

BOOK REVIEW

Damned for their Difference: the Cultural Construction of Deaf People as Disabled

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According to the authors, the aim of this book is to explore the cultural construction of deaf people as “disabled”, and the construction and marginalization of deaf people as a minority group, in their current and historical dimensions. Information about social structure, history and biography are integrated in the presentation. The authors emphasize that analyses have traditionally focused on either the textual and visual images of prejudice and discrimination or on histories of deaf education. The problem is that these studies do not place their analyses in wider cultural, social and historical contexts. Within a sociological perspective, the authors aim to reveal the unconscious complexity of the upper- and middle-class values that are formed through the agency of parents, teachers, academics, doctors, leaders, etc. In addition, they intend to demonstrate how this contributes to the reproduction of structured inequalities and associated discriminatory attitudes and practices.

Structure and content

The book is in two main parts and comprises nine chapters. The first part, chapters one and two presents an historical overview of the general cultural construction of disability. It focuses specifically on how professionalism, bureaucracy and, later also, eugenics, affected the cultural construction of disabled people. The second part, chapters 3–9 presents the cultural construction of deaf people as “disabled”. The authors emphasize that the general processes related to the cultural construction of “the disabled”, are also relevant for deaf people. In addition, the processes of disabling deaf people are related to an assumed missing capacity for communication. Issues such as language and use of sign language, both in society and within the education of deaf pupils, are therefore emphasized. The book is based on a large volume of empirical material and focuses especially on the situation in

Great Britain. At the same time, the presentation of the British history of deaf education is related to developments in France and the USA. While the French and the American history of deaf education has been described well in earlier publications, the presentation of the British history of this subject provides new information.

The seven chapters in part two are structured chronologically. The presentation starts in 17th century Europe, when there was a growing interest in deafness and deaf people. From being part of a diversified population, the concept “the deaf person” arose as a specific human and social category. The interest in deaf people and sign language was related to a general philosophical interest in language. In the search for the perfect language, the question was raised as to whether sign language held a clue to this.

Although the fact that there is little knowledge about the use of sign language before the 17th century, there is information both from Great Britain and the rest of Europe that sign language was used both among deaf persons and between deaf and hearing persons. The authors examine this information in the light of recent research in non-Western communities, where sign languages are used among deaf people and in communication between deaf and hearing people. These studies document that sign languages are in no way dependent on oral speech systems, but are used as natural modes of communication. The authors claim that we have no reason to assume that the sign languages used in Europe prior to the 17th century, were not equally full-fledged languages, used in communication in the same way as they are used in local non-Western communities today.

During the 18th century the education of deaf pupils was formalized (c.f. the establishing of the school for deaf and poor pupils in Paris in 1771 and in Edinburgh in 1883). At the same time, the confrontation between spoken languages and natural sign language of deaf people became more complex and more overt. Within deaf history and culture, the period from 1760 to 1800 has been presented as a golden age. The key persons, especially in France (L’Epée, Sicard, etc), are honoured for the role they played in the development of education of deaf people through the use of sign language. There is, however, another side to this story. Although the work of l’Epée and his successors did establish an education where deaf people could participate using sign language, these educators also laid a foundation for the effective medicalization of deafness and for the construction of deaf people as “disabled”. Through descriptions of l’Epée and his successors the authors show how the interest in deaf people was transformed from a concern with the philosophy of language, to the development of institutionalized education and the rational application of scientific techniques. Traditionally this part of the history of deaf education has focused on the contradictions between the French (manual) and the German (oral) tradition. In this book the authors investigate the differences in development between Britain and France, with a special focus on ideological orientations. In Britain there was still a part to be played by the “missionary zeal” represented by educators, while there was an increasingly medical orientation in France, where humanity was being diagnosed, classified, rationalized, demystified and institutionalized. In this

process the clinical gaze of medicine played a major role in labelling deaf people.

Throughout the 19th century there was rapid growth and change in mass education, and the education of deaf people. Towards the end of the century the cultural construction of deaf people as “disabled” changed. The focus shifted from education of deaf people “as deaf people” (a collective perspective) to the education of deaf people as “disabled hearing individuals” (an individual pathological perspective). The medical and pedagogical forces oriented toward pure oralism, and speech therapy began to influence the points of view of the actors.

The last three chapters focus on developments in the 20th century. Key aspects in the first part of the century are the bureaucratization of the education of deaf people, systematization of teacher training, increasing emphasis on speech therapy and new technology. The second part of the century is characterized by the introduction of hearing devices such as cochlear implants (“the surgical violence of medicine”) and the closing of schools for deaf people (“the violence of mainstreaming”). Finally, the book presents perspectives on developments during the last decades, related to recognition of national sign languages and deaf people as a linguistic minority.

Some comments

The book presents a sociological case study based primarily on a British context. The authors are Australian researchers and the book is published in the USA. From my perspective, as a Norwegian educational researcher with 25 years of experience in deaf education, there are some questions to be raised and aspects to be discussed. What I was most struck by was the thorough presentation of historical information and the discussion of the cultural construction of deafness. Those who know Nora Groce’s 1985 book “Everyone Here Spoke Sign Language” will find that this book presents similar perspective and conclusions, although with a wider focus. By using the development of modernity as a frame for analysing the history of deaf education, rather than the traditional dichotomy between manual and oral approaches, it becomes possible to discuss other aspects of the interaction between deaf people and their contexts. First of all it is demonstrated how education, institutionalization, individuation and disablement are interconnected processes in the construction of deafness. Slogans such as “the school for the deaf as the cradle for the deaf culture”, which has emphasized much of the rhetoric of the last decades, in this perspective seem more complex and less glorious. In addition, it becomes obvious that the education of deaf pupils is a complex enterprise. Within the field of inclusive education, we have learned that inclusion and exclusion have to be considered as two interrelated concepts. We cannot look at the one without considering the other. The analyses in this book confirm this experience.

Secondly, the similarities between how sign languages were used in Europe prior to the 17th century and in present non-Western communities highlights

some aspects of the construction of sign language within the educational system today. The recognition of national sign languages as languages in their own right is an important achievement in regard to deaf people's participation in society, both on an individual and a collective level. The challenge today is related to how we can integrate sign language into educational contexts outside traditional schools for deaf pupils, in a way that makes it a communicative tool for deaf and hearing pupils. As long as sign language is tied to some segregated institutions, called deaf schools or resource centres for the hearing impaired, the risk of excluding deaf pupils from interaction with hearing peers continues.

My criticism of the book concerns how I experience the analysis of the construction of sign language and deafness. When the book presents relatively wide definitions or ideas of these concepts, the authors are moving into deep water. From an educational point of view the approach to deafness will have to balance individual and collective perspectives, for example, the tension between a compensatory approach and a social and cultural approach. The book analyses the cultural construction of deaf people as disabled. One of the lessons we have learned during the last decades is the problem related to the use of a single conceptualization of deafness. In a society with a high incidence of hearing impairments due to infections (e.g. Europe in the 17th and 18th century) the population of deaf people will be much larger than our present 0.02% of the population. This has consequences for how we can interpret descriptions of education, sign language and everyday interactions between deaf and hearing people.

In spite of this objection I have no difficulty in recommending this book. It will be valuable for students at the postgraduate level and for anyone interested in understanding disabling processes in relation to the development of modernity. Within deaf studies, the book represents a valuable supplement to some of the traditional presentations of deaf history.

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