf Women United (DWU) Conference

1993

- Special interest group for Deaf Lesbians
 - Located far from other special interest groups
 - Door remained shut because there were “some Deaf women who were curious who we were and might spread the word”
 - Agreed to all sit at same table for closing ceremony - needed about 6 tables for 50+ people
 - “Finally out of the closet and had a place at the table!”

1995

- Two workshops - standing room only
 - “Celebrating Deaf Lesbians”
 - Only open to Deaf Lesbians
 - Needed time to themselves to express their pride without stigmatization
 - “Homophobia”

1997

- Deaf Lesbian caucus finally met
 - Organized first Deaf Lesbian Festival in Seattle in 1999

Rejected Identity

L/G Deaf Rejected by Deaf Community

- Homophobia within Deaf Community
 - Visual responses
 - (clenched teeth, squinted eyes, shaking head, etc)
 - Violence
 - Two murders at Gallaudet University
 - First murder was of a gay man and thought to be a hate crime.
 - Second victim was (supposedly) not gay
 - Murderer said he chose his victims because he saw them as weak
 - Deaf community was quick to brush aside the possibility of a hate crime
 - “After all, aren’t we all Deaf?”

Gallaudet Murders

- Eric Plunkett
 - Found beaten to death in dorm, assumed to be rage killing/robbery
 - Suspected Thomas Minch
 - Erik's love interest
 - "Eric had invited me to come to his room just to sit and chat, and he was trying to make some moves on me," says Minch. "And I had told him, wait a second, we're good friends, I would rather not go that far, and he kept just trying to push it a little bit." (Truesdell)
 - Bank card was stolen
- Benjamin Varner
 - Found stabbed to death in dorm
 - Bloody shoe prints and bank video footage of Mesa attempting to cash forged check of Varner's
- Joseph Mesa
 - Convicted 15 counts against him
 - Robbery homicide
 - Life in prison

L/G Deaf Rejected by LGBTQ+ Community

- Decisions made about L/G issues made by hearing L/G
 - Hierarchy
 - Deaf L/G = second-class citizens
- Pride Day Festival
 - Interpreters were placed in front of stage next to giant speaker
 - Didn't want them to distract from musicians and speakers
 - Deaf L/G reserved space = very limited
 - No Deaf speakers
 - "...what would Deaf speakers have to say? And didn't they already have a disabled Gay person on the program?" (pg 270)

Codes in the Deaf Closet

“Define” ... meaning “to limit”

“Deaf, hard-of-hearing, deaf mutes, deaf and dumb, hearing impaired, those with hearing loss, those who move their hands, those poor people, hearing handicapped, dummy, monkey-like signers, apeline, Washoe.” (pg. 268)

“Lesbians, Gays, Queers, faggots, butch dykes, homosexuals, sissies, tomboys, fairies.” (pg 268)

Deaf Codes

- What is the proper way to sign a word
 - Ex. LESBIAN
 - Index finger and thumb = more homophobic
 - Just index finger = less homophobic
- Deaf L/G Codes
 - GOLF = Gay
 - BASEBALL = Bi
 - GREEN AND YELLOW = G-A-Y
 - Gaze in direction of someone and use yes/no brow
- Straight Deaf asking if L/G
 - Fingerspelling “A-R-E Y-O-U?”
 - Don't use the L/G sign and they use English instead of ASL



Figure 16.3. Closeted sign for GAY.

Deaf L/G Resources

- Very few formal studies
- Limited resources
- No formal studies= need to refer to hearing L/G community

Queer and Deaf

Parallel Cultures

- Used to compare Deaf culture with black culture
 - However black people acquire culture through their family
 - Only about 10% Deaf people attain their culture through their family
- 1994 compared Deaf culture with Gay culture
 - Distressed some in the Deaf community
 - Did not want to be compared with Gay
 - Thought people may start to confuse them
 - “We are not like Gay people!” (pg 267)
 - “I know, Gay was mentioned too often in that article, I worry people think Deaf people are the same as Gays” (pg 267)

Conclusion

Queer

Parents

- Few parents of Gay/Lesbian are queer
- Many parents don't accept
- Psychiatrist
- Seek Cure

Education

- Denial

Society

- Normalization
- Homophobia Epithets
- Misconceptions (Sex, Sex, Sex)
- Homosexuality
- acceptance/tolerance
- Resistance to public identity based on community membership
- Denial of self-labeling
- Lesbian/Gay Studies

Figure 16.4 Queer/Deaf similarities (pg 271)

Deaf

Parents

- Only 5-10 percent of Deaf have Deaf parents
- Many parents don't accept
- Therapist
- Seek Cure

Education

- Denial

Society

- Hearingization
- Audism
- Epithets
- Misconceptions ("can't syndrome)
- Deafness
- acceptance/tolerance
- Resistance to existence of Deaf culture
- Denial of self-labeling
- Deaf Studies

Queer

Culture

- Denial/silence
- Coming out repeatedly
- Misrepresentation (Andrew Cunanan)
- “Passing”
- Stereotypes (tomboys, sissies)

Identity

- Defined by what we *do* (sexually)

Deaf

Culture

- Denial silence
- Acknowledging repeatedly
- Misrepresentation (H. Whitestone)
- Speech = more desirable
- Stereotypes (wild, emotional)

Identity

- Defined by speech or dB loss

Queer

Language

- Often the language of majority

Congress

- Barney Frank S. Gunderson
- G.Studds

Media

- Recognition

Age of Onset

- Genetic
- Coming-out age

Culture

- Old envy young

Deaf

Language

- ASL, BSL, etc

Congress

- No Deaf Representative

Media

- Not much after DPN, unless attention on on gaining hearing (cochlear implants)

Age of Onset

- At birth

Culture

- Young envy old

Sources

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