

BOOK REVIEW

# Deaf Identities in the Making; Local Lives, Transnational Connections

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It is difficult, if not impossible, to interpret other people's experiences, and to understand other people's lives as they themselves understand them. What we might hope to aim for is an understanding of the circumstances under which people live and act, so that their narrated experiences, expressions or actions make sense to us. The ethnographer, Geertz (1983) argues, "does not, and, in my opinion, largely cannot, perceive what his informants perceive. What he perceives, and that uncertainly enough, is what they perceive 'with' – or 'by means of', or 'through' ... or whatever the world should be" (p. 58). In his attempt to understand how the Javanese, Balinese and Moroccans define themselves as persons, Geertz searched for and analysed the symbolic forms – words, images, institutions, behaviours – through which people represented themselves to themselves and to others. As a hearing person, trying to explore the deaf world and deaf identities, Breivik follows the same path in this book. Based on ten extensive life stories, Breivik seeks to understand how deaf people define themselves, and the *routes* along which they have travelled to arrive at their perception of themselves. The book reveals a mixed and, to a certain extent, intricate landscape of experiences, controversies, positions and self-orientations. Deafness, which most (hearing) people probably think of as a one-dimensional auditory deficit, is displayed through these life stories as a complex system of meanings, constructions and cultural representations.

## Narrated Lives

The book is, in itself, a narrative, in the sense that it tells the story of the inquirer, a story that gives sense to the complexity and dimensions entailed in the individual narratives. The ten life stories are categorized and grouped under a number of headings.

Under the heading *Being, Becoming and Longing*, we encounter glimpses of the lives of Hilde and Anita. They are both part of the deaf community, but at the same time seek to retain a certain distance. They are critical to the

extremist version of cultural deafness and seek to explore the best aspects of both deaf and hearing worlds. At the same time their backgrounds are very different. While Anita was born into a deaf context, Hilde was denied contact with the deaf community. Hilde learned to see deafness as a deficit that should be combated by learning to adapt, as far as possible to the hearing world. Anita, however, being adopted by a deaf family, learned to take the deaf world for granted.

Under the heading *Liminality* we are introduced to Trygve, Ragnhild and Håkon, who are all *deafened*, meaning that they lost their hearing more gradually throughout childhood or adulthood. Being deafened, we learn, is a rather liminal position. It is liminal in the sense that it excludes people from a secure position in the hearing world, at the same time as it does not automatically qualify them for access to the deaf world. It is, to a certain extent, a suspicious status, as seen from the more ethnic deaf position, first of all because it often entails a preference for the so-called “sign plus speech system”. The liminal position also represents a challenge to the *doing of identity*, which is reflected differently in the three life courses. While Trygve has aimed at a rather accepted position within the deaf world, Ragnhild is more of a loner, “hunting for herself” and seeking contacts in both worlds. And while Ragnhild’s liminality means not really belonging to any of the worlds, Håkon is part of both.

*The Homeless Mind – Belonging and Limbo*, frames the life story of Klara, which is a story about exclusion and neglect from early childhood. Despite casting more light on the consequences of neglect than on deafness, it is probably not an exceptional story within the deaf community. It is also a story that confirms Breivik’s thesis that even deaf citizens are in need of some sort of territorial homestead, at least in the formative years of childhood. For Klara, these formative years were characterized by rootlessness and disruption. Her family moved around a lot and she was constantly exposed to new places, new environments and new schools. These experiences, among others, have in different ways marked Klara for life.

The life stories told by Albertine and Sally have a more positive tone. Under the heading *Local Lives, Transnational Connections* we learn about two women who have taken the step from a liminal or “hard of hearing” status, to a deaf status. It was a conscious and deliberate move for both of them, reflecting the importance of identity work as a highly reflective process in the deaf world. The transition to a deaf identity is reflected in a before-now dimension, which is particularly evident in Sally’s story, but not in the form of a conversion that leads to any extreme position. That is more evident in the two remaining stories, told by Bill and Lisa, who have both aimed for a more *ethnic mode of identification*. Even with a strong degree of self-reflection and an awareness of the various legitimate concerns involved, they are both frontline soldiers for a more clear-cut deaf identity, fronting not only the hearing world, but also what they see as deceitful elements within the deaf world.

### A Transgressing Analysis

This well-written book introduces us to an interesting, sensitive and transgressing analysis. It is interesting because it displays such a rich cast of characters and identity orientations, giving us an insight into the rich and complex world that the deaf community represents. It is sensitive both in the sense that it gives a lot of space to the storytellers and avoids attempts to exceed what is already in the story, making the analysis trustworthy to the reader. It is easy to follow on what grounds the researcher reached his conclusions. At the same time it is also a transgressing analysis in that it, in many fruitful ways, manages to relate features characteristic to the deaf world to a wider empirical and theoretical context. One example is the way in which characteristic elements from the life stories reflect more general features of late modernity, such as growing reflexivity: flexibility of selves and the disembedding mechanisms that lift people out of spatial and social boundaries, leading both to homelessness and to a more global senses of connectedness.

A transgressing vehicle is also the comparison made with other minority groups, especially the gay/lesbian movement, who not only show the same tendency of translocational practices, but also, like parts of the deaf community, seek a more ethnic mode of identification. By comparing the phenomenon of *queering* and *muting*, Breivik shows how this ethnic orientation leads to, or makes use of, a polarization aiming at eliminating the normalizing pressure from society and celebrating and purifying deafness/gayness. Breivik is also vigilant about showing how far such similarities go. Gay and lesbian culture are seldom self-supplying, at least not in biological terms, while many deaf children are born and raised into the deaf culture. The deaf culture also has its own language, hence resembling many national minorities, which gay/lesbians do not.

Breivik manages to keep a fine balance between what Geertz (1983) calls experience-near and experience-distant concepts: "An experience-near concept is, roughly, one that someone – a patient, a subject, in our case an informant – might himself naturally and effortlessly use to define what he or his fellows see, feel, think, imagine, and so on, and which he would readily understand when similarly is applied by others. An experience-distant concept is one that specialists of one sort or another – an analyst, an experimenter, an ethnographer, even a priest or an ideologist – employ to forward their scientific, philosophical, or practical aims" (p. 57). *Hearies* and *Deafened*, and *Queering* and *Muting* are examples of experience-near concepts, while *translocational practices* and *ethnic modes of identification* are examples of experience-distant concepts, helping us to understand the social significance of local experiences.

One could possibly argue that the issue of ethno politics and ethnic identification – or the "extreme cases", as it may appear through the life stories contained in this analysis – takes too much space in the more theoretical discussions, blocking the light for other interesting aspects reflected by the narrators. Both the liminality and the flexibility – the desire

to utilize both worlds – contain many interesting issues, possibly more representative of the deaf community as a whole. Breivik states that it became gradually clear to him that “different aspects of self and identity operate differently in different situations”, and that people’s “ability to employ different frames simultaneously all point towards a need for a new understanding of selves and identities, as shifting, flexible, and alert to the necessities of the situation”. Especially in relation to the title of the book, it would have been interesting if this had been explored further. Breivik uses the concept of *frames*, without any reference to Goffman’s *Frame analysis* (1974), which could have provided an intake not only to the fluctuate character for modern identity, but also to the active and reflective work of making identity. It could even have provided a conceptual framework for bringing together the different modes of orientation and for a closer analysis of the polarizations and controversies involved. To Goffman, framing is an active undertaking; not only for presentation of self, but also for portraying the other, and for creating or naturalizing an order which legitimizes one’s own position.

These remarks should not be read as objections to the choices made, but rather as suggestions for further exploration of this exciting landscape. The book is highly interesting as it is, maybe even revolutionary as the blurb suggests. It represents a very good introduction to, and a sensible and trustworthy analysis of, a world that is unfamiliar to most people outside the deaf community. The book is also a valuable contribution to the understanding of modern identity as something constantly in the making and, as such, it is also a valuable contribution to social sciences in general.

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## References

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