

Reflections on Validity and Epistemology in a Study of Working Relations Between Deaf and Hearing Professionals

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In this article, a research study that examined the working relationships between Deaf and hearing professionals in health and educational services in the United Kingdom is addressed. These service providers worked in bilingual organizations where both British Sign Language and English were used and in which Deaf people's identity as a cultural-linguistic minority was accepted. The focus of this article is on issues of validity and epistemology that arose for the Deaf and hearing research team in the course of this study. In particular, it examines the influence of identity attributions on the research process for researchers operating within a context of historical oppression, minority language use and legitimization of research knowledge, and challenges to the interpretative analysis used in the study that arose from the dynamics of majority-minority power relations in the wider social world.

A central methodological concern in much qualitative research is the relationship between ideological and political values and the research process. If by *research process*, one refers to the details of how research is conducted and knowledge is produced (Stanley & Wise, 1992), then the critical question is, What is or should be the impact of an explicitly held value base on research production? Critical disability research, feminist research, and emancipating and participatory research, among others, all grapple with this question.

Within critical disability research, for example, there have been groundbreaking debates about who should set the research agenda and direct the research process (Oliver, 1992; Zarb, 1992). Without disabled people leading and doing the research, it is argued that some studies have little relevance to the lives of disabled people (Oliver & Barnes, 1997; T. Shakespeare, 1996) and may reach conclusions that leave disabling personal, political, or practical barriers unchallenged (Moore, Beazley, & Maelzer, 1998). For feminist researchers, attention to the relationship between the research process and value base has informed discussion of all aspects of research production, for example, subject identification (Scott, 1985), data collection (Maynard, 1994), team work (Ramazanoglu, 1990) and analysis (Millen, 1997). Exploration of antioppressive interview practices, for example, that lead to the prioritization of women's constructions of the world has had an enormous influence on the general understanding of the significance of the research self in data collection (Maynard & Purvis, 1994). Within the developing world, an overt emancipating agenda has

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driven the development of participatory research methods that have explored the boundaries of interpretative data analysis using lay community knowledge (Holman, 1987).

Debates that have emerged from thinking about the relationship between the research process and value base are, however, not just about innovative research methods or ideological integrity within research activity. Fundamentally, they are also about epistemology. Epistemology is concerned with how reality can be known, who is or should be a knower, what the relationship is between the knower and the knowable, and on what grounds his or her knowledge should be trusted (Stanley & Wise, 1992). In making methodological decisions about who is to direct the research, how data are to be collected, from whose experience data are to be analyzed, and for what purpose the research is being conducted, one also makes epistemological choices. One makes decisions about "who to trust, what to believe and why something is true" (Collins, 1991, p. 203).

These questions of what counts as knowledge and why it can be trusted also go to the heart of the debate about validity construction in qualitative research (Wainwright, 1997). Indeed, some of the issues that arise in exploring the relationship between the research process and value base also arise as key markers of validity in qualitative research: the influence of the researchers' identities, values, and beliefs (Ramazanoglu, 1990); transparency of method, including the rationale for the decisions made (Eisenhart & Howe, 1992); reflection on research processes (P. Shakespeare, Atkinson, & French, 1993); how to establish the trustworthiness of the inferences drawn from the data (Hammersley, 1990); and the grounds on which the credibility and plausibility of findings could be claimed (Hammersley, 1990).

This complex interconnectedness between ideological and political value bases, the research process, epistemology, and validity both troubled and intrigued us in the course of the research study described below. What follows is our reflection on some of the issues surrounding this theoretical debate that the practice of one particular research study forced us to consider more deeply.

THE RESEARCH PROJECT

The research project was a qualitative study that examined the working relations and working practices between Deaf and hearing people in three statutory organizations in the United Kingdom (Young, Ackerman, & Kyle, 1998). In this context, the capitalized term *Deaf* refers to people whose first, preferred, or only language is British Sign Language (BSL). BSL is a language that is grammatically distinct from English and is not a visual representation of it (Sutton-Spence & Woll, 1999). It is not a form of gesturing or mime but a naturally occurring, complete language as complex as any other (Brien, 1992). BSL is at the heart of a vibrant community with its own traditions, values, attitudes, behaviors, and history—in short, its own culture (Ladd, 1988). In other words, the Deaf people who were part of our study perceived themselves to be (and were accepted by the authors as being) members of an indigenous, minority cultural community in the United Kingdom. They should be clearly distinguished from people with a hearing loss, who do not identify with the Deaf community and who use speech and lipreading as their preferred means of communication (e.g., Jones, Kyle, & Wood, 1987).

However, the status of BSL as a real language has been denied for centuries. Its use as a medium of educational instruction for deaf children was largely banned after 1876 (Lane, 1984). Although recognized in 1987 by the European Parliament as the fourth largest indigenous language in the United Kingdom, British law has yet to ratify this declaration. The culture of Deaf people, founded on their language, community, and history, has largely been ignored, particularly by medical and educational organizations that have sought to restore Deaf people to the status of hearing and speaking members of society (Lane, 1992). As a result of these and many other dynamics in the relationship between hearing and Deaf people, members of the Deaf community feel they have been oppressed, discriminated against, and marginalized in British society (*The Voice*, 1998).

Our research project occurred at a time when some services to Deaf people in the United Kingdom had begun to challenge this oppressed position and to recognize the importance of employing Deaf people as service providers rather than seeing them only as service users. Three such organizations took part in our research: two specialist psychiatric hospital units for Deaf people and a school for deaf children. All were chosen because they employed a large number of Deaf people rather than just a token one or two. We were primarily interested in identifying the critical issues for Deaf and hearing staff members in their cooperative working practice. This focus necessitated an examination of how the bilingual and bicultural working environment was created and maintained, the influence of organizational structure on power sharing, and the similarities and differences in how Deaf and hearing informants conceptualized problems and solutions (Young, Ackerman, & Kyle, 2000).

The project lasted 18 months. Drawing primarily on the principles of ethnography and symbolic interactionism, data were collected through interviews, observations, and focus group discussions. There were two principal researchers on the project (the authors of this article): one Deaf and one hearing. They worked for a university research department that was exclusively devoted to deaf studies and was itself a bilingual and bicultural environment in which Deaf and hearing staff members worked together.

VALUE BASE AND RESEARCH PROCESS

We brought a very clear value base to the research project that was rooted in an acknowledgement of Deaf people's oppressive life experiences, a respect for Deafness as a cultural phenomenon, and a commitment to the legitimacy and adequacy of BSL. We sought to make this value base congruent with the research process in both its design and execution. In this respect, there were two crucial issues for us at the start of the project. First, we wanted to build an equitable research partnership between ourselves as Deaf and hearing researchers. This might seem an obvious point, but it was an aim that directly challenged the more usual power relations between Deaf and hearing researchers. In the United Kingdom, very few Deaf people enter higher education, let alone become involved in research relevant to their own community. Typically, few Deaf people have undergone the lengthy research training and traditional doctoral qualification of their hearing counterparts. There is usually, therefore, a significant imbalance in status and power within the aca-

demic world between Deaf and hearing people. Second, we were also concerned about putting Deaf "ways of knowing" at the heart of the interpretative process involved in the research, particularly with regard to data analysis. We shared a concern that although an increasing number of research studies have been conducted with both Deaf and hearing researchers on the team, there is often scant information about the extent of the Deaf researcher's involvement. Although it is often reported that the Deaf researcher collected the data in sign language, little further information is supplied about his or her role. Within a research study that was essentially cross-cultural and concerned with informants' conceptualizations of issues, it was vital that the Deaf researcher occupy a central role in the inductive data analysis process.

It was in following through with these commitments within the research process that we encountered unexpected challenges to the validity of our work, and we came to question the adequacy of our own attempts at facilitating Deaf ways of knowing (epistemology) within the project.

IDENTITY, RESEARCH PROCESS, AND VALIDITY

As the project began, we were very aware that in a fundamental sense, we, as researchers, were also the subjects of our study. We were a Deaf and hearing team coming from different cultures, using two languages (BSL and English), and working in a bilingual and bicultural institution. We expected that this mirror image of us and the research subject we were addressing would be a basic strength in our work. We predicted that the quality of the data we collected would be high because respondents would realize that they were being interviewed by people who had personal experience with the same sorts of issues we expected them to discuss. We imagined that these circumstances would also strengthen the validity of our work because both the academic community and the readership of the final report would be aware that both a Deaf and a hearing person had carried out the study. Our findings would, in this sense, be regarded as credible because we were not colluding with the long tradition of research being done on Deaf people rather than with Deaf people (Baker-Shenk & Kyle, 1990). Finally, we had an ongoing personal commitment to explore our own working relationship during the life of the project. In reality, all of these assumptions about the potentially positive influence of ourselves and our relationship on the validity of our work proved to be inaccurate and did not account for the effects of historical identity attribution and cultural representativeness on the research process.

Identity Attribution

Although our relationship as a Deaf and a hearing person working together did, in some respects, enhance the trustworthiness of the research in the eyes of the informants, it also tapped into a whole raft of assumptions in those we met that were directly related to the history of oppressive power relations between Deaf and hearing people. We lost count of the number of times Deaf people we met (both at the research sites and elsewhere) presumed that the hearing researcher was the Deaf

researcher's interpreter or that the Deaf researcher was some kind of session assistant to the research project. The notion of an equally involved, equally responsible research partnership between two professionals was largely inconceivable to those outside the project team. On more than one occasion, the Deaf researcher was asked by Deaf informants if she was "all right," namely, was she being treated well by the hearing researcher or was she being "controlled" by her. Similarly, hearing informants asked the hearing researcher how she "coped" because they assumed it was highly demanding to be with a Deaf colleague all day, particularly one who had a reputation for being assertive and uncompromising in her statements about Deaf people's views and rights.

These occurrences were important because it was clear that no matter what our personal commitment might have been to seeking an equitable research partnership, in the eyes of those we met, we also carried around the history of Deaf people's subordinate position to hearing people and the uncomfortable questions raised by the slow change in power relations between the communities. Whatever anti-oppressive values might be directing our own research practice, we could not escape the historical attributions made by others. Furthermore, our informants were bound to some extent to respond to us in the data collection process based on those attributions, however much we may have sought to challenge them.

In thinking about our claims to validity, we learned that in contexts of historical oppression, the significance of the self in the research process was as much the self defined by others as the self explored by us.

Individuality and Cultural Representativeness

We used an inductive methodology in our study, and we were very conscious when analyzing the data that our different cultural identities were crucial in making sense of the information we had been given. Deaf respondents were interviewed by the Deaf researcher in BSL, and hearing respondents were interviewed by the hearing researcher in spoken English. Our task was complex: We each had to make sense of our group's responses in their own terms (unicultural), to share our analyses with each other as researchers beginning from different cultural perspectives (cross-cultural), and to compare and contrast the data sets and analyses in our organization and presentation of findings (metacultural).

Once again, we perceived our basic tools in addressing these tasks to be ourselves and our cultural affiliations. To a large extent, that was true. For example, with infinite patience, the Deaf researcher would explain to the hearing researcher why a concept such as "to be involved" (arising from the Deaf informants' data) did not have quite the same meaning as its English language translation. Roughly paraphrased, the BSL/Deaf emphasis of the term *involved* was strongly associated with language and communication, and it arose from Deaf people's usual experience of the world as a linguistically excluding environment. Thus, to say that one was involved at work was to say primarily that the environment was a communicating one, whereas for hearing informants to describe Deaf colleagues as involved emphasized more their right to be at a meeting or that their opinion was sought when making decisions, an emphasis on the boundaries of legitimate participation.

In our analysis process, there were literally hundreds of examples of discussions like this. Without the critical sharing of the linguistic and cultural knowledge

they embody, the trustworthiness of our interpretations would certainly have been suspect because our own culturally bound assumptions about the data would not have been held up to critical examination.

However, a basic problem, which we never adequately addressed, was the difference between the individual cultural self and the culturally representative self. As mostly hearing colleagues (although also some Deaf colleagues) increasingly pointed out to us, the project would have been entirely different if the researcher had been a different kind of Deaf person. Leaving aside for the moment the interesting issue that nobody suggested that a different kind of hearing person would have had an effect, these comments were important because they focused attention on wider-world assumptions about Deaf people's identities and questioned the relevance of those assumptions to our particular data analysis.

To fully understand the salience of this issue, it is first necessary to have an idea of perceived identities in the Deaf community. The Deaf researcher on this project is from a Deaf family. Such intergenerational cultural and linguistic transmission only occurs in about 10% of the Deaf community (Kyle & Allsop, 1982). Deaf children of Deaf parents, therefore, hold a special place as guardians of the culture and, in some sense, as standard bearers of the language (Padden & Humphries, 1988). Although neither of the roles guarantees an immunity from oppressive life experience, it is thought that these roles do provide a greater reservoir of lifelong coping resources that are not available to many other Deaf people (Ridgeway, 1998). The question people were asking, therefore, was, What if the Deaf researcher on this project had been from a hearing family? Or less embedded in Deaf culture? Or somebody who spoke to hearing people? (The Deaf researcher on this project was bilingual in BSL and written English but did not use spoken English.) Would our data interpretations, with all of our emphasis on cultural frameworks, and subsequently our conclusions have been different? The answer is probably yes.

But what about the question itself? Is it a relevant one to ask? In one sense, all qualitative work grapples with the issues of the effects of personal identity on the interpretation of data and how the basis of validity is unlikely to lie in claims to the generalizability of findings in a traditional positivist sense (Schofield, 1993). However, the issue that was being brought to our attention concerned whether we could claim that the Deaf researcher was culturally typical. Why was the question of cultural representativeness being asked, particularly because it did not routinely arise with regard to the hearing researcher?

The problem is that it is a short conceptual journey from wondering about the cultural representativeness of the Deaf researcher to beginning to make discriminatory distinctions about what is a more or a less acceptable Deaf view. This is a danger that exists for representatives of any oppressed group: His or her insights may be easily dismissed by simply suggesting that he or she is not like the rest, and his or her view cannot be regarded as typical. It is also an easy means for the more powerful group to define the nature of what is to be known about the less powerful group and how it is to be known. Through this process, a preferred version of Deaf (or Black, female, or disabled) is chosen by the majority and validated as the acceptable version.

In other words, we found that what had started out as a methodological issue for us about ensuring a culturally appropriate framework for data analysis had

become an essentially epistemological challenge, namely, whether the Deaf knower was a legitimate person to be that knower. In reflecting on these challenges to the research process, we would argue that their roots are in the power imbalances surrounding hearing (majority) and Deaf (minority) relations and assumptions as much as in understandable methodological queries about the nature of the data analysis.

LANGUAGE, RESEARCH PROCESS, AND EPISTEMOLOGY

Language and Thought

Although both researchers were in different ways bilingual in BSL and English, their strongest shared language was BSL. Although the Deaf researcher used written English, she did not use spoken English, and any attempt to rely on lipreading as a primary means of receptive communication would be highly inadequate. For the hearing researcher, BSL was a second language learned as an adult, but she could use it fluently enough to allow communication about any subject, regardless of its abstraction. Therefore, the language of the research process between us had to be BSL because it was the only means of direct communication and the most likely means of inclusive communication for the Deaf researcher. However, the significance of this language choice for the research process was far greater than simply inclusive practice. More fundamentally, the use of BSL between us for all planning and discussion at every stage of the research process was also a commitment to BSL as the language of thought for the project and the language in which knowledge was to be constructed.

As anybody who is multilingual knows, the issue of which language one thinks in has a direct bearing on the way concepts are viewed and developed and meaning is sought. In its simplest form, it is the experience that there are some things that are better expressed in one language than another or concepts that are found in one language but not in another—the oft-cited use of the German word *Schadenfreude* is a simple example. Therefore, our commitment to BSL as the currency of thought in the project was also about giving Deaf ways of knowing the primary place in research practice.

Thus, for example, interview schedules to be used with both Deaf and hearing respondents were first constructed using BSL and then translated into English. Subsequent beneficial effects included focusing on what would be the culturally appropriate order of questions for Deaf informants, giving the Deaf researcher greater control over the parameters of the data to be collected, and evaluation at an early stage of whether issues held to be important from a Deaf perspective would translate and have meaning from a hearing perspective. Similarly, the process of data analysis, as previously discussed, occurred in BSL. The creation of the original research proposal, subsequent reports to funding bodies, and the thinking behind academic articles such as this one all happened first in BSL and were later committed to paper in written English.

In other words, by making BSL the day-to-day language of the project, we were not just ensuring an inclusive research practice commensurate with our value base, but we were also seeking to construct epistemological validity by placing a marginalized language and oppressed cultural perspective at the very center of knowledge construction. The complexity of this endeavor becomes clear when one realizes that BSL has no written form (other than systems created by linguists for research purposes). In some important sense, thought becomes real for Deaf people only when it occurs live in its face-to-face, direct, visual form.

Language and the Legitimization of Academic Knowledge

Although the epistemological validity of the project was considerably strengthened by the use of BSL, particularly from the Deaf researcher's point of view, there were threats to the centrality of Deaf ways of knowing in this project that were simply insurmountable. From her perspective, the problem was that even though the project was carried out in a language that did not put her at a disadvantage and was commensurate with the values that drove the project, the final product would always be judged in academic terms by its published, written English version. Although we did make arrangements in the life of the project for a video summary of the findings to be produced in BSL, a publication in this form (in a visual, unwritten language whose legal status as an indigenous language is currently not accepted in the United Kingdom) carries no weight. In other words, from her point of view, Deaf-centered research knowledge would gain a legitimate academic status only by denying the primacy of the language in which it had been thought. (Indeed, the current article is another example of that process.)

The point that is being made here is perhaps appreciated only by making a comparison. The fundamental issue for the Deaf researcher was not one of translation, as it might be for somebody who had carried out a research project in Dutch, for example, and whose research publications then go on to be translated into English. Rather, it was about how an acceptance of the need for the research product to be published in written English was also, in another sense, collusion with the historically oppressive significance of English in Deaf people's lives. Deaf people's own language has been denied any kind of legitimacy as a medium of education and learning; its very capacity as a language has been questioned, and English in its spoken and written forms has continually been regarded as the superior way for Deaf people to communicate. Therefore, given this historical context, the primacy of written English in the wider academic setting felt like another example of the ongoing denial of Deaf people's linguistic legitimacy.

Once again, the resonance of the wider heritage of oppression imbued an aspect of the research process with meanings way beyond any influence over the research process that we as researchers might try to assert. In essence, preexisting socio-political hierarchies of language influence and power (a phenomenon seen elsewhere in spoken languages as well) were subverting our attempts to construct validity based on a congruence between value and process and to give status to a Deaf epistemology.

DISCUSSION

Our reflections on the relationship between, the value base, the research process, validity, and epistemology promoted by the study described in this article have led us to two main conclusions about this work, conclusions we hope others might find relevant to their research practice.

First, with hindsight, we had assumed that the fit between the value base and the research process was essentially something that we as researchers made decisions about and controlled. The choices we made about data collection, analysis, publication, and so forth all followed lengthy debates grounded in our commitments to an explicit value base we brought to our work. However, what we had not taken into consideration, perhaps naively, was the influence of factors within the wider sociopolitical world that could disrupt and undermine the assumptions we had made about the relationship between the value base and the research process. In our case, the major influences we encountered arose from the heritage of oppressive and unequal power relationships between Deaf and hearing people. There were significant influences, as we have described, that were almost entirely out of our control as researchers. As a consequence, we learned to be constantly attentive and to question any claims we made about the validity of our work based on the fit between our research practice and the value base of the work.

Second, it is true that the choices we made about how to conduct our research were also epistemological choices. They had direct effects on who was defined as having knowledge, how the knowers were shown to possess and exercise that knowledge, and the nature of the knowledge produced in the findings of the study. However, in the case of the Deaf researcher, the legitimization of that knower was fundamentally questioned as the wider dynamics of oppression in the social world collided with the methodological concerns of the project. Preexisting accepted systems of academic publication and the nature of power relations between majority and minority groups were two simple but significant examples. For us, the interface between the dynamics of oppression in the social world and antioppressive research practice and epistemological validity became a crucial issue. It is one that we are only beginning to explore within our particular interest in Deaf people and sign language, but it is one that we suggest is of relevance to many other researchers whose concerns lie with marginalized and disempowered groups.

CONCLUSION

For some researchers working within the qualitative paradigm, methodology is a political issue. Those politics are not just about the standpoint from which one undertakes research activity but also about how ideological and political values directly shape research practice and the production of knowledge. For those working with oppressed and marginalized groups, questions about the recognition and legitimization of knowledge that is produced are vital. The interlocking concerns we have sought to explore in this article have demonstrated the complexity of the relationship between the value base, the research process, validity, and epistemology,

but this is not a remote theoretical issue. It is a concern that is alive and encountered in very concrete ways in the life of research studies such as the one we have described.

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