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Durham University

**A Study of the Identity, Culture and Language  
of a Sample of the Deaf Gay Male  
Community in Britain**

A Thesis submitted for the Degree of Master of Arts  
School of Modern Languages and Cultures  
Durham University  
June 2014

Paul Anthony Michaels  
June 2014

## **Contents**

<b>Abstract</b>	v
<b>Foreward</b>	vi
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	vii
<b>Dedication</b>	viii
<b>Declaration</b>	xi
<b>List of Figures</b>	x
<b>List of Tables</b>	xi
<b>List of Images</b>	xii
<b>1 Introduction</b>	
1.1 The importance of the subject	1
1.2 Previous work on the Deaf gay community	2
1.3 Objectives	3
1.4 Limitations of the research	4
1.5 Overview of the topics discussed	5
<b>2 Methodology</b>	
2.1 Research Ethics Approval	7
2.2 Research participants	7
2.3 Format	9
2.4 Interview locations	12
2.5 Interview procedure	13
2.5.1 Set up	13
2.5.2 Ethical responsibilities	13
2.5.3 Consent Form	14
2.5.4 Confidentiality expressed	14
2.5.5 Interview conducted and recorded	14
2.5.6 Interpretation from BSL-English	16
2.5.7 Transcript written per person	17
2.6 Impact of researcher on the research	18
<b>3 The Deaf Community</b>	
3.1 Introduction	20
3.2 Deafness as a medical model	20
3.3 Deafness as a social model	21
3.4 Deaf statistics	23
3.5 The National Census 2011 - the first to include British Sign Language	27
3.6 The defining factors for inclusion into the Deaf community	31
3.7 Deaf culture	36
3.8 Minority groups within the Deaf community	44

	3.9	Deaf identity	46
	3.10	Summary	49
<b>4</b>		<b>The Sign Language and Identity</b>	
	4.1	Introduction	51
	4.2	What is sign language?	51
	4.3	Sign language and cultural values	58
	4.4	Sign language and identity	61
	4.5	Deaf minority groups and language identity	67
	4.6	Summary	68
<b>5</b>		<b>The Gay Community</b>	
	5.1	Introduction	70
	5.2	What is homosexuality?	71
	5.3	Statistics on homosexuality	73
	3.3.1	Sexual identity by age group	77
	3.3.2	Ethnicity, religion and health	78
	3.3.3	Qualifications and employment	78
	3.3.4	Domesticity	79
	5.4	Equality Act 2010	79
	5.5	The defining factors for inclusion into the gay community	80
	5.6	Gay Culture	82
	3.6.1	Politics	82
	3.6.2	Bars	82
	3.6.3	Drag	84
	3.6.4	Literature	84
	5.7	Minorities within the gay community	85
	5.8	Gay Identity	86
	5.9	Summary	92
<b>6</b>		<b>The Deaf Gay Community</b>	
	6.1	Introduction	93
	6.2	Statistics on the Deaf gay community	94
	6.3	The defining factors for inclusion into the Deaf gay community	95
	6.4	Deaf gay culture	96
	6.5	Deaf gay identity	98
	6.6	Multiple Identities if the Deaf gay community	99
	6.7	Relationships in the Deaf gay community	105
	6.8	Summary	113
<b>7</b>		<b>Spoken Gay Slang From Around The World</b>	
	7.1	Introduction	115
	7.2	Polari - UK	115
	7.3	Kaliarda - Greece	122
	7.4	Bahasa Gay - Indonesia	126
	7.5	Swardspeak - Philippines	129
	7.6	Gayle - South Africa	131
	7.7	Oxtchit - Israel	133
	7.8	Summary	135

<b>8</b>	<b>Gay Sign Variation</b>	
8.1	Introduction	136
8.2	Methodology	137
8.3	Gay Sign Variation - The British perspective	138
	7.3.1 The gay sign variation using community	141
	7.3.2 Linguistic analysis of gay sign variation in BSL	144
8.4	Gay Sign Variation - The American perspective	154
8.5	Gay Sign Variation - The Irish perspective	157
8.6	The use of Gay Sign Variation by Sign Language Interpreters	158
8.7	Summary	161
<b>9</b>	<b>Conclusion</b>	
9.1	Summary	162
9.2	The Deaf Gay Community	163
9.3	The implications of the work for future research	165
<b>10</b>	<b>Appendix a - Participant consent form</b>	167
<b>11</b>	<b>Bibliography</b>	169

## **Abstract**

There appears to be a plethora of academic work focusing on minority cultures. However, the instance of conducting research into the characteristics, behaviours, in-group dynamics of specific minorities within the Deaf community is seldom tackled at length. Work specifically focused on is often relegated to a small section within a book or journal paper and does not receive the attention it may warrant. This research was encouraged by the aspiration to fill this gap in knowledge and by the explicit research question: What is the identity, culture and language of the Deaf gay community? By seeking to establish what the Deaf gay community is, its culture, its identity, the language used and the issues it faces within the Deaf community and the gay community, the present work aims to pioneer and stimulate further research into the dynamics emerging in the relationship with those wider communities and organisations with which Deaf homosexuals engage.

Specialist literature discussing and analysing what the Deaf, gay and Deaf gay communities are have been reviewed, so that the present study could begin to put together a profile that brings together the distinctive features of this community. Such profile was reliant on surveying a cross section – albeit a small one given the time constraints and scope of this preliminary study – of the UK Deaf gay community so as to gain an insight as to what these three communities mean to their members.

The survey also intended to pursue a better understanding of the ways in which Deaf gay people identify themselves within each community. Finding out what the ‘Deaf gay community is’ was also something that was sought to be defined in relation to what cultural aspects set it aside from the Deaf community or the gay community. It is considered that Gay Sign Variation is an important part of the Deaf gay community so the examination of language as an identifier for gay and Deaf gay people was to be explored. Lastly, it was considered whether a definition of the Deaf gay community could be achieved deriving information from the interviews carried out with fifteen research participants in Britain and by comparing and contrasting what emerges from the interviews with the characteristics, features, and definitions in the literature.

## **Foreward**

This research has largely been objective in nature and as a researcher who has semi-insider status, because of working with the Deaf gay community, I would like an opportunity to give a few personal opinions based on the research I have done and the information gleaned from the Deaf gay community.

Firstly, I feel that the Deaf gay community is not given the consideration I feel it deserves when variation in the Deaf community is discussed. Attention is given to areas such as religion, race and gender but sexuality is often overlooked. There is a Deaf gay community and I feel they need to start to be recognised.

Furthermore, I would like the professionals working with the Deaf community and more specifically, the Deaf gay community not to want to 'fix' Deaf people, which I feel is something which happens all too often. I feel that many professionals see Deaf homosexuals as a problem which needs sorting out. I would much prefer to see acceptance of difference rather than an attempt to normalise.

Lastly, when it comes to Deaf homosexuals managing multiple identities, I feel there should be more support for the community. Deaf homosexuals should be encouraged to embrace their multiple identities and use them to their advantage. Different perspectives will go a long way to educating the wider society which would hopefully tackle the feelings of isolation, loneliness, invisibility and oppression which some members of the community say they feel.

## **Acknowledgements**

First and foremost I would like to thank each and every research participant for giving me their time and information. Without them, this study would not have been able to be carried out. I thank you all.

I would like to thank the people that have helped me along the way. Frances Coates deserves thanks for reading my work and correcting my grammar, I'm grateful to Andy Levey for the lend of the books (he didn't realise they would be missing from his bookshelf for quite so long!), thanks to Yanna Dandolou for supplying me with a Greek translation of information relating to Kaliarda and many thanks to Alexander Scholar for the love, support and encouragement I needed to complete this work.

At Durham University, I would like to say a big thank you to Paul Hann and Granville Tate for being there when I wanted to bounce ideas off them and for their words of encouragement. Also, Lucia Luck for always being available for practical advice. A very special thank you goes to Dr Federico Federici for his dedication and support as my secondary/primary supervisor. Without the support I have received, this thesis would not have been completed.

Also, lastly, I would like to thank my family. My Dad is a constant support to me in all I do, as are Stephen, Bev and Kieran. And of course, without Lucy, literally none of this would have happened.



## **Dedication**

I would like to remember two very special ladies.

Firstly, this thesis is dedicated to my Mum. Even though she is not here to see me achieve the things I never thought were possible, in my heart of hearts, I know she is with me every step of the way.

Secondly, I would like to acknowledge a very special person. Judith Tate-Collins was my supervisor throughout this research and she was sadly taken from us far too soon. Throughout the latter part of my research Judith was receiving treatment for cancer but continued to support me as much as possible. On 1st July, I sent her a text to say that I had submitted my thesis and she responded to say she was happy and sent me a big hug. Sadly, only 10 days later, she passed away but I take comfort in the knowledge that she knew I had submitted my thesis. She inspired me since the day we met and I will continue my career knowing that her encouragement is behind me 100%.

## **Declaration**

I confirm that no part of the material offered has previously been submitted by myself for a degree in this or any other University.

Paul Anthony Michaels  
June 2014

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## **List of Figures**

- |            |   |
|------------|---|
| Figure 1.1 | Numbers of Deaf people in<br>England as at 31 March 2010    |
| Figure 2.2 | Age groups of people registered<br>Deaf as at 31 March 2010 |

## **List of Tables**

Table 1	Sign type descriptors
Table 2	Handshapes
Table 3	Summary of Signs Analysed

## **List of Images**

Image 1	Old sign for GAY
Image 2	Sign 1 HOW ARE YOU? BSL sign
Image 3	Sign 2 HOW ARE YOU? Gay variant
Image 4	Sign 3 BORING - BSL sign
Image 5	Sign 4 BORING - Gay variant
Image 6	Sign 5 CHICKEN BOY - BSL sign
Image 7	Sign 6 CHICKEN BOY - Gay variant
Image 8	Sign 7 DEAF - BSL variant
Image 9	Sign 8 DEAF - Gay variant
Image 10	Sign 9 GO AWAY - BSL sign
Image 11	Sign 10 GO AWAY - Gay variant
Image 12	Sign 11 HEARING - BSL sign
Image 13	Sign 12 HEARING - Gay variant
Image 14	Sign 13 TIME - BSL sign
Image 15	Sign 14 TIME - Gay variant
Image 16	Sign 15 WALK - BSL sign
Image 17	Sign 16 WALK - Gay variant 1
Image 18	Sign 17 WALK - Gay variant 2

## **1 Introduction**

### **1.1 The importance of the subject.**

There appears to be a plethora of academic work focusing on minority cultures. Within the Deaf community there has been a lot of work published by researchers working in different contexts worldwide (see: Hoffmeister, 1996; Lane 1996; Valli 1992; Lucas, 1997; Mindess, 2006, Padden and Humphries 1988 & 2005; Johnston, 1984; Napier, 2002; Valentine and Skelton, 2009; Ladd, 2003, Leeson, 2005). However, the instance of conducting research into the characteristics, behaviours, in-group dynamics of specific minorities within the Deaf community is seldom tackled at length. Possibly the main exception to this would be the work of Ceil Lucas or Anna Mindess relating to the Black Deaf community.<sup>1</sup> Work specifically focused on is often relegated to a small section within a book or journal paper and does not receive the attention it may warrant. Cultural appreciation prior to research should be considered and that is where the motivation lies to conduct this research. The Deaf gay community is worthy of more than simply a small section within a book or journal.

This research was encouraged by the aspiration to fill this gap in knowledge and by the explicit research question: What is the identity, culture and language of the Deaf gay community? By seeking to establish what the Deaf gay community is, its culture, its identity, the language used and the issues it faces within the Deaf community and the gay community, the present work aims to pioneer and stimulate further research into the dynamics emerging in the relationship with those wider communities and organisations with which Deaf homosexuals engage. Such organisations could include other members of both the Deaf community and the gay community, local authorities, policy makers, interpreters and service providers. If these people are aware of the specificity and distinctive features of this community and its related needs and wants, they will hopefully be in a better position to provide support in order to meet those needs.

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<sup>1</sup> See chapter one for further information.

It is recognised that there are Deaf homosexuals in society and, therefore, the Deaf gay community warrants research when it is established that Deaf people and homosexuals are protected categories in the UK under the Equality Act 2010, with respect to the two categories: people with disabilities and sexual orientation.

## **1.2 Previous work on the Deaf gay community.**

Paddy Ladd briefly refers to the perceived larger percentage of Deaf gay and lesbians compared to the majority of society in his book *Understanding Deaf Culture* (2003). He identifies that this is especially the case within Deaf families. On the website *Jacksonville.com*, Virginia Gutman responds to the question 'Why are so many deaf men gay?' by affirming that there are no scientific studies that support a posited link between deafness and homosexuality. Instead, she suggests that hearing people will see groups of Deaf people signing at events aimed at the gay community and that not all of the people may be gay but instead, heterosexual friends or allies of the gay community. The sheer number seen may mislead people into thinking that the whole group is homosexual. There have been limited references to the Deaf gay community in various publications – Chapter 6 engages with the relevant works in this area.

Steve Friesse (2000) in his article entitled 'Seen But Seldom Heard' for *The Advocate* – a US-based bi-monthly magazine for the gay community – in which he describes the difficulties the Deaf gay community face in relation to access to services, dating and health services. Tina Gianoulis (2006) has written a piece for the website *qlbtg.com* in which she describes the similarities between and intersection of the Deaf community and the gay community. Catherine Healy (2007) dedicated her thesis at Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania, USA to *Living on the Edge: Parallels Between the Deaf and Gay Communities in the United States*; there she examines the 'parallels between the experiences of Deaf people and gay people in the United States, addressing misconceptions held by the general public, the pathologization of difference, and the question of choice.' Additionally, a book entitled *The Deaf Way* (2007), a collection of perspectives from the International Conference on Deaf Culture in 1989 at Gallaudet University in Washington D.C., includes a

chapter by Thomas Kane titled *Deaf Gay Men's Culture*. In this chapter, he talks about Deaf homosexuals being different to Deaf heterosexuals in the way they interact with each other, members of the Deaf community and members of the gay community. In addition, he refers to the differences in the sign language used by Deaf homosexuals, as well as their collectivist society behaviours.

These pieces play a part in establishing Deaf gay culture, identity and language but the greatest collection of work is included in the books titled *Eyes of Desire* (1993) and a follow-up volume; *Eyes of Desire 2*, (2007) both edited by Raymond Luczak. The first book was the first-ever anthology of deaf lesbian and gay "voices," and won two Lambda Literary Award nominations (Best Lesbian and Gay Anthology, and Best Small Press Book). These books created the opportunity for members of the Deaf gay community to contribute to awareness raising of the community through their personal stories, interviews and poems. The first focuses on the USA and Canada but the second enjoys a more international flavour with some contributions from members of the Deaf gay community in the UK. That said, none of works mentioned focus heavily on the Deaf gay male community in Britain relating to the communities' identity, culture and language. Hence the motivation for this research remains valid.

### 1.3 Objectives

Firstly, there was a desire to analyse any specialist literature discussing and analysing what the Deaf, gay and Deaf gay communities are, so that the present study could begin to put together a profile that brings together the distinctive features of this community. Such profile was reliant on surveying a cross section – albeit a small one given the time constraints and scope of this preliminary study – of the UK Deaf gay community so as to gain an insight as to what these three communities mean to their members. The survey also intended to pursue a better understanding of the ways in which Deaf gay people identify themselves within each community. Finding out what the 'Deaf gay community is' was also something that was sought to be defined in relation to what cultural aspects set it aside from the Deaf community or the gay community. It is considered that Gay Sign Variation is an important part of the Deaf gay community so the examination of language as an identifier for gay and



Deaf gay people was to be explored. Lastly, it was considered whether a definition of the Deaf gay community could be achieved.

#### **1.4 Limitations of the research**

As mentioned above, information relating to the Deaf community and likewise for the gay community has been growing steadily in quantity and quality over the last two decades; however, there is a very limited number of published works relating specifically to the Deaf gay community. The most widely accessible material is not academic in nature but a number of discussions held in websites, personal blogs, forums and social media, which still have to be fully assessed and analysed as sources of credible and reliable information. Therefore, it is difficult to refute or confirm an argument as to what the Deaf gay community is because, as yet, there have been no real studies on it – this consideration affected the methodological choices, as discussed in Chapter 4.

With a research project of this small scale, it is difficult to achieve a representative number of interviews in order to conduct a survey engaging with the Deaf gay community. In this perspective, the aim was not to achieve statistically validity, especially amidst such large discrepancies over the total number of the members of the communities, but rather to challenge, contrast, and compare some of the assumptions in the literature through the reflections put forward by the real voices of the research participants who belong to the community. Such a small sample survey did not aim to produce statistically reliable data but rather to present a snapshot of the community's self-perception of its own identity. Such comparison offers then an effective argument as to establishing what the Deaf gay community entails. Among the other limitations of the present study, it ought to be considered that limited time and financial resources were available to carry out the interviews; these were also translated and later transcribed. This method took a considerable amount of time. In the end, a total of 16 research participants were recruited and interviewed; for a pilot study of the scope and ambition of the present dissertation, the number was deemed to be sufficient. However, it is acknowledged that such small number is hardly representative of overall Deaf gay community. For that reason, the information included within this thesis must be considered as information

gathered with an ethnographic approach and not intended to deduct generalisable information about the community as a whole, but rather to encourage further critical questions to engage with the research question that motivates the present study. Ideally, the more appropriate and fuller answer to the research question is likely to be achieved only through a large-scale, funded research project. Only a team of Deaf and hearing researchers would be able to conduct research over a greater and more significant number of Deaf gay people that would ultimately result in a more definitive answer as to what the Deaf gay community is. Within the specific of the ethnographic approach, an additional limitation to this study was the fact that I am a hearing researcher interviewing Deaf research participants. However fluent I am in British Sign Language, it is recognised that this is a second language for me. Also, I have not lived my life as a Deaf person and more importantly, a Deaf homosexual. My status as a non-Deaf researcher makes me an outsider of the community looking into it, as I do not share the experiences of my research participants.

### **1.5 An overview of the topics discussed**

The present study is subdivided into six chapters. Chapter 1 examines the Deaf community from the social model perspective where culture and language is of paramount importance and recognises the differences between this and the medical model of deafness, which places an emphasis on the condition of deafness and not being able to hear. The numbers of people belonging the Deaf community reported by various organisations is scrutinised, the enormous discrepancies in the number given –only within the UK context– as well as the issues in collecting the data are discussed. The Chapter also engages with the discrepancies between this figure and the higher projection that had been anticipated when collating the 2011 Census data. The Deaf community is geographically spread throughout the United Kingdom; yet there is cohesion amongst the community and possible suggestions as to why this happens are given within this chapter. The culture that exists within the Deaf community is explained and examples of Deaf culture are offered. The relationship between minority groups and the wider Deaf community is examined and the issue of Deaf identity is explored. Chapter 2 focuses on the relationship between identity

and British Sign Language; one of the most important defining cultural aspects of the Deaf community. The chapter examines what sign language is and how minority groups, such as the Deaf community, use language as an identity marker. Chapter 3 addresses the conceptualisation of the Deaf gay community in relation to exactly what homosexuality is deemed to be, its own self-definition and representation, and the size of this community. The connections and relationship between minority groups, gay identity, and the notion of a geographically spread community are explored in relation to the Deaf community. Chapter 4 collates information relating to gay slang from around the world; it describes, analyses, and discusses sign variation in relation to minority communities of speakers. Slang from six countries is here considered – Britain, Greece, Indonesia, The Philippines, South Africa, and Israel. The motivation for the emergence of these slang is identified and the similarities and differences explored. Chapter 5 analyses the Deaf communities version of a gay slang known as Gay Sign Variation (GSV). GSV is explored providing an overview of its use from the perspective of the Deaf gay communities in the UK, USA, and Ireland whilst considering both a linguistic and a cultural perspective. Lastly, Chapter 6 seeks to define the Deaf gay community deriving information from the interviews carried out with fifteen research participants in Britain and by comparing and contrasting what emerges from the interviews with the characteristics, features, and definitions in the literature. Like the Deaf community and the gay community, statistics of the size of the community are estimated along with the defining factors for inclusion into the Deaf gay community. Its culture is explored as is the attempt to explain how Deaf gay men might identify themselves. The issue of managing multiple identities is explored and the issue of establishing, maintaining, and perceiving personal relationships within the community is examined amid instances of possible homophobia within the community.

## **2. Methodology**

### **2.1 Research Ethics**

The School of Modern Languages and Cultures at Durham University was sent the Research Ethics Monitoring and Approval Form and this was referred to the faculty's ethics advisor who stated that sexuality is defined as sensitive personal data under the Data Protection Act (DPA) but that the DPA would not apply if the survey or interview was truly anonymous. It was felt that because participants are identified as P1, P2, P3 etc. that anonymity is achieved (see 2.5.6 and 2.5.7 for more information). In addition, data would not be classed as anonymous under the DPA if it is released in a configuration that allows the identification of an individual. It was felt that this would also be unethical as the data would be supplied in confidence.

They also stated that consent would be implicit in the completion of the questionnaire or interview and therefore, a project permission letter was created (See Appendix a) which each participant had an opportunity to read, as well as translated into British Sign Language. The letter gave an overview of the research, the expectations of the research participants, confirmed that participation was on a voluntary basis, the benefits and risks of participation were highlighted and confirmation that the information provided was completely confidential (see 2.5.4 for more information).

### **2.2 Research Participants**

A total of 39 (100%) Deaf homosexual men were contacted via email or a message on Facebook. Of those, 15 (38%) did not respond and 24 (62%) agreed to an interview so I asked them to arrange a mutually convenient date. Of those 24 who had agreed to an interview, only 15 (38%) ended up committing to a date (13 people - 87%) or completing the questionnaire on paper (2 people - 13%). This number was considered as a sufficient number given the timescale and expectations of a pilot research project of the nature of this dissertation. A paper questionnaire was offered as two respondents said they were happy to be interviewed but did not wish to be on camera.

Hale and Napier (2013: 167-68) suggest that 'if using non-random sampling, the goal would be to have a sufficiently large enough sample so that

true differences between the control and experimental groups could be more probable.' Bearing in mind the potential number of Deaf gay homosexuals there are in the UK, this small sample, it could be argued, is not large enough to be representative of the community – for details of the UK-wide Deaf population see Chapter 1. 'People who use sign language are a diverse population, and one or two D/deaf or hearing researchers cannot effectively represent a sign language view-point of these groups' (Harris, Holmes & Merten, 2009: 114). However, as an initial study of such a topic, it goes some way to initiating further research.

The research participants were all Deaf homosexuals that were known to me through my work as a sign language interpreter, therefore the research was conducted using non-random sampling. I had worked with some of them and others I knew socially and that aided in the respect that we had an existing rapport. Young and Hunt (2011: 8) observe that, 'interview-based data collection methods, in particular, require the development of a good rapport between interviewer and interviewee. Tuning in to the nuances of what an interviewee is seeking to express is not just a matter of content but sensitivity also to affect.' It felt that there was an existing relationship and therefore rapport was natural.

The geographical spread of the research participants was as follows:

<b>Place</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Region</b>	<b>Interview type</b>
London	9	Greater London	FtF
Brighton	2	South-East	FtF
Bristol	2	South-West	1 Ftf, 1 written
Cardiff	1	Wales	FtF
Manchester	1	North-West	Written
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>15</b>		

Areas not covered were East of England, East Midlands, West Midlands, Scotland and Northern Ireland; it was however felt that the spread of locations covered was representative of a range of different locations where Deaf homosexuals lived.

## 2.3 Format

The interviews took place between 27th January 2012 and 26th February 2013 and there were two methods in which data were collected. The first method was through semi-structured Face-to-Face interviews (FtF) which is described as synchronous communication in time and place (Opdenakker, 2006) because of the fact that questions are asked and answers are given at the same time in the same place. The second method was a written questionnaire that was emailed to research participants and later returned by them. This is classed as asynchronous (Opdenakker, 2006) because the questionnaire is sent, it is then later completed, and it is later returned to the researcher.

The preference for FtF interviews was based on prior experience of attempting to collect data from the Deaf gay community where the questionnaires were sent via a link on SurveyMonkey; a web based survey solution. At the time, this was found not to be as fruitful as desired. Therefore, the decision was taken to conduct FtF interviews with a smaller number of Deaf homosexuals using their first or preferred language. The aim was to collect a small amount of quality data rather than a large amount of quantitative (or mixed) data from responses, which did not fully answer the questions asked. Young and Hunt (2011: 7) profess that 'in research studies that involve data collection in person, making the research process accessible is a central concern'. Conducting these interviews in BSL goes some way to addressing such concern.

There were a mixture of questions with a majority of them being open questions of an attitudinal style and a small number of closed questions. 'With an open question respondents are asked a question and can reply however they wish. With a closed question they are presented with a set of fixed alternatives from which they have to choose an appropriate answer' (Bryman, 2001: 142). By using a majority of open questions in attitudinal style (Hale and Napier, 2013: 56), it allowed for a greater level of freedom for the respondents to express their personal views and feelings relating to the questions. This solution however did complicate the process of extracting themes from the answers given. In contrast, the closed questions allowed the quantitative element of the questionnaire to be compared and clarified meaning with the

research participants. However, some of the research participants felt that some of the options given did not apply to them. In these scenarios, explanatory notes were added to the transcripts.

The types of questions asked were varied in order to attempt to elicit different types of information. These included personal factual questions to provide personal information about themselves, informant factual questions in relation to the communities they interact with, and questions about knowledge of the communities they engage with – in line with current approaches to conduct survey-based research (Bryman, 2001: 146-148).

The age ranges of the men interviewed were as follows:

<b>Age</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Interview type</b>
18-35	5	3 FtF, 2 written
36-50	6	FtF
51+	5	FtF
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>15</b>	

The approximate age at which the men began to acquire BSL was as follows:

<b>Age</b>	<b>Number</b>
1-3	2
At Nursery	0
At primary school	3
At secondary school	3
After secondary school	7
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>15</b>

The type of secondary school that the men attended was as follows:

<b>School</b>	<b>Number</b>
Mainstream	10
Mainstream - Deaf unit	2

Deaf - day only	1
Deaf residential	2
TOTAL	15

The parents of the Deaf men were as follows:

	<b>Number</b>
Both hearing	13
One Deaf and one hearing	2
Both Deaf	0
TOTAL	15

The ages at which the Deaf men came out as gay was as follows:

<b>Age</b>	<b>Number</b>
14	1
16	1
18	3
19	3
20	1
21	1
23	2
27	2
60	1
TOTAL	15

From these age ranges, the average age at which the Deaf men declared their sexuality as homosexual was almost 23. However, there was one research participant who came out as homosexual very late on in life and therefore, excluding this participant, the average age would be 20. In 2010, the lesbian, gay and bisexual charity in the UK, Stonewall, claimed that the average age of coming out had fallen by over 20 years. According to an online poll of over 100,000 followers on their social media sites 'the average coming out age has fallen by over 20 years in Britain. The poll, which had 1,536 respondents,



found that lesbian, gay and bisexual people aged 60 and over came out at 37 on average. People aged 18 and under are coming out at 15 on average' ([Stonewall.org.uk](http://Stonewall.org.uk), 2010). Although none of the research participants in this study were under 18, it does go to show that the average age at which the participants did come out was fairly young.

## 2.4 Interview locations

The research participants were contacted through email and the private message service within Facebook and a mutually convenient time and location was arranged for the interviews to take place 'where the interviewee is going to feel comfortable and where the interview itself can be conducted without interruption' (David and Sutton, 2011: 126). Hence, the interviews were held in a variety of locations used which included the interviewers home, the interviewees home, a library, an hotel, cafes, and bars. In public spaces, unfortunately, there were sometimes issues with interruption and distraction but in contrast to that, it also created a somewhat relaxed environment in which to have a conversation whilst still recording the interview.

The context-based interruptions and distractions unfortunately go against best practice, as advocated by Young and Hunt 'For sign language users, ensuing visual accessibility and the avoidance of visual distractions are important. Rooms with busy walls create difficult backgrounds against which to "read" a visual language' (Young and Hunt, 2011: 7). These locations also raised some issues later when watching the video and interpreting it from BSL to English, as the lighting was not always conducive to capturing nuances and expressions and sometimes the video had to be replayed several times in order to confirm what had been signed. This issue added to the length it took to interpret the interview.

The question of confidentiality was raised with each research participant prior to conducting an interview in a public place, but all agreed that this was a preferred location for them to partake in the research (See the section below: *Interview recorded and conducted*).

## 2.5 Interview procedure

### 2.5.1 Set up

At the point of contacting the research participants, the nature of the research and purpose of the interview was explained. This information was further reiterated prior to the interview starting, which allowed an opportunity for the research participant to seek clarification – as in recommendations by Hale and Napier (2013) on best practice.

### 2.5.2 Ethical responsibilities

Young and Temple argue that research involving Deaf people should meet 'the same ethical standards of be guided by the same kinds of ethical principles as any other research' (Young and Temple, 2014: 57) hence the need for the ethics approval as described in section 2.1.

There was a risk that this research could have led to the potential discovery of practices or conduct, which would present an ethical dilemma (Robson 2002). Such instances could have been in regards to matters relating to a disclosure of sexual or physical abuse or an illegal activity. With this in mind, appropriate actions were considered prior to the interviews as to how such a disclosure would be handled.

The NDCS advise that if their volunteers are 'concerned that someone aged 18 or over who is in receipt of a service might be being abused by someone in their lives (outside of the NDCS setting), then it would be for the vulnerable adult to determine whether or not they wanted support or referral to the Police or Adult Social Care. It is not possible to make a referral without the consent of the person involved unless other people are at risk or the person is not able to act to protect themselves or does not have the mental capacity to make the specific decision to seek support' (Dodd and Weston, 2012: 34-35). This is the action that would have been taken however, a disclosure of an illegal activity would have been referred to the police.

It was felt that all research participants would have had the mental capacity to to make a decision to seek support but as the university did not

provide a formal counselling scheme for research participants to discuss any issues that were raised in the interviews, an informal arrangement of a contact person based at the university was offered. Research participants would have been able to speak to this person in their first or preferred language (BSL). None of the research participants made such a disclosure or took advantage of the follow-up de-brief.

### *2.5.3 Consent form*

A consent form (see appendix a) was devised and delivered to each participant in BSL prior to the interview. This was not recorded but a written form was presented to each participant. However, 'delivery of information in BSL does not ensure understanding unless the implications of a participant's fund of information is also taken into consideration' (Young and Hunt, 2011: 16). The fund of information which Young and Hunt refer to are the 'facts we pick up, or that common sense understanding of ideas that we accumulate through exposure to casual conversation and access to media' (ibid.).

### *2.5.4 Confidentiality*

Although the research participants were told that the interviews were confidential, as Young and Hunt observe, 'preserving the anonymity of participants can pose complex challenges' (Young & Hunt, 2011: 17). As outlined above, a de-brief was offered but had the interviewee taken up this offer, from that moment on, their anonymity would be at risk. 'Familial, social and professional networks amongst Deaf people (and some hearing people who might be insiders to different extents) are very tight and overlapping. The researcher who carries out an interview may in the same week appear in a different guise at a community event or a family party' (Young and Hunt, 2011: 16) However, the nature of recording the interviews onto camera exposes the research participant to the risk of loss of anonymity which is explained in the following sections.

### *2.5.5 Interview conducted and recorded*

All interviews, apart from the one completed on the paper questionnaire were video recorded. Robson asserts that 'whenever feasible, interviews should be

audio-taped. The tape provides a permanent record and allows you to concentrate on the interview' (Robson, 2002: 289-90). Because of the fact that BSL is a visual language, the recording was not on an audio tape but instead a hand-held digital video recorder was used. 'When language users are aware that they are being observed, they may exhibit self-consciousness in their language production and adjust their language to the perceived preference of a researcher' (Hill, 2015: 199). Therefore, it should be considered that the research participants involved may have disclosed only what they thought the researcher wanted to learn or expressed themselves in such a way. This was identified by Labov as 'Observer's Paradox' which observes that trying to 'find out how people talk when they are not being systematically observed' can only be achieved by 'systematic observation' (1972: 209). Hill (2015) goes on to state that 'The presence of a recording device can make language users feel self-conscious'. This was something that the researcher was aware of but due to budget and lack of access, it was not possible to use an interview suite with hidden camera. Once the interviews had been recorded, they were then uploaded onto a desktop computer that requires a password to enable access.

Each interview was semi-structured. In that respect it had 'predetermined questions, but the order can be modified based upon the interviewer's perception of what seems most appropriate. Question wording can be changed and explanations given; particular questions which seem inappropriate with a particular interviewee can be omitted, or additional ones included' (Robson, 2002: 270). The semi-structured format allowed the interviewer the flexibility required of qualitative research. 'A good interviewer will use their awareness of sub-texts (what is hinted but not expressed) and the skills of active listening to help direct the course of the interview and what is covered' (Young and Hunt, 2011: 8). It can be argued that guided by the principles of good practice described above, the overall methods adopted followed an ethnographic approach and considered the specificity of the individual interviewee as well as the expectations and perceptions of the interviewer in conducting the research.

It was important that the interviews had an element of structure so as to be able to collect the required data and look for common themes between members of the Deaf gay community. The interviews were between 30 - 90

minutes in length depending on how much information each research participant wanted to give.

#### *2.5.6 Interpretation from BSL - English*

Because of the confidentiality issue and maintenance of anonymity of the research participants, it was felt that interpretation from BSL to English would not be outsourced and that it would be my responsibility; a fully qualified BSL - English interpreter and translator. However, Hale and Napier (2013) remind researchers of 'translation difficulties and interpreters' strategies to overcome them, issues of accuracy, equivalence, semantic and pragmatic meaning, illocutionary point and effect, cross-linguistic and cross-cultural differences' (2013: 130-131). There is the possibility that there may have been a 'loss of meaning through translation and through the reinforcement of the dominance of spoken/written word' (Young and Hunt, 2011: 17-18). The translation of the interviews could not be checked by someone else due to the confidential nature of the answers; had there been any issue with translation inaccuracies, although every effort was made to alleviate this potential occurrence, these might have gone undetected. A strategy to alleviate this would be to refer back to the informants for clarification. It might be argued that the possibility of accidentally introducing errors in translation goes against one of the 'cardinal principles' expressed by Christians. 'Fabrications, fraudulent materials, omissions, and contrivances are both nonscientific and unethical' (Christians, 2000: 140). The stringent rules on confidentiality and the ethical concerns over the content of the interview were considered as priority over the risks associated with potential mistakes in the transfer of meaning.

However, it cannot be denied that in this situation 'a hearing person might understand from a linguistic perspective what is being said or signed, but could they correctly interpret it from a cultural perspective?' (Young and Hunt, 2011: 10) The response to that would be that because of the number of years that the researcher has been involved with the Deaf and Deaf gay community, they are in a position to understand the Deaf and Deaf gay communities culture to a level what would merit the appropriateness of being able to translate the recorded interview.

That does not detract from the fact that the ideal situation would be for a Deaf homosexual to conduct the research because a 'hearing researcher, however experienced and skilled, has not had the personal experience of growing up as a deaf child. Their resources for interpreting data involving Deaf adults will be very different from those of their Deaf colleague who has been a deaf child. It might also be highly relevant to making sense of the data produced, particularly within interpretative methodologies' (Young and Hunt, 2011: 10).

#### *2.5.7 Transcript written per person*

'Whether or not you make a full transcript of the tape depends on the resources at your disposal, the number of tapes to be transcribed and the way you will use the data' (Robinson, 2002: 290). An alternative method would have been to be selective and pick out relevant quotes but this would have meant that the videos would have needed to be watched repeatedly to decide what was relevant. It was felt that this would have been more time consuming. For this reason, the decision was made to transcribe all 15 interviews in full and this was achieved by using Express Scribe Transcription Software. The software was used because of specific functionalities that make it easy to alter the speed of the playback of the audio file loaded; such feature allows the researcher to play the audio file slowly at a constant pitch in order to enable simultaneous typing of what was being heard. Transcribing could have been done directly into the software but, instead, a Pages file was created and the use of 'hotkeys' to control playback was enabled. This was a lengthy process but it meant that the document could be accessed on a range of devices to allow for remote working. The result was approximately 60,000 words worth of data once transcribed.

Once there was a transcript per interview, this information was exported to a spreadsheet. Each page of the spreadsheet contained all of the answers from the research participants relating to a specific question. All answers to question 1 on one sheet and all of the answers to question 2 on one sheet etc. This meant that all of the answers from each research participant could be analysed per question without having to toggle between pages. This saved time and allowed for the extraction of themes in the answers whether these be common or contradictory.

Throughout the transcription, anonymity was considered and the use of 'P' with a number denoting the participant was used. No names were used even though their locations are detailed above. Each respondent was assigned a number in random order. However, 'watertight confidentiality has proved to be impossible. Pseudonyms and disguised locations are often recognised by insiders' (Christians, 2000: 139). Throughout the interviews, the research participants referred to events in their lives past or present which included places. Certain members of the Deaf community and in particular the Deaf gay community who would read this thesis, would potentially be able to identify from whom the quote originated. This concern was acknowledged by the research participants and they recognised it as an inescapable, uncontrollable variable, and accepted it was a condition of their engagement in the research.

## **2.6 Impact of researcher on the research**

As mentioned above, it would have potentially been more advantageous for a Deaf homosexual to undertake research regarding the identity, culture and language of Deaf homosexuals; unfortunately, this was not the case for this research. Although the researcher is not Deaf, homosexual identity is recognised and therefore an element of insider status applies and this needs to be considered when thinking about the interpretation of the primary and secondary data collected. As Young and Hunt reflect, 'the basis from which we know a situation or experience is important for what we see, how we tell what we see and how we interpret what is told (Young and Hunt, 2011: 10). Nevertheless, it could be reasonably argued that sharing the same sexuality as the research participants together with the years of experience in working with the community put the researcher in a position to effectively conduct the research. However, the researcher was aware of the potential 'problem of the observer's paradox and the sensitivity of signers to the audiological status and ethnicity of interviewers or interlocutors' (Hill, 2015: 199).

The hearing status of the researcher was obvious to the research participants but equally the sexuality was known. McCormack reflects that 'the disclosure of personal information regarding one's sexuality is likely to encourage mutual respect and reciprocity' (McCormack, 2012: 17). Although

this research on the Deaf gay male community in Britain was not [entirely] observational it is considered ethnographic based on the definition that Hale and Napier (2013: 84) offer: 'the study of a social group or individual or individuals representative of that group, based on direct recording of the behaviour and 'voices' of the participants by the researcher over a period of time'. Angrosino and Mays de Pérez (2000: 683) assertions apply when they state that 'one's sexual orientation, are matters that must be taken into conscious account when a researcher endeavours to conduct observational ethnography'

It is also possible that the fact that I am hearing dissuaded the 15 (38%) people initially contacted from responding to my call for research participants, although as no follow-up took place, this is only speculation. Young and Temple (2014: 152) assert that 'who the researcher is influences what is said/signed and what we can know from any piece of research. The question of "who" is linked to the nature of language and community ties but not with any in-built presumption that particular kinds of people are always preferable'.



### **3. The Deaf Community**

#### **3.1 Introduction**

There was an address by James C. Woodward, Jr. to graduates of the Montana School for the Deaf on 1st June 1973 where he refers to the 'Deaf World' in which he said:

By the deaf world, I do not mean some imaginary world. I mean a real world, a living world, a world full of people who interact with each other. The deaf world has its own international organizations, its own small social clubs, its own churches. It has its own schools, and, most important, the deaf world has its own language that ties it together - sign language. (Woodward, 1973)

It describes a world in which Deaf people lived 40 years ago and at first glance, it would appear that not much has changed but much has. There have been many improvements in the rights to access to communication for Deaf people and the effect of the recognition of BSL is explored further in chapter 2. This section will, however, look at the complex differences there are between the 'Deaf' and 'deaf' communities and examine the differences between the social and medical perspectives of deafness.

#### **3.2 Deafness as a medical model**

Collins (2007) recognises that there have been conflicts between the Deaf community and the medical model of deafness which is where the medical profession will refer to Deaf people as disabled. 'More often than not professionals adhered to the medical paradigm and its preoccupation with bodily disfunction, to the effect that the disabled person was seen primarily as someone with a problem, 'a case' to be treated' (Reinders 2000: 2). This approach, by the medical profession, covers all forms of disability. They do not see the person as an individual who's body or bodily functions operate

differently from another. 'Some deaf people may want to resist being labeled as "disabled," the fact remains that they are often labeled as such and that these labels - in all cases - are not always accurate but may have consequences' (Brueggemann 2008: 33). Such consequences may be how the Deaf person is treated by the medical profession.

### 3.3 Deafness as a social model

The 'Medical paradigm has been replaced by a new paradigm in which the approach to disability has been shifted from 'defect' to 'potential' (Reinders 2000: 2). This social shift seemed to have started to take place a lot earlier for the Deaf community. In 1972, James Woodward described the social variables of Deaf people and how their language choice will vary according to setting, topic and language choice. Most often the Deaf community is identified by using a capital 'D' in the word 'Deaf. The shift to the Deaf community identifying themselves as a linguistic minority started to take shape. This is detailed by Padden & Humphries (1988) where they explain that 'Following a convention proposed by James Woodward (1972), we use the lowercase *deaf* when referring to the audiological condition of not hearing and the uppercase *Deaf* when referring to a particular group of Deaf people who share a language... and a culture' (Padden & Humphries 1988: 2).

It was later, in 2005, that they reiterated that use of the capital 'D' also included the 'cultural practices of a group within a group' compared to the lowercase 'd' which when seen as 'deaf' refers to the 'condition of deafness'. (Padden and Humphries, 2005) However, Blankmeyer Burke recognises that 'the categories Deaf, oral deaf, hard of hearing, and so forth are fluid and not easily defined' and that 'establishing a working definition for the larger deaf community is complicated' and we should 'avoid the pitfall of generalising the population commonly referred to as the 'deaf community' (Blankmeyer Burke 2008: 64).

'Deaf people work around different assumptions about deafness and hearing from those of hearing people. The condition of not hearing, or of being hard of hearing, cannot be described as apart from its placement in the context of categories of cultural meaning. Names applied to one another are labels that

define relationships. The relationships Deaf people have defined include their struggles with those who are more powerful than they, such as hearing others' (Padden and Humphries 1988: 54-55).

Brennan (1992), Padden & Humphries (2005) and Collins (2007) describe the Deaf community of consisting of people who have a profound hearing loss, are hard of hearing, born into a Deaf family or because they identify strongly with the community through the use of its language and through entering into its cultural life. Also, most Deaf people will generally prefer to identify themselves as a language minority rather than that of a disabled group (Ladd 2003; Collins 2007). The people within these groups are the ones who have had to grow up with a severe or profound hearing loss as opposed to a person who loses their hearing later on in life. 'Although in recent years the term 'hearing impaired' has been proposed by many in an attempt to include both Deaf people and other people who do not hear, Deaf people still refer to themselves as DEAF' (Padden & Humphries 1988: 43). The members of the Deaf community have:

...Inherited their sign language, use it as a primary means of communication among themselves, and hold a set of beliefs about themselves and their connection to the larger society. We distinguish them from, for example, those who find themselves losing their hearing because of illness, trauma or age; although these people share the condition of not hearing, they do not have access to the knowledge, beliefs and practices that make up the culture of Deaf people. (Padden & Humphries 1988: 2)

Knowing now how some Deaf people see themselves as a linguistic minority and a community with culture in their own right, the defining factors for inclusion in the Deaf community will be discussed later on in this chapter but one would be mistaken in thinking that the social model of deafness was the ultimate aim. This may not necessarily be the case as Ladd identifies that 'many are uncomfortable with the inclusion in the disability social model because, however it might try to construct itself to assimilate them, the criterion used for

including Deaf communities in their ranks is that of physical deafness' (Ladd 2003: 15).

What Ladd is pointing out here is that the actual diagnosis of a hearing loss, which cannot be questioned comes under the medical sphere, is what's used to integrate Deaf people into the social model. What this highlights is that Deaf communities' issues relate to the fact that they cannot hear and may need technological support on a daily basis alongside the fact that language and culture play an important role in their everyday living. As Ladd puts it, Deaf people are thus 'dual-category members' (Ladd 2003: 16).

### **3.4 Deaf Statistics**

This section offers an overview of the current statistics on the UK Deaf community so as to help us to quantify just how many people in Britain will be classed as members of such community. It is important that these figures are examined to establish the size of the community in question. We will look at figures that are published by governmental organisations such as the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the Department of Health (DoH), as well as British charities including Action on Hearing Loss (AOHL), The British Deaf Association (BDA), The Royal Association of the Deaf (RAD), and the National Deaf Children's Society (NDCS) who are working with Deaf people. It will highlight the figures released in the 2011 census; the first in Britain to include a question relating to signed languages and the response levels which were lower than expected by charities and other interested parties.

It cannot be denied that there are many millions of Deaf people in the world but it is very difficult to know exactly how many there are. This is largely due to the fact that official statistics are not collated in many parts of the world. According to the WHO, there are 360 million people worldwide with a hearing loss. This represents over five percent of the world's population. 'The majority of these people live in low- and middle-income countries where the children will rarely receive any schooling' (WHO 2013). That is generally not the case with Deaf people here in the UK but trying to determine the specific numbers is very difficult to pinpoint.

Various British organisations offer estimates that refer to vastly different figures and also do not consistently collect data in relation to levels of deafness, a possible cause also of the discrepancies in the different figures, and whether the people they are counting are first language users of BSL. For example, the DoH published figures on the Councils with Social Services Responsibilities (CSSR) in England (see Figure 1.1 below) which claimed that as at 31 March 2010, there were 56,400 people registered as Deaf in England. This figure is an increase of 3 per cent since March 2007 and 24 per cent since 1995.

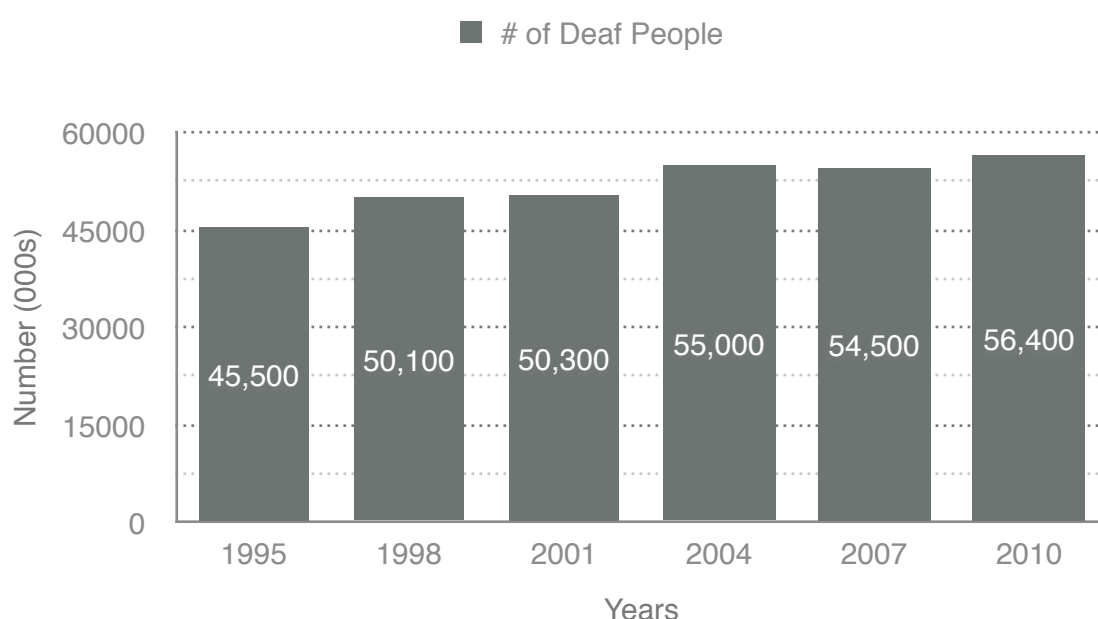


Figure 1.1 *Numbers of Deaf people Registered in England as at 31 March 2010*

(Source: The Health and Social Care Information Centre, 2010)

It can be seen from the graph overleaf (see Figure 1.2) that over half (53%) of the people registered as Deaf are aged 18 to 64, with the second largest age group being 75 and over (31%). Only 4 per cent of those registered Deaf are aged under 18 with the remaining 12 per cent being aged 65 to 74.

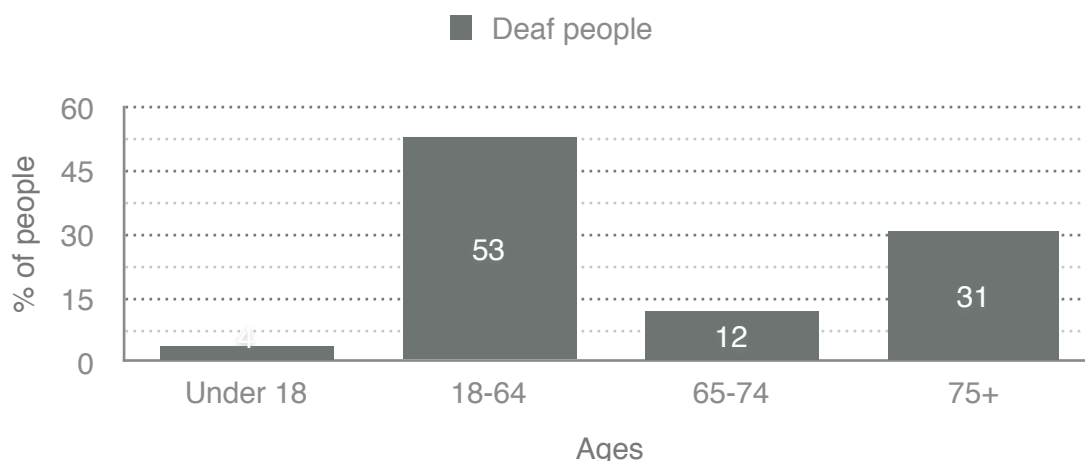


Figure 2.2 *Age groups of people registered Deaf as at 31 March 2010.*

(Source: The Health and Social Care Information Centre, 2010)

Together with the official institutional figures, the several charities in the United Kingdom focusing on the Deaf community also give varying figures. AOHL, previously the Royal National Institute of the Deaf (RNID), stated in 2011 that there were 10 million people in the UK with some form of hearing loss. This equates to one in six of the UK population. This figure has risen from previous statistics which claimed that this number was one in seven, hence why their magazine was named *One In Seven*. They anticipated that this total figure will rise to 14.5 million in 2031 which would reflect the rise that the DoH have documented above. Of the current total, it is claimed that 800,000 people have a hearing loss which is severe or profound.

Throughout their publications, AOHL do not focus on the numbers of Deaf people using BSL as a first or preferred language. However, Dr Terry Riley, Chairman of the BDA does and in his statement within the Trustees' Report and Accounts for the year ended March 2012, he states that there are "105,000 Deaf children and adults who use BSL as their first or preferred language" (British Deaf Association 2012) within the UK. If we base these figures on a UK population of 60 million, that equates to 0.175% of the population. These organisations are not explicit in how they arrive at these figures.

Another charity focusing on the BSL using population, RAD express a similar figure quoted by the government in their Strategic Plan 2012 - 2017:

The latest GP survey states some 0.3% of adults in the United Kingdom are Deaf and use BSL, rising to 0.5% in London. The Government recognises that BSL is a language in its own right and used by the Deaf population (101,107 Deaf adults in England). RAD works in London and parts of East and South East England, where there are about 35,000 Deaf people of all ages. (RAD n.d.)

They recognise that due to the changing landscape of education and the technology available to the Deaf community, that these figures may change because the Deaf community may not automatically use BSL as a first or preferred language.

The NDCS is recognised as the 'leading charity dedicated to creating a world without barriers for deaf children and their families'<sup>2</sup>. They suggest that there are 45,000 Deaf children living in the UK. This vastly contradicts the number that the DoH quote above, which would equate to just 2,256 if, as they state, only 4% of the 56,400 who they claim are registered as Deaf, are under the age of 18 years of age. The NDCS note that 90% of all children diagnosed as Deaf are born to hearing parents. It is unlikely that these children will have any knowledge or understanding of a Deaf community because of the fact that their parents will have no knowledge of it and therefore not be able to teach their children. These figures are echoed by Padden and Humphries (1988) where they add that 'most [Deaf people] are born into families that do not know of the community of Deaf people' (Padden and Humphries 1988: 31).

Of the total number of Deaf children, the NDCS claim that forty per cent (18,000) have additional needs over and above their deafness. They profess that 'given the right support deaf children can achieve the same as any other child.' When it comes to Deaf children being born to Deaf parents, Moores (2001) quotes this figure as being approximately 4% whereas Denmark concurs with the NDCS and states that 'Approximately 90% of children of deaf parents

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<sup>2</sup> See: [www.ndcs.org.uk](http://www.ndcs.org.uk) for further information.

have normal hearing' (Denmark 1994). Again, these figures show a discrepancy of six per cent.

Another organisation focusing on children is the Consortium for Research in Deaf Education (CRIDE). They conducted a survey throughout England Northern Ireland and Wales, 2011-2012, on specialist educational services for Deaf children on educational staffing and service provision. Scotland was not included in this survey because of not wishing to duplicate on a survey being conducted by the Scottish Sensory Centre at Edinburgh University. According to their survey, there were 41,406 Deaf children aged 0 - 19. Had figures from Scotland been included, this figure would have risen to 43,932.

The Scottish Council on Deafness estimate that 'in Scotland there are an estimated 57,000 people with severe to profound deafness' (Scod.org.uk, 2014) and it can be assumed that a majority of the people with a profound hearing loss would use British Sign Language as a preferred first language. However, they go on to say that 'the number of people in Scotland whose first or preferred language is BSL was estimated by the Scottish Executive to be around 6,000' (Scod.org.uk, 2014).

### 3.5 The National Census 2011 - the first to include British Sign Language

For the first time, the 2011 National Census asked a question which allowed people to state that they were a British or other Sign Language first language user. It related to question 18 which asked:

What is your main language?	
English	
Other, write in (including British Sign Language)	

(Source: ONS, 2011)



It then went on to ask in question 19:

How well can you speak English?	
Very well	
Well	
Not well	
Not at all	

(Source: ONS, 2011)

It was generally felt, within the Deaf community that this was a positive move to recognise the fact that BSL is a language in its own right and should be recorded as the first or preferred language of many people within the Deaf community. However, there were some comments relating to the fact that this was to be recorded in written form and that really, the census should be made available to answer in BSL to avoid confusion. After the census had taken place, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) published that 'a small percentage (22,000) of usual residents reported a sign language as their main language; of these usual residents 70 per cent (15,000) used British Sign Language' (ONS 2013).

This observation vastly contradicts the figures put forward by charities for Deaf people and the Deaf community themselves. As expected, this produced a backlash from the Deaf community and many comments were posted on websites, blogs, vlogs and social media networks. David Buxton, Chief executive of the BDA was quoted on the *Remark!* website as saying that "by asking the question confusingly, the census undercounted those for whom BSL is a first language" (Remark! 2013). If the form was confusing, one could assume that another person in the household completed it on behalf of the Deaf person. So, the issue of who was completing the form came into question. There were concerns that hearing people in certain households incorrectly identified a Deaf householder's first or preferred language. The RAD stated 'We know how many hearing people do not realise that BSL is a distinct language

and that there were probably some misunderstandings by people completing the form for themselves, or on behalf of others' (RAD, 2013).

This identifies that there is more work to be done by organisations collecting data to ensure that it is gathered in the most effective and accessible way. RAD highlight this when the state that 'the numbers are higher than the census puts them. Deafness is hidden, Deaf language and culture is too often misunderstood. Next time, we hope the people who design the census consult with the Deaf community about how to ask the question more clearly' (RAD 2013). It is unknown as to whether the Deaf community were consulted prior to designing the questions relating to their community.

Steve Powell, Chief Executive of SignHealth, supported this argument and said: "The census figure is important, but we doubt it is the whole picture. We already know of households where hearing parents put 'English' for everyone in the house, even though their sons or daughters would have put sign language" (SignHealth 2013). This is significant in respect of identity when it is already established that 90 per cent of Deaf children are born to hearing parents. It is one more example of how Deaf children do not learn about or inherit a Deaf identity even though some parents may attempt to encourage this.

An example is told by a mother of a Deaf child in the *One Mothers Diary* blog on the Peterborough and District Deaf Children's Society website. On this occasion, she writes about teaching her teenage son, Callum, the concept of 'mother tongue' and how this relates to the language you feel most comfortable using. As a child who attend a toddler group at the local Deaf Club, a pre-school group for Deaf children, a Deaf school and now a mainstream school with a unit, it would appear that, although growing up in a hearing family, Calum has had a lot of interaction with the Deaf community in his life. The description of the conversations goes:

"Now," I sign to Calum, "what would you say your first language is?"

"English." Calum replies.

"No," I sign back to him, "I mean which language do you feel most comfortable using?"

"English!" Calum repeats with increasing exasperation.

(Anon 2013)

The Deaf community was concerned that the lower than expected number would have a negative impact on important service provision by local authorities and the health service. SignHealth, the charity seeking to improve the health of Deaf people, argued that this should not be the case and stated that 'Health services still need to be making reasonable adjustments so the language barrier is removed. It makes no difference whether there is one sign language user or one million' (SignHealth 2013).

Other, non charitable and therefore potentially less politically sensitive websites displayed opinions by their contributors for all to see. Limping Chicken is the UK's independent Deaf news and Deaf blogs website edited by the Deaf journalist, Charlie Swinbourne, and on it, the question of language use was raised and the fact that "Many Deaf people use both BSL and English to some degree. Some who would state that their first or preferred language is English may also be sign language users who would need to use sign language in certain situations. They would have been omitted from these results" (Swinbourne 2013).

However, the statistics recorded may be a true reflection. In the February 2014 issue of the British Deaf News, there was an article which was a summary from The Dominion Post in New Zealand which stated that 'The Census 2013 figures in New Zealand have shown that the numbers of people using New Zealand Sign Language reduced by more than 25% in the past 12 years... the decline is particularly sharp among teenagers' (*New Zealand Sign Language declining?* 2014: 5-6). In the article, the reasons cited were the rise in cochlear implants among children, the decline in Deaf schools and fewer adult education options which is a pattern that would appear to be the same here in the UK.

If this section of the thesis is to definitively establish how many Deaf people there are in the UK, then it fails to do so. However, what it does show is that according to the census statistics, the Deaf community would appear to be much smaller than originally thought by charities working with Deaf people and the Deaf community themselves. It also highlights the need to educate Deaf people that, if they want to emphasise the size of the community, then they

should be declaring that sign language is a first and preferred language when being accounted for in national statistics. This, in large, relates to identity and how Deaf people view themselves which, as established, it can be difficult to ascertain, when family backgrounds are considered. To be able to be accounted for effectively, responsibility falls upon the shoulders of the people collecting the data and consultation with the Deaf community should be improved as to how this can be achieved.

### **3.6 The defining factors for inclusion into the Deaf community**

Brennan (1992) states that 'the Deaf community is scattered throughout the country, but nevertheless has a strong coherence and sense of common identity' (Brennan 1992: 2) and the four avenues identified by Baker-Shenk & Cokely (1980) as to how to become a member of the the Deaf community are: 'audiological, political, linguistic and social' (Baker-Shenk & Cokely 1980: 47). Audiological refers to the 'actual loss of hearing ability', political is the 'potential ability to exert influence on matters which directly affect the Deaf Community', linguistic is the 'ability to use and understand American Sign Language' and social is the 'ability to satisfactorily participate in social functions of the Deaf Community' (Baker-Shenk & Cokely 1980: 47). Any person satisfying one or more areas may be viewed as a member of the Deaf community but a person satisfying all areas would be considered as a core member. Collins adds that Deaf people will, 'identify strongly with the community through the use of its language and through entering into its cultural life' (Collins 2007: 5).

It could be considered that this membership can be attained regardless of class. "The shared experience of being Deaf forms a bond of quality that cuts across social class. The goal of the community is not to dwell on difference but to work together for the good of all Deaf people" (Mindess 2006: 68). However, this wouldn't appear to be the case all the time, as one of the research participants expressed that:

Sometimes I have felt that I've been treated differently because I didn't grow up using sign language. I used sign language later on in life so I do feel that sometimes the

deaf community will treat me differently because I didn't grow up a 'grass roots' deaf and BSL wasn't my first language. English would have been my first language. So, I sometimes feel that I can be a bit excluded. I sometimes feel a little bit like a second class citizen compared to 'grass roots' deaf people. They can make me feel like that because they are all signing away. Sometimes if they are really going for it with sign language, I will feel a little bit withdrawn and I will step back a bit. If its a large deaf event with everyone signing I can sometimes feel a bit like that.

P1

Although Mindess would argue that 'One must essentially be born into and grow up within that culture to qualify as a member' (Mindess 2006: 40), Padden & Humphries (2005) identify others who may potentially be members of the community. These include hearing people who are family members of a Deaf person, someone who works with Deaf people on a regular basis such as a sign language interpreter, a social worker or a teacher of Deaf children. However, it may be that because they are hearing, they never fully understand the experiences of oppression and exclusion from information in hearing society that many Deaf people encounter. (Napier, McKee and Goswell, 2006; Jankowski, 1997; Valentine & Skelton, 2009) As an attempt to combat this, and give something back to the Deaf community, many hearing people will display reciprocity by 'offering voluntary interpreting occasionally, or contributing other skills or information from the hearing world, in support of a Deaf community activity' (Napier, McKee and Goswell 2006: 52).

Mindess, in her book on American Deaf culture, refers to collectivism which is the action of people promoting welfare and helping each other to survive, partaking in activities together, showing loyalty within a group and being aware of behaviour which might embarrass or betray members of the group. She states that 'American Deaf culture clearly qualifies as a collective culture with its emphasis on pooling resources, the duty to share information, the boundary between insiders and outsiders, and loyalty to and strong

identification with the group' (Mindess 2007: 40). Napier, McKee and Goswell (2006) explain that in Australia and New Zealand 'because deaf people's access to information is limited, personal and general information is freely and directly shared in the community; what hearing people might regard as discretion or privacy can be seen by deaf people as unsociable withholding of information' (Napier, McKee and Goswell 2006: 52).

The craving of information, subsequent sharing of that information and support of each other was expressed by some of the research participants. They state that:

The Deaf gay community is very small so we do know each other and we will support each other and learn things from each other. So, I would have to say the sharing of information and learning something new from each other. There's more knowledge about safe sex because of sharing information with each other. I don't know what more I can say on that really.

P6

Before, there were no computers, no phones, no minicomms, no faxes, no mobiles, so people used to congregate every week, they'd go to the Deaf club, their local Deaf club and they'd be hungry for information and they'd want to know what was happening. You know, we'd find out what was happening in the news, or if friends were ill or had died or whatever and you'd find all that out. But now, a lot of the Deaf clubs are closing because the numbers are dwindling and technology has taken over.

P5

Number one would be a need and desire to share. If you know something, you must share that information. If you withhold information and you don't share, Deaf people would say that you should be sharing that information. It's

very important. It's very important, culturally, to share information. If you didn't share something and somebody found out, you really would be in trouble. So sharing is very important. That's number one. Its massive.

P8

This collectivist culture which Deaf people seem to favour is different from an individualist culture which focuses on independence, self reliance, responsibility for one's own actions, personal choices, freedom of choice, personal autonomy and as such, group membership is flexible and identification with groups is weak. Of course it is a generalisation that the Deaf community will generally act in a collectivist manner but there is indication that this is how the Deaf gay community behaves.

They'll go to Deaf cultural events. It could be theatre or social events or films. It doesn't matter but loads of Deaf people will get together and use sign language at those events. Deaf people like to socialise together and mix together and go out for dinner with each other and all sign and they have access to information. It's all equal. That is Deaf culture. Access to information. I think about the culture that's involved. We've got Deaf issues that we talk about, emotions and problems and barriers that we face so there's that common issue there for all Deaf people.

P1

The way that we describe each other is that we say 'we' so therefore we're putting ourselves in the community. We don't say the way 'they' that's like me as a hearing person, saying 'they' as in those Deaf people. But I say 'we' so the collective Deaf group. That's one influence and that's one way of cultural reference that you're the same as everybody else... as in a Deaf community... culturally you fit in with the other people within that minority group.

P3

Being together, going to events and planning events all around the UK and maybe Deaf people like to get together with each other. They do arrange events, they do meet up and they do get together with friends. And of course, the Deaf community is very small so you do have friends all around you as a Deaf person and Deaf people travel a lot because when they leave school they keep in touch. The community feels quite strong. I mean, from London you could travel to Scotland quite easily and keep in touch with friends. I think its different for hearing people. They wouldn't necessarily travel to see people but if you meet a Deaf person for the first time you almost kind of become friends with them and that sticks for life.

P6

One participant shared the negative side of a collectivist culture and expressed that:

It's a good thing sharing information and supporting but at the same time, telling somebody something and them telling somebody else is not that good., You can't have many secrets in the Deaf community. I'll watch things on TV like Eastenders and everyone knows everything about each other and its a bit like that with the Deaf community. But saying that, you can't win all the time can you?

P6

Another felt that the Deaf community is now made up of more smaller groups and is experiencing a reduction in collectivism:

Maybe it's less now than before because the community, I feel, is a bit weaker now. I think there is less community



feeling. There are less Deaf events happening, I feel. That will affect culture. Cohesion between different groups. When there is one group, you get cohesion but when there are smaller groups, that reduces. You have your own groups of friends don't you.

P10

### 3.7 Deaf culture

Ladd is one of the major scholars to attempt to identify and define Deaf culture and has examined a number of theories by well known theorists such as Bourdieu (1990, 1992), Keesing (1974), Williams (1976), Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952) and Turner (1990) and he concludes that the theories he examined 'are important for Deaf cultural study; they validate the perception that in cultures which are striving to maintain their own values in the face of oppression, many apparently ordinary everyday acts and beliefs *become* fundamentally political/oppositional' (Ladd 2003: 214). This is an important observation because the campaigning that Deaf people do for basic rights, which are often simply related to access to information which the wider community enjoys, can often be seen as confrontational.

Ladd goes on to admit that most of the theories he examined 'do not cover the particular situation of a Deaf culture completely surrounded and permeated by a majority culture and its materiality, where cultural transmission through ethnicity is problematic and where individual Deaf identity processes are disrupted by a particularly intense form of educational oppression' (Ladd 2003: 21). This, it would seem, was the motivation to write his book on Deaf culture; to educate the masses that there is a concept of Deaf culture which is individual to the Deaf community alone and which he refers to as 'Deafhood' (Ladd 2003).

Others discussing Deaf culture tend to refer to it in terms of specific cultural behaviours by the Deaf community. Mindess (2006) created a list:

- straight talk - direct and indirect styles of communication.
- direct personal comments - can be positive, negative or mixed.

- keeping others informed - practicality of knowing someone is leaving, sharing pertinent information, not gossip, professionals expected to respect confidentiality.
- sharing information - taboo topics like money, sex, illnesses.
- clear access to visual communication - light in the right place, no visual distractions, furniture arranged correctly.

(Mindess 2006: 83-94)

The research participants in this study also expressed what they perceive Deaf culture to be and it tended to be around certain activities which could be categorised into ten different categories; sharing a common experience and empathy, social activities, travelling, living in a visual world, use of sign language, humour, sharing information, equality, straight talking and teaching Deaf culture.

Sharing a common experience and empathy resulting in affinity was one particular aspect that was considered important in Deaf culture:

I think Deaf people share a common experience... We've got Deaf issues that we talk about, emotions and problems and barriers that we face so there's that common issue there for all Deaf people.

P1

Inside you've got a connection anyway because you're Deaf. And you've got empathy because of [experiences of] discrimination. That's a big thing... you kind of know what it's like to be a minority group as well, you know... You know exactly what that feels like. You're on the same wavelength. I mean when you've got the majority there and you're in this little group and those people in that little group are all sharing the experience of being in that little group, so you've kind of got that shared experience. So, culturally you fit in with the other people that within that minority group.

P3

If you never met a Deaf person and you suddenly meet them in an international setting, you have an immediate affinity with them. Because of those shared experiences in life and the shared experience of being Deaf.

P8

Another aspect was partaking in social activities together and being at the Deaf club:

They'll go to Deaf cultural events. It could be theatre or social events or films. It doesn't matter but loads of Deaf people will get together and use sign language at those events. Deaf people like to socialise together and mix together and go out for dinner with each other and all sign.

P1

Well, there's Deaf sports isn't there, Deaf holidays. And that's all aimed at communication. [Deaf] People feel comfortable in a group of Deaf people so they'll all go on holiday together. They'll all do sports together - football, cricket and various ones. Everybody's Deaf. They'll do activities together.

P5

Being together, going to events and planning events all around the UK and maybe Deaf people like to get together with each other. They do arrange events, they do meet up and they do get together with friends.

P6

However, in this age of technology, some people noticed that getting together in larger groups of Deaf people is becoming less frequent.

While Deaf people always used to meet at Deaf clubs, this is now not always the case due to Facebook, mobiles etc. Its easy for people to meet in pubs or clubs, when I was younger we had to meet at the Deaf club because we weren't able to contact people.

P9

Things like Deaf clubs. Thats part of culture. There's lot of evidence of that. Maybe it's less now than before because communities, I feel, is a bit weaker now. I think there is less community feeling. There are less Deaf events happening, I feel. That will affect culture.

P10

A lot of the social activities that people referred to include travelling and that is something that Deaf people will do a great deal of to keep contacts that they make in their home country and abroad.

International contacts and links. UK Deaf culture links internationally. If you think about the whole world, they've got those links with those other Deaf people around the world. If you imagine the world as a community, that's really amazing.

P8

The need to adapt to living in a visual world compared to an auditory world was something that was referred to:

I'd say tapping people or banging on the floor to get peoples' attention, waving or throwing things. All those visual things... It's a very visual culture. People look around all the time.

P4

Deaf people are so visual with emotion. You can get somebody's emotions just by looking at them. They're very visual. They use their eyes all the time, obviously. That is very much Deaf culture. That is a conversation without words. You can read peoples' emotions. You don't need to have signs. You can get so much from a person, just by looking at them and judging their expressions. You can see it in their face. It's number one. Of course there is sign language but the face...!

P8

Deaf people are very visual. They love watching TV for example. Hearing people, I suppose are the same with the radio. They'll listen to the radio but they won't necessarily take it in. Also, if you think about Deaf people, they'll have a round table and they'll move flowers out of the way so they can see each other.

P14

The use of sign language was a common thread through all the of answers from the research participants:

They share sign language, a recognised language, a preferred language of communication.

P1

Deaf culture for me really is about sign language... It's very different isn't it - sign language.

P2

Recognising BSL makes the language stronger but I think that's really what the Deaf community is about. It shows strength and acceptance of who you are and feeling

comfortable with who you are and you don't feel you have to struggle. When Deaf people are together they don't have to struggle with understanding language.

P6

Therefore, with the use of British Sign language it could be argued that the Deaf community is not disabled because if Deaf people live in an environment where the wider community use sign language, they are not in a position where their possibilities are limited. (Reinders 2000: 3) Linked to Sign Language is Deaf humour which Bienvenu (1994) recognises is 'based on people's perceptions of the world and is shared between groups of people who share similar values and belief systems' (1994: 16) and this was referenced by some of the research participants:

Hearing jokes are very different to Deaf jokes. Hearing jokes are all about words and if I don't understand then it makes me look stupid so I will often fake laughter even though I haven't understood what's been going on. So, I will fake that laughter in certain situations.

P1

Comedy... is different to hearing people.

P2

Humour is very different between Deaf people and hearing people. I mean you'll get a Deaf person laughing away at something and a hearing person just wouldn't get it.

P3

They have their own facial expression and the way they express themselves. People will use humour to tell stories. That comes from inside. It's expressive. When you express yourself it's more visual and you can actually see that happening and you re-create that and it becomes very

funny. Hearing people don't get that. They don't get that strong visual humour.

P8

Access to information is something that many were passionate about, understandably.

Yes, with hearing people I generally understand but I don't get access to information all of the time. I want information. I want access to information because I want to know what people are talking about. I get angry if I don't.

P1

Because English people access language through radio, TV and conversations but Deaf people have limited access to information and that can affect their perceptions of the world.

P15

With access comes equality and that featured quite heavily among the research participants.

It's all equal. That is Deaf culture. With a Deaf group, I'm using sign language and I'm equal. I never feel behind or left out or anything like that.

P1

The way that we describe each other is that we say 'we' so therefore we're putting ourselves in the community... Thats one influence and thats one way of cultural reference that you're the same as everybody else... as in a Deaf community.

P3

Straight talking was something that was mentioned by some of the research participants. One such comment was:

Being blunt as well. That's quite a cultural thing within the Deaf community. Being direct and blunt...

P3

Teaching people Deaf culture was felt to be of importance but one research participant said that it wasn't something you could teach.

Well, when I'm teaching level 1 and level 2 [BSL] you don't really teach culture. I mean, it's in the curriculum - Deaf culture is kind of within behaviours so, eye contact, referencing, tapping people so I'd explain that was culture. I'd just explain what it is and then in level 2 they'll tell me all about these cultural references that they've learnt from level one... people learn over time that there is things thing called Deaf culture but you don't really teach it under a subject heading.

P12

Having said this about Deaf culture, one research participant felt that this wasn't culture at all and that it was just Deaf people adjusting to the fact that they couldn't hear.

It's about difference. It's not as clear as a lot of people think. It's difficult to categorise it isn't it. To point a point on it. To put your finger on it.

*So, do you think it's about behaviour and things that happen?*



Yes, Deaf peoples' behaviour because they modify things. I don't know... for example, lots of Deaf culture will talk about interrupting but that's more about modification rather than culture or banging on the floor. That's not culture, that's modification.

*Oh! You mean because they can't hear?*

Yes, you modify behaviour. That's not cultural. I think it's hard to say exactly what is cultural behaviour. I think its modification. So, it's something to think about really and research.

P11

This is an interesting way of thinking about the behaviour of Deaf people. It could be argued that the modifications the Deaf community have made have become the culture that is recognised as Deaf centric.

### **3.8 Minority groups within the Deaf community**

Within the Deaf community, there are a number of minority groups and this is well documented by scholars within a range of publications. (Padden and Humphries 1988, Cohen, Fischgrund and Redding 1990, Swiebel 1993, Butler and Valentine et al. 2001, Ahmad, Atkin and Jones 2002 and Mindess 2006). Padden and Humphries (1988) recognise that there are minority groups within the Deaf community in relation to 'class, profession, ethnicity, or race, each of which has yet another set of distinct characteristics' (1988: 4). However, the Deaf gay community is rarely included within these minorities even though they can be viewed as a dual minority-group. Much of the literature describes the Deaf Black community in America, with regards to the fact that 'until about 1970, racial segregation in the larger society dictated that white and black deaf children in the southern states should attend separate schools' (1988: 4). This was happening for over 100 years and in over 15 southern states in America

where the schooling was described as inferior to the white Deaf attending Deaf schools. (Mindess 2006: 130)

It was not only schools that the segregation of Deaf black and Deaf white people were segregated. 'Deaf clubs, where Deaf people traditionally gathered to socialise after work and on the weekends, were also divided into Black and white. There was rarely any crossing over, even though the Black club and the white club might be located only a few blocks apart' (Mindess 2006: 130). It is recognised by Cohen, Fischgrund and Redding (1990) that 'Deafness makes one no less a member of a racial, linguistic or ethnic minority group. In fact, Deaf persons represent a variety of ethnic minorities in addition to their membership in the group community. Deaf children who are members of ethnic minorities, including Black, Hispanic, Greek, and Jewish groups, possess dual minority-group membership, often compounding their role confusion and identity crises' (Cohen and Fischgrund et al. 1990: 67-73).

The complexities of multicultural families was examined by Barbara Gerner de Garcia (1995) who has published work on Spanish-speaking families with Deaf children. She identified that 'families [who] are in a trilingual/multicultural situation that may not be recognised by most schools for the deaf. Ideas about the bilingual/bicultural nature of the Deaf community are influencing deaf education, whereas the trilingual/multicultural situation of many linguistically diverse families with deaf children is rarely addressed' (Gerner de Garcia 1995: 221). This situation is highlighted in Spanish-speaking families but this of course could apply to any multilingual/multicultural family setting.

Linguistic diversity of Asian Deaf youth is noted by Butler and Valentine et al. (2001) when examining language barriers for young Asian Deaf people. They observe that 'Asian deaf youths often have no way of developing a sense of Asian identity. Unable to communicate with their parents they can find it difficult to attend the Mosque and understand religious teachings or other cultural events. As a result professionals believe they often have no sense of their 'Asian' identity and a negative understanding of their deaf identity.' (Butler and Valentine et al., 2001) Add to this the fact that someone may also have a gay identity and the confusion and crisis is likely to be heightened.

When religion is considered, Abraham Swiebel (1993) researched Deaf people in the Jewish religion and concluded that there was 'evidence pointing to

deaf individuals with high socioeconomic status in Jewish society from as early as the first century A.D... educational opportunities for deaf people, both individually and within Jewish frameworks... legal thought regarding deaf people has been advanced for its time... [and] an overall attitude of respect towards deaf individuals in Jewish society." (Swiebel 1993: 236-237)

Research surrounding the identity of 70 young UK Asian people (mainly Pakistani Muslim) and 15 members of their families was conducted by Ahmad, Atkin and Jones in 2002 and they found that young people's identities were multiple, complex and contingent. Their findings suggested that there was a 'higher crossover between BSL and spoken language users than might be expected' also participants in the study felt that 'Deaf culture offered many advantages; but it failed to recognise and provide for religious and cultural sensitivities' (Ahmad, Atkin and Jones 2002).

On the other hand, the 'Young people found it difficult to become full members of their religious and ethnic communities' (Ahmad, Atkin and Jones 2002). Some did find that because of communication, it was difficult to access their religious teachings and communicate with family, which is an area where they may have been informally educated about the families religion. It would appear that people within multilingual and multicultural backgrounds will need to manage identities at the same time.

### **3.9 Deaf identity**

It has been said that black Deaf people, a sub-group of the Deaf community, identify with their blackness over their deafness: 'Black deaf individuals believe that society views them as black first because of the high visibility of skin color. Deafness is an invisible handicap' (Aramburo 1989: 113). It is understandable how black Deaf people would take this view, considering judgements are often made on appearances alone. Mindess (2006) identifies that the 87 percent of black Deaf people polled in 1989 identified with their Black culture first but they explained that they 'were not denying either culture, but placing them in the order of social acceptance' (Mindess 2006: 129). This is not necessarily the case when the Deaf gay community is examined because unlike the high visibility of skin colour, sexuality can be as 'invisible' as their deafness. A

majority of the research participants in this study (75%) considered their Deaf identity as more prominent in their lives. This is reflected in the following comments:

Oh! Deaf identity first. It doesn't matter - your sexuality. You know, some people don't even have sex do they? They don't even think about sex. Yes, definitely Deaf. Deafinitely. Because of communication. Definitely.

P5

Oh! Deaf identity because its so important for communication. Its just so important. I use sign language every day and so therefore my Deaf identity is more important to me. I'm gay as a person, I know, of course but I don't feel like I have to show everybody that. I'm just me and I'm just a person. Deaf is so much more important because of communication. I want full communication. I don't want to miss out on things and I want to make sure that people are aware of my needs every day as a Deaf person.

P6

Deaf! Full stop. Gay is just a part of me but I am a Deaf person and that is the most important. It doesn't matter if you're gay, straight, lesbian. It's not relevant. I am a Deaf person. I have a Deaf identity and I fit into the Deaf community.

P14

The comments above positively contradict the statement made by Corker (1996) in her book *Deaf Transitions* where she states that:

On the basis of the narratives explored in this book, and also, I have to say, on the basis of many years' participant

observation in the Deaf community and my experience in working with Deaf clients in the counselling situation, I cannot confidently place deafness at the core of the identity configuration of any Deaf person apart from those who have been exposed to the linguistic and cultural heritage of a Deaf *family* from birth. (Corker 1996: 187)

A majority of the research participants in this study were from hearing families and a majority of them express their deafness as their core identity. Some of the Deaf homosexuals interviewed also recognised both their Deaf and homosexual identity and culture however, the placing of cultures for some of them was quite difficult and could depend on different situations.

It depends on the situation. I'm not going to go up to you and say to you "I'm gay" or go up to someone and say "I'm Deaf" it really depends on the situation I'm in. I'm a Deaf person and I'm gay... If I'm with a group of gays then my gay identity or if I'm with a group of Deaf people then my Deaf identity... I can't say I am Deaf first or I am gay first. It depends on the situation and where I am. I'm flexible. I try to be flexible. We're not all the same. At the end of the day, we're all individual. We're all people.

P4

It's hard to answer, which is number one. If I'm allowed to I'll say Deaf number one and gay would be number two but ask me if I'm going on holiday or going out with friends, then being gay would be number one... Plus I've got lots of other identities too. Which means that I'm me. I go to work and I have an identity so its a multi faceted identity. I depends on who's looking at you and what you want to show them about your identity. But I would say that I am Deaf and then gay. I'm a Deaf professional, I'm a gay academic. I'm many different things.

P8

Both. But if I had to pick friends - Deaf come first. I have no loyalty to the commercial scene, but to Deaf gay individuals, more so than gay hearing people. As a Deaf bi-lingual person, I have loyalty to Deaf-friendly hearing people (boyfriend & family etc.)

P13

It would appear that people within multilingual and multicultural backgrounds will find that to be integrated within the cultures and communities that find themselves in, they will need to use these identities flexibly and according the situation they are in.

### **3.10 Summary**

Understanding the Deaf community is both complex and challenging. This is because it is seen from two perspectives; the medical and the social. An understanding of both of these will go some way in appreciating the richness of the community in question. I have highlighted the differences and the need to appreciate each. If this section of the thesis is to definitively establish how many Deaf people there are in the UK, then it fails to do so. However, what it does show is that according to the census statistics, the Deaf community would appear to be much smaller than originally thought by charities working with Deaf people and the Deaf community themselves. That said, there are questions as to how accurate these Census figures really are. Due to the comments made by various people within the community, were the Census repeated, these figures could be vastly increased. What the recent Census figures highlight is need to educate Deaf people that, if they want to emphasise the size of the community, then they should be declaring that sign language is a first and preferred language when being accounted for in national statistics.

This, in large, relates to identity and how Deaf people view themselves which, as established, it can be difficult to ascertain, when family backgrounds are considered. To be able to be accounted for effectively, responsibility falls

upon the shoulders of the people collecting the data and consultation with the Deaf community should be improved as to how this can be achieved. The question of identity and culture of the Deaf community had been discussed with some focus on minorities within the Deaf community and how identity and culture can be particularly challenging for them when multiples need to be considered.

The use of sign language is one of the defining factors for inclusion into the Deaf community and this, as well as how sign language is an identity marker will be discussed in Chapter 2.

## **4. Sign Language and Identity**

### **4.1 Introduction**

In Chapter 1, it was recognised that sign language was of significant cultural importance to the Deaf community. The linguistics of sign languages from different parts of the world is something that has been of interest to scholars in recent years and has been well documented in the USA (Stokoe 1960, 1978; Valli, Lucas & Mulrooney 2005; Wilbur 1987), UK (Collins 2007; Deuchar 1984; Sutton-Spence & Woll 1999), Australia (Johnston 1989; Johnston & Schembri 2007) and many other countries, so the aim of this chapter is not to explain the complexities of the linguistics of various sign languages, but to focus on how sign language is integral to the Deaf community in relation to identity formation for a Deaf person. 'Deaf people have their own language and their own culture, which that language generates.' (Hall 1994: 35)

### **4.2 What is Sign Language?**

There have been many definitions penned by scholars and an early one from Deuchar (1984) states that 'BSL refers to a visual-gestural language used by many deaf people in Britain as their native language. The term visual-gestural refers to both the perception and production of BSL: it is produced in a medium perceived visually using gestures of the hands and the rest of the body including the face.' (Deuchar, 1984: 1) The fact that the face plays such an important part in BSL is often a surprise to many people.

Deuchar (1984) uses the term native because she recognises that 'it is the language they know best and are most comfortable with. It may not necessarily be the first language they are exposed to, however' (Deuchar 1984: 1). This is a fundamental issue with Deaf people. Many are now educated in mainstream settings and as was discussed in Chapter 1. In addition, ninety per cent of Deaf children are born to hearing parents (Moore 1978), around eighty five per cent will attend mainstream schools (National Deaf Children's Society 2010) and as a result of being educated in



a mainstream setting and they sometimes rarely meet other Deaf people until they leave school. It is at this point that they will make a decision about the language they would prefer to use, even though the environment they may have experienced growing up in, was predominantly hearing. This is expressed by one of the research participants as follows:

I grew up oral and my parents told me I had to speak and when I was at work I used to speak, because I spoke well, various people that I would meet, it gave me confidence to speak to people. Some of course, not 100%. But if you ask me if it's my first or second language, I would say it's my first language. I would prefer to use British Sign Language.

P4

Because of the statement from participant 4, one would deduce that this person is one of the ninety percent of Deaf people born to hearing parents and that they have grown up in a mostly hearing environment. This is correct, as they go on to say that:

I was brought up in an oral school. My parents were hearing. They tried to get me to speak. I would sign a little bit. But actually acquiring BSL, I think that was a bit later. After I left school. When I met Deaf people. That's when I started to learn but before that I was quite oral. I had no links to the Deaf community. I wasn't really equal to Deaf people until I started signing.

P4

An interesting point that the mention is the fact they felt they were not really equal to Deaf people until they started signing. One thing that culturally Deaf people value is the use of BSL as a common denominator.

BSL is, for many, what makes them a community and as Kannapell (1982) reflects: 'Language choice reflects identity choice (Kannapell 1982: 27)

I do agree that in certain situations it [BSL] could be a preferred language and depending on the situation. But also it depends on who you meet. If I meet someone and they use BSL then I'll use BSL. If they speak then I'll speak. There are some Deaf people who will absolutely refuse to speak because its based on English but sometimes you have to adjust.

P4

This respondent recognises that BSL could be a preferred language but they also talk about having to adjust to accommodate language, which is something that many Deaf people have to do in their daily lives. Another research participants talked about adjusting when in a hearing environment when they said:

For me its a bit difficult because I'm kind of in both the Deaf world and the hearing world. My family is hearing and I've got lots of hearing friends. At work I talk and then I go into the Deaf community and I have to really adjust myself.

P2

The comment from Participant 4 above states that "I wasn't really equal to Deaf people until I started signing". The Deaf people that grow up in a hearing environment and mark their Deaf identity later on in life by learning sign language, may have to work at elevating their status within the Deaf community; the position they hold in the community. Butler and Valentine et al. talk about the importance of language choice being down to the individual:

If deaf people are ever to be fully integrated into British society rather than normalised or tolerated as a marginalised 'ethnic' group, there has to be increased understanding and awareness of Deaf culture and not least its language. Only then will deaf people themselves be able to have a positive self-image and be free to choose the first language that suits them as individuals best without political pressures from the Deaf community or beyond. (Butler and Valentine et al. 2001)

Crystal (2007) states that 'it is only occasionally that the adoption of a social role requires the learning of a completely different language... more usually, a person learns a new variety of language...' (Crystal 2007: 311) This could be true of members of the Deaf community who were educated in a mainstream setting and learnt to communicate in sign language that was more towards an English register; commonly known as Sign Supported English (SSE)<sup>3</sup>. Once the person reaches an age where they leave education and join the workforce as an adult, it is often then that a person will adopt British Sign Language in its truest sense and become involved in the Deaf community. It is at this point they also adopt their Deaf identity. This was echoed by one of the research participants as follows:

I grew up in the hearing world and spoke but now I've completely changed over the last 10-12 years. Although I have links with the hearing world, I'm in the Deaf community. I'm a BSL user. I'd rather be with BSL users in the Deaf community. I'd rather focus on sign language usage. When I moved to England, I became involved in the Deaf community and I met a lot of Deaf people and I learnt sign language here, I did become a

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<sup>3</sup> SSE is not a language in itself. SSE uses the same signs as BSL but they are used in the same order as spoken English. SSE is used to support spoken English, especially within schools where children with hearing impairments are learning English grammar along side their signing, or by people who mix mainly with hearing people. (Learn British Sign Language - BSL & Fingerspelling Info and Resources, 2013)

lot more involved in the Deaf community and therefore Deaf culture and Deaf identity, a positive Deaf identity followed. I identify with Deaf people... with a Deaf group, I'm using sign language and I'm equal.

P1

Crystal (2007) also observes that 'Switching from one language to another may also be a signal of distance or solidarity in everyday circumstances' (Crystal 2007: 311). It could be argued that this may happen with a Deaf person a couple of times throughout their lives in the respect that they may switch from spoken English to SSE to BSL, thereby distancing themselves from the hearing community and aligning themselves with the Deaf community. English is a constant influence on Deaf peoples' lives but Deuchar (1984) states that 'BSL used natively by deaf people is quite different from English... The only part of BSL which directly represents English words is the fingerspelling system, or manual alphabet' (Deuchar 1984: 8). Baker describes the ways in which sign language is used by the Deaf community and how that can result in the community distancing themselves from the hearing community:

When Deaf people use sign language, they are creating both distance from the hearing community and a marker of identity with the Deaf community. The inner understandings, wise sayings, stories and tales, ideas and ideals, expectations, and understandings among Deaf people have become increasingly embedded in sign language. It is sign language that often most vibrantly encapsulates the historical traditions of Deaf people and their community life and subcultures. The thoughts and experiences of Deaf people are increasingly embodied in sign languages, with Deaf people's culture, heritage and identity stored and shared through such sign languages. (Baker 2010: 163)

Deaf people using a mix of BSL, SSE, speaking and lip-reading creates a diglossic situation that occurs in sign language when a Deaf person is communicating with hearing people that can sign. Crystal (2007) describes a situation of *diglossia* as:

A language situation in which two markedly divergent varieties, each with its own set of social functions coexist as standards throughout a community. One of these varieties is used (in many localized variant forms) in ordinary conversation; the other variety is used for special purposes... It has become conventional in linguistics to refer to the former variety as *low* (L), and the latter as *high* (H). (Crystal 2007: 312)

There could be questions raised as to which language to use, but there is no doubt with the Deaf community. 'By choosing to use one language over another, deaf people make a statement about their identity. They indicate whether or not they consider themselves to be a member of the Deaf community' (Burns and Matthews et al. 2001: 198). As discussed above, when a Deaf person is conversing with a hearing person, they will adjust their register to take into consideration the fact that the person they are talking to may not be fluent in BSL and therefore use a register of sign language closer to SSE (H) which could be considered a special purpose compared to conversations with Deaf peers when BSL is used freely (L) and regarded as ordinary conversation.

However, BSL can be used in formal and informal settings and Deuchar alludes to the 'consideration of whether there was a diglossia in the British deaf community, with an 'H' variety used in formal settings, and an 'L' variety used in informal settings.' (Deuchar 1984: 149) Here she is saying that the English language would influence the 'H' variety. This is some way disregarding the persons Deaf identity by, in a way, forcing them to adopt English; the 'first' language of hearing people in Britain.

These differences in language may cause tension for a Deaf person. 'A Deaf person's position on the continuum may have some impact on their language attitudes typically there is a tension between the two languages: on the one hand, the spoken majority language is needed for social and economic survival or advancement; on the other hand, deaf people continue to use natural sign language because it plays a most important function in their lives.' (Burns and Matthews et al. 2001: 197) These tensions were highlighted by one of the research participants when he was discussing being Deaf in a hearing environment with his partner. He said that:

My partner is hearing so we go to hearing events but I don't always feel comfortable. They wouldn't make me feel left out but I feel left out because I can't follow the conversation. They do help. They try and help but I never feel it's equal. They will talk so I will lip-read and I'll get that then somebody else speaks and I've missed what they've said and I'm always behind in the conversation.

P1

In contrast to that, another research participant discussed at length the merits of being able to use a range of communication methods, including gesture. Having this spectrum of different approaches to communication is, in itself, an advantageous situation to be in, but he is providing mixed messages in what he says:

It depends if lots of people are chatting or if they are signing. Because I grew up oral, my parents were hearing, and I felt I didn't have the right language. I do now. Not back then. I was very poor at sign language. I used to use a lot of gesture. I went to Mary Hare and we had lots of gesture but later on in life it did change. I felt more confident with the language. And of course, I've got deaf children so I would say that I'd use SSE

compared to BSL. It would be a bit of a mixture, more than just English. I would probably use more SSE I would say. Now that I'm older I would use a lot more BSL because I mix a lot more with the deaf community. I wouldn't say I was 'grass roots' deaf. So, because of that, I'm quite good at sign language but I do need people to slow down sometimes and then I'll get it. If people are slow, particularly with finger spelling, if they're fast with that I just don't get it. I need that slowly. I've got the best of both worlds. I've got good English, SSE, BSL, spoken language so I can cope quite well in any situation.

P4

He states that "I've got deaf children so I would say that I'd use SSE compared to BSL." It would appear that this goes against all that is said about Deaf children learning sign language, as their first language, from their Deaf parents. (Padden 1989: 8) However, he would have had the children a long time ago when he freely admits that he was not as fluent in BSL as he says he is now. He now reflects that he now uses a lot more BSL because of mixing a lot more in the Deaf community. He does identify that he has a good command of a range of communication methods which he sees as the "best of both worlds".

### **4.3 Sign language and cultural values**

Although this study focuses on research participants from Great Britain and therefore using British Sign Language as a first or preferred language, it could be argued that the cultural values that Deaf people hold are universal. Padden (1989), when referring to cultural values held by Deaf people in the USA says that:

Certainly an all-important value of the culture is respect for one of its major identifying features: American Sign

Language. Not all Deaf individuals have native competence in ASL; that is, not all Deaf individuals have learned ASL from their parents as a first language. There are many individuals who become enculturated as Deaf persons and who bring with them a knowledge of some other language, usually English. While not all Deaf people are equally competent in ASL, many of them respect and accept ASL, and more now than, before, Deaf people are beginning to promote its use. (Padden 1989: 8)

What is significant here is that there is identified respect for the language even if its not something that someone learnt from birth from within a Deaf family. Later on in life, it is identified by Deaf people that there is a common language which is recognised and should be used and promoted so that there is equality through language can be achieved. Padden (1989) goes on to say that ASL belongs to Deaf people and allows them to take advantage of their capabilities as normal language-using human beings. Many of the respondents interviewed for this research discussed how BSL was important to them:

I'm a BSL user. I can lip-read, I can speak but I'd say I'd rather not. I'd rather be with BSL users in the Deaf community. I'd rather focus on sign language usage.

P1

Of course recognising BSL makes the language stronger but I think thats really what the Deaf community is about. It shows strength and acceptance of who you are and feeling comfortable with who you are and you don't feel you have to struggle. When Deaf people are together they don't have to struggle with understanding language.

P6



Specifically, the recognition of BSL was something that many of the research participants felt was important for the Deaf community in Britain. Some comments were as follows:

Of course, campaigning has been done and it's [BSL] been recognised as a language and that's the Deaf community that have campaigned to achieve that... it may not be one specific person but that the community as a whole that's achieved something.

P2

I think the most amazing achievement has been the recognition of BSL because there were campaigns to the government and they kept ignoring us and we organised marches, big marches, and the government, they hadn't accepted BSL, you know, not fully of course, it's half but its better than nothing isn't it. It's a step forward.

P5

I think campaigning for BSL recognition, because BSL really, it wasn't recognised for such a long time and years ago Deaf people could have given up and thought "it's not worth it" but they did carry on and it was recognised. I think thats another thing Deaf people should be proud of achieving.

P6

The reason that the recognition of BSL by the government is so important for Deaf people in Britain could be explained by observations that Padden and Humphries (2005) have made of the Deaf community in the USA.

The recognition of sign language, not by linguists or scholars, but by Deaf people themselves, was a pivotal moment. While Deaf people had been aware that their sign language met their needs and provided them with an aesthetic pleasure that only sign languages can provide, the realization that sign languages were equal to yet uniquely interesting among human languages brought Deaf people a sense of vindication and pride. (Padden & Humphries 2005: 157)

Having this sense of pride in sign language is important for Deaf people to feel equal in a society that may not always see them as such. Failure to provide services in sign language shows little respect for the Deaf community and the language they use to access information. 'To possess a language that is not quite like other languages, yet equal to them, is a powerful realization for a group of people who have long felt their language disrespected and besieged by others' attempts to eliminate it. (Padden and Humphries 2005: 157) As Burns, Matthews and Nolan-Conroy (2001) reflect, 'Languages and language varieties can serve a bonding or solidarity function; they can act as a symbol of group identity. Knowledge of a language involves a personal sense of unity with, and a set of attitudes toward the community that uses the language' (Burns and Matthews et al. 2001: 197-198).

#### **4.4 Sign Language and identity**

For many Deaf people, they find themselves in two worlds; the Deaf world and the hearing world. This creates confusion when determining an identity which is 'increasingly viewed not as a fixed label, but as a means of articulating the relationship we have with the world around us' (Kiely and Rea-Dickins et al. 2006: 2). Kannapell (1982), when viewing this from an American perspective, says that 'ASL is a powerful tool for identity in the Deaf community, along with the cultural beliefs and values that are

expressed through ASL. This suggests that ASL is the cultural language of the Deaf Community' (Kannapell 1982: 25).

This could be the same for the British Deaf community. Kannapell (1982) goes on to say that 'There is a symbolic function in relation to identity and power, and we often keep our use of ASL limited to ourselves to preserve these factors of identity and power.' (Kannapell 1982: 26) That may have been the case in the US in the early 1980s but it could be argued that this is not the case in Britain today. If it was similar to the US in the early 1980s, its good to see that the situation has changed. Signature is the leading body for qualifications in communication techniques with Deaf people and they state that:

With over 30 years experience we are a leading awarding body for qualifications in deaf and deaf-blind communication techniques. We offer 15 qualifications, all accredited by the Office of Qualifications and Examination Regulations (Ofqual), which can be studied at over 700 locations throughout the UK and Ireland. We provide teachers access to the latest training and resources to ensure you get the best experience possible whilst studying our qualifications. (Signature.org.uk 2014)

This means that more and more people will be learning sign language in Britain which will only go towards achieving equality for Deaf people through inclusion. As Charrow & Wilbur (1989) reflect when they talk about the Deaf child as a linguistic minority in the US, 'It is ASL, above all else, which truly defines the Deaf community. Native signers (Deaf children of Deaf parents) are automatically members of the deaf community' (Charrow & Wilbur 1989: 112). Therefore, it would appear that all other Deaf people, the ninety per cent born to hearing parents, are not automatically members of the Deaf community. Their Deaf identity will take a lot longer to establish when this is the case. It could be argued that the earlier Deaf people learn

sign language the earlier they will feel part of a community and recognise their Deaf identity.

However, Kannapell (1994) found that 'some students saw a combination of ASL and English, that is, a contact variety of language<sup>4</sup>, as their basic language identity. In essence, they believed that if they used a mixture of ASL and English, they were better off than those who used ASL alone' (Kannapell 1994: 46). This may apply to professional or educational situations where a person must rely on English as the more prominent language used in those situations but arguably this would be a different situation for Deaf people in the Deaf community. Corker (1996) notes this when she says that 'If we look at the functions of language – self-exploration, self-expression, social interaction with others and a conveyor of information about the environment, it seems that language must act *as a bridge between* personal and social identity rather than exist as a distinct identity type' (Corker 1996: 56).

Here in Britain there have been campaigns to be proud of sign language. Remark!, the organisation in London which is the largest Deaf-run organisation specialising in multimedia in the UK, have a charitable division which organises events for the Deaf community. In 2013, they partnered with the BDA and Islington Council to organise a BSL Pride Day and their aim was 'to celebrate our language BSL and celebrating deaf culture' (Remark.uk.com 2013). Prior to this, in 2012, the BDA were celebrating the recognition of BSL and produced some turquoise campaign ribbon badges and they said that 'we hope to see as many people as possible wearing them with pride throughout March' (BDA.org.uk 2012). Another such event which will take place this year is 'Deaf Diaspora 2014' which will celebrate its 5th year. On their website they say:

This year, Deaf Diaspora has reached its 5th birthday.  
This year, 'we wish you were here' to join us during a  
weeklong festival. Brighton and Hove city will become  
a Deaf home, a sign language world, for just one week.

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<sup>4</sup> The interdisciplinary study of the ways in which languages influence one another when people speaking two or more languages (or dialects) interact. The term contact linguistics was introduced in 1979 at the First World Congress on Language Contact and Conflict in Brussels. (Nordquist 2014)

We would like you, our Deaf and hearing people locally and across the world, to be part of that week. Deaf Diaspora coincides with the International Deaf Day hosted by World Federation of the Deaf. This festival aims to create a home, in Brighton and Hove city, where sign language is cherished, where signed language(s) and Deaf culture is at the heart of what we do. (Deafdiaspora.org.uk 2014)

These types of events are important to build community spirit and cement Deaf identity amongst the community. They are seeing somewhat of a resurgence since the traditional Deaf clubs have seen a decline. However, they appear to be taking on a more political stance in the recognition of language and the Deaf community whereas the coming together of Deaf people in the past seemed to be more social.

Generally, within the deaf community, language is seen as inextricably linked to social identity as the language or languages that deaf people are able to use or feel comfortable using will often determine the dominant social affiliations that they will make. If we view language as an identity type, we are in effect saying that it is possible, at least in theory, for someone to be Deaf and oral. Though there may well be individuals who would choose to exist in this state of personal identity, it may represent a conflict between their personal identity and their social identifications. They often exist in isolation because they are seen as socially unacceptable. This situation is, perhaps, similar to the confusion between homosexual acts and homosexual identity, with language being the 'act' that expresses our orientation towards Deafness or hearingness.' (Corker 1996: 56-57)

There are personal identity issues that need to be explored by a Deaf person. They may be asking themselves where they fit in to both the hearing world and the Deaf world. There is also the social identity which needs to be explored and which can conflict with their personal identity. If they are a Deaf person they are expected to be proficient in sign language and engage with the Deaf community. This will be difficult for someone who has grown up in a hearing world and educated in a mainstream setting. In this scenario, there would be little opportunity to develop their Deaf identity. However, this can be somewhat alleviated with the support of Deaf role models.

Thankfully, the lack of sign language-using Deaf role models was not something that was identified by some of the research participants:

Well, there are a few. There's lots of successful British Deaf people. People that you would know well through the media that have set up projects or things like that. People like Mark Nelson. He set up his own company, media company, Remark! It's great. He's young. He's set it up. He supports Deaf people. He's very good. I know a friend of mine, Paula Garfield who set up Deafinitely Theatre. Absolutely fantastic. She works really hard for the Deaf community in theatre. There are people like those in the BDA for example. They do a lot of campaigning. You couldn't say it was one particular person but the whole organisation. They empower. They campaign for rights. Again, you've got to respect people like that for helping the majority of the Deaf community. People who've raised money for good causes for example. Oliver Westbury raised money for the Deaf community which is fantastic. Again, one person who's a fantastic role model is Paddy Ladd and his research into 'Deafhood'. He's gained a PhD and he's made the community recognise Deafhood. There's quite a few out there.

P1

Although the use of sign language is not specifically mentioned, the fact that these organisations are led by people who are Deaf and the fact that the audience they target is the Deaf community, it cannot be denied that the language of BSL is an important factor in recognising these people as good role models. However, these people would be known within the Deaf community but in the wider society, they would potentially go un-noticed.

I really don't feel that there are role models because there's no Deaf people on mainstream TV.

P2

Greater visibility of the use of sign language will only enhance Deaf identity but the person doesn't necessarily need to be on TV to be a role model. Sometimes peers were discussed by the research participants. One significant comment was:

I went into year 7 at about aged 11 and there were some older boys there in year 11 and I would see a friend going out with their older brother and his friends and I would ask "How do you communicate with your brother and his friends?" and he said "Well, my brother signs and I will lip-read and we'll just chat" and I thought that was really good because really, I went to school and they were all hearing and I had hearing family and hearing friends and everything but I had my own communication methods and my world of communication but I'd never seen loads of Deaf people together all using sign language. At my mainstream, we didn't have anything like that. We'd maybe go to the Deaf club but one day, I visited her house for dinner with her family and I was really surprised. I thought it was really strange because it was a round table and

everyone was signing. It was amazing. Nobody stopped eating, they just carried on signing and it really hit me that there were more Deaf people out there and that you could use sign language.

P6

#### **4.5 Deaf Minority Groups Language and Identity**

In the case of the identity of minority groups within the Deaf community, it must first be considered what terms them a minority group and who would be included. 'The term identity literally refers to sameness. One might therefore expect that identity would be most salient when people are most similar' (Bucholtz and Hall 2004: 370). There are different language varieties in minority groups that add to the identity of the group. The most prolific example would be in the Black Deaf community. There has been a significant amount of research conducted, particularly in the USA, relating to the dialects used by the Black Deaf community from a sociolinguistic perspective. Sutton-Spence and Woll (1998) observe that:

In America, until the 1960s, Black and White children were segregated for education. Deaf clubs also had, and continue to have, a tradition of being separate, although they are no longer segregated by law. The history of segregation has led to language variations based on racial group. Black signers often know both the White and Black varieties of sign, while only the White signers often know the White signs. (Sutton-Spence and Woll 1998: 27)

The fact that the Black signers will know both varieties but the White signers will not is an interesting concept. It shows how the Black signers language would have appeared inferior to the White signers and not significant enough to learn while the Black signers would have needed to understand the White dialect to be able to function in the Deaf community. It



would have undoubtedly had an impact on the identity of the Black Deaf community. The situation is slightly different in the UK. 'There were relatively few Black people in Britain until the 1950s, and black deaf children all went to 'mixed' deaf schools, where they were often in the minority so learned the 'White' dialect of BSL' (Sutton-Spence and Woll 1998: 27). Over time, a more prominent Black variation of BSL may emerge.

Status is different from the value that a language may be to someone. 'Speakers of a minority language may have reservations about the status of their language; yet it may hold significant social value to them, and they may attribute to it qualities such as intimacy and homeliness' (Burns and Matthews et al. 2001: 196). Therefore the qualities of intimacy and homeliness may be more important than being sneered at for using a language which may be perceived as not holding as much status as spoken languages. This is where Deaf people will distance themselves from the hearing world and spoken languages. 'It is not surprising, therefore, that many Deaf people have negative feelings toward their native sign language and may even refuse to use it, particularly with hearing people' (Burns and Matthews et al. 2001: 197).

James and Woll (2004) published a chapter in a book titled *Negotiation of Identities in Multilingual Contexts* which related to racism within the Deaf community in Britain and they state that racism 'was seen as evident in the refusal of many white Deaf people to accept the new ways in which Black Deaf people expressed themselves through sign language, and in the persistent use of derogatory signs to denote aspects of Black culture' (James and Woll 2004: 147). With this in mind, a Deaf person 'of colour' may question their identity within the Deaf community. They may question which part of their identity is more prominent. Are they Black Deaf or are they Deaf Black? This question, in relation to the Deaf gay community, is discussed in chapter 4.

## 4.6 Summary

This chapter has explored how language can be such an important defining factor of the identity of an individual as well as a group and that just because

someone is born Deaf and uses sign language, it should not be assumed that they take on a Deaf identity. This is something, in many cases, that needs to be adopted through involvement in the Deaf community, as was discussed in Chapter 1, as well as the use of sign language. Burns and Matthews et al. (2001) state that the 'Use of natural sign language is a defining and non-disposable part of being 'ethnically' Deaf. Sign languages will continue to be maintained as long as there are biologically deaf people who need to use them to communicate, and as long as these people come together to form Deaf communities' (Burns and Matthews et al. 2001: 198).

It was identified in this chapter that there were feelings of inequality, when a Deaf person from a hearing family tries to integrate with the Deaf community, based on the fact that they were not a proficient in sign language compared with those who were brought up using sign language. However, it was highlighted that language choice should be down to the individual. Language choice, as recognised, can also depend on the situation the Deaf person encounters. There is often adjustments that need to be made by Deaf people in their everyday lives which it comes to the language they are forced to use. Ultimately, the Deaf person then has little choice because the default will be spoken language because that it used by the majority of society.

In 2003, the recognition of BSL as a language in its own right was a major event in the lives of the Deaf community in Britain. It was pivotal in that Deaf people could feel a sense of pride in their language and one which would now be respected. One way which would be supported is through the teaching of the language which the awarding body, Signature, oversees. Greater visibility of sign language will enhance Deaf identity and also assist minority groups within the Deaf community to assert a Deaf identity in addition to other cultural identities they ascribe to. One such additional identity would be that of their homosexual identity, which be discussed in Chapter 3.

## **5. The Gay Community**

### **5.1 Introduction**

The Deaf community has been discussed in Chapter 1 and another community that a Deaf homosexual will most likely be involved in is that of the gay community. Weeks (2000) describes a community as something that 'must be constantly reimagined, sustained over time by common practices and symbolic re-enactments which reaffirm both identity and difference... Without such reimaginings a community will die, as difference is obliterated or becomes meaningless before the onrush of history' (Weeks 2000: 185). The gay community, it could be argued, has all of these characteristics.

Sexuality is something that can be talked about openly in some situations but equally kept very private in others. Depending on the situation taking place, the people involved and the subject matter being discussed, can determine the level of privacy or candidness. Nye (1999) reflects on the subject of sexuality and declares that:

It has often been the 'real' subject of cultural, religious, and political discourses that did not dare to mention it or did not have the language for addressing it directly. We now possess both the language and the cultural temerity to discuss sexuality as straightforwardly as we like and with a frankness that would have shocked people a few decades ago. (Nye 1999: 15)

In these modern times, sexuality is discussed boldly and the subject is related to a broader range of categories than simply the act of sexual intercourse. Weeks (2000) observes that when we think of sexuality it encompasses reproduction, relationships, erotic activities, fantasy, intimacy, warmth, relation to our sense of self, our collective belongings, personal identity, political identity, sin, danger, violence and disease. It is because of the cultural temerity that Nye (1999) refers to and the fact that in Britain, we live in a

permissive society, that we now are able to discuss sexuality in the all encompassing way that Weeks (2000) refers to.

Often, sexual preference is discussed with parallels to other minority groups and the gay political movements were often compared to the feminist and racial equality which have prevailed and made significant achievements in recent years. However, there is an argument to view sexuality as a cause in its own right which is unique. This is asserted by Whisman (1996) who states that 'We must begin to recognise and utilise the very political uniqueness of sexual preference instead of relying on facile parallels with race and gender' (Whisman 1996: 124).

## **5.2 What is homosexuality?**

It is understood the the act of homosexuality has been practiced since time began and Kane (1994) defines the meaning of homosexuality as 'a label for sexual behavior between members of the same sex, which has existed since the beginning of mankind' (Kane 1994: 483). Sexual behaviour would be defined as 'any activity—solitary, between two persons, or in a group—that induces sexual arousal. (Encyclopedia Britannica 2013). These definitions of homosexuality echo the way deafness is described as the 'medical model' as seen in in the Deaf community in Chapter 1 (See appendix 1). However, homosexuality is a fairly new label because of the fact that in the late 19th and early 20th century sexologists began to categorise sex, it was then that differences began to be labelled. (Weeks 1989) Sexuality is thought of in terms of binary opposites: male—female, heterosexual—homosexual, marital—extra-marital, and each case, one of these pairs is privileged, is seen as the 'normal.' (Caplan 1987: 20).

Kane (1994) claims that there is research to suggest that 'nearly every male will have at least one homosexual experience in his life, usually during puberty' (Kane 1994: 483). This would allude to a higher number than Kinsey et al (2003) suggested, stating that 'at least 37 percent of the male population has some homosexual experience between the beginning of adolescence and old age' (Kinsey, Pomeroy, and Martin, 2003).

'People are encouraged to see themselves in terms of their sexuality, which is interpreted as the core of the self. But what is sexual in one context may not be so in another: an experience becomes sexual by application of socially learned meanings.' (Caplan 1987: 2) These sexualities will be fluid and will be determined by an individuals varying circumstances and situations and very much based upon sexual acts alone and do not consider other factors such as fluidity or sexual preferences.

Before the scientific construction of "sexuality" as a positive, distinct, and consecutive feature of individual human beings — a person's sexual *acts* could be individually evaluated and categorized, but there was no conceptual apparatus available for identifying a person's fixed and determinate sexual *orientation*, much less for assessing and classifying it. (Halperin 1990: 229)

Sexual orientation has to do with the sex of our preferred sex partners. More specifically, it is the trait that predisposes us to experience sexual attraction to people of the same sex as ourselves (*homosexual, gay, or lesbian*), to persons of the other sex (*heterosexual or straight*), or both sexes (*bisexual*) (Levay 2011: 1). Similarly, Savin-Williams (1990) recognises that sexual orientation is 'a consistent, enduring self-recognition of the meanings that sexual orientation and sexual behaviour have for oneself' (Savin-Williams 1990: 3). This definition is broad and all encompassing but specifically referring to homosexuals, orientation would be the feelings towards someone of the same sex and behaviour would be the homosexual act with the person of the same sex.

This can be seen as different to 'gay', which is where homosexual men 'have adopted 'gayness' as their lifestyles. Gay people usually live in large cities and settle in predominantly gay communities, where their lifestyle can be tolerated' (Kane 1994: 483). This is most common in London. This is more akin to the 'social model' paralleled to the Deaf community in Chapter 1.

In the times proceeding the decriminalisation of homosexuality as a result of the Sexual Offences Act 1967, the larger cities, particularly London,

'simultaneously offered queer men some indication of where and how they could evade surveillance. Police procedures produced and institutionalised a particular geography of danger and safety, publicity and privacy, secrecy and disclosure, within which queer open culture could take hold and develop' (Houlbrook 2005: 37). This still remains, to a large degree, the situation today. Solace is sought in larger cities and that's why homosexuals will migrate to them. There is also a sense of anonymity where a community can be built. Weeks (2000) states that:

Because homosexuality is not the norm, is stigmatized, that a sense of community transcending specific differences has emerged. It exists because participants in it feel it does and should exist. It is not geographically fixed. It is criss-crossed by many divisions. But a sort of diasporic consciousness does exist because people believe it exists. (Weeks 2000: 183)

It may also be the case that people want to believe community exists to feel that sense of belonging to a group of like-minded people, which they may feel they don't achieve in society in general. Within this group, individuals can gain the confidence to think and act for themselves, thereby shaping behaviours and achieving goals within the community. Weeks (2000) refers to this as 'an imagined community, an invented tradition which enabled and empowers' (Weeks 2000: 192) Imagined or not, it has been created and probably for the good of the community.

### **5.3 Statistics on homosexuality**

Like the Deaf community and the Deaf gay community, it is difficult, if not almost impossible to quantify the gay community. There are a few reasons for this; one being that there are no census figures available. Another would be the fluid nature of sexuality.

'Numbers and geographical concentration are vital conditions for the growth of politicised sexual identities, but these only become crucial where

there is a felt sense of oppression to combat.' (Weeks 1985: 193) However, when these figures are not available, this invisibility creates difficulties in ascertaining the exact size and composition of the homosexual population. Various data exists regarding the estimated number of people in the UK who identify as homosexual. This data stems from a range of sources such as AVERT (1990; 2013), Durex (2009), Stonewall (2012) and the Office for National Statistics (2010), but it must be acknowledged that all of these figures are estimates due to the fact that there are no official census statistics available regarding sexual orientation. Stonewall estimates that 5–7 per cent of the population is homosexual and this estimate is accepted by government agencies. (Knocker 2012)

A source of data is that collected through the National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles which is conducted every ten years. The latest results available that are published by AVERT.org are that of the nearly 19,000 people surveyed between 1989 and 1990, the male respondents who had ever had a sexual experience, not necessarily including genital contact, with a partner of the same sex was 5.3 per cent. This was repeated in 2000 by asking just over 11,000 people and the number had increased to 8.4 per cent.

The number who had ever had sex with a same sex partner, including genital contact was 3.7 per cent in 1990 and 6.3 per cent in 2000 and the number who had had a same sex partner in the last five years was 1.4 per cent in 1990 and 2.6 per cent in 2000.

These figures clearly show a rise in numbers in each category and this would indicate that actual incidences of same sex activity or relationships are on the increase or that peoples attitudes to disclosure are changing and they are more willing to be open about their sexual behaviour. AVERT.org go on to state:

In 1990, 93.3% of men said they had only ever had sexual attraction towards the opposite sex, whilst by 2000 this had fallen to 91.9%. 93.6% of women in 1990 said they had only ever been attracted to men, but by 2000 this had dropped to 88.3%. From this we can therefore deduce that 11.7% of women and 8.1% of men have felt a sexual attraction towards the same sex at least once in their lives.

(AVERT 1990)

The National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles survey took place again between September 2010 and August 2012<sup>5</sup> and 15,162 men and women aged between 16 and 74 were interviewed. The data released showed that the percentage of the the population aged between 16 and 44 years of age who had ever had same-sex experience had dropped to 7 per cent. However, the percentage who had had same-sex experience with genital contact remained at 5 per cent. (Sexual attitudes and lifestyles in Britain: Highlights from Natsal-3 2013)

A higher number of respondents in *The British Sex Survey 2009* conducted by Durex, the condom manufacturer, said they had participated in a same sex relationship (9.35% of 11,000 people). However, they do not state what percentage are men or women. Numerous correspondence were sent to Durex to seek to clarify this date, yet no response was forthcoming.

Because the data from Durex and AVERT indicate a larger number of the population potentially identifying as gay, it could be questioned as to whether the ONS data is the 'reliable sources of data on sexual orientation' it professes to be in its report. ONS quote Betts (2008) and state that higher estimates 'should be treated with caution primarily because it is based on the findings of a number of studies utilising different methods of administration and conducted among differing sampling populations measuring different dimensions of sexual orientation.' (Joloza and Evans et al. 2010: 15) Chapter 6 in this thesis estimates of the number of Deaf gay people proposed based on the estimated number of Deaf people and the estimated number of people who identify as gay. By doing this, the size of the Deaf gay community can be projected, albeit in a speculative way.

In 2007, because laws and subsequently policies in the UK change from time to time and because of ever changing social attitudes, the ONS found that there was 'an increasing demand for data on sexual orientation to meet legislative requirements' (Joloza and Evans et al. 2010: 5). They go on to state that 'this increased demand for data relating to sexual orientation was from a

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<sup>5</sup> The full articles can be found in The Lancet ([www.thelancet.com/themed/natsal](http://www.thelancet.com/themed/natsal)) and details of the study methodology are on the Natsal website ([www.natsal.ac.uk](http://www.natsal.ac.uk)).



range of potential users including both central and local government, public service providers, lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) service providers and both individual researchers and research organisations.' (Joloza and Evans et al. 2010: 5).

As a result, the ONS Sexual Identity Project was established with the following objectives:

- To develop a question on sexual identity
- To test the question and implement
- Provide user guidance in implementation for use by other researchers

(Haseldon and Joloza 2009: 5)

The need for such data was somewhat politically driven and would appear to be slow in materialising considering that Weeks (1985) identified gay identities 'as much *political* as personal or social identities' (Weeks 1985: 201) years before the Sexual Identity Projects inception.

The ONS sought to devise a question on self perceived sexual identity following consultation with experts, LGB groups, academics and focus groups involving a cross section of the public. This consultation was based on these peoples understanding and acceptance of the question proposed by the ONS. There were four main objectives from these consultations:

- Collect reliable data.
- Use easily understood terminology.
- Maintain confidentiality.
- Develop a question that would be accepted by both interviewers and respondents alike.

(Joloza and Evans et al. 2010: 6)

The reason the ONS wanted to focus on identity rather than orientation was based on the factor above which highlights that identity can change throughout a persons lifetime and that discrimination and disadvantages can be experienced by people based on their sexual identity. Recognising the fluidity of sexual identity, they also wanted to capture data on how the respondents viewed themselves at the time of the questionnaire. They did accept however,

that 'no single question would capture the full complexity of sexual orientation. A suite of questions would be necessary to collect data on the different dimensions of sexual orientation, and to examine consistency between them at the individual level' (Joloza and Evans et al. 2010: 6).

In 2010, the ONS collected experimental data from its Integrated Household Survey (IHS) between April 2009 and March 2010 in which it claimed that 0.9 per cent (466,000) of adults in 2010 identified themselves as gay or lesbian compared to heterosexual people of which there was an estimate of 94.2 per cent. A total of 4.3 per cent responded with *other, don't know/refusal* or *Non response*.<sup>6</sup> Later in the report, it stated that of the male population, 0.6 per cent (317,812) identified as homosexual. (Joloza and Evans et al. 2010) In 2012 the questionnaire was repeated and 1.5 per cent of men identified themselves as homosexual compared to heterosexual men, of which there was 93.2 per cent. The total population had risen therefore the estimated number of men identifying as homosexual was 370,600. (Office for National Statistics, 2013)

'Other' was a category offered and could possibly include people who may not feel any sense of sexual identity at all and who could then identify as asexual. Similarly, there may have been people who disagree with the simplistic view that society has of splitting men and women which is known as gender binary. It is also possible that a certain percentage of the people being surveyed, may not have understood the terminology.

'Don't know' was coded by the interviewers when the respondent spontaneously reacted with "don't know" and refusal was when the eligible respondent was completely silent or reacted with an indication of embarrassment or **offence**. No assumptions were made as to a persons sexual orientation even if it was likely to be a certain category. For the purposes of this study, only figures where 'gay' is included in the data will be included.

### 5.3.1 Sexual identity by age group.

In 2010, a majority of the eligible respondents who identified as gay/lesbian were aged 25-44 (50.2%) compared to 27.3 per cent being 45-54, 16.8 per cent

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<sup>6</sup> Other is a valid response by the participants.

aged 16-24 and only 5.7 per cent being over the age of 65. It may be noteworthy, that of the respondents over the age of 65, a large proportion (25.1%) expressed 'Don't know/refusal' as an answer. (Joloza and Evans et al. 2010) This may be because they found the question offensive or that they were not as liberal about sexual identity as people of a younger age group may be. In 2012, the age ranges had changed slightly so the largest age group was 16-29 (29.8%) followed equally by the 25-34 year olds and the 35-39 year olds (26.3%) the the 50-64 year olds (12.2%) and lastly the over 65s at 5.3 per cent. (Office for National Statistics, 2013) The most notable change here was the younger age range was now the group who identified themselves as homosexual.

### **5.3.2 Ethnicity, Religion and Health**

The figures for ethnicity and religion in 2010 were grouped as gay/lesbian/bisexual. In the survey, this questions was asked after the one relating to how people identify themselves as in trials, the ONS found that 'the proportion of respondents reporting to be heterosexual increased when sexual identity was asked after the religion question'. A vast majority – 93.2 per cent, of the eligible number of respondents were white and 65.5 per cent followed a religion. 80.8 per cent of gay/lesbian people were perceived to be in good health with a high percentage having never smoked cigarettes or have given up smoking (64.6%). Figures for 2012 were not published in the Key Findings statistical bulletin.

### **5.3.3 Qualifications and Employment**

The 2010 report stated that 38.4 per cent of the gay/lesbian population have qualifications to degree level or equivalent and therefore, not surprisingly, most were in the employment age range of 16-64 were employed (74.5%) with 48.8 per cent holding managerial positions. Figures for 2012 were not published in the Key Findings statistical bulletin.

### 5.3.4 Domesticity

In 2010, 63.2 per cent of the gay/lesbian/bisexual people were single or never married compared to 28.7 per cent who were married, living with a spouse or currently or previously in a civil partnership. 91.9 per cent of the gay/lesbian people had no dependent children in the household. However, 43.2 per cent of eligible respondents said they were cohabiting which is defined as living as a couple but not married to each other or in a civil partnership. The largest proportion of gay/lesbian/bisexual people were living in London (2.2%) and the lowest proportion in Northern Ireland (0.9%). This concurs with Kane (1994) who stated that homosexuals usually live in large cities. (See earlier in this chapter). Figures for 2012 were not published in the Key Findings statistical bulletin.

In the end, the question of sexual identity did not appear on the list of questions on the 2011 National Census because after consultation, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) stated that they had 'significant concerns surrounding the issues of privacy, acceptability, accuracy, conceptual definitions and the effect that such a question could have on the overall response to the Census' (Wilmot 2007: 1).

### 5.4 Equality Act 2010

The particular legislation referred to by the ONS is the Equality Act which came into force in the United Kingdom on 1st October 2010. This Act replaced all previous anti-discrimination laws so that means that they now all fall under one Parliamentary Act. This Act covers nine protected characteristics which the Equalities and Human Rights Commission define as:

- Age - belonging to a particular age or range of ages.
- Disability - a physical or mental impairment which has a substantial and long-term effect of that persons ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities.
- Gender reassignment - the process of transitioning from one gender to another.
- Marriage and civil partnership - the union of a man and a woman or same sex

couples.

- Pregnancy and maternity - the condition of being pregnant and the period after birth linked to maternity leave in the work context and the 26 weeks after birth in the non-work context including when a woman is breastfeeding.
- Race - a group of people defined by their race, colour, and nationality (including citizenship) ethnic or national origins.
- Religion and belief - religious and philosophical beliefs including lack of belief.
- Sex - man or woman.
- Sexual orientation - whether a person's sexual attraction is towards their own sex, the opposite sex or to both sexes.

(Equalityhumanrights.com, 2012)<sup>7</sup>

The research participants at the core of this current study are Deaf gay men who would be protected by at least three of these characteristics; Disability, Sex and Sexual Orientation. However, they could also be protected by three others; Marriage and Civil Partnership, Race and Religion and Belief'. One characteristic important to this study is Sexual Orientation. It is a complex area as it can stem from:

- Sexual attraction - feelings for and interest in another person based on the way they look, smell, move or sound.
- Sexual behaviour - whether a person has partners of the same sex or not.
- Sexual identity - how people see themselves. This may not match how they behave or who they are attracted to and can sometimes change throughout a persons lifetime.

(Joloza and Evans et al. 2010: 6)

## 5.5 The defining factors for inclusion into the gay community

A 'defining characteristic of gay identity is the focus on sexual object choice, or who you have sex with, as the primary and singular defining factor... Gay

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<sup>7</sup> Further information relating to the protected characteristics included in the Act can be found at: <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/part/2/Chapter/1>

identity then is defined by a conscious acknowledgement of a "man" who desires to have sex with other "men". (Manalansan 2003: 23)

Reflecting upon the view that Mansalan shares, the conscious acknowledgement of sexual desire is intrinsic in the formation of a gay identity. However, nowadays, not all members of the gay community feel they have to flaunt their sexuality or in fact even class themselves as a member of a community based on sexual orientation because of society's acceptance of homosexuality. Part of the reason for this is because of what is stated above, increasing numbers of people are identifying as homosexual. This was not always the case. 'Despite the long-standing taboo against homosexuality, social conditions have varied enormously, and many homosexual people have been content to 'pass for straight' throughout the century.' (Weeks 1985: 193)

Passing for straight was not always the case. In Chapter 4, Polari is examined at length. This was the slang used by the gay community which was often linked to campness which now tends to be rejected by the gay community because 'among some gay people, camp is regarded as inadequate gender performance that is too closely associated with homophobic representations of gay men' (Cox 2002: 168).

As stated above with the coming out process, actually accepting that an individual is a homosexual usually results in them becoming a member of the gay community. This process, as Gonsiorek (1995) reflects, is usually by choice but should be conducted with careful consideration. 'With gay and lesbian individuals, disclosure of minority status is usually optional; the choices are more complex. One may not necessarily disclose: the psychological task involves not only considering a range of responses should disclosure occur, but weighing the pros and cons of nondisclosure' (Gonsiorek 1995: 40). The reason that the minority status is optional as homosexuality, in some way similar to deafness, is hidden which contrasts to However, this is not always a choice as one of the research participants states later in this chapter.

Acceptance and an appreciation of and inclusion with elements of gay culture would identify a member of the gay community. These, as discussed below, can include such elements as political activism, social activities, the arts and literature.

## 5.6 Gay culture

### 5.6.1 Politics

Political activity has always been an important part of the desire for realisation of equality for gay people. Organisations such as the Gay Liberation Front were fundamental in the fight for rights for gay people. They were formed after the Stonewall Riots 45 years ago in New York. This is famously where the revolution appeared to begin. The riots broke out as a result of harassment by police of customers frequenting The Stonewall Inn in Greenwich Village. As a result, support for gay rights began to increase and groups were set up to fight for the cause.

Gay-activist leaders, leftists all, were enemies of mainstream culture who insisted that gays were the vanguard of a revolution against capitalism and, indeed, against the entire premise and project of Western civilization; and yet the more sophisticated of them held up as heroes of the “community” (Bawer 2013).

Today, activism still plays a part in the gay community, although this can often be forgotten because of the relaxed society we live in today. However, Stonewall in the UK is well known for its campaigning and lobbying.

Some major successes include helping achieve the equalisation of the age of consent, lifting the ban on lesbians and gay men serving in the military, securing legislation allowing same-sex couples to adopt and the repeal of Section 28. More recently Stonewall has helped secure civil partnerships and ensured the recent Equality Act protected lesbians and gay men in terms of goods and services. (Stonewall.org.uk 2014)

### 5.6.5 Bars

Not everything linked to the gay community must be political. Myslik (1996) claims that 'queer spaces' of which bars could be viewed, play a 'social,

emotional, cultural and symbolic' (Myslik 1996: 166) role in the lives of homosexuals. It was really the 1970s and 1980s when pubs bars and clubs opened to cater for the increasing numbers of homosexuals. In London, this started around Earls Court with the Coleherne. Because the community is diverse, so then are the bars that were opened to cater for such diversity.

Not all gay bars are the same. Some like private clubs, and some very mixed. Some are run by Queens, who cruised the customers and gossip like fish-wives. There will be a continuous soundtrack of gay disco music, which gets even the most sedentary type tapping his foot. The more liberated and energetic ones dance minimally on the spot, trying to look cool and part of the 'scene'. Other bars have no music at all, just hubbub, a mixture of serious and catty conversation, the latter punctuated with pearls of inane hysterical laughter. (Pickles 1984: 38)

Today's gay scene in London is primarily centred around Soho. However, with the question has been raised as to whether, in today's more liberal society, specific venues catering for the gay community are needed. Gary Henshaw who runs a group of bars in London is quoted as saying:

Laws have changed, but not all attitudes have. And no matter how liberated things have become, people still want their own space. That's why Irish bars, sports bars, music bars are still popular, you want to mix with your own type of people. (Hotson 2014)

Social media and relaxed attitudes will undoubtedly have an affect on the actual need for spaces exclusively targeted to the gay community but there is an argument that the gay bar will still exist for the gay community. As Thomas (2011) asks, 'If the gay bar disappears, where will we learn to dance? Where will we realize that we're not alone? Where will we go to feel normal?' (Thomas, 2011).



### 5.6.3 Drag

Drag has always been an important part of gay culture and is recognised and is also important within the Deaf gay community. (See Chapter 6) The term refers to the 'clothing which is characteristic of one sex and worn by the other, although it is mainly used to refer to the female dress that a man occasionally wears' (Gonzalez 2008: 231). Wanting to entertain and perform in drag is not an easy thing to do. Many work for no remuneration but still have to purchase clothing and accessories in which to look authentic.

Most will portray a woman in varying degrees from the very authentic to the theatrical 'dame' that is seen in pantomime. In addition, 'there is a form of drag that doesn't require shaving, and it's called "bear" or "skag" drag. In this form of drag, the queens keep their facial hair and apply makeup around it' (Bartolomei 2013). A now famous one of this group, would be the recent winner of the Eurovision Song Contest; Conchita Wurst from Germany.<sup>8</sup>

### 5.6.4 Literature

There were some specialist bookshops established to stock works that would be of interest to the gay community. The only one remaining in the UK is *Gay's The Word* which opened in 1979 in Marchmont Street in London. However, it almost closed in 2007 because of rent rises. A similar situation occurred again in 2010. It is recognised that a bookshop is not there just to sell books but is often seen as a community space. (PinkNews.co.uk 2010) 'As much as the shop acted as a safe-place for the LGBT community, it also helped straight people in the city. Family members of newly out sons or sisters often came into the store for advice' (Rogers 2012).

'First-rate gay authors such as Alan Hollingshurst continue to write about gay protagonists, but fewer gay people seem to feel driven to read them, even as more straight readers feel perfectly comfortable doing so' (Bawer 2013). However, works from the likes of Hollingshurst and others such as Armistead Maupin and with his *Tales of the City* series, Edmund White and Michael

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<sup>8</sup> See: [www.conchitawurst.com](http://www.conchitawurst.com)

Cunningham all provide a form of education regarding gay issues, identity and the gay community.

In the political section above, Bawer (2013) refers to the leftist gay-activist leaders and acknowledges that the champions of gay culture were literary figures such as Oscar Wilde and W.H. Auden, 'who were pillars of Western civilization and mainstream culture and whose own politics, in many cases, were hardly leftist' (Bawer 2013). He reflects that Wilde as well as Tennessee Williams, Truman Capote and Gore Vidal 'shocked audiences from time to time by the sheer act of acknowledging in their works the existence of homosexuality and the humanity of homosexuals' (Bawer 2013).

### **5.7 Minorities within the gay community**

There are minority groups within the gay community. One such group would be Black homosexuals. 'Black Gay Pride' is something that has emerged to celebrate Black and gay culture because of feelings of exclusion from the black community and the gay community. There are now organisations promoting equality for black gay people such as the *Center for Black Equality* in the USA who's vision is to 'build a global network of LGBT individuals, allies, community-based organizations and prides dedicated to achieving equality and social justice for Black LGBT communities through Health Equity, Economic Equity and Social Equity (Center for Black Equity 2014).

Closer to home, UK Black Pride has a mission statement which states: 'UK Black Pride promotes unity and co-operation among all Black people of African, Asian, Caribbean, Middle Eastern and Latin American descent, as well as their friends and families, who identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual or Transgender' (Ukblackpride.org.uk, 2014). However, as Weeks (1987) reflects, 'many black homosexuals prefer to identify primarily as 'black' rather than 'gay' and to align themselves with black rather than gay political positions' (Weeks 1987: 43).

Keogh, Henderson and Dodds (2004) published the results of research into two ethnic minorities in the UK; Black Caribbean and Irish. They found that 'the experiences of UK-born Black Caribbean men and White Irish migrants are markedly different despite growing up within similar types of social institutions

and both belonging to ethnic minorities in London' (Keogh, Henderson and Dodds 2004) They claim that:

To assert that an ethnic identity takes precedence over gay identity, that a man is say, Black first and gay second is to misrepresent how gay men from ethnic minorities live their lives. A man has an ethnic identity and a gay identity (and other identities besides). His challenge is to construct a life which allows him to make the most of these legacies while preserving what is important for him. Our challenge is to learn from his experience rather than asserting a hierarchy of identity. (Keogh, Henderson and Dodds, 2004)

## 5.8 Gay identity

Weeks (2000) claims that identity politics 'became a defining characteristic of the new sexual movements from the early 1970s onwards, and the question of identity has been the central issue for lesbians and gays in both everyday life, collective self-assertion – and endless academic debate.' (Weeks 2000: 240) The sexual movements Weeks refers to would be such organisations as the Gay Liberation Front<sup>9</sup> and Queer Nation. Jagose (1996) recognises that they were both 'committed fundamentally to the notion of identity politics in assuming identity as the necessary prerequisite for effective political intervention.' (Jagose 1996: 77)

Sexual identity is a form of social identity, and in the case of lesbians and gays it has often been formed in the face of stigma, shame and exclusion. It goes beyond mere sexual object choice and desire. (Morrish and Sauntson 2007, p. 4)

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<sup>9</sup> See: <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/pwh/glf-london.asp>

Fortunately, the gay community had continued to fight against that stigma, shame and exclusion to assert their identity and reinforce that being gay is not just about sexual activity.

Gay identity has become more than just homosexuality, same-sex desire, and sexual acts. In the three decades since Stonewall, it has become evident that gay identity has meant all these things and more. (Manalansan 2003: 23)

Before someone can accept their gay identity, they must first go through a process of exploring and coming to terms with that identity. This process is what is known as the 'coming out' as a homosexual. Savin-Williams (1990, 1998, 2001 and 2005) has written extensively on the coming out process of gay and lesbian youth. He claims that 'Although a public declaration of this status [sexual identity] is not inherently necessary for sexual identity, there must be some level of personal recognition of this status. Affirmation, to varying degrees, may or may not follow' (Savin-Williams 1990: 3).

Affirmation can happen but many homosexuals will not reveal their sexual identity. They may be closeted<sup>10</sup> and never choose to be open about their sexuality, depending on their circumstances. When and if an individual feels it is appropriate to come out, exploration of their homosexual identity will begin. Morrish and Sauntson (2007) explain that 'identity is constructed and may be projected -- most of the time intentionally, but it may also be concealed contingently when the individual feels this is necessary. Clearly those who are members of a sexual minority are also members of other communities as well, and we might all avow several, sometimes contradictory, identities. (Morrish and Sauntson 2007: 4)

As was discussed earlier, the average age that the research participants in this study came out as homosexual was almost 23, which is higher than the age at which Stonewall are claiming younger gay people come out now (See Methodology). 'More and more gay people today are recognizing their gayness

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<sup>10</sup> A range of behaviors and psychological mechanisms used to avoid knowledge of or discussions about either one's own homosexuality or that of others. (Drescher, 2012 p4)

at astonishingly young ages, and they wear their gayness with a remarkable lightness' (Bawer 2013). Coming out is not always an easy thing to do. Some people chose to come out but others are forced.

Well, really, I was forced to come out. It wasn't by choice. It was because of the situation that happened in my life. I was forced to come out and be honest with who I am. I was out to my family first. Friends, no, I was still closeted.

P1

For many people, the coming out process can be a long process.

My brothers and grandparents, 14... [My friends] a bit later. probably about 18... I was quiet about it for a long time. My family knew but none of my friends until I was about 18.

P1

Well, I realised something was different when I was about 12 or 13. So I knew myself because I moved to my secondary school and people kind of... you know... I was different from everybody else but I didn't quite know how to say it... at about 18 or 19 my parents found out that I was gay.

P12

It can also be quite a frightening time.

You have to remember, it was quite awful to be gay. Now it's more acceptable but that time, it was very frightening, so I kept it secret.

P5

I was really frightened so I just kept quite.

P12

Certain life experiences can play a significant role. Cox (2002) examined how holiday plays a 'significant role in the cultural construction of differing gay identities' (Cox 2002: 151-152). He claims that holidays can challenge and change sexual identities and cultures and ultimately contribute to identity development as a result of exploration of identity whilst on holiday and away from the lifestyle played out daily. Similarly, Hughes (2002) states that because of such factors as disapproval by society in general, 'Being away from home gives the opportunity to be gay in a way that many people cannot experience at home or in work' (Hughes 2002: 178). This would most likely only be achieved with like-minded people in locations where such disapproval is lesser than at home and a sense of security can be realised.

Anonymity is important when someone is exploring their gay identity and being on holiday provides an opportunity for this. Hughes (2002) goes on to say that 'many gays will choose to travel in search of an anonymous environment in which to be gay. Gays may not frequent local gay pace because of the fear of discovery and may choose to 'be gay' elsewhere' (Hughes 2002: 178). As a consequence of exploring this environment that Hughes refers to, Cox (2002) observes that as a result of the time spent away, people may initiate a change in their life upon returning. 'For those gay people who are denied space to be gay in their lives at home, finding gay spaces on holiday may provide 'a turf' – a space to identify with other gay people in ways which may not be possible at home' (Cox 2002: 161-162). The home situation may be one in which they face 'stigma, shame and exclusion' (Morrish and Sauntson 2007: 4) because of their sexual identity, in a similar way that Deaf people face exclusion because of barriers to communication.

It was identified in Chapter 1 that the Deaf community is a collectivist society with shared experiences. Similar can be said for the gay community and as Morrish and Sauntson (2007) reflect, 'a sense of community is formed around shared knowledge, experience and access to power within society and strategies of visibility' (Morrish and Sauntson 2007: 4). The Deaf community may be visible in society but it could be argued that they do not share the access to power the gay community might. (See Padden & Humphries, 1988)

Savin-Williams (1990) defines identity as 'a consistent, enduring self-recognition of the meanings that sexual orientation and sexual behaviour have for oneself' (Savin-Williams 1990: 3). This definition is broad and all encompassing but specifically referring to homosexuals, orientation would be the feelings towards someone of the same sex and behaviour would be the homosexual act with the person of the same sex.

As Jagose (1996) reflects on identity, 'The word 'identity' is probably one of the most naturalised cultural categories each of us inhabits: one always thinks of one's *self* as existing outside all representational frames, and as somehow marking a point of undeniable realness' (Jagose 1996: 78). In essence, what Jagose is saying is that we consider ourselves individual for the most part. We also recognise that our own identity is personal to us even though, on occasions, we may identify with a particular group which can, at times, prove advantageous. Identifying as a minority, communities can be constructed which will result in recognition and equal rights within society as whole.

Identities are fluid and can be constructed to suit a purpose. This is asserted by Cox (2002) who maintains that 'the desire and ability of gay people to be able to reinvent themselves on holiday raises questions about the formation of a person's identity, suggesting that identity can be formed and then reformed, thereby supporting notions that sexual identity is fluid and ever-changing' (Cox 2002: 164). This is echoed by Hughes (2002) who asserts that:

There is a common assumption that the homosexual is defined by sexual activity. There is though a distinction between homosexual activity and homosexual orientation; the former is probably more widespread than is the latter. Some men may occasionally have same-sex sex but may not identify as gay, and they may have opposite-sex partners or spouses; others may identify as gay but not be sexually active. Sexuality is a very fluid concept and being homosexual is ultimately a self-defined category. (Hughes 2002: 176)

Weeks' (1985) perspective is that 'we are increasingly aware that sexuality is about flux and change, that what we call 'sexual' is as much a product of language and culture as of nature' (Weeks 1985: 186). More recently, the term queer is used as an overarching label of someone not confirming to heteronormativity or any other such label prescribed by society. 'Though the term 'queer' encapsulates a plurality of meanings, it primarily refers to the rejection of binary categorizations such as man/woman and gay/straight. Instead the multiplicity and instability of identity labels in general is emphasized' (Mottier 2008: 111).

Queer 'exemplifies a more mediated relation to categories of identification. Access to the post-structuralist theorisation of identity as provisional and contingent, coupled with a growing awareness of the limitations of identity categories in terms of political representation, enabled queer to emerge as a new form of political identification and political organisation' (Jagose 1996: 77) Queer is most definitely self-identification rather than someone else observing your characteristics and assigning you with a particular label and can involve 'an emphasis on inclusiveness and solidarities around diversity' (Mottier 2008: 112) Weeks (2000) refers to solidarity when discussing community and states that solidarity 'empowers and enables, and makes individual and social action possible' (Weeks 2000: 185) Solidarity, to some, could be perceived as rebellion.

Culturally, queer theory involves an emphasis on 'permanent rebellion' and subversion of dominant social meanings and identities... Instead of promoting assimilation into mainstream society, queer theory aims radically to transform the social order by destabilizing not only the taken-for-grantedness of heterosexual norms, but also stable, biologized understandings of gay and lesbian identity as well as gender. Gender and sexual identities are, it is argued, fluid and unstable.' (Mottier 2008: 111)



## 5.9 Summary

It has been shown in this chapter that sexual preference is discussed with parallels to other minority groups and causes such as feminism and racial equality but there is an argument to view sexuality in its own right because of its uniqueness. Homosexuality from both the physical and social perspectives have been outlined and the difference between orientation and preferences have been explained. This is seen as important when it comes to identity formation.

Like the Deaf community and the Deaf gay community, an estimate of the numbers of homosexuals has been attempted to be realised but because of a lack of consistent data, this is impossible to quantify. As yet, this is not information that the National Census the UK requests however, homosexuals are protected under current legislation in the UK by means of the Equality Act 2010.

Defining factors for inclusion into the Deaf community have been examined which largely centres around, who a person is sexually active with and acceptance of sexual identity by an individual. Some elements of gay culture were highlighted, including political activity, bars, drag, and literature. How these interweave in intrinsic in the formation of an overarching gay culture.

It is recognised that there are minority groups within the gay community and some of these minority groups have been discussed. Lastly, gay identity has been covered at length including how political movements have been instrumental in the construction a gay identity. The appreciation that sexual identity is somewhat fluid and sometimes takes a considerable amount of time for an individual to form has been appreciated.

## **6. The Deaf Gay Community**

### **6.1 Introduction**

The research carried out in order to complete this study has focused on the Deaf community and culture as well as the gay community and culture. Some Deaf homosexuals will straddle both the Deaf community and culture as well as the gay community and culture. Mindess (2006: 79) emphasises that 'every culture is made up of individuals, and within each culture there exists variations shaped by the background and personality of its members... regional variations exist, as do individual differences'. The individual differences that Mindess (2006) refers to could include members of the Deaf community who identify as homosexual. Hence, exactly because of the collectivist culture of the Deaf community, as Hughes (2002) underlines, being homosexual is a characteristic that many people will not admit to and will conceal (Hughes 2002: 176).

One thing that is common for both Deaf people and homosexuals is that most grow up in familial cultures different to themselves; Deaf people in hearing families and homosexuals in heterosexual families. This is likely to result in isolation, loneliness, invisibility and oppression. Normalisation is desired and therefore families will do their utmost to make the child 'hearing' and heterosexual. As a result, there tends to be a two-phase coming out process for Deaf homosexuals; one as a Deaf person and one as a homosexual.

This chapter intends to attempt to quantify the Deaf gay community taking into account the difficulties it was to achieve that in Chapter 1 with the Deaf community and Chapter 3 with the gay community. Then, as is the case with preceding chapters, defining factors for inclusion to the Deaf gay community will then be examined along with Deaf gay culture, Deaf gay identity and the recognition and management of multiple identities. Finally, relationships in the Deaf gay community will be explored.

## 6.2 Statistics on the Deaf gay community

Chapters 1 and 3 have shown that the statistics around the number of Deaf people and homosexuals is extremely difficult to pinpoint. The same goes for the number of Deaf gay men, because of the lack of official statistical data. The average of the figures quoted by the Department of Health, RAD, BDA and the National Census gives us approximately 70,000 Deaf people who would use BSL as a preferred language. If the figures quoted by Durex and AVERT are to be believed, we can assume that there is approximately eight per cent of the population potentially identifying as homosexual. Therefore, an estimated figure of the number of Deaf gay men in Britain could be as much as 5,600. However, it is unlikely that a definitive number could ever be established, therefore, to some extent, any study focused on investigating the Deaf gay male community will always have to speculate on number of members of the community.

Ladd (2003) acknowledges this when he says that 'It is commonly said that there appears to be a much larger percentage of Gay and Lesbian Deaf than in the majority society, especially within Deaf families. However there is almost no research onto these subject and speculation would be unhelpful' (2003: 63). There is a definite perception that there are higher percentages of homosexuals who are Deaf compared to homosexuals who are hearing. Virginia Gutman (2005) explains the phenomenon in these terms, 'because of using sign language, deaf individuals are very visible at public events hearing people see a group signing [at a gay event] and say, "Hey, look at all the deaf gay people." Some may not be gay, but instead are heterosexual friends or allies. The impression that is formed may not reflect the reality.' (Reported in *The Times Union*, 2005)

Friesse (2000) explains that people perceive high numbers of Deaf homosexuals because 'homosexual feelings are more easily manifested and acted on because many deaf children are educated in group homes and seek comfort because they feel abandoned by their parents. Still others suspect the process of coping with being deaf makes acceptance of yet another difference more natural' (Friesse 2000) Another suggestion

is that 'Deaf children are sheltered from the most virulent expressions of societal homophobia to the idea that having already coped with deafness, gay and lesbian Deaf individuals find it less traumatic to accept other differences such as homosexuality' (Gianoulis, 2005). To this end, the perceived numbers may not actually represent the actual numbers. The comments by Gutman and Frisse above are, of course, unfortunately all anecdotal and not based on any qualitative research.

### **6.3 The defining factors for inclusion into the Deaf gay community**

The Deaf homosexuals will undoubtedly find themselves straddling the Deaf community and the Gay community but the third community they may be involved in directly is the Deaf gay community. There would be certain factors that would enable integration. The first would be recognition of shared deafness and homosexuality. 'The Deaf and gay communities have more shared ground than might be immediately apparent. Both have struggled to define themselves to the larger culture as celebrants of identity, rather than victims of pathology, and both are making more strides now than ever before as they petition for societal acceptance and equal rights under the law' (Healy, 2007: 5).

There are distinctive tends to be different classes of Deaf gay men in the Deaf gay community; these have been categorised from the US context. According to the US studies: 'The first is the lower-educated deaf gay men. The second is the deaf gay loners. And the third is the better educated deaf gay men who went to Gallaudet<sup>11</sup> and also tend to interact with the deaf theatre community' (Alex 1993: 75). This 'class system' was also referenced by one of the research participants related to his use of BSL within the UK community, which was considered in the present study:

I used sign language later on in life so I do feel that  
sometimes the deaf community will treat me differently

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<sup>11</sup> Gallaudet University is the world leader in liberal education and career development for deaf and hard of hearing students. The University enjoys international reputation for its outstanding programs and for the quality of the research it conducts on the history, language, culture, and other topics related to deaf people. (Gallaudet.edu 2014)

because I didn't grow up a 'grass roots' deaf and BSL wasn't my first language. English would have been my first language. So, I sometimes feel that I can be a bit excluded. I sometimes feel a little bit like a second-class citizen compared to 'grass roots' Deaf people.

P1

Participant 1 (P1) went on to say that because of this feeling of exclusion, there was a tendency to gravitate towards a particular group within the Deaf gay community, and with an insistence on the geographical specificity of the considerations he makes:

Myself, it sounds a bit snobby but I've been involved with the deaf gay professionals really. Again, I feel that in London, the deaf gay community is separated. You've got the professionals and then the 'grass roots'. I know that sounds a bit elitist. It's not linked to education. It's linked to professional recognition maybe. There are differences in London.

P1

#### **6.4 Deaf gay culture**

This section explores the complexity of defining criteria of belonging and distinctive features that allow insiders and outsiders to recognise members of the Deaf gay culture which is imperative in understanding the community as a whole. One of the most recognised distinctive aspects underlying 'cultural' belonging to the Deaf gay community would be the use of GSV which was the subject covered in Chapter 5. Not only the specific lexicon but also the style of signing used by Deaf gay men. There are, however, other elements that could be described as culturally specific to the Deaf gay community.

One such element would be the act of dragging up; wearing clothes associated with a person of the other gender.

Drag is quite a big part. It's a big part of the gay community but certainly within the deaf gay community parties and dragging up for fun is definitely cultural.

P1

Some small groups would regularly go out and drag up. That's quite a Deaf gay thing as well.

P8

Another would be that Deaf homosexuals will often stick together to protect themselves from the risk of homophobia as well as disability discrimination. With that comes the confidence to be who they want to be in a non-threatening environment.

They've got confidence with each other. They can be themselves and they've all got something similar in common. Outside of that comfort zone they could feel nervous and could feel that they wouldn't know how to cope, so when they're in that community they are very comfortable and very confident. So, I would say that there is a different culture because there is a commonality there.

P6

To that end, it can take a while before any individual is accepted into the Deaf gay community as time is necessary to build trust in order to avoid being betrayed or rejected. As Kane (1994) suggests, the Deaf homosexual would seek a 'reference' from a fellow Deaf homosexual to save 'time and effort of building friendship and trust with a person who would prove unaccepting' (Kane 1994 p.484). Another way of building that trust would be through perseverance and regular contact.

You have to break through. A group that's already established as a group of friends. It's very difficult. Whether they're the deaf community of the deaf LGBT community it doesn't matter. You have to go regularly to these events to be accepted.

P15

Being open and direct is something that is culturally Deaf but maybe more so with the Deaf gay community, especially when it comes to talking about sex.

We'll talk about things like safe sex, HIV and AIDS but straight people won't do that. I've seen it happen. They'll say "God! You gay people are so open about these kinds of things". But the hearing gay community is a lot more open than the hearing straight. There are differences there. So, it's culturally appropriate for deaf gay people to be a lot more open.

P12

Another point worth considering is that Kane (1994) asserts that Deaf homosexuals 'interact with hearing gays far more often than straight (heterosexual) deaf people interact with straight hearing people' (Kane 1994 p. 483).

## **6.5 Deaf gay identity**

In Chapter 1, reference was made to the Deaf community being collectivist which means that members of the community should be 'aware of behaviour which might embarrass or betray members of the group' (Mindess 2007, p. 40). Coming out and identifying as a Deaf homosexual '*might* be to jeopardise one's Deaf identity. Consequently Deaf gay men and lesbians formed their own groups' (Bienvenu, 2008 p. 264). The groups referred to would be the Deaf gay community. Bienvenu

(2008) feels that one way to fight homophobia in the Deaf community is for Deaf homosexuals to come out of the closet.

However, she states that 'Gay men were afraid of being out of the closet, and it was worse before the 1970s. It is still difficult for some of them to come out fully. Often those who came out experienced struggles with family and friends, but many of them don't regret the decision to be out of the closet' (Bienvenu 2008, p. 272). This fear may be due to the fact that much of the early support for the Deaf community was established by religious organisations. An example of this is the Deaf Cultural Centre in Birmingham which dates back to 1872 when it was originally called 'The Birmingham Town Mission' with an aim of supporting the 'needy and those on the margins of society' (Deafculturalcentre.com 2014). The Deaf community of the time was seen as a group that needed such support and churches have been fundamental in Deaf culture for many years. The church of the time was less than tolerant of homosexuals in society and for that reason, it would have potentially been difficult for homosexuals to assert their identity.

However, she states that 'Gay men were afraid of being out of the closet, and it was worse before the 1970s. It is still difficult for some of them to come out fully. Often those who came out experienced struggles with family and friends, but many of them don't regret the decision to be out of the closet' (Bienvenu 2008 p. 272).

Deafness may protect homosexuals because of the fact that they cannot hear. Friess (2000) quotes a Gallaudet University instructor, Buck Rogers by stating that 'deaf gay children are sheltered from much of the mainstream culture's verbal homophobia by not hearing it.' (Friess, 2000) This is confirmed by some of the research participants:

My deafness is an advantage I think because I remember at school, I realised that because I was Deaf, my friend was the hearing one and he got abuse but I didn't. I didn't actually suffer with any of that. So in a way, my deafness blocked the abuse that would have



been directed at me but was actually directed towards my friend.

P1

People might talk about me but I can't hear them because I'm Deaf. I don't know.

P5

If a Deaf homosexual does choose to come out, they will possess two main identities; firstly their Deaf identity and secondly their homosexual identity. How strong these identities are will often depend on the situation that they find themselves in. 'We think of ourselves as gay first then deaf second; but in the hearing world we think of our deafness first and our gayness second' (Kane, 1993 p. 36) Among the research participants of this study, seventy-three per cent of them felt that generally, their Deaf identity was more important than their gay identity. Thirteen per cent said that they couldn't say either way and seven per cent felt that their gay identity was more important. The remaining seven per cent felt that neither was important. The views of the research participants who felt that their Deaf identity was more important was expressed as follows:

Being gay only happens to part of my life, maybe at weekends with friends or something but I'm always deaf. It's 100% of the time that I'm Deaf.

P2

Being gay seems more accepted in the wider community but there is still a lot of discrimination out there regarding deafness. I want to erase that. I would say that I'm Deaf first then gay second. Definitely. That's my identity.

P3

Oh! Deaf identity first... because of communication

P5

I use sign language every day and so therefore my Deaf identity is more important to me. I'm gay as a person, I know but being Deaf is so much more important because of communication. I want full communication.

P6

For me it would be my Deaf identity because I'm Deaf first really because I'm recognised as a Deaf person from quite an early age and also I'm more independent as a Deaf person.

P10

I'm more focused on the Deaf community first. I don't know why. I think it's to do with access to communication problems.

P12

Deaf! Full stop. Gay is just a part of me but I am a deaf person. I have a Deaf identity and I fit into the Deaf community.

P14

As is evident from the quotes above, communication is one of the major reasons why research participants felt that their Deaf identity was more important than their gay identity. In contrast, the one man who felt that his gay identity was more important stated that:

My gay identity first because I prefer to be with gay people. If there was a whole bunch of straight people

and only me as a gay person, I wouldn't feel comfortable.

P1

The people who felt that neither identity was more important of who felt they couldn't decide said:

It depends on the situation. I can't say I am Deaf first or I am gay first. It depends on the situation and where I am. I am flexible. I try to be flexible. We're not all the same. At the end of the day, we're all individual. We're all people.

P4

If I'm allowed to, I'll say Deaf number one and gay would be number two but ask me if I'm going on holiday or going out with friends, then being gay would be number one.

P8

Both. But if I have to pick friends - Deaf come first. I have no loyalty to the commercial scene, but I do to Deaf gay individuals, more so than gay hearing people.

P13

Therefore, situation plays an important part as to whether a person feels their Deaf identity is more important than their gay identity but one research participant expressed feelings of isolation as a Deaf gay person stated:

I think you are more isolated as a Deaf person who is gay. If you're hearing and gay you have lots of friends and they talk about discrimination and the fact that they are not accepted and I'll say "well yes, try being Deaf

AND gay". It has a big impact on who you are as a person and your identity. It affects so many things.

P10

Another research participant expressed feelings of difficulty in coming to terms with their identity in regards to being both Deaf and gay.

I had to come to terms with being Deaf first which really was a struggle during my formative years. My gay identity was really suppressed for a long time although I knew I was gay since the age of 11, though I did not know the meaning of the word at the time.

P15

This particular research participant grew up in a hearing family, went to a mainstream school and came out as gay at the age of 27, which would go some way to explain the struggles he had with both his Deaf and gay identities.

## **6.6 Multiple Identities of the Deaf gay community**

This section introduces the concept of multiple identity in order to articulate the complexity of the members of the community. Deaf homosexuals face a unique challenge that most members of racial and religious minority groups do not share: they are often the only 'different' members of their families, and so are left wholly without role models or mentors as they try to determine where they belong in the world (Healy 2007, p. 19). They have to manage multiple identities and these are not only related to their Deafness or homosexuality but also potentially sexual preferences.

Well, you've got deaf bears, or deaf gay leather men or deaf gay younger men. They're still together, they'll all

talk to each other but they've still got their preferred little groups and they'll go to little events together.

P1

Within the specific context of Deaf identity issues, Leigh (2008) recognises that multiple identities exist, depend on environment and can be salient and points out that 'these identities, which help individuals define and understand themselves as well as align with social groups, tend to be forged through perceptions of differences and classifications, including gender, ethnicity, education levels, career categories, sexual orientation, hearing status and so on' (Leight 2008, pp. 21-22). Having these multiple identities can have a very positive affect on the people within the Deaf gay community as a couple of research participants expresses:

Plus I've got lots of other identities too. Which means that I'm me. I go to work and I have an identity so its a multi- faceted identity. I depends on who's looking at you and what you want to show them about your identity. But I would say that I am deaf and then gay. I'm a deaf professional, I'm a gay academic. I'm many different things.

P8

There's lots of various people within the deaf gay community but they kind of all accept each other because you've got two big identities there; being deaf and being gay.

P1

Having these multiple identities can have a very positive affect on the people within the Deaf gay community, as one interviewee expresses:

I think the deaf gay community feels more safe when we're all together. We're more open about our sexuality. We're more open about our experiences of being deaf. So, you've got that double support, as it were. Two big parts of their identity that share with each other.

P1

'Social grouping is a well-known and studied process not merely of discovering or acknowledging a similarity that precedes and establishes identity but, more fundamentally, of inventing similarity by downplaying difference' (Bucholtz and Hall 2004, p. 371). A Deaf/Jewish and hearing/gentile reflect that 'We have both experiences a great deal of oppression in our lives and as a Jew and as a deaf person. It helps as a couple having hearing friends who are part of the deaf community and who are also fluent in sign language, and having Jewish friends who can sign. We have both taught each other about our cultures, and that feels great. I think we can relate to each other's experiences with oppression, even though the ways we have been oppressed are different' (Karen 1993, pp. 199-200).

### **6.7 Relationships in the Deaf gay community**

Deaf gay people, like most of the population, would like to have a relationship with someone to share their life with. There are only two real choices regarding relationships within the Deaf gay community and that is to enter into one with a fellow Deaf person or with a hearing person. Whichever happens, with that comes a number of issues both positive and negative. The first is that it is not always easy to find a partner. 'Many deaf gay people are frustrated, almost desperate to find a lover. Very few deaf gay people are lucky finding lovers. Often, once they have sex with someone, they rush into becoming lovers even though they don't know each other that well' (Patrick 1993, p. 82).

There is much discussion amongst the Deaf gay community relating to relationships in respect of them being with fellow Deaf men or

with hearing men. 'Many deaf gay men maintain long-term relationships with hearing gay men, relationships between deaf gay men are rare' (Kane, 1994 p. 484). If a Deaf man enters into a relationship with a hearing man, they cannot expect their Deaf partners to learn English or speech, so the emphasis is on them to learn Sign Language. They must understand that when they begin a relationship with a Deaf partner, it can work but there must be respect on the part of the hearing partner. The complexity of communication between Deaf BSL user and hearing English speaker with limited BSL in a couple was expressed by one of the research participants:

We speak to each other. He can sign a bit and he can finger-spell a bit. The basics. One-to one, we talk. With a group of friends, he will talk with me and maybe translate for me but I don't really like that because everyone is talking and I have to wait and he will repeat what they said and everyone looks at me and I feel quite embarrassed about that.

(P1)

There is obvious frustration at not being included in the communication whilst this takes place. This could put strains on the relationship. The fact that the hearing partner would ideally learn sign language is appreciated as an unfair balance. However, a level of understanding of what it must be like for a Deaf person to grow up in a hearing world is what is required. Therefore, hopefully, the motivation for the hearing partner to learn sign language is to be able to include their Deaf partner in predominantly hearing events they both may go to as a couple. Problems are likely to occur without this level of understanding. This was expressed by one of the contributors of *Eyes of Desire* (the greatest collection of work playing a part in establishing Deaf gay culture, identity and language. See Introduction). 'We fought constantly, usually over deaf related topics, because he had no understanding of what I could, and couldn't perceive' (Michael 1993, p. 167).

Another research participant also felt that relationships with a hearing person were difficult:

I think it's very interesting that the majority of the deaf gay community, most of the time they get into a relationship with another deaf gay community member. It's rare that you get a deaf gay linked with a hearing gay within the gay community because of communication. That's the big issue. You can't have a relationship without communication. I've tried. It doesn't work. They're not interested in sign language so it just doesn't mix.

P15

This situation is made even more difficult with Deaf gay men with Usher's syndrome which as a condition where the person affected has sensori-neural deafness – a problem with the inner ear or the auditory nerve. (See appendix a). Usually a person with Usher experiences the hearing loss from birth. They also develop a sight loss which is caused by an eye condition known as retinitis pigmentosa (RP), which leads to a gradual and progressive reduction in vision (Sense.org.uk 2012).

I've met a lot of deaf gay men, and I've asked them out for a date. But they've always made excuses not to go out with me. I know why, they don't even say it: they are not comfortable with my Usher's syndrome. I can understand that, and I am not angry or upset over that. Yet when I ask hearing dates out, they accept my vision problem. They always say "What's more important is your heart." So I see a very big difference of attitude towards deaf-blind gay men between deaf gay men and hearing gay men. (Victor 1993, pp. 127-128)

Brooks (1993) gives ten reasons why Deaf-Deaf relationships are better than Deaf-hearing relationships. These are summarised as follows:



- Communication - misunderstanding is reduced when the same language is used and when two lovers communicate in the same language.
- Love - There is an appreciation of difference and a shared culture.
- Trust - The same cultural background and use of language develops trust more quickly.
- Pride - This resides in the same shared culture and language.
- Non-Paternalism - Equality is achieved with the reduction of the possibility of one lover paternalising the other which can sometimes occur in Deaf-hearing relationships.
- Leadership - Lovers from the same culture tend to be involved in the community which is a plus for the Deaf community and gay community.
- Understanding - Appreciating the shared culture reduce the risk of the Deaf person becoming alienated from the Deaf community.
- Companionship - The risk of clashing with the Deaf community and forced association with the hearing lover's friends is reduced.
- Friendship - Friendships in the Deaf community tend to continue for years whereas friendships in the hearing community tend not to last as long.
- Acceptance - The Deaf community is more accepting of two Deaf lovers rather than a Deaf and hearing lover.

(Brooks 1993, pp. 147-148)

The list above focuses on Deaf-Deaf relationships; additional areas of significance also emerged from the small sample of respondents interviewed for this study. Through the interview process, several important considerations by the respondents suggest that a few things could be added to such a list when considering Deaf-hearing relationships:

- Humour - It was mentioned in Chapter 1 that hearing jokes and Deaf jokes are very different to each other so an understanding of the differences between Deaf and hearing humour would be an advantage.

So, you know, there's jokes being told and they'll all be laughing and I'll ask what was said and he'll tell me. I'd rather he'd not tell me because everybody looks at me. Hearing jokes are very different to deaf jokes. Hearing jokes are all about words and if I don't understand then it makes me look stupid so I will often fake laughter even though I haven't understood what's been going on. So, I will fake that laughter in certain situations.

(P1)

- Open to learning sign language - Chapter 2 highlighted the huge importance of sign language to the Deaf community. A hearing partner of a Deaf person should be open to learning sign language so that moments can be shared and effective communication can take place. Without this, it would be very difficult to maintain a relationship. 'I wish the entire hearing gay community could learn sign language so I wouldn't have to deal with the same old thing - we meet, and I have to teach him signs, only to find him forgetting everything all the time. It's tiring.' (George 1993 p. 225)
- Patience - Sign language cannot be learnt overnight. Chapter 2 explained that sign language is a language in its own right with grammar, syntax and lexicon; therefore, it takes many years to become fluent in sign language so there must be patience on both sides. Regional and social variation can add many more years to that learning process.
- Embrace Deaf and Deaf gay culture - A hearing person will not be able to understand their Deaf partner fully without an understanding of the complexities of Deaf and Deaf gay culture. They should learn to understand, embrace and respect these cultures even if they do not spend a majority of their time in their partners culture. One of the ways this could be achieved is the hearing partner going along to Deaf events and taking in what is going on even though it may not be fully understood.

But, my partner coming to deaf events... his personality is such that he doesn't really bother if something goes over his head. If people are signing he'll just watch. He's not really bothered.

(P1)

- Overcoming prejudice - The couple may face prejudice from both or either community that they are in and may find it difficult, at first, to be accepted in the other community. As described in Chapter 1, Deaf culture is a collectivist culture where there is a boundary between insiders and outsiders and it would be fair to say that many hearing people are not as open to diversity as would be welcomed so prejudice on both sides could be faced. How this is managed by the individual couples would vary but it should be overcome for the relationship to thrive.
- Flexibility - adjusting to behaving differently in certain situations or being responsive to new cultures will mean a level of flexibility would be needed on both parts. It would be a learning curve for both parties but more so, potentially, for the hearing person if they have no prior knowledge or experience of the Deaf community and their culture. One element would be the need to understand alienation.

But the other way, when I'm in the hearing world and I don't understand I do get angry because I have a hearing family and my Mum would tell me things and I would want to know because I'm really nosey but sometimes family would say "Oh! Don't worry, we'll tell you later" but my partner, it doesn't bother him if he doesn't understand sign language.

P1

- Honesty - talking about the differences in cultures and cultural behaviour and how those are affecting the individual will form the basis for an open and honest relationship. Openness and honesty will only be achieved

through effective communication and that relates to more emphasis on the hearing partner learning sign language, as stated above.

- Teacher/Interpreter roles - this is something that would naturally happen and although both parties may be quite happy to take on the role of teacher or interpreter, it should not be allowed to happen too much because then the relationship takes on a completely different form. It becomes more of a 'service' to each other rather than an equal relationship.

As an illustration of the ways in which the community sees also the possibility of Deaf/hearing relationships to work successfully was given in the following explanation by one of the research participants:

There's a lot of those out there. It's rare to see deaf and deaf. If you think about Alex and Kieren. You've got deaf and hearing. You've got Stephen and Scott who are deaf and hearing. You've got lots of couples like that. There's more of that happening compared to relationships with two deaf people. I'm just trying to think of other deaf/deaf couples. Most of them would be straight, that I know. Not gay. Me and my partner are both deaf and that's rare.<sup>12</sup>

P16

From this respondents' answer, it could be deduced that if the relationship is worth building, it can work. Communication may be difficult at first but it takes perseverance and recognition that communication may not be as easy at the beginning. It may require the use of pen and paper, simple signs, finger-spelling or gesture and body language but communication can take place. Being a member of the 'third culture' can also help. 'I see two kinds of relationships. One is when the hearing person is already from a third culture - he is between the hearing and deaf

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<sup>12</sup> The names included here are fictional names to protect the identity of the respondents and of the people they refer to.

worlds - so he is already on the periphery' (Alan 1993, p. 208). This third culture could be, for example, an interpreter. This would mean that they would be a hearing person but have sign language skills and Deaf cultural knowledge. The fact that 'members of the hearing gay community are also more aware of and sensitive to the needs of deaf people than are people in the straight world' (Kane 1994, p. 484) may also play a part in the success of Deaf-hearing relationships.

The comment by P16 above highlights that relationships should not be limited because of the level of an individuals' hearing. 'The bottom line is when two people relate, it's because of the things they had in common before they *ever* met. Just because some hearing people learn sign language, they want a deaf partner. No, that's not a good bond. The relationship must have to do with things other than being deaf and being hearing' (Mackintosh 1993). Alan (1993) echoes this position when he states that:

'Generally, I don't see that deaf/hearing relationships should be any more or less successful than any other type of relationship. People break up all the time for all types of reasons. If people want to stay together, they will make the effort. At the same time, with all the straight couples I have seen, the hearing partner has always been fluent in sign language. (Alan 1993, p. 209)

Ultimately, 'the Deaf gay person has a smaller number of deaf people to consider as future partners' (Doe 1994, p. 466) which is why another relationship that is important in the Deaf gay community; that of friendships with other Deaf homosexuals. The members of the community are both Deaf and homosexual so there is shared experience. One research participant expressed that:

I don't have to adjust so much and I can fit into those groups quite easily. I don't have to worry about making adjustments.

P6

## 6.8 Summary

As a way to sum up the findings from the survey, it would be ideal to be able to state with Brooks that 'Being Deaf and gay is a double pleasure, not a double handicap' (Brooks 1993, p. 147). The respondents and the interviews have however painted rather more challenging pictures of the reality in which these relationships evolve. It is true to say that the Deaf gay community 'bring to the diverse mix of queer culture a unique and valuable cultural identity' (Gianoulis 2005); however, it was identified earlier on in this chapter that even though we know the diverse mix exists, the numbers of these people who add to the mix is totally unknown. It is appreciated that the mix combines recognition of shared deafness and homosexuality over different classes.

Already Chapter 5 had focused a substantial part of the discussion on the role of GSV among the Deaf gay community. However, this Chapter further emphasised how GSV is one of the most recognisable cultural aspects of the Deaf gay community because of what it embodies at the deeper level of the relationship between communication and identity. This emphasis can be evidently deducted by referring to the small, yet representative sample of the community in which many research participants identified GSV as being used by Deaf gay people hence as being a marker of identity. Deaf gay identity remains difficult to define by the individuals who belong to such 'abstract' community with very real concerns and relationships. From the point of view of the research, the survey and this chapter also pinpoint that similarly to other attempts at defining multi-faceted identities the comparators and external factors, the situations and the relationships between peoples, the definitions of these converge to emphasising how the distinctions are made by comparative means rather than by adherence to principles and

categories of belonging. Some situations are more important in defining a certain identity compared to others. The notion of multiple identities was explored with regards to race and religion. (Padden and Humphries 1988; Mindess 2006; Aramburo 1989; Cohen and Fischgrund et al. 1990).

There is much discussion amongst the Deaf gay community relating to relationships and this aspect was covered at length by the respondents. Among their responses indeed emerged often conflicting views as to whether a Deaf-Deaf relationship deserves more merit or consideration than a Deaf-hearing relationship. Ultimately this is a matter for the individuals involved but both relationships can be successful in defining the complex identity of Deaf gay males.

## **7. Spoken Gay Slang From Around The World**

### **7.1 Introduction**

This chapter, is socio-linguistically focused and examines six different spoken language gay slangs that have been identified as being used in Great Britain (Lucas 1997; Baker 2002), Greece (Montoliu 2005; Gkartzonika 2012), Indonesia (Boellstorff 2004), The Philippines (Hart & Hart 1990; Manalansan 2003), South Africa (Cage 1999; McCormick 2009) and Israel (Levon 2010). Within sign language, a parallel to gay slang would be Gay Sign Variation (see chapter 8) but examining spoken language gay slang helps to understand why Deaf gay people might use Gay Sign Variation.

Slang is described as being 'one of the chief markers of in-group identity' (Crystal 1995: 182). The motivation to create gay slang was largely due to the fact that at a time when homosexuality was a criminal offence, it could be used without people not privy to the slang, finding out what was being said. (Baker 2002; Boellstorff 2004; Cage 1999; Gkartzonika n.p.; Hart & Hart 1999; Levon 2010 and Lucas 1997) The motivation and construction of these language varieties will be explained as well as the social purpose they serve in relation to identity creation and maintenance. As Baker reflects, 'As well as being funny, gay slang is often subversive, assigning bold new meanings to words that already exist, tackling taboos and laughing in the face of adversity... [and] can sometimes be shocking to the uninitiated, frequently comical, but rarely boring' (Baker 2010).

### **7.2 Polari - UK**

There is little written on Polari but what has been published is mostly by Professor Paul Baker (2002) and Ian Lucas (1997). In 1997, Lucas wrote a chapter in the book titled *Queerly Phrased: Language, Gender and Sexuality* which was edited by Anna Livia and Kira Hall. Later, in 2002, Baker published two books. The first was titled *Polari - The Lost Language of Gay Men*, and being part of the Routledge Studies in Linguistics series is directed towards scholars and the second titled *Fantabulosa: A dictionary of Polari and Gay*



*Slang* which would appeal to a much wider audience who may simply be interested in the subject from a more informal perspective. It is from these two sources that most of this section is written.

Polari is broadly described by Lucas (1997) as 'the most comprehensive extant form of English gay slang. It is derived from a variety of sources, indulging rhyming slang, circus back-slang, Romany, Latin and criminal cant' (Lucas 1997: 85). In it's time it was 'a secret language mainly used by gay men and lesbians, in London and other UK cities with an established gay subculture, in the first 70 or so years of the twentieth century' (Baker 2002a: 1) This definition is a broad generalisation but Baker also notes that Polari was used 'to indulge in high-octane gossip, bitchiness and cruising...' (Baker 2002: 1)

Baker recognises the extensive research and compilation of dictionaries of slang that Eric Partridge wrote between 1950 and 1974 and notes that the spelling of a form of language known as Parlyaree, thought to be derived from the Italian verb of parlare: to speak, varies considerably (parlaree, parlary, parlyaree, parlare, paralarie, and palary). It is thought that the word 'Polari' could also be derived from Parlyaree. One contributing factor to the fact that these spellings are so varied is that the slang was rarely written down because of the fact that it is generally 'a minority spoken language variety, used by a number of (generally poorly educated) groups' (Baker 2002a: 24). Graffiti may be the exception to this rule. The people who spoke these varieties 'were not part of a dominant mainstream culture and had no access or interest in publishing accounts of the uniqueness of their own language variety' (Baker 2002: 20). That is not the case today and much more is being documented on gay slang as will become evident throughout this chapter.

However, a few words don't make a language. Polari is recognised primarily as a collection of words and phrases and this is recognised by Lucas. when he states that 'the very nature of the language, its obliqueness, its anachronistic sense of time and place, meant that as a code or theatrical manoeuvre, it is very limited... As a language form in itself, it never successfully developed to the point where it could be distanced from its context' (Lucas 1997: 87-88). The context would be to use Polari as a code that wasn't recognised by the majority of people with the aim of concealing what is being

discussed. It was adopted to 'serve a community of interests based on exclusion and secrecy' (Lucas 1997: 87).

Baker attempts to analyse the historical origins of Polari whilst appreciating that finding evidence of the origins is difficult because, as mentioned above, slang is less likely to be written down but he notes that there were a number of older slang vocabularies before Polari such as Thieves Cant or Pelting Speech; a very early recorded language variety which was a secret coded language used by criminals in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries.<sup>13</sup>

In the 18th century, the precursor to the modern day gay bar was the Molly House<sup>14</sup>. This tavern or private room was where a man was 'effeminate and engaged in sex with other males' (Baker 2002a: 22). These men became known as a 'Molly'. The fact that they engaged in sex with men is significant as it supersedes 'rakes' who were men who were reported to have sexually penetrated younger adolescent males whilst still being sexually interested in women and therefore not seen as effeminate. Effeminacy was commonly identified in men known as 'fops' who were men who did not have sex with men. So, the Molly was a combination of the two; they were effeminate men who had sex with men. The language that the Mollies used incorporated both euphemistic phrases for male-male sex as well as words that were more likely to be from [Thieves] Cant, which were less sexually oriented. (Baker 2002a: 22).

Up to 1967, homosexuality in Britain was illegal but that does not mean that prior to then, homosexual men did not meet, conduct relationships and engage in sexual activity. Baker recognises that many gay men would live in larger and more progressive cities where a gay subculture was shaped in pubs and bars that often required membership but were spaces that allowed men to dance with each other, express their sexualities and find a potential sexual partner. (Baker 2002a: 63) This is still somewhat the case today with larger cities in the UK like London, Brighton, Manchester and Glasgow now offering gay men a varied social scene, support groups and activities targeted towards the gay community.

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<sup>13</sup> See: Coleman, J. 2009. *A history of cant and slang dictionaries*. Oxford [u.a.]: Oxford Univ. Press.

<sup>14</sup> See: Norton, R. 1992. *Mother Clap's molly house*. London: GMP.

The use of Polari meant that a person would be able to not only conceal their sexuality but also tentatively test the water with people they were talking to so see if in fact, they were also gay. If the person being spoken to recognised Polari it was an indication that they were also gay. Therefore, Polari is not only a language variety but also instrumental in revealing or establishing the sexual identity of the speakers. (Baker 2002a: 68)

The covert revealing of sexual identity from one person to another was described by one of the research participants in relation to the use of Gay Sign Variation which is discussed in greater detail in chapter 6. He stated that:

The use of GSV which is covert signing. So, if you go to a deaf club, I'm gay and there's somebody who'd closeted gay, we can communicate without people knowing and talking about it. It's secret signing. For example, deaf people are around, they're all signing and maybe at about 11 o'clock or so, people will go outside and you'll say "Do you want to go outside?" and you might have been having a bit of a flirt with eye contact... I suppose, eyes, facial expression, signing. You don't want people to know so you'll just go out for a private chat. There is that. There's definitely that. That happens a lot.

*OK, that happens because you're openly gay. Is that right?  
And they may be closeted?*

Yes, I'm talking about a long time ago. Now, I don't know. Probably it's the same now but I suppose it depends. If we want to go out to a gay pub and we didn't want people to know that we were planning on going because we didn't want to be discriminated against or bullied or something we could go out to a pub and chat there.

P 11

This form of covert action is described by Lucas as Polari being 'strategically employed either to create a sense of belonging... or to exclude *naff omees* (straight men) from pointed conversation' (Lucas 1997: 87).

In the interview with Jo Purvis, who featured in the Channel 4 documentary *A Storm in a Teacup* (1993), Baker reflects that 'polari could be used to conceal one's sexuality' and in the case of Jo Purvis 'allow her friends the means to carry on conversations about other people while they were present. Thus, conversations that contained references to homosexuality could occur in public places, without the speaker having to compromise or reveal his/her sexuality to multiple listeners' (Baker 2002a: 67).

This would be the practice of the men who were not overtly camp and therefore seemingly obviously gay but by the men who appeared to be the 'west end' social class. These were men who dressed conservatively in pinstriped suits and potentially married and known by today's term as 'closeted'. The other extreme was the overtly camp man who wore make-up and the people Baker describe as 'fiercely camp working-class queens... they used it [Polari] with such inventiveness, complexity and frequency that for some it actually began to resemble a real language' (Baker 2002b: 1).

Therefore, Polari was something to be played with by the people using it and that was what eventually made it popular. By using this code, people were able to express innuendo, which would be seen as quite risqué in 1960s Britain. It was camp and that lent itself well to comedy. It found its way into mainstream British radio comedy at this time. (Lucas, 1997: 86) The most popular of these comedies was *Round The Horne* created by Barry Took and Marty Feldman which ran for four series which were transmitted on a weekly basis between 1965 and 1968. The programme featured the larger-than-life characters of Julian and Sandy. Baker interviewed Took for his book and was granted permission to reproduce excerpts from the programme.

As stated above, Polari was mainly used by gay men and lesbians so when it was used in *Round the Horne*, it had to be diluted 'through a comic, heterosexual filter in order to exorcize (and therefore make use of) the language for its ostensibly heterosexual listeners' (Lucas 1997: 87-88). The straight people enjoying listening to the programme would have found it funny but not truly understand the references being inferred. It would potentially have only

been the gay men and lesbians who used Polari on a regular basis who would have fully understood the content. Baker reflects that 'rather than causing homophobes to choke on their lunches, it was quickly established as the most popular (award-winning) comedy show in the country, attracting about 9 million listeners a week' (Baker 2002b: 4).

Because of the fact that Polari was used so frequently in the programme and listened to by so many people, it then became so recognised that it soon ceased to be secret. At this point it became unusable and cannot serve its original purpose; secrecy. It is at this point that it is at risk of not continuing to be used. Lucas (1997) explains that 'Polari's *raison d'être* had self-exploded; it was no longer needed as a theatrical manoeuvre in communities that had become legitimised or sanctioned, however restricted such acceptance might be' (Lucas 1997: 88).

Because of the political situation in Britain 'In the 1970s, Polari started to fade from people's memories... In 1967, the legal situation for the average gay man was improved with the implementation of the Wolfenden Report's recommendations of ten years earlier. Homosexuality was partially decriminalised (although there were still a variety of ways that men could be prosecuted for having gay sex), and as a result, there was less need for a secret language' (Baker 2002b: 5). Less need rather than no need is important here. Even though partial decriminalisation took place, it would not be unreasonable to assume that long-standing contempt for homosexuality would have existed in society at large and there would have potentially been high instances of homophobia. Therefore, it would be feasible to assume that some gay men would have continued to use Polari for security as well as a sense of belonging.

At this time, 'Gay men wanted a new image in order to counter decades of 'sissy jibes'. Anything connected to camp was eschewed' (Baker 2002b: 5). The fact that the language needed to be conducted with an aim of secrecy meant that gay men were oppressed and politically, this was a state that the early gay liberationists wanted to put an end to. 'Queens of a certain age and background are likely to retail Polari as part of their heritage, although opportunities for passing on the *bona lavs* are limited by the increasing polarization of the commercial queer scene, where marketing dictates a style

and orientation based on premise of youth and beauty that create different and exclusive worlds for different ages' (Lucas 1997: 88). This is something was expressed by a couple of the research participants in relation to GSV:

The new, younger generation of gays, you don't see them using GSV. The older generation who were proud of their deaf gayness, well, they're kind of dwindling.

P3

You don't see it much now. It tends to be the older deaf gay people who will use GSV.

P10

Those older people that the research participants mention will not be around in years to come, which is why many of the researchers quoted in this chapter, justify documenting these gay slang so that they are not lost and forgotten. However, times are changing for gay people. 'With more people becoming relaxed about sexuality, Polari has recently undergone a revival of interest. Its now possible to view it as part of gay heritage - a weapon that was used to fight oppression, and something that gay men can be proud of again. Camp is no longer viewed as apolitical' (Baker 2002b: 6). Other linguists and queer studies theorists like Ian Hancock (1984) who wrote 'Shelta and Polari' in 1984, Leslie Cox and Richard Fay (1994) who penned 'Gay-speak, the Linguistic Fringe: Bona Polari, Camp, Queerspeak and Beyond' in 1994 and Ian Lucas (1997), the author of 'The Color of His Eyes: Polari and the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence' in 1997 have raised the profile of Polari not only within the gay community but wider afield. That is evident as many of the researchers in the following sections cite Polari and primarily the works of Baker and Lucas in their work.

In today's modern society the internet also plays a big part in keeping Polari alive and there are now a number of websites that focus on Polari. These include 'Polari' (chris-d.net 2007), 'Polari: A Queer Sort of Language' (uk.similartites.com n.d.) and 'The Secret Language of Polari' (liverpoolmuseums.co.uk 2014). There are many groups, online

magazines and social media<sup>15</sup> that are targeted toward the gay community that use Polari or Polari lexicon in their title which will, hopefully, enable the spirit of Polari to continue. Polari may also continue with the development of a software application for smart phones from an organisation titled Polari Mission which is publicly available to download. This project has received funding from Arts Council England and has the following aim:

The project uses Polari as a starting point to examine how contemporary LGBT groups and individuals view, understand, appreciate, utilise, or see reflected in their own 'communities of language' the influence of Polari, and its impact on how we communicate today. The project will produce a series of exhibitions, performances, visual artwork and audience participation. (Polarimission.com 2014)

### 7.3 Kaliarda - Greece

Another slang which is little documented is one found in Greece known as Kaliarda. There is, like Polari, little documented on the subject. The main body of works come from three main sources. The first is from César Montoliu (2005) who published a paper in Spanish in *Erytheia* (Revista de estudios bizantinos y neogriegos) in which the aim was to 'describe Kaliardá, the Greek gay slang, and to evaluate the importance of the Romani element in it' (Montoliu 2005: 299-318). The second is from Elias Petropoulos (2010) who published a dictionary of Kaliarda and the third, and most recent, is a thesis titled *An Ethnographic Analysis Of Kaliarda: The Greek Gay Variety* by Galini V. Gkartzonika in 2012 which was as part of a Master of Arts Degree in Linguistics from the Northeastern Illinois University.

It is this thesis that much of the information on Kaliarda comes from, as its the only documentation to be found in English. Another source is a brief filmed interview on a website with Paola Revenioti (born Pavlos) who is a

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<sup>15</sup> See: [www.polarimagazine.com](http://www.polarimagazine.com), [www.vadamagazine.com](http://www.vadamagazine.com), [www.polariliterarysalon.co.uk](http://www.polariliterarysalon.co.uk), [www.facebook.com/PolariMission](https://www.facebook.com/PolariMission), for a few examples.

transvestite prostitute, publisher, poet and activist. In the clip, she talks about creating a documentary on Kaliarda to showcase a bygone era; "An era where sexuality was darker, more alluring, more horny. An era that's gone." (Revenioti 2014) The aim of the clip on the website is to encourage people to donate money towards the cost of making the documentary. The interview is in Greek but a translation was provided by Yanna Dandolou.

Gkartzonika cites Petropoulos (2010) as stating that, from an etymological point of view, Kaliarda is a combination of Turkish, Italian, French, and English words with Greek suffixes (Gkartzonika n.p.: 35) and is a slang that is used 'as a marker of speech community identity and membership and fosters co-membership and camaraderie.' (Gkartzonika, n.p.: 26) The main group of people who will use it are most likely to be members of the Greek LGBTQ community but Gkartzonika recognises, from the interviews she conducted with people that, 'if someone is gay, it does not necessarily mean that he is a member of the Kaliarda speech community, or that he even knows what Kaliarda is.' (Gkartzonika n.p.: 16) The same could be said for the Deaf gay community in that a Deaf gay man may not use GSV or even know any signs in GSV.

Gkartzonika (2012) cites Montoliu (2005) as the person who originally hypothesised that Kaliarda first appeared in a Romani- speaking environment and was connected with male prostitution. He concluded that it is not a mixed Gypsy language, but 'a slang or a professional jargon with an important Romani element in it' (Montoliu 2005: 299 as cited by Gkartzonika n.p.: 14). The way that Montoliu uses the term 'professional' indicates that Kaliarda is used in a different way to that of Polari. It would appear that there is more of a link to the use of Kaliarda in prostitution than there would be in the use of it as an identity marker. This is a similarity to Polari, which, as discussed previously, was thought to originate within the underworld and later became intrinsic in the delivery of comedy.

However, one research participants of Gkartzonika's was a person known as *Blacky* who asserted that originally gay people did not use Kaliarda and that it was only the transvestites and the transsexuals so as to be protected by the police. He claims that it was some time later that gay people then started using Kaliarda too. When this did happen, it then took on the eventual role



similar to that of Polari, which was as; "an amusing variety that was fun and enjoyable" (Gkartzonika n.p.: 26). In this respect, the gay people and the trans-people are forming links to each others' somewhat different communities through the use of speech even though the original motivation for the use is quite different.

Language is diverse and its varied use is the only thing that make it common. Unlike the transvestites and transsexuals, Kaliarda was not used as an 'identity survival instrument' for gay people, because apparently, they didn't have anything to be afraid of by the time they started using Kaliarda. In this respect, the motivation for using the same slang is different. It is serving a different purpose. For gay people, Kaliarda became 'an identity marker highly associated with their existence as a group that was part of the general Greek society' (Gkartzonika n.p.: 26). What is being indicated here is that the gay people using Kaliarda do not feel that they are in any way different from any other Greek person, unlike the trans-people, aside from the fact that they are group within Greek society. That in itself would indicate a difference otherwise they wouldn't be a group that was 'part of' general Greek society.

Gkartzonika identified from her research participants that there are a variety of situations and settings in which Kaliarda is used by members of the Kaliarda speech community in Greece. She was able to observe Kaliarda in use in a variety of settings: gay bars and clubs mainly in Gazi, the gay neighbourhood of Athens and also in everyday contact with gay and straight people who were either direct friends or friends-of-friends. In this respect, she was able to observe the use of Kaliarda in areas where its use could serve to entertain or conceal.

Depending on who is using Kaliarda and where would depend on the intended affect. For example, one of her research participants, Sultan, declared that he 'never uses Kaliarda words when he is among people he doesn't feel familiarity with, even though they may be homosexuals' (Gkartzonika n.p.: 31). This would seem strange to those that subscribe to theories on kinship because of the fact that it would be assumed that Sultan would feel a connection due to all parties identifying as gay and therefore a sense of belonging and acceptance. It may not be any surprise now to find that Gkartzonika also identified the subject matter discussed was of a sexual content or related to

something not wanted to be understood by outsiders. This matches the profile of other slangs identified within this research.

According to almost all of Gkartzonikas' research participants, at this moment in time, 'Kaliarda does not serve any unique need of the Kaliarda speech community or of the general LGBTQ speech community.' (Gkartzonika n.p.: 31) The fact that it may not be needed to be used as a secret code with the aim of protection is likely due to the fact that both male and female same-sex sexual activity is legal in Greece. The current purpose that it appears to serve is as a 'a marker of speech community identity and membership and fosters co-membership and camaraderie.' (Gkartzonika n.p.: 32) This togetherness and fellowship will further encourage assurance that there is a place for Kaliarda and its users in Greek society.

Gkartzonika recognised that it was not only gay people that used Kaliarda but simply by using it in the first instance, however intentional or not, a person will introduce homosexuality to their identity. This does not mean that the person self identifies as gay but that it is something that they are relaxed with as part of who they are. The modern 'Metrosexual' would be an example of this. The term was first coined to describe a young, affluent, attractive, self assured man. It is often difficult to pinpoint the metrosexuals' sexual orientation because they 'might be officially gay, straight or bisexual, but this is utterly immaterial because he has clearly taken himself as his own love object and pleasure as his sexual preference' (Simpson, 2002). This blurs stereotyping. No longer can someone be labelled as gay if they take care over their appearance, which has often been the case.

As well as how one looks, what they say is also significant because as Mahootian (2012), cited by Gkartzonika asserts that 'Language is one of the means at our disposal by which to 'present and re-present' ourselves' (Gkartzonika n.p.: 32). This appears to happen all the time in youth culture. The way a young person may speak to an adult presents them-self in a certain way but by introducing fashionable words which they use with peers, they are able to re-present themselves as something different. This is also the case with slang used in the gay community where multiple identities are represented through the use of different language. This creates a

'psychologically safe place where one can unfold their sexual identity' (Gkartzonika n.p.: 34).

From the information that the research participants gave to Gkartzonika, it would appear that nowadays Kaliarda is used minimally and has 'no primary or basic role for the Kaliarda speech community' (Gkartzonika n.p.: 33). This may well be the case because of the social shifts in Greece but that's not to say that it is still not important for a number of people. Hence the reason that Revenioti is attempting to document its use through the media of film. Gkartzonika asserts that:

The use of the few words and expressions of the Kaliarda lexicon that have survived until today, serves, among others, as a proof of the identity construction and presentation of the Kaliarda speech community members. Kaliarda is a marked linguistic variety. People who use it communicate a message, apart from the one communicated by the actual words they use; they make a statement about their sexual identity introducing in this way to the others part of themselves. The members of the Kaliarda speech community construct and present part of their identity via the use of code-mixing between Kaliarda and Greek. (Gkartzonika n.p.: 48)

## 7.4 Bahasa Gay - Indonesia

The gay spoken language in Indonesia called bahasa gay has been written about by Professor Tom Boellstorff (2004) in an article called *Language and Indonesia: Registering belonging* which appeared in the Journal of Linguistic Anthropology.<sup>16</sup> He classes Bahasa gay as an effeminate register created in the 1970s which is based on the national language of Indonesia; bahasa

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<sup>16</sup> Bahasa gay is also known as bahasa banci, a closely related language variety. Banci is a nationwide (and somewhat derogatory) term for male-to-female transvestites; two well-known bahasa gay/banci variants of the term are binan and b'encong (thus this language is also called bahasa binan or bahasa b'encong). (Boellstorff 2010, p249) For the purposes of ease, the term used throughout will be bahasa gay.

Indonesia<sup>17</sup>. Bahasa gay 'involves derivational processes including unique suffixes and word substitutions and a pragmatics oriented around community rather than secrecy' (Boellstorff 2004: 248). This is slightly different from the other forms within this chapter which put quite an emphasis on secrecy.

Boellstorff (2004) seeks to 'provide linguistic evidence for the hypothesis that gay subjectivity is bound up with a fractured but real national culture' due to the fact that he found 'only minor and temporary variations' on 'well-documented and extensive variation in local cultures across the Indonesian archipelago' (Boellstorff 2004: 249). He expected to find variation because of the difference in spoken language found in the area, such as Balinese and Javanese. This is a fairly unique situation because of the geographical make up of the country but it would be unconceivable to potentially have regional variation in any of the spoken gay slang.

However, Boellstorff (2004) notes that 'one variation on this pattern is that terms that are claimed to be Javanese (though often of unclear origin) have become an element of bahasa gay in Makassar on the island of Sulawesi. This is not simply an instance of the broader incursion of Javanese into the national vernacular (Anderson 1990b)<sup>18</sup>, because these terms are not used by gay men on Java itself; their use is distinctive to gay Makassar, reflecting a sense of translocal connection' (Boellstorff 2004: 253).

Boellstorff (2004) asserts that 'bahasa gay indicates how the lifeworlds of gay men are "leaking" into Indonesian national culture' (Boellstorff 2004: 251). By saying this he is reflecting that the experiences and activities are having an influence on the wider society in Indonesia and as a result, gay men will become part of the wider culture and not a minority. He recounts that 'Gay men not only informed me of the existence of bahasa gay but also eagerly taught it to me. I likewise observed such men teaching bahasa gay to other Indonesian men who were new to the gay world (such teaching was almost always limited to lexicon)' (Boellstorff 2004). This kind of teaching was also mentioned by some of the research participants in relation to GSV.

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<sup>17</sup> See: [www.ethnologue.com/language/ind](http://www.ethnologue.com/language/ind) for more information.

<sup>18</sup> See: Anderson, B., 1990. Sembah-Sumpah: The Politics of Language and Javanese Culture. In: *Language and Power: Exploring Political Cultures of Indonesia*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press. pp194–240.

Well, through friends you pick it [GSV] up really, through friends and you get an understanding of it because it's quite different to British Sign Language

P2

I was taught GSV and every now and again it would come up.

P4

I remember a workshop that I was involved with and a very strong deaf lesbian was involved in it and they were talking about it... nearly 20 years ago now.

P8

But it's not all about the lexicon because Boellstorff (2004) claims that 'true fluency is signalled not just by knowing vocabulary but by knowing the processes and being able to coin neologisms oneself' (Boellstorff 2004: 255). That appears to be the case with much of the gay slang covered in this chapter. It is not just the skill of being able to recount it but to enhance, create and develop it would reflect a true master of the language. This may potentially elevate one's status in the community if there is an element of teaching the language to others. Bahasa gay is 'a "slang" in the sense of a language of association and community (bahasa gaul). My argument is that it is the goal of association that makes a particular utterance a valid 'move' in the game of bahasa gay and that what is at issue in this association is a sexual community understood in national, not ethnolocalized, terms' (Boellstorff 2004: 259).

Boellstorff (2004) provides a counter-argument to claim that bahasa gay is not a secret language because not all gay men know it and also the fact that it is rare to see whole clauses of bahasa gay because often only the first syllable of an Indonesian word is changed which doesn't render it very secret as it would be understood by many and also that many people in Indonesia will use it and it is recognised in mass media. His argument is that it appears that bahasa gay is used by gay men to primarily 'invoke a sense of gay community... to stabilize social relations, creating a sense of similarity and shared community'

(Boellstorff 2004: 260-262). He reflects that gay men will use bahasa gay in their own gay company and not in situations where gay and straight people will be mixed together. In this situation, there is no need for it to be secret as comments do not need to be masked because there is nothing to hide.

There is a sense of belonging when gay men use bahasa gay but is 'seen to be hip, not queer' (Boellstorff 2004: 264) when non-gay Indonesians use it this is argued by the fact that 'gay subjectivity is so strongly linked to national culture in the first place' (Boellstorff 2004: 264) and therefore not linked to being gay. Boellstorff (2004) cites the work of Hervey (1992)<sup>19</sup> and suggests that bahasa gay 'is shifting from a "genre register" linked to context, to a "social register" linked to "stereotypical personality types"' (Boellstorff 2004: 182) which is a significant shift when the context of a secret code used by gay men is considered, as this will potentially not be the case in the future and will give bahasa gay a different perspective which may also apply to other gay slang.

## 7.5 Swardspeak - Philippines

Swardspeak has been documented from two perspectives. The first is from a linguistic perspective and that was by Donn and Harriet Hart in 1990 and the second which is from the sociolinguistic perspective by Martin F. Manalansan IV in 2003, both of which we discuss in this section.

Hart and Hart (1990) conducted research into Visayan Swardspeak in Cebu City, the second largest city in the Philippines, and in Dumaguete City, which is even though much smaller, is the capital of Negros Oriental. Cebuano is the language spoken in both cities. Between Cebu City and Dumaguete City a total of 63 informants checked Visayan Swardspeak for variations and popularity and it was constantly being revised and recirculated. This method resulted in a number of words being proposed but it was only the most popular words and the ones that could be validated for meaning by John Wolff's *A Dictionary of Cebuano Visayan*, that were included in their study. Over half of the root words were Cebuano, with English being the second largest source followed by Spanish and Tagalog. (Hart & Hart 1990: 27) Manalansan (2003) reflects that 'Swardspeak is not a mere bundle of words but actually reflects the

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<sup>19</sup> See: Hervey, S. and Or. 1992. Registering registers. *Lingua*, 86 (2), pp189-206 for further information.

politico-historical and cultural experiences of multiply marginalized men from a former Spanish and American colony' (Manalansan 2003: 46).

There were two words found to be used to label a gay man; *Bayut* and *Sward*. Bayut is an older term that refers to all male homosexuals, transvestites, and effeminates and more recently, sward is used with the same meaning as bayut, but usually denotes those bayut who consider themselves to be upper class, educated, and refined. (Hart & Hart 1990: 28)

It was also established that bayuts and swards are visually different from each other. 'Bayuts are more swishy, dress more colourfully, wear more cosmetics and generally advertise their bayut-ness' (Hart & Hart 1990: 28). In this respect, it would appear that the way these men dress and conduct themselves they are choosing to identify as more feminine. On the other hand, it may be interpreted from the informants of Hart & Hart that swards conduct themselves in a more masculine manner. As a result of this upper- and lower-class system, swards can associate with a bayut fairly easily but not vice versa. Steve Valocchi (1999) has examined the creation of gay collective identity in the US and he argues that gay identity is class-biased and was reinforced by consumer capitalism in the 1990s which changed the category of gay identity from a political one to that of a lifestyle (Valocchi 1999, pp. 207-224). However, Manalansan (2003) found that 'most informants, who are neither from the lower classes or nor work in beauty parlors, consider swardspeak as a more democratic system of linguistic practice' (Manalansan 2003: 48).

One thing that both the bayut and sward share is the fact that they will both use swardspeak and it was identified by Hart & Hart that 'one needs to learn swardspeak in order to fully participate in the entertainment and high fashion industries' (Hart & Hart 1990: 29). This is one reason why swardspeak would be understood by not only the gay community; not everyone in the entertainment and high fashion industries are gay, however, like the non-gay users of Kaliarda, the non-gay users of swardspeak are aligning themselves with the gay community by using the argot.

From the identity perspective, Manalansan argues that 'Filipino gay men use swardspeak to enact ideas, transact experiences and perform identities that showcase their abject relationship to the nation. At the same time, the practice of swardspeak highlights Filipino gay men's complicated struggles in negotiating

their sense of belonging, or citizenship, and self-identity' (Manalansan 2003: 46-47).

## 7.6 Gayle - South Africa

The South African gay slang known as gayle was written about by Ken Cage (1999; 2003) as partial fulfilment for the degree of Master of Arts in the Department of Applied Linguistics and Literary Theory at Rand Afrikaans University in Johannesburg in 1999. This information was then published as a book in 2003 titled *Gayle: the language of kinks and queens: a history and dictionary of gay language in South Africa*. Data was collected via an initial qualitative questionnaire of which there were 27 responses which he admits were 'not every enlightening' (Cage 1999: 16), followed by a quantitative questionnaire of 84 results which was created for the following reasons:

- to assess the distribution and frequency of various lexical items in gayle.
- to supply lexical items which had not been incorporated in the core vocabulary
- to supply three possible reasons from nineteen as to why they might use gayle
- to identify the field of discourse in that respondents might use gayle.

The data Cage collected relating to demographics revealed that 'The greatest number of respondents were white, English-speaking males, living in Gauteng, between the ages of 30 and 40, and with a post-matric education' and from the results he concludes that 'White, English speaking males are probably the least affected by cultural taboos and constraints in coming out and Mother-tongue English and Afrikaans speakers have more exposure to gayle than vernacular language speakers (Cage 1999: 20).

Cage recognises that gayle is not a language but that it is a lexicon and register used by gay people socially. In 2009, Tracey Lee McCormick wrote an article titled *A Queer analysis of the discursive construction of gay identity in Gayle: the language of kinks and queens: a history and dictionary of gay language in South Africa* and in it she argues that 'the defining and therefore fixing of 'new' lexical items (although temporarily a source of interest) does not



indicate how these items operate in actual language usage and the role they play in the production of reality. Also, decontextualised lists do not further an understanding of who used the items being defined, how they were actually used and for what purpose' (McCormick 2009). Here, McCormick is questioning Cages' ability to state that this lexicon is used socially.

McCormick also says that 'The problem with Kinks and Queens is that it claims well known items as being part of a unique South African gay language when they are in actually generally available to mainstream linguistic communities. The defining of such items in Kinks and Queens points to the difficulty of trying to carve out a unique gay language since speakers make use of a wide array of linguistic items no matter what their sexuality or gender' (McCormick 2009: 8). This is true but the reason gay people are using the slang is to be questioned. It is said by various scholars cited in this chapter that the motivation is as follows: 'serve a community of interests based on exclusion... create a sense of belonging...' (Lucas 1997: 87), revealing or establishing the sexual identity of the speakers. (Baker 2002a: 68), 'as a marker of speech community identity and membership and fosters co-membership and camaraderie' (Gkartzonika n.p.: 26). These reasons are arguably more important than the lexicon alone.

Cage (1999) also asserts that South African gay people 'live invisible lives within mainstream society' (Cage 1999: 22). It could be argued that this is a generalisation and that not all gay people necessarily live invisible lives. It very much depends on the individual as to how little or much they express their sexuality and therefore how visible or invisible they are.

Cage (1999), like Levon (2010) in the next section on 'Oxtchit', also draws on the work that Halliday (1978)<sup>20</sup> published on 'anti-language' to justify categorising gayle as an anti-language because of factors such as that gayle is a word list, vocabulary switches but grammar remains the same, it creates and maintains an alternative reality and code-switching (Cage 1999: 24-25). It is used 'in a narrow, controlled environment where speakers feel that it is safe to use the register. The act of using Gayle implies some kind of environmental circumstance for the discourse, and the discourse is understood relative to this circumstance' (Cage 1999). So this implies that gayle is limited in its use and

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<sup>20</sup> See: Halliday, M. A. K. 1978. *Language as social semiotic*. Baltimore: University Park Press

used with caution; where gay people feel comfortable and create a connection with others through language. People will identify with other members of the community. Cage (1999) goes on to say that:

It serves an interpersonal function, which establishes, specifies and maintains relationships between members of a society/culture, and includes interpersonal linguistic skills, which makes conversation a two-way experience. By speaking, a Gayle user actively constructs and displays his role and identity in a gay context. Gayle would only be used when both speakers in a speech event are gay themselves, and underlines their membership of a subculture. (Cage 1999: 29)

To say that it would only be used when both speakers are gay is different to the other gay slang in this chapter as many of them will be used by non-gay people who are also 'members' of the gay community as a result of friendship or employment.

## 7.7 Oxtchit - Israel

The main collection of research on the little know subject of oxtchit is from Erez Levon who wrote a book titled *Language and the Politics of Sexuality* in 2010. This was a study of language and sexuality among lesbians and gays in Israel and the interconnections between sexuality and national politics. Oxtchit is generally used by an *oxtcha* (the singular of *oxtchot*) who Levon describes as:

A young, effeminate gay man normally of Middle Eastern or North African descent (i.e., *Mizrachi*<sup>21</sup>) who is physically slight, wears the latest designer clothing and is obligatorily passive during sex. In addition to these bodily characteristics, *oxtchot* are also notably distinguished by

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<sup>21</sup> Mizrahi or Mizrachim are Jews from Northern Africa and the Middle East, and their descendants. Approximately half of the Jews of Israel are Mizrahi. (Jewfaq.org, n.d.)

their use of language, which is normally described in terms of exaggeratedly high speaking pitches, wide pitch ranges and high levels of pitch dynamism laid over a distinct and unique set of lexical items. (Levon 2010: 132)

Oxtchit is not only described with the features of higher pitch, intonation and dynamism but as a 'lexicon of certain "secret" words known only to other "speakers" of *oxtchit*' (Levon 2010: 133) and it is here that Levon draws a parallel to Polari but recognising how restricted a code oxtchit is compared to Polari and how it does not 'diverge in any significant way from standardized Hebrew syntax' (Levon 2010: 133).

Published is a list of words<sup>22</sup> which Levon classifies as offered examples from an online lexicon which were not verified and a list he classes as 'borrowed' from the source language because of the fact that they are 'identical in form and use'. These words share a 'common semantic domain, primarily concerned with the physical, behavioural and/or sexual attributes of individuals (usually men)' (Levon 2010: 134). This is the same with the other gay slang which has been described above. Levon notes that two-thirds of the words that he lists are from words that originated in languages other than Hebrew and he also notes that some words (a total of eight) experience 'a combination of both morphological and semantic innovation' (Levon 2010: 134) in that the structure of the words described changes to create a play on words or take on a specialised meaning.

It is recognised that 'given these differences in both meaning and form as well as the rather high percentage of words of non-Hebrew origin, it is clear that someone not familiar with *oxtchit* could have a hard time understanding a speaker who makes abundant use of these terms. In this sense, oxtchit can be considered an *anti-language* (Halliday, 1978), a linguistic tool with which to gain entry into a "secret" *anti-society* (Levon 2010: 134).

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<sup>22</sup> The lexicon of oxtchit can be found in *Language and the Politics of Sexuality* on p135

## 7.8 Summary

The gay varieties featured in this chapter may not be an exhaustive list but it demonstrates its existence in a number of language communities throughout the world. The language varieties discussed in this chapter are referred to in different forms such as language, argot, slang and code. There is general consensus that gay slang are generally bodies of lexicon often created from origins other than their native languages which describe physical, behavioural and/or sexual attributes of individuals with the purpose of secrecy, identity creating and bonding. It is a tool for people to gain access to a society hidden from the wider society they interact with. Levons' (2010) observations of *oxtchit* are applicable to all of the varieties features in this chapter when he says that '*oxtchit* could be understood both as a kind of "password" into the *oxtcha* world and the means through which an *oxtcha* subjectivity and sense of community is constructed' (Levon 2010: 136).

It is not only spoken language where a slang is used for the purpose of secrecy, identity and bonding. The same happens with certain sign languages and this is discussed in detail in chapter 5.

## **8. Gay Sign Variation**

### **8.1 Introduction**

This linguistically-focused section will explore Gay Sign Variation (GSV) from the UK, USA and Ireland. It will examine why GSV is a variety within different sign languages and will touch on explaining why its use is important for the Deaf gay community, although this is covered in greater detail in Chapter 6.

I first started researching Gay Sign Variation (GSV) in 2008 with the aim of establishing how much, if any, the articulation of signs used in the Deaf gay community differ from that of BSL. This was examined from both a linguistic and sociolinguistic perspective drawing parallels from research previously conducted with a variation found in ASL (Kleinfeld and Warner 1996; Rudner and Botowsky 1981) and features recorded in BSL (Beck and Hesselberg 1995).

Aside from the authors mentioned above, there is very little written about GSV and the sociolinguistics surrounding it which justifies the further examination which will, in turn, provide further information about and a greater understanding of the Deaf gay community as a whole. Establishing what GSV is and how it fits into the larger Deaf community and establishing the role that GSV might play within the community provides us with further knowledge on a sub-culture which exists within the wider Deaf community. Understanding the notion that there may be a sub-culture within a culture then helps to understand if the Deaf gay community would label themselves as a sub-culture. This is discussed again in greater detail in Chapter 6.

When researching if there is evidence of GSV, it is important to understand that there is first a recognised sign language that it can derive from and in the case of the UK, that language is BSL, which was introduced been in Chapter 2. Therefore, the existence of GSV would be described as a social language variation. This is described by Crystal as identifying who you are compared to a regional language variation which would identify where you are from. He states that 'it is usually language – much more than clothing, furnishings or other externals – which is the chief signal of both permanent and transient aspects of our social identity' (Crystal 1995: 364). This means that

British Deaf people would use BSL and the people within the group of self-identifying Deaf gay people would potentially sometimes use the variation of BSL depending on the situation they are in. Baker (2002) acknowledges the work of Stanley (1970), who identified that 'many subcultural lexicons include *core* and *fringe* vocabularies. Core vocabularies contain a few words or phrases that are known to many people, including those who are not part of the social group who use the slang' (Baker 2002: 40). Therefore, it may also be feasible that both hearing gay and Deaf straight people outside of the Deaf gay community, may be aware of, and possibly use, GSV. However, a lexicon, jargon or vocabulary does not make, by itself, a linguistic variation as this is based on regional and/or social variations.

## 8.2. Methodology

GSV, like spoken language gay variety, is deemed to be used covertly, is signed rather than written and quite possibly originated in a time when access to video recording was limited. For those reasons, there is little documented and archived material available on which to basis a study. However, some documents were found in existence on the topic; some from the United States focus on the lexicon of their GSV (Kleinfeld and Warner 1996; Rudner and Botowsky 1981) and one from the United Kingdom (Beck and Hesselberg 1995) which analysed the features of GSV. No research had been conducted into the link between GSV and identity as a Deaf gay person until the interviews conducted for the purposes of this study and that is covered more in the Chapter 6. Eight BSL signs have been analysed and compared to GSV to confirm or refute its classification as a variation of BSL. It would appear that this is the first time that any such comparison has been made.

Because of the lack of published material, the Internet was utilised with key search words and phrases such as 'Gay Sign Variant / Variance / Variation', 'Gay sign BSL / ASL' 'Deaf gay culture' and 'Gay sign language'. This internet search revealed information as to which publications included information on GSV and Deaf gay culture. Contacting individuals personally was also an important part of the research. Mala Kleinfeld, who co-wrote a paper with Noni Warner (1996) '*Lexical Variation in the Deaf Community Relating to Gay,*

*Lesbian and Bisexual Signs*' in the book *Queerly Phrased: Language, Gender and Sexuality* edited by Anna Livia and Kira Hall, was contacted directly and she kindly provided a copy of '*Signs Used in the Deaf Gay Community*' by William A Rudner and Rochelle Botowsky (1981) which can be found in the journal *Sign Language Studies*.

From the UK perspective, Howard Beck and Simon Hesselberg (1995) presented at the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) conference in Vienna, Austria in July 1995. The title of the presentation was *Culture and Membership of the Gay Male Deaf Community: Gay Male Sign Variation in British Sign Language*<sup>23</sup>. (Beck and Hesselberg 1995) Additionally, and following on the theme of personal contact, one-to-one interviews were conducted with two members of the Deaf gay community in London who were known to have considerable knowledge of GSV and the Deaf gay community. The linguistics and culture of the users of gay sign variety was discussed in these interviews. The input from these individuals was invaluable with regards to the history of GSV and its usage to date.

### **8.3 Gay Sign Variation: The British perspective**

It is not easy to identify exactly what GSV is because of the minimal research that has been carried out by the researchers mentioned above. However, we do know that there are certain signs that are linguistically different to those of BSL, which is identified and used within the British Deaf gay community. The unpublished contents of the presentation given at the WFD Congress in Vienna in 1995 documents the time when Liz Scott Gibson, then Director of Sign Language Services at the BDA, contacted Howard Beck, then Deaf Equality Team Co-ordinator from Equal Opportunities at Leeds City Council and Judith Collins, Teaching Fellow of Durham University, to establish a research project to explore this particular use of BSL. Along with Scott-Gibson, Collins, Beck and Hesselberg were Dr. Iain Poplett, then Co-ordinator of DLAGGS (Deaf Lesbians and Gays Group) and John Wilson, then Deaf Arts Officer at Shape London, who was also an Actor / Trainer.

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<sup>23</sup>As this is not published, Simon Hesselberg kindly forwarded on a copy, having previously given access to a private collection of a number of other magazines and books in 2006.

The aims of the group were to examine gay sign variation and ascertain whether or not it is a commonly used form of BSL by videoing and analysing signing of self-identified Deaf gay males and one hearing gay male who had worked with Deaf homosexual males, from various regions of England, Scotland and Wales. These men were attending the BDA Congress in Reading when they volunteered to be included in the study. (Beck and Hesselberg 1995)

By the time the group met to analyse the findings from the video tapes in 1995, there were some changes in the group. Frances Elton, then Director of British Sign Language Tutor Training Courses, Research Fellow, Sign Language Studies, Deaf Studies Research Unit of University of Durham and member of the British Sign Language Advisory committee of the BDA became involved. In addition, Liz Jones, then temporary manager of British Sign Language services of the BDA replaced Scott-Gibson. Charts were used to identify such areas as: outlines / posture / framing of signing, facial features (eyes and teeth), hand-shapes (wrist and arm movements), lexical, and general overviews. The information captured was then analysed to identify patterns of style, facial expression, body movement and hand-shape. (Beck and Hesselberg 1995)

It was found that the style of the signing displayed by the Deaf gay males was influenced by camp behaviour. (Beck and Hesselberg 1995) Deriving from the Austrian spoken language, camp or *kamp* is a slang term used to describe gay men or as an adjective to describe things within the gay world. The New Partridge Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English states that it is 'to exhibit humorously exaggerated, dramatic, effeminate mannerisms' (Dalzell and Victor 2005: 334-335).

A common feature among the men was to sign with their elbows close to their body. Of the 21 men recorded, 16 of them displayed this feature. This is quite opposite to masculine heterosexual Deaf males who would use a much more open and forward style of signing. (Beck and Hesselberg 1995) It has been commented, jokingly that "this is to ensure their handbag doesn't slip off their arm whilst signing" (Jackson 2008). This in itself is a 'camp' comment and one, which could be described as 'tongue in cheek'. Photographic examples of this can be seen in the analysis of the signs later on in this chapter.



The face plays an important part in the expression of 'camp' signing and a high proportion<sup>24</sup> were identified as displaying their teeth a lot more than that of the average BSL user. (Beck and Hesselberg 1995) As there is very little research concerning this in BSL, it is difficult to be able to compare the differences. Similarly, there was exaggerated use of the eyes and eyebrows, in that the eyes were often opened wider than usual and the eyebrows used more frequently and with greater animation. (Beck and Hesselberg 1995)

Body movement and signing space were also identified as being more significant than that of average BSL user. Deaf gay men seem to express themselves through role-shift and it is recognised that the more a Deaf gay person drinks alcohol and becomes drunk, the larger these movements become and the more space they need to be able to sign in (Jackson 2008). Hand-shapes for commonly used signs in BSL were identified as being different in areas such as:

- ALRIGHT (Sign 1 - see page )
- BORING (Sign 2 - see page )
- DEAF (Sign 4 - see page )
- GO AWAY (Sign 5 - see page )
- HEARING (Sign 6 - see page )
- TIME (Sign 7 - see page )
- WALK (Sign 8 - see page )

These signs, with the addition of CHICKEN BOY, have been analysed in this chapter (see pages 145 - 151). However, linked to the hand-shape is the use of the wrists and in the study, it was identified that the Deaf gay men used their wrists in a more flexible manner than that of heterosexual Deaf men (Beck and Hesselberg 1995). The limp wrist has always been synonymous with camp and the old sign for GAY was a limp wrist (see image overleaf).

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<sup>24</sup> No percentages were presented in the document.



(Image 1 - American Renaissance Magazine 1995)

### 8.3.1. The gay sign variation using community

It is important to understand who will generally be made aware of the variant and use it within groups of likeminded individuals. Primarily, the people who will use GSV will be the British Deaf gay and lesbian community but it cannot be assumed that every member of the community will understand GSV. As Stanley explains, core vocabularies contain a few words or phrases that are understood by many people whereas fringe vocabularies, which are larger than core vocabularies, will only be known to a few speakers. So, the situation may arise that only a few members of the Deaf gay community will understand GSV in great detail but many more will understand the core vocabulary.

It has been explained in Chapter 3 that the gay community consists of men and women who are sexually or emotionally attracted to other men and women of the same sex. Like many other communities, they are not always easy to categorise into a particular group. However, unlike people from other language minorities, Deaf gay people do not tend to live in a community within a particular location, for example the Indian, Irish or Greek communities in the UK, but will, instead, live throughout the UK.

For that reason, the first group for Deaf LGBT was established in London in 1978 by David Moller called Brothers and Sisters Club. (Lgbthistoryuk.org 2014) There was once a website for this organisation ([www.brothers-and-sisters-club.org.uk](http://www.brothers-and-sisters-club.org.uk)) which has now ceased. All that remains is a Facebook page

(<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Brothers-Sisters-Club-DEAF-LGBT-London-England-UK/121561357929026?ref=ts&fref=ts>) The aim of this club was to promote to the social and online welfare of Deaf Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender people in Greater London. After 30 years, the club's Constitution stated that it aimed to:

- Network with other organisations to raise awareness of social needs of Deaf GLBT people.
- Promote the participation of Deaf GLBT in social and recreational opportunities.
- Provide a regular relaxed meeting space for Deaf GLBT people.
- Publish a regular newsletter on a monthly basis online and in paper format.
- Formulate and promote an effective working relationship between committee, members and representative officers in the community of the club.

The current Facebook page states:

Welcome to Brothers & Sisters Deaf Club for lesbian, gay , bi and transgender people living in London.

Description

EVERYONE are very welcome to access our fan page/ club as an equal op....

Our team are here to support, community, health, social, events, etc TO YOU....and we team want to making your DEAF life easier.....Any DEAF L.G.B.T. new people to come or live in our CITY or wanted to ask for HELP, we team are very happy to advisor and 100% support YOU....

(Facebook 2014)

Other people identified as potentially using GSV and understanding the core vocabularies as explained above, would be friends and colleagues of Deaf

gay people. This may not be as straightforward as it sounds though, as many Deaf gay people may not be openly homosexual and may well be 'in the closet' which means hiding one's sexual identity (see Chapter 3). By a person using these signs with a Deaf colleague, they could automatically 'out' themselves when really they wanted to remain 'closeted' which could in turn cause the Deaf gay person a number of problems among their heterosexual peers.

An additional group with the potential to use GSV would be hearing interpreters working with Deaf homosexual clients. Similar issues are raised as the ones above. The situation is that an interpreter may be making a presupposition regarding their clients sexuality or may know the client well, and use GSV with them in a social situation, but it may be inappropriate for the interpreter to use GSV in that particular domain or booking.

However, it is expected that the client would be protected because of the National Registers of Communication Professional working with Deaf and Deafblind People (NRCPD) code of conduct for communication professionals that registered interpreters are duty bound to adhere to, which states that:

- You must respect the confidential nature of any information gained in the course of your professional activity.
- You must seek to maintain the highest standards of professionalism and integrity.
- You must avoid discrimination against parties involved in an assignment, either directly or indirectly, on any grounds.

(Nrcpd.org.uk 2010)

The sexuality of the signer conversing or interpreting for the Deaf gay person is a further consideration. There are questions as to the appropriateness of straight people using GSV. Linda Day (2000), in her lecture notes for students at Bristol University which are freely available online stated 'Many members of the gay community feel that it is wrong for straight people to use their dialect... some gay men are natural show-offs and like other people to admire their GSV, but do not want them to use the GSV'. (Bristol University 2000) However, there are deaf gay men who are "happy for straight people to

use GSV with them because it shows an understanding and acceptance of their sub-culture". (Maguire 2008)

### 8.3.2. Linguistic analysis of gay sign variation in BSL

This part of the chapter will examine eight different signs. Seven of these are signs used within the Deaf community and the differences between BSL and the variety of BSL; GSV, are highlighted. The eighth sign is used exclusively in the Deaf gay community, so no comparison can be made but the linguistic make-up of the sign can be explained. GSV is part of the productive lexicon of BSL and is often, like many signs, visually motivated. The source of the BSL is from the BSL Dictionary and the GSV was shown to me by Daryl Jackson.

The sign types, referred to below, are from the research from Stokoe (1965) who identified there are three basic sign 'parameters' or parts: hand-shape, location and movement. (Sutton-Spence and Woll, 1999). The form of signs was then classified into six different types depending on how many hands are used, their location and their movement.

Table 1. Sign type descriptors.

<b>Sign type</b>	<b>Description</b>
1	One hand only, articulated without touching or being near to any specific body part.
2	One-handed signs which make contact with, or are close to, a body part other than the non-dominant hand.
3	Two-handed signs where both hands are the same shape, are active and perform identical or symmetrical actions without touching each other or the body.
4	Two hands with identical hand-shapes perform identical actions and contact each other.
5	Two handed signs where both hands are active, have the same hand-shape, perform identical actions and contact the body.
6	Two-handed signs where the dominant hand is active, and the non-dominant hand serves as the location of the movement; they may have the same or different hand-shapes.

(Sutton-Spence and Woll 1999: 160-161)

Table 2. Handshapes

Handshape	Description
A	Fist
Å	Fist with thumb extended
B	Flat hand, fingers extend and together
H	Index and middle fingers extended together
5	All fingers extended and spread
.. B	Curved hand, thumb at side
G	Index finger extended from fist
I	Little finger extended from fist
V	Fist with index and middle fingers bent

(Sutton-Spence and Woll 1999: xiv-xvii)

Sign 1 - ALRIGHT?

BSL sign (image 1)



Gay variant (image 2)



This is a type 1 sign where in BSL the **A** hand is the fist with the thumb extended and held with the palm facing left. The hand is in front of the body and it makes short firm movements away from the signer. Slightly raised eyebrows would indicate a question. Compare this with the GSV and the **A** hand is held in a fist with the palm facing up with the thumb held against the side of the index finger. It is in front of the body and moves in slight circular movements in clockwise direction. The shoulder of the arm in use would be slightly forward and facial expression is raised eyebrows with the lips pursed. Both signs are using the **A** hand-shape in a similar location but pointing in a different direction with different movements and different facial expression.

### Sign 2 - BORING

BSL sign (image 3)



Gay variant (image 4)



This is a type 2 sign where in BSL the **B** hand is held with the palm facing towards the signer and the fingers are pointing up. The hand is held with the fingers in front of the chin and the fingers tap the chin twice. Compare this with the GSV and the hand-shape and location are the same but the palm is facing away from the signer. The facial expression would be more exaggerated with the head slightly raised.

Sign 3 - CHICKEN BOY

BSL sign - not used (image 6)



Gay variant (image 7)



This is a sign that would be unique to the Deaf gay community as it refers to 'A young boy, usually with little or no homosexual experience; adolescent or preadolescent; youthful looking. (Aaronsgayinfo.com 2014) This is a type 3 sign where the **V** hand-shape with the index finger, middle finger and thumb extended from the fist and spread apart. The hands are held in front of the body and move up and down to replicate a chickens feet.

Sign 4 - DEAF

BSL sign (image 8)



Gay variant (image 9)



This is a type 2 sign where in BSL the **H** hand is held with the palm facing left and the index and middle fingers are facing up. The tips of the fingers are touching the ear. This sign can be produced with the cheeks puffed out.



Compare this with the GSV and the location is the same but the hand-shape changes to a **5**. The head would be slightly bent to dramatise the sign.

### Sign 5 - GO AWAY

BSL sign (above) (image 10)

Gay variant (below) (image 11)



This is a type 1 sign where in BSL the **B** hand is held with the palm facing left with the arm in front of the body. The hand twists at the wrist, so that the palm faces down, while opening. Compare this with GSV and the **B** hand-shape changes to a **B**. The hand is still in front of the body but the movement becomes short nudges away from the body. The face would express dislike at whatever was in front of them.

Sign 6 - HEARING

BSL sign (above) (image 12)

Gay variant (below) (image 13)



This is a type 2 sign where in BSL the **G** hand is held with the palm facing left and the index finger facing up whilst beside the ear. The hand then moves across the cheek to touch the chin. Compare this with the GSV and the action is the same but the hand-shape changes to **I**. It is worth noting that this is the hand-shape, which is usually associated with negativity and used in such signs as BLAME and FAIL. The facial expression used with this sign would echo this. This may reflect a cultural dislike of hearingness.

Sign 7 - TIME

BSL sign (image 14)



Gay variant (image 15)



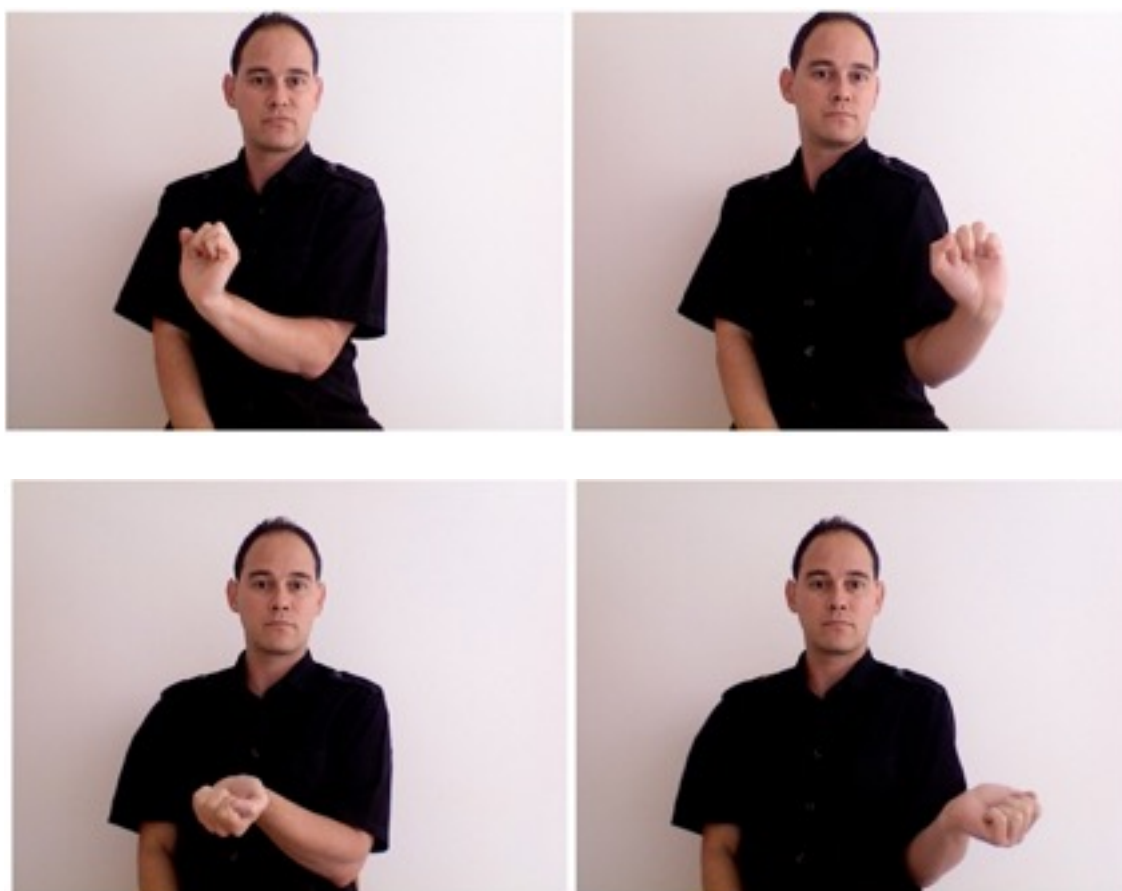
This is a type 6 sign where, in BSL the **G** hand is held with the palm facing down. The left forearm is held in front of the body (with the palm facing down) and the right index finger is held above the left wrist. The right index finger then taps the left wrist several times. Compare this with the GSV and the right hand-shape changes to become **5**. This is an exaggerated sign based on BSL.

Sign 8 - WALK

BSL sign (image 16)



Gay variant (version 1 above - image 17 and version 2 below - image 18)



This is a type 6 sign in BSL where the right hand is the **V** hand-shape which is held with the palm facing down as it moves away from the body on the left hand which is the **B** hand-shape. This sign can be produced as a type 1 sign. Compare this with the GSV 1 and 2, where both are type 1 signs using the **A** hand-shape but variant 1 faces away from the signer in front of the body and variant 2 faces up. Both movements are a repeated swing from left to right.

Table 3. Summary of Signs Analysed

SIGN	SIGN TYPE		HANDSHAPE	
	BSL	GSV	BSL	GSV
Alright	1	1	Å	A
Boring	2	2	B	B
Chicken Boy	N/A	3	N/A	V
Deaf	2	2	H	5
Go Away	1	1	B	.. B
Hearing	2	2	G	I
Time	6	6	G	5
Walk	6	1	B	A

Table 3 above records the eight signs analysed, their sign type and the hand-shape they use to be able to easily note any changes that occur between the BSL and the GSV.

It is worth emphasising that fifty per cent of all BSL signs are made up of just four hand-shapes 'B', '5', 'G' and 'A' (Sutton-Spence & Woll 1999: 162) and in the GSV signs that have been analysed above, 5 of the 8 of them follow this frequency. This is excluding the sign CHICKEN BOY, which would only be used in the Deaf gay community and not by the BSL using community in general. Most sign types as described in the table above, remained the same between the BSL and GSV versions of each sign.

Only one sign type changed when shown in GSV and that was the two signs for 'WALK'. It is quite a significant change. It is sign type 6 in BSL, which is a two-handed sign where the dominant hand is active, and the non-dominant hand serves as the location of the movement; they may have the same or different hand-shapes and in this example it's the latter. The sign then becomes type 1 in GSV for both versions, which is one hand only, articulated without touching or being near to any specific body part. Similarly, the locations of the

signs remained the same when comparing BSL to GSV. The major difference between BSL and GSV appears to be the hand-shape. All the hand-shapes in GSV change - apart from BORING which remains the same as BSL.

Oscar Wilde once said that 'The only thing worse than being talked about is not being talked about' (Wilde 1997) and this really catches the essence of GSV in that it is very expressive, lively, dramatic and can be fun to watch. Camp gay men, the type of people who use GSV, generally love to show off and shock – and love to be talked about.

Slang of any form is quite difficult to perform with conviction and credibility and this is often the case with GSV. There are people in the Deaf gay community using GSV in such a way that it is almost a skill and art form in its own right. It can be hugely entertaining. Slang 'is described as fresh and novel, often colourful, faddish, playful and humorous, and aims either at establishing a social identity for the speaker or at making a strong impression on the hearer'. (Mattiello, 2009: 67).

This study really only touches on the issues of GSV in BSL and there is clearly the potential for more detailed research in this area both linguistically and culturally. However, significant information has been found out from this study as follows:

- There are differences between the hand-shapes used in GSV signs compared with BSL.
- The 'style' of signing seen by the British Deaf gay community displays it's own features.
- People using GSV are identifying themselves as part of the Deaf gay community, which is a sub-group of the Deaf community.

It could be questioned therefore, after identifying these differences, whether "GSV is a variety or an act?" (Jackson, 2008). Here, Jackson is referring to the act as a performance but GSV could also be seen as an act of identity. Romaine (2000) states that 'Language choice is not arbitrary. Through the selection of one language over another or one variety of the same language

over another speakers display what may be called 'acts of identity,' choosing the group with whom they wish to identify' (Romaine 2000: 35). These variations to BSL are used, recognised and understood by people in the Deaf gay community, which would suggest that there is a variation of BSL specific to that community.

A limitation to this study was the lack of documented research available. Most of this study was based on two papers, which is not enough for form a definitive argument as to what exactly GSV is. In addition, only examining eight signs is insufficient to be able to confirm a variation in a language. However, indications are there that it is.

#### **8.4 Gay Sign Variation: The American perspective**

*A review of Signs Used in the Deaf Gay Community: A study* by William A Rudner & Rochelle Butowsky (1981) was a paper written as a result of an investigation into signs within ASL relating to the Deaf gay community and its members by people of the same generation, from throughout the United States of America, living in the Washington DC area. Both gay and straight Deaf people were interviewed to determine which signs were generally known to them or which were restricted to the gay community exclusively. This was done by privately showing them all photographs of fourteen sign used by or referring to gay people and asking them which signs they could explain the meaning of in English or successfully identify. A number of observations were made relating to the following which will be explained:

- Regional variation
- Positive and negative perceptions
- Openly used signs
- Covert signing
- Man v woman

As each of the people interviewed were from different areas throughout the USA, it was not always easy to identify if the sign they were being shown was unknown to them in a gay context. This was because of the fact that some

interviewees translated the signs as something completely unrelated to gay issues. This would indicate that the signs identified were a display of regional variation as opposed to a gay sign variant.

An example of this was the sign for GAY or QUEER using the 'G' hand-shape on the chin, which was translated by one person as 'old maid' and the sign BUTCH, which was translated by some as 'bitch' or 'bastard'. Another example was the sign BATH CLUB, which was the fingerspelling abbreviation 'B-C', which was identified by all of the gay men and one straight woman as either 'birth certificate' or 'birth control'. In addition, the other sign GAY, produced by tugging on the earlobe was translated as 'birthday', which is the sign used by the Deaf community in Pennsylvania.

However, gay people generally responded with the individual signs special meanings because of the context of the group of signs in question. Depending upon the sign and the individuals' sexual orientation depended on whether people found a particular sign to have positive or negative connotations. Furthermore, individuals from a sub-group may have varying opinions. An example of this was the sign GAY, produced by tugging at an ear lobe, which was recognised by ninety-five per cent of the Deaf gay people and only forty-five per cent of the straight people. This sign was rated as highly positive but one straight man rated it as highly negative. The sign FAG (f-a-g or the abbreviated f-g) was generally seen as negative by all participants in the study and approximately fifty-five per cent of both the straight and gay people said they never used the sign.

Political correctness or cultural sensitivity is an important factor to consider when using GSV, particularly for non-members of the deaf gay community, by reducing the possibility of great offence being taken by the recipient of the signs, when this may not be the intention. This also relates to the insider-outsider status (see Methodology) of the person using the language variety. The sign GAY produced by tugging on the earlobe was seen to be used more openly by Deaf gay people (95%). It is, therefore, possible that this particular sign will no longer be a sign used secretly within the Deaf gay community as more straight people see it being used. Another such sign in the study was EFFEMINATE where 66% of the straight males and ninety-two per cent of the straight females knew the sign. Even though such signs were more



commonly recognised by the straight participants, they were still not openly used by them and remain predominantly used by the gay participants. Therefore, these, and other such signs, may well be classed as general signs and not sub-cultural, as society becomes generally more liberal to homosexuality.

Some signs were used almost covertly to make sure that straight people in the vicinity were unaware of the topic of conversation or the questions being asked. A way of doing this was by replacing signs or shifting the body. An example of this was ARE YOU ONE? where one gay person was asking another if they were also gay. This was correctly identified as a question by the straight participants but was translated, as 'are you alone?' Another example was the sign MY LOVER, mainly used by Deaf lesbians, was recognised by one hundred per cent of the lesbians and eighty per cent of the gay men but most of the straight participants glossed it as 'both of us' or 'we two'. With this sign, the body is turned to hide the hands and action. It was generally observed that lesbians were more secretive about their sub-cultural signs and GSV and felt that it should only be used by others gay people. This may have something to do with the more flamboyant and camp gay men enjoying the attention 'camp signing' brings.

It was interesting, although not surprising, to observe that of the participants taking place in the study, more of the straight women than straight men knew or recognised the variant signs used. This may have something to do with society in general where more women than men are more likely to feel comfortable amongst and mix with gay men and pick up their signed variation. This was particularly evident with the signs used predominantly in the Deaf gay community. An example of this is BUTCH where only eight per cent of straight males identified it correctly and instead glossed it as 'bitch' or 'bastard', compared to approximately half of the women. The abbreviated fingerspelled sign for BATH CLUB 'B-C' glossed as 'birth control' or 'birth certificate' and DRAG QUEEN glossed as 'dorm' were universally unrecognisable amongst the straight men and women. This would indicate that these signs really do belong only to the Deaf gay community.

Rudner and Butowsky (1981) concluded that the straight participants often misunderstood the understanding of certain signs used, which would

indicate that there is a 'particular jargon belonging to the deaf gay community' (Rudner and Butowsky 1981: 47) and this jargon had 'linguistic patterns with a lexicon of signs distinct from the standard signs used by the ethnically white heterosexual American Deaf community' (Rudner and Butowsky 1981 p. 48). They go on to say that:

The heterosexual respondents often identified the signs as if they were variants of standard signs with meanings unrelated to the context. This differences in responses supports our sociolinguistic thesis. The divergence in the attitudes of gays and non-gays regarding the appropriateness of the signs in different situations further separates them linguistically, as does the practice of homosexuals using some of these signs only among themselves. (Rudner and Butowsky 1981: 48)

### **8.5 Gay Sign Variation: The Irish perspective**

Leeson (2005) wrote about the coping strategies employed by sign language interpreters when dealing with variation in language and one variant she highlighted in her work was that of sexual identity and the fact that a GSV has been posited for Irish Sign Language. This, like many other variations related to sexuality, is based on 'one tentative discussion of the subject' (Leeson 2005: 255) which was as a result of a video document presented by Edwina Murray Snr. (2002) as part-fulfilment of the requirements for the Diploma in Irish Sign Language Teaching. It was identified by Leeson (2005) that generally, GSV in ISL 'is considered to be predominantly lexical in nature. GSV appears to be made up of a range of vocabulary items and phrases, and for "standard" ISL items, the movement path may be elongated and some handshape components altered, leading to a recognizable stylized articulation which could be described as being "camp"' (Leeson 2005: 255). This matches the findings by Hesselberg and Beck (1995) as described above.

Although Ireland has come a long way in recognising equality for gay people, there appears to be a long-standing 'tension' in the wider Irish society

regarding sexuality that would not be heteronormative. As a result, like the British and American version of GSV, 'this may lead to Deaf men using GSV only in contexts where they are open about their sexuality, probably within gay community settings' (Leeson 2005: 255).

## 8.6 The use of Gay Sign Variation by Sign Language Interpreters

One group of people that have been identified as potential users of GSV who are not themselves Deaf are sign language interpreters, although as Leeson (2005) states, 'it is not always appropriate for all members of a language community to use all varieties, even though they may know and understand them. Some varieties may be commensurate with "insider status", which may result in a reluctance to share specific terms with non-deaf people.' (2005: 255) This as also identified by Kleinfeld and Warner (1996) and Michaels (2009).

Research within the international Deaf gay community as to the use of GSV by interpreters at events aimed at the Deaf gay community has been conducted by Michaels (2009). 23 people responded to the questionnaire which asked a number of questions but two main questions regarding the use of GSV. In this survey I used the term *Gay Sign Variation* but it was identified from the respondents that this term wasn't always recognised. Some variations on the term were identified as *Gay Sign Language/Variant/Camp*. The first such questions was 'Do you feel interpreters at LGBT events use Gay Sign Variation?' and the second was 'Would you like to see GSV used at an LGBT event?'

Forty-six per cent of the respondents felt that GSV was used at LGBT events and a further thirty-six per cent recognised that it may be used at events they may not have attended. Approximately one fifth (19%) said they felt interpreters did not use GSV at LGBT events. Of the nineteen per cent who felt that interpreters did not use GSV at LGBT events, twenty-two per cent felt it was because of a lack of knowledge by the interpreter, seventeen per cent felt it was a lack of knowledge of the Deaf community and another seventeen per cent felt it was not appropriate. Some comments from the anonymous respondents were as follows:

Is GSV necessary/appropriate... should be applied in specific instances but what I don't know... I am assuming GSV means "camp" but I could be wrong. But GSV could be about using signs that are applicable to gay culture... perhaps we need to become more knowledgeable about different G Signs and agree???

Not really... as I often see the terps [interpreters] at concert stage in Pride. But I often see Deaf gay relay terps [interpreters] in some places and they were great with GSV.

I have seen deaf gay people use variety of signs that might not be used in the normal mainstream, therefore I am sure many interpreters are not sure what "gay sign variance" is. I have coordinated many interpreters for our pride here and most of them are g/l but few were heterosexual who are GLBT friendly. Those who are not GLBT may not know much of gay variance signs is another possible reason for lack of knowledge.

Depends on really... often seen terps [interpreters] doing signed songs etc. but nothing very flamboyant/colourful that how it should be.

Also, not all interpreters can use GSV, and those who do don't always get it right.

It was felt by this small sample that the Deaf gay community could research and agree gay signs used within the community. This would be a project that could be undertaken in a similar vein to the British Sign Language Corpus Projects ([Bslcorpusproject.org](http://Bslcorpusproject.org) 2014) and would educate interpreters as to the possible variation potentially used in LGBT settings in order to meet the

needs of the Deaf gay people who do use GSV and make interpretations more 'flamboyant/colourful'.

Secondly, and probably more importantly to consider is the sensitivity in a non-community user using a community-users language and this is raised in the question of seeing sign language interpreters use GSV at an LGBT event. 57 percent said they would like to see GSV used at an LGBT event with 39 percent saying they don't mind. Only 4 percent said they wouldn't want to see it used. Some other comments from the anonymous respondents were as follows:

It depends on the event - women tend to use GSV less, so if it was a womens' event, then probably it would look a bit odd..??

So I can understand it better and have an interpreter who is comfortable signing it too.

If it is a sign that deaf gay people use to describe themselves [sic] but it will be inappropriate for straight people to use, then I don't mind (Like gay men will refer to each other as "faggots", but it will be inappropriate for straight people to say that).

Absolutely. When signing to any community, always use the signs used within that particular community where possible. To do so otherwise shows disrespect to the target community, can affect the audience's ability to understand the interpreted message, and can affect the credibility of either the interpreter or the message.

In general, it was felt that GSV would want to be seen in use to aid understanding and match appropriateness but with the respect that is due to the Deaf gay community. As Leeson (2005) recognises 'some Deaf people may expect that interpreters simply understand their variety and adequately represent them in the target language without feeling compelled to use a "camp"

accent (particularly if the interpreter is not gay). On the other hand, some signers may feel that interpreters should both understand and be able to produce a specific variety, including GSV' (Leeson 2005: 255).

## 8.7 Summary

The GSV examined above is a lexicon used by some members of the Deaf gay community. It is not a language in its own right. It does not have its own grammar and structure as recognised languages do, or variants and varieties of standard languages do too. GSV, whether it be from the UK, US, Ireland or any other country not covered in this research, is intertwined with its respective signed language and when used, would be classed as code-mixing. According to Mahootian (2012, cited in Gkartzonika 2012: 44), code-mixing is used among members of the community 'as a resource [...] to create a context of solidarity, ... or ... to express the presence of a minority group'. It was identified that the Kaliarda speech community were following this pattern and I would argue is the way that GSV is used. 'When one listens to a word or expression from the Kaliarda lexicon uttered by someone, it is most common and expected that the Kaliarda word or expression is part of a Greek otherwise sentence (Gkartzonika, 2012: 48). It could be argued that this is the same for GSV in that the sign is part of an otherwise signed sentence. This minority group that uses GSV is referred to as the Deaf gay community; Chapter 6 therefore seek define exactly what in-group use of GSV represents.

## **9. Conclusion**

### **9.1 Summary**

This research began as a study into a perceived minority within a minority; the Deaf gay community. It is recognised that there had been very little documented about this group of people and therefore a void in knowledge was identified. It was hoped that information relating to the identity, culture and language of the Deaf gay community would be gleaned in the process, to fill that void. In addition, it was an attempt to identify any issues that may arise for a Deaf person identifying as homosexual when they are interacting with the Deaf community and the gay community. As a result of the research, it was hoped that the some form of education regarding the Deaf gay community – its wants and needs, would be available to stakeholders who might range from members of the Deaf community, members of the gay community, interpreters and other language professionals, local authorities, policy makers and service providers.

An objective of the research was to create profiles of the Deaf community, the gay community and the Deaf gay community as a result of the documentation on each of these communities. Because there is little documented on the Deaf gay community, a cross-section of the community were interviewed to gain an insight as to how they identify as a minority within the Deaf community and the gay community and to identify if there is such a thing as the Deaf gay community. One primary area was to identify if Gay Sign Variation was an important marker for identity as a Deaf gay person. Ultimately, a definition of the Deaf gay community was something to aim towards. Within each of the chapters focusing on the Deaf community, the gay community and the Deaf gay community, a similar theme was employed in each in that firstly, an overview of each was offered followed by an attempt at quantifying the respective communities. Following on from that, the identity and the culture was examined and how certain things like the way minority groups are viewed, how multiple identities are managed and how relationships are conducted.

Language plays a large part of this study and therefore the chapter on BSL focused on what sign language is and how it is linked to the cultural values on the Deaf community and how it can assisting in the identity formation of a

Deaf person. In addition, and in a similar vein to the other chapters, minority groups were examined and how the sign language within minority groups forms their identity. Other language forms examined were gay slang from different parts of the world – Britain, Greece, Indonesia, The Philippines, South Africa and Israel. The motivation for the use of these slang, the people who might use them and how they serve as identity markers was examined. A similar exercise was employed with GSV but this chapter was more linguistically focused on the GSV within Great Britain and socially focused on the form used in the USA and Ireland.

## **9. 2 The Deaf gay community**

There is undoubtedly a Deaf gay community because of the fact that there are Deaf people who are homosexual. How large that community is is the debatable question. Unfortunately, it is unlikely that a definitive number of Deaf homosexuals could ever be established, so any figure quoted in a study surrounding Deaf gay men will always be one of speculation. A few scholars have expressed that there is a perception that there is a disproportionately greater number of Deaf homosexuals in the Deaf community. This may be contributed to by the fact that sign language is visual and groups of people using sign language at a event targeted towards the gay community, whether they are homosexual or not, may be assumed as homosexual. There is also an argument that being Deaf makes acceptance of another difference easier to deal with which results in larger numbers of Deaf homosexuals having the confidence to come out.

There are certain factors that enable integration in to the Deaf gay community and that is shared deafness and homosexuality seen from the social perspective rather than that one of a medical condition. However, it has been identified that there is a 'class system' within the Deaf gay community ranging from the lower-educated Deaf gay men to the Deaf professionals.

One of the most recognised cultural aspects of the Deaf gay community would be the use of GSV not only because of the specific lexicon used but also because of the style of signing that many Deaf gay men employ. In addition, Deaf homosexuals will often stick together to protect themselves from the risk of



homophobia from the Deaf community and disability discrimination from the gay community. As a result building trust can take some time and new members are initially accepted with caution. In the end, through perseverance and regular contact, this trust can be established.

Being open and direct is something that is common within Deaf culture but it was recognised that this, I suggest, may be more so with the Deaf gay community when it comes to talking about sex. Often, the Deaf gay community will educate each other regarding matters of safe sex because of the fact that there are barriers to communication in accessing this information.

The fact that Deaf homosexuals mostly grow up in straight, hearing families, it is likely that as a result the Deaf homosexual will encounter feelings of isolation, loneliness, invisibility and oppression. These feelings may affect their identity formation because of the fact that they are managing multiple identities. When Deaf homosexuals do find themselves engaging with the Deaf gay community, it is not uncommon in the UK to see them gravitate to a particular group because of their social standing.

A Deaf homosexual will have two main identities – Deaf and homosexual. The strength of these identities will often depend on the situation they find themselves in. From the research participants that took part in this study, seventy-five per cent of them felt that generally, their Deaf identity was more important than their gay identity and communication was one of the major reasons why they felt this.

It was identified that there are potentially feelings of difficulty in coming to terms with identity with regards to being both Deaf and gay. Deaf homosexuals are often the only members of their families who are both Deaf and or homosexual, which results in a lack of role models or mentors as they try to determine where they belong in the world. It is not only Deafness and gayness that are part of peoples' multiple identities though as there are such elements including race, religion, gender and class to consider. Aligning oneself with social groups or people who share the same experience as yourself tends to forged friendships and a support network to acknowledge and embrace difference.

Deaf homosexuals, like most people in society, strive to be happy in a relationship and there are only two real choices regarding relationships within

the Deaf gay community and that is to enter into one with a fellow Deaf person or with a hearing person. However, it is recognised that it is not always easy to find a partner so when they do, they tend to enter into the relationship with haste. It was felt that Deaf-Deaf relationships were rarer than Deaf-hearing relationships.

The hearing partner must understand that when they begin a relationship with a Deaf partner, very often, the onus will be on them to learn sign language to enable effective communication. It is appreciated that this may be an unfair balance of responsibility but without this, frustration at not being included in the communication taking place will be felt by the Deaf partner, could put strains on the relationship. It is often the case that the hearing partner will have sign language skills and Deaf cultural knowledge prior to beginning the relationship.

It is thought by some scholars that it is not possible to come out as homosexual in the Deaf community because it may jeopardise their Deaf identity. This is due to the fact that the Deaf community is seen as a collectivist society and to do something which results in embarrassing the community is frowned upon. If they do come out, they may experience struggles with family and friends. On the other hand, it was identified that deafness may actually protect a Deaf gay person from homophobic comments because of the sheer fact that they cannot hear.

### **9.3 The implications of the work for future research.**

There have been many areas of investigation within this study that have only been briefly touched upon and therefore, areas for further research or collaboration to establish service provision would be as follows:

- 1) Gay Sign Variation – Further linguistic studies could take place to establish how these signs are created, used and maintained within the Deaf gay community. A corpus of GSV should be created so that the information relating to this variation within BSL does not get lost in the future. In addition, the use of GSV as an identity marker could be explored further.
- 2) The health provision for Deaf gay men could be examined further to make sure that the needs of the community are being met in a language that

they understand. Currently, members of the community are educating others within it and that may lead to wrong information being shared. An organisation such as GMFA<sup>25</sup>

3) There could be some research on the mental health and well-being of the Deaf gay community to ensure that feelings of isolation, loneliness, invisibility and oppression are tackled and eliminated. This could be done in collaboration with an organisation such as SignHealth<sup>26</sup> or PACE<sup>27</sup>.

4) There is an increasing number of older Deaf homosexuals and there could be some joint working with organisations such as Age UK<sup>28</sup> to establish support for older Deaf homosexuals. This would link to the work carried out relating to mental health and well-being.

5) The younger Deaf community should be made aware of support networks that would assist in the exploration of homosexual identity of the coming out process. This could be in partnership with an organisation such as Stonewall<sup>29</sup>, who currently work with young people around sexuality.

6) Workshops around successful relationships could be something the Deaf gay community could benefit from. Again, an organisation such as PACE would be best place to conduct such workshops.

Ideally, because of the limitations outlined in the methodology, these would be funded research projects carried out by Deaf homosexuals or with a mixed team of Deaf and hearing researchers.

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<sup>25</sup> See: [www.gmfa.org.uk](http://www.gmfa.org.uk) for further information.

<sup>26</sup> See: [www.signhealth.org.uk](http://www.signhealth.org.uk) for further information.

<sup>27</sup> See: [www.pacehealth.org.uk](http://www.pacehealth.org.uk) for further information.

<sup>28</sup> See: [www.ageuk.org.uk/health-wellbeing/relationships-and-family/older-lgbt-communities](http://www.ageuk.org.uk/health-wellbeing/relationships-and-family/older-lgbt-communities) for further information.

<sup>29</sup> See: [www.stonewall.org.uk/at\\_school/education\\_for\\_all/default.asp](http://www.stonewall.org.uk/at_school/education_for_all/default.asp) or [www.youngstonewall.org.uk](http://www.youngstonewall.org.uk) for further information.

## **Appendix a**

### **Project Permission letter (sample)**

Date: (insert date)

Title of Project: Identity, Culture and Language of the Deaf Gay Community

Faculty Supervisors: Judith Collins, Professor Lucille Cairns and Dr Federico Federici, Department of Modern Languages and Cultures, (PHONE #, EMAIL)

Student Investigators: Paul Michaels, Department of Modern Languages and Cultures, p.a.michaels@durham.ac.uk)

### **Study Overview**

I am a Master's student in the Department of Modern Languages and Cultures at the University of Durham conducting research under the supervision of Judith Collins, Professor Lucille Cairns and Dr Federico Federici .

You are invited to participate in a study examining the identity, culture and language of the Deaf gay community incorporating aspects of the Deaf community and the gay community.

### **What You Will Be Asked to Do**

You will be asked a series of questions relating to the following topics:

Demographics

The gay community

The Deaf community

The Deaf gay community

The interview will be recoded onto video to enable analysis to take place at a later date.

### **Participation and remuneration**

Participation in this study is voluntary, and will take approximately 60 minutes of your time. You may decline to answer any questions presented during the study if you so wish. Further, you may decide to withdraw from this study at any time by advising the researcher.

### **Personal Benefits of the Study**

Provided an email address if given to the research, and providing you request a copy, the MA thesis will be made available for you to read.

### **Risks to Participation in the Study**

We want you to be aware of the possible risks/side effects associated with participation in this research. Although there is no physical risk to you, there may be some emotional risks to your wellbeing. You will be asked to think about times where you may have felt discriminated against or had to deal with barriers you may have encountered.

In the event that you develop any negative reactions, or are concerned that you may, please contact the researcher, Paul Michaels at [p.a.michaels@durham.ac.uk](mailto:p.a.michaels@durham.ac.uk). You may also contact Judith Collins at [j.m.collins@durham.ac.uk](mailto:j.m.collins@durham.ac.uk).

### **Confidentiality**

All information you provide is considered completely confidential; indeed, your name will not be included or in any other way associated, with the data collected in the study. Furthermore, because the interest of this study is in the average responses of the entire group of participants, you will not be identified individually in any way in any written reports of this research.

### **Consent of Participant**

I have read the information presented in the information letter about a study being conducted by Paul Michaels under the supervision of Judith Collins, Professor Lucille Cairns and Dr Federico Federici of the Department of Modern Languages and Cultures at the University of Durham. I have had the opportunity to ask any questions related to this study, to receive satisfactory answers to my questions, and any additional details I wanted. I am aware that I may withdraw from the study at any time by advising the researchers of this decision.

This project has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through, the Office of Research Ethics at the University of Durham. I was informed that if I have any comments or concerns resulting from my participation in this study, I may contact the Director of the Office of Research Ethics.

With full knowledge of all foregoing, I agree, of my own free will, to participate in this study.

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Print Name

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Signature of Participant

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Dated

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Witnessed

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