Interviewing Deaf Adults in Postsecondary Educational Settings: Stories, Cultures, and Life Histories

Peter Freebody
Centre for Literacy and Language Education Research
Griffith University

Des Power
Centre for Deafness Studies and Research
Griffith University

This article provides a brief examination of how Deaf adults describe their life histories as learners and as workers in the workforce. We show how these histories are intricately tied to the movements in and around the participants' social positions as Deaf persons in a hearing world. Three discursive positions are evident in the talk of these interviewees in relation to Deafness: as disability, as logistic complexity, and as community/culture. We also show how the life stories produced in the interviews entail variations on the theme of fragmentation: the losing, missing, and finding of viable life circumstances. In addition, we discuss how the interviewer-interviewee relationship comes to embody a hearing community's interests, recasting a Deaf interviewee's everyday life into a series of curiosities.

This article presents analyses of interviews, conducted in Australian Sign Language (Auslan), with hearing-impaired and Deaf adults who were, at the time of the study, students in postsecondary educational settings. Because some participants had some speech and some did not, in some instances in the interviews sign language was supplemented by speech.

The participants were invited to describe individually the nature of their hearing loss and the consequences of that for previous and current educational and social experiences. They also discussed various views of the interrelationship of their experiences as "different" kinds of students (i.e., Deaf) to their histories of educational support and achievement. The first purpose of this article is to document and analyze reported characteristics of Deaf lives as reflected in participants' descriptions of their family, school, and current experiences in work and in the community. A second purpose is to show how the interactive structure of interviews shapes the ways in which interviewees describe and explain their life stories. This article draws data from a larger project whose focus is literacy education among deaf adults, including examination of classroom lessons in Auslan (see Freebody & Power, 1998; Hyde & Muspratt, 1998; Power & Leigh, 2000).

The analyses for this article proceed from a starting point summarized by Power: "[P]ossession of a hearing loss need not be a handicap unless the structures of a society in which the person with a hearing loss must live and learn make it so" (1994, p. 429). In the interview context, these Deaf participants were asked to present versions of themselves, stories about their identities. Contemporary conceptions of social life and identity focus on interactive communities as the crucial interfaces between the individual and the social order (Gee, 1991). That is, identity and ways of proceeding as the "self" are accorded to an individual by the interactive communities in which that individual is being, or has been, enculturated and, critically, enculturated *by* those interactive procedures that endow and substantiate "selfhood." Thus, the nature of one's "self" as a Deaf or hearing-impaired person is built through the ways in which attributions are attached to "Deaf-

The research reported in this article was conducted with the support of a grant from the Australian Research Council, File Number A79532440.
Correspondence should be sent to Peter Freebody, Centre for Literacy Education Research, Faculty of Education, Griffith University, Queensland 4111, Australia (e-mail: P.Freebody@mailbox.gu.edu.au).

ness." Further, these attributions are assumed or made explicit in the important interactive settings in which the person lives. This article addresses the question of how hearing-impaired adults, studying in postsecondary settings, describe in interview settings the history of their educational opportunities and problems.

The topic addressed here grew out of our interest in educational competence among hearing-impaired and Deaf adults in the postsecondary years of their education and training, but it did not end there. In discussing educational histories and the role of schooling in their lives, these individuals attempted to "autobiographize" themselves. In doing this, they provided us with an example of what Smith termed the overwriting of everyday experience with a variety of formal and official accounts of the meaning of those experiences. Smith (1987) observed that official knowledges such as medicine and sociology provide members of the society with

> a consciousness that looks at society, social relations, and people's lives as if we could stand outside them, ignoring the particular local places in the everyday in which we live our lives. . . . A mode of ruling has become dominant that involves a continual transcription of the local and particular actualities of our lives into abstracted and generalized forms. . . . The practice of ruling involves the ongoing representation of the local actualities of our worlds in the standardized and general forms of knowledge that enter them into the relations of ruling. (pp. 2–3)

In analyzing our interview materials, we found we needed to develop our awareness of the nature of the interview situation itself (e.g., Baker, 1997; Holstein & Gubrium, 1997). We needed to understand that our respondents needed to locate, characterize, "find," and sketch *their story* for purposes of the interview. Thus, our interview settings, and, we suspect, most such interview settings, become a data collection method that actually finds and consolidates, for both of the interactants concerned, the "other-ness" of hearing-impaired and Deaf persons. Indeed, we concluded that the interviews represent a hearing community's interests: posing queries and problems asking hypotheticals about everyday things; turning the interviewee's everyday life into a series of curious, problematic speculations; making the everyday seem "exotic" as a way of consolidating the "disability interpretation" of deafness. Aspects of this disability interpretation recur throughout this discussion, but its focus is deficiency, and its essential feature is the assumption that the salient characteristic of deafness is its restriction on people, rather than potential cultural opportunities through association with the Deaf community and culture.

Participants

All 46 interviewees were deaf or hearing-impaired people who were at the time enrolled in postsecondary educational programs. These programs included university degree and diploma courses, certificate programs at colleges of technical and further education, and workplace education and training programs, usually offered on the site of employment.

These are some relevant personal and demographic features of the group:

- 29 of the participants were women, 17 men;
- mean age of the female participants was 27.5 years; for the males, 30 years;
- 27 of the participants indicated that they had been born in Australia, others indicating origins in Southeast Asia or Pacific countries;
- 32 of the participants indicated that there was no history of deafness in their family, including their spouse/partner;
- approximately 30% of participants had a deaf family member either through marriage or birth, a higher rate than generally found in the deaf population (usually about 10%);
- 25 participants indicated that they had been born deaf, with the majority of others reporting that their deafness was diagnosed within the first two years of life;
- 24 of the participants described their deafness as either "profound" or "full" bilaterally, with other respondents indicating a degree of useable hearing in one or both ears;
- major cause of deafness was described as German measles (Rubella).

Interview

The roughly 30-minute interview was videotaped and back-translated by two bilingual (English/Auslan) assistants, who produced the written transcript. It began with assurances of confidentiality of individual responses and described the purpose of the interview as exploring the education of deaf and hearing-impaired adults and some of their school experiences and their current life situations. The participants were advised that they would be asked to talk about the course/s that they are currently studying and what they hoped to achieve by taking the course.

The interview was semistructured in two senses: first, although a set of questions was provided to guide the interview, the interviewer was instructed to cover these questions but not necessarily in the sequence provided, should the discussion move from topic to topic. Second, interviewers were instructed to allow discussion to range freely and to pursue topics of lines of thought that may not have been anticipated in the interview protocol but were potentially relevant to the general topic. The participants were informed of these latitudes for responding in the interview.

The questions were organized into five categories. The first set dealt with the source and extent of the participant's deafness or hearing impairment (e.g., "Were you born deaf or did you become deaf later in life?" "What kind of hearing loss do you have?"). Next followed questions concerning the characteristics of family communication (e.g., "When you were a child at home what kind of communication did you use with your parents?"). Discussion then moved to the participant's experiences at school, including queries about the kind of school attended, the support services available, and the participant's satisfaction with these arrangements (e.g., "What kinds of schools did you go to?" "What do you think are the positive and negative aspects of your primary school years?"). The interviewer also inquired about the participant's current reading, writing, and other communicational practices (e.g., "What type of reading/writing do you do at home?"). Finally, questions dealt with the current course of study in which the participant was enrolled (e.g., "Have you experienced any problems in doing this course?" "Do you watch the interpreter all the time or do you try and understand what the teacher is saying first and then look to the interpreters if you miss?").

Analytic Methods

The analyses used here derive in part from the ethnomethodological study of talk, which aims to understand social practice through the detailing of people's accounts of the relationships between everyday practices and social order. Members of a culture (e.g., Deaf or hearing-impaired people, members of their families, and those who teach them) have different understandings of concepts such as these and use different terms for different kinds of discursive work. In our case, for example, the attribute "Deaf" can be used to refer to a disability or to membership in a communicative culture, by both professional and lay members of a society, including members of that culture. This view is widely debated. Some say that hearing people who appreciate the distinctiveness of Deaf culture and who support the values and aspirations of Deaf people are "associate" members of that community (e.g., Foster, 1987; Padden & Humphries, 1988).

Documenting how Deaf and hearing-impaired people link particular aspects of their history and the things they do, observe, or infer every day to broad structural categories in society is crucial to understanding their experiences in institutional settings. This approach demands close attention to the data, and the researcher needs to show that the aspects of the participants or the context that we as researchers deem relevant to the interactional event are in fact relevant to our participants, as they reveal to one another (and thus to an analyst) in their talk. Schegloff (1991) described the goal of ethnomethodological approaches in the following terms:

> [We must] examine the data so as to be able to show that the parties were, with and for one another, demonstrably oriented to those aspects of who they are, and those aspects of their context, which are respectively implicated in the "social structures" which we may wish to relate to the talk (p. 52; see pp. 65–66)

Similarly, Lee (1991) has outlined a number of principles that summarize the way an ethnomethodo-

logical approach gives new direction to the study of social life and the accounts people give of their histories and social experience. Among these, he observed that the aim was to explore how people make sense of their everyday courses of action in and through their talk and the local routines of that talk without preempting the structure of those routines. He also urged that we treat the orderliness of a culture (e.g., the Deaf) not as a "backdrop" but as something achieved day to day in ordinary activities; therefore, that orderliness can be revealed in the details of such courses of everyday action as accounting and narrating.

Within this framework, Lee suggested we think of culture (whether we want to use that term in the expansive sense of "the cultures of Europe" or in the more specific sense of local sites such as "Deaf culture") as embedded in and built by courses of everyday action, explanation, and accounting. That, he argued, is how members of the culture encounter it, rather than as some external constraint of those everyday actions.

Most approaches to interviews as a research device do not scrutinize the culturally based interpretive frameworks that make sense of the talk of interviews. For our purposes (following Smith, 1987), we assume talk in interviews about "hearing impairment" and "educational experience" draws upon a cultural history, a history of professional and community interpretations, that allows the members of a culture to interpret their own lives as both sensible and reasonable within particular terms. The task for the analyst, then, is to document the conceptual and interpretive procedures used by the participant, not to decide in advance what is important about the topic or about what the participant might mean.

To capture these issues analytically, we drew our approach from the work of Jayyusi (1982, 1991; see also Baker, 1997; Eglin & Hester, 1991; Freebody, Forest, & Gunn, 2000; Hester, 1992). Our adaptation of their methods has led us to ask the following sequence of questions in systematically interrogating the interview data.

What *categories of people* are established in and by the talk? What kinds of people are there "in this topic" so that the talk can be made sensible? In documenting the categories discernible in the talk, we also ask about the contrasts that are, perhaps implicitly, set up: what are the "standardized relational pairs" provided (that is, "not-of-this category," e.g., opposite, supplementary, and complementary categories of people)?

What *attributes are attached* to these categories in and by the talk? Again, what are the "standard relational pairs" to these attributes, and are they stated or left implicit in the talk? What are the *cause-effects* accounts enabled by these category-attribute connections? Given that the participant has set up the important ways of categorizing the people implicated in the talk and attached certain attributes to these categories of people, explicitly or otherwise, what kinds of explanations of social activity are permitted or made inevitable by and from that process?

We report here initial analyses we have conducted on the features of these interviews, grouped under a number of general headings. First, we address the issue of how the respondents self-described, in terms of official and technical categorizations. We then turn to how the respondents located a narrative to present to the interviewer. These can be grouped under the headings of social cohesion, communicative complexity, and a recurring cycle that we observed, relating to the connection between the respondents' communicative capabilities and their social lives (a cycle we call "losing, missing, and [re]discovering"). Our discussion concludes with a summary of these issues and a consideration of the research technology of the interview itself as part of a process by which the "exotic other" is retrospectively constructed and presented.

Self-Categorizing: What Is 'Deaf' for This Interview?

We observed three distinctive ways in which the respondents answered our first set of questions about the level and origin of their deafness. First, a number of participants immediately adopted the official and technical designations applied to them in the course of their diagnosis and treatment for deafness or hearing impairment. Examples 1 and 2 display this feature.

Example 1

1. Interviewer: In terms of diagnosis, what type of hearing loss do you have? Is it severe, mild, profound?

2. Interviewee: It's a mild hearing loss, I think, about 50% loss in the right ear and 25% loss in the left ear.

We can note in this exchange that the interviewer provides a category solution to her first question. The three categories of a hearing loss are offered as the terms in which the answer can be provided, and the interviewee indeed uses those categories, adding further technical information about her knowledge of the degree of loss in each ear. In that sense the interviewer, at the outset, provides a *hearing* of her very first question, and the interviewee not only complies with the categories offered but elaborates on the technical discourse traditionally used to designate degree of hearing loss.

Example 2

1. Interviewer: Were you born with hearing impairment?
2. Interviewee: I was born deaf.
3. Interviewer: Do you know what degree of hearing loss you have?
4. Interviewee: I am profoundly deaf.

In this opening exchange we see the interviewee not only responding concerning the state in which she was born but also correcting or elaborating upon the interviewer's descriptor "hearing impairment." In turns 3 and 4, we see the interviewee, unprompted, adopt the technical designation for the category of her deafness. These two examples of opening exchanges, while containing visible points of negotiation and refinement, nonetheless display a ready and direct acceptance of the official and technical designations for degrees of deafness. At the very outset of the interview, in these cases, the particular nature of "the Deaf person" is established in terms related to the publicly available discourse of "diagnosis of disability."

There were, however, a number of instances in which this ready reversion to official descriptions was not immediately evident. In these cases, the participant generally arrived at such official descriptions at some point in the talk, but generally the talk took either a narrative or re-categorizing pathway to get there. Example 3 is an instance of a narrative aimed at explicating the cause and, by inference, the nature and level of the impairment.

Example 3

1. Interviewer: Okay, do you happen to know any of the details of your hearing impairment, like is it mild, severe or moderate?
2. Interviewee: Well, umm, my mother was telling me that because of the tests, they just never knew what caused my hearing impairment, so I've come to the conclusion that it must have been Rubella. That was what my mother had but that's my theory.
3. Interviewer: Right, okay. Do you know what degree of deafness you have? Would you describe it as a mild loss or moderate loss?
4. Interviewee: Severe in one ear and profound in the other.

In this opening exchange we again see the interviewer self-solving an initial question with the provision of three official/technical categories. The interviewee then provides a narrative drawn from her mother's account of the causes of the impairment and her own reasoning about that. The interviewer acknowledges the relevance of that with standard tokens ("right, okay") and reputs the question in technical terms. This last question, as in the examples above, was answered without any queries for clarification, indicating that the participants knew well the official descriptor that applies to the hearing condition, but that they chose to insert other considerations along with or, in these cases, before the naming of that descriptor. Thus, they locate a particular history for themselves prior to the official categorization.

As a final example of the initial, mutual location of the "Deaf person" by the participants, we can consider the opening exchanges from another interview, shown in example 4.

Example 4

1. Interviewer: I just want to talk about your level of deafness. You were born deaf or did you become deaf later?
2. Interviewee: Born deaf.
3. Interviewer: Would you call yourself hearing-impaired or deaf person, hard of hearing, or what would you refer to yourself as?
4. Interviewee: I'm just a person. I call myself, I'm in the middle.
5. Interviewer: Oh! So (.5)
6. Interviewee: I'm not really deaf or hearing-impaired. I'm in the middle somewhere.
7. Interviewer: Do you happen to know what the level of your deafness is mild or moderate?

8. Interviewee: It's profound B. [not a known categorization of deafness]

This exchange is complex. The interviewer initially opens the topic of "level of deafness" but immediately follows that with a question about the onset of the deafness. There are two possible hearings of combined moves in talk such as in turn 1: first, that the question about onset is an insertion into a larger exchange concerning level; that is, in determining the issue of level we need first to determine the issue of onset. A second hearing is that the second question is in fact a self-solution of the first issue; that is, they will resolve the issue of deafness by turning to onset, taken, for practical purposes here and now in the interview, as its equivalent. Such hearings are resolved moment-to-moment by participants, for there is usually no a priori method for determining which hearing will turn out to be the preferred one. The interviewee, as usual in such double requests, answers the second part first and waits for further elaboration from the interviewer. In turn 3 the interviewer specifies the question of level in terms of the ways in which the interviewee would describe himself, with the provision of a number of commonly available descriptors. The respondent's move in turn 4 is noteworthy. The categories offered by the interviewer are not drawn upon. Rather, the participant focuses on his own descriptions of himself as a "just a person," and "in the middle." After the interviewer registers surprise and invites the participant to continue, turn 6 provides an elaboration wherein the typical labels do not apply to him. In turn 7 the interviewer tries again, this time using a softened approach ("do you happen to know"), and again offers official technical categories of description. This time the participant complies with these categories in a way that, again, is sufficiently unproblematic to indicate his appreciation of the category-form sought all along. Exchange 7–8 clinch the category-identity of the participant.

It is the interviewees' deafness that occasions the interview in the first place. In that sense, the "interviewee-as-Deaf" is the occasioned category, and the interviewer represents the interests of the "stable" categorization in this pair: the hearing community (Jayyusi, 1984, p. 139). Local working identities are accomplished often early in the piece as resources for the immediate practical tasks of talking, implying, and inferring. The issue of the establishment of an identity-for-the-interview is thus taken to be significant, especially for the members of the occasioned category, the interviewees, whose talk is by definition the object of curiosity. The specific nature of the interviewer's interests in this category—Deaf and hearing-impaired—also needs to be established through the course of the talk, but, at the outset of the interview, these interests are not always made clear. Given the restrictions on the interviewer to be "objective" and to follow a protocol of predetermined questions (which Clayman, 1994, summarizes as the "neutralistic footing" of the interviewer), it is usually only through the actual progress of the interview that the interviewee can gain a sense of those interests. In particular, the interviewer's interests stand, at the outset of the talk, as systematically equivocal: he or she could be interested in this person, for example, only as a member of the group "Deaf," or as a specific person, with a particular history, who also happens to be a member of the group "Deaf."

But, as we have seen, determining whether the interview will proceed with the interviewee as a speaker for or representative of "the Deaf," on one hand, or as, on the other, a specific individual who happens to be Deaf, is not just the prerogative of the interviewer. In the examples above we can see the variety of techniques the interviewees used to effect their local identities-for-the-interview. In the production of these identities, a categorization such as "Deaf" or "hearing-impaired" can allow for certain "typified" assumptions and predictions about the person to operate during the interview. One of the outcomes of this process, however, is that the particular histories and cultural habits of the individual are subsumed under the typification. In the latter examples above, speakers generally ensured that some aspects of their biographies find their way into the event (Jayyusi, 1984, p. 25). Each speaker uses distinctive techniques to "biographize" his or her identity and thus the narrative resources that he or she can draw on, and can be heard as validly drawing on, in the course of the talk, rather than allowing that identity to be assumed as typical from the category "Deaf" or "hearing-impaired."

"Deafness" then is enacted in three distinctive ways, drawn from three distinctive discursive devices. In this group of participants, "Deafness" is variously enacted as a disability, a potential logistic impediment,

or as membership of a cultural collective. In some abstract sense, in some undefined or putative space, it can be all or need be none of these; but to accomplish the practical work of the interview, the interviewee generally derives from one of these discursive devices the resources for a form of coherent, relevant self-presentation. That choice has implications not only for the ongoing conduct of the interview but also for the kinds of conclusions and recommendations that might be drawn from such research. Thus, it has implications for how the research may contribute to the public discourses available on Deafness.

Multiple Sociocultural Settings

An issue that arose throughout the participants' presentations of their accounts was the communicative complexity of their environments. In some instances, participants drew attention to the multiplicity of perspectives and sociocultural contacts this complexity afforded. Others noted the difficulties it had caused. The complexity of everyday communication reaches far into the domestic lives of some of these participants, as shown in example 5.

Example 5

1. Interviewer: At home with your husband, do you talk or do you sometimes write or do you sign?

2. Interviewee: We use some gesture, we talk. If there are long words that I can't understand my husband will write them down. So if he says something and I don't understand, it's a long word, he will write it down. It makes it easier for me. We understand each other. We communicate easily. We have known each other for twelve years.

3. Interviewer: So you understand his way.

4. Interviewee: Yes.

5. Interviewer: Are your children the same? They use lipreading, you talk to them and use some gesture?

6. Interviewee: My daughter, she signs, she likes signing. My son, he's younger. He's like his father. My daughter is eight and she signs.

7. Interviewer: Oh, that's lovely, and what about your friends?

8. Interviewee: Well, it's the same. We use some miming; we use English.

9. Interviewer: Your Deaf friends, do they sign?

10. Interviewee: Yes, but I'm learning Auslan now, so we use some signs that I'm learning here.

11. Interviewer: If there are a lot of Deaf people, and you want to talk, do you talk and sign, or do you sign, or do you try to follow the lip patterns?

12. Interviewee: Well, I don't really have a lot of Deaf friends. I don't go to a lot of things where there are a lot of Deaf people. My friends mostly sign and use English. I'm here to learn Auslan, that's all.

While noting that she and her husband "communicate easily" (turn 2), this participant sketches a detailed picture of the communicative complexities presented to her in her relations with her husband, children, and friends. Clearly, the family does not have a "communications policy" with respect to Auslan, signed English, gesture, lipreading, or writing. The choice of channel is ad hoc: the husband may use a long word (turn 2); the daughter happens to "like signing"; the son is "like his father" (both turn 6); the friends, mostly not Deaf, use a variety of makeshift techniques (turns 8, 10, and 12). What this participant presents, then, without any apparent complaint, is a wide range of adventitious communicative techniques she and those around her use.

Significantly, these observations are, at critical points, oriented to what she takes to be the overall line of interest of the interview: her purposes for attending the Auslan course. In discussing the "Deaf friends," the participant directly relates to the resources she is developing in the course. The direct inference to be drawn here is that the undertaking of this course in Auslan is related to the changing make-up, actual or anticipated, of the participant's contacts.

As in their domestic lives, many participants noted the communicative complexity of the educational and training settings they face. As institutions have become more aware of the particular needs of Deaf and hearing-impaired students, provisions have been offered, especially for the education and training of adults. Some have entailed sign language classes and curriculum delivered by a signing teacher, but often the provision has been for an interpreter as an adjunct to a hearing class. That means that if a student does not fall clearly and fully into one of the two categories implied by the provision (hearing or Deaf-and-signing), the

communicative environment becomes complex and potentially difficult, as illustrated by the participant in example 6.

Example 6

1. Interviewer: Have you come across any problems while you have been doing your [staff training] courses?

2. Interviewee: Do mean just in the education side of it or. . .

3. Interviewer: Yes in regards to you as a learner and also in relation to trainers.

4. Interviewee: For my self as learner, no I haven't had any problems there but I have had problems with the interpreters. That is, the interpreters are there for the Deaf staff not the hearing-impaired staff. For example, when the interpreters are saying what the Deaf people are signing, then their faces are looking away because they are looking at the Deaf people and often their voices are not loud enough. So, it's, they make it difficult for me to pick up what the interpreter is saying, what the Deaf people are saying.

5. Interviewer: Do you use an interpreter yourself or has an interpreter been there simply because there has been other Deaf people there?

6. Interviewee: Well really they have been there for the Deaf people but over time I've found that I have relied on the interpreter. If I can't understand what the signer is saying, then I will look to the interpreter for the lip patterns and things like that. So sometimes I did rely on the interpreters to be able to lipread them, and seeing as I couldn't understand sign language, although I realized that would help.

7. Interviewer: Have you ever learned to sign?

8. Interviewee: Well, I started learning sign language about twelve months ago with the people that I work with and that's made things easier.

9. Interviewer: Do you mean it's been easier understanding other Deaf people or has it made it easier for you to understand the interpreter when they have been there for the courses?

10. Interviewee: It's made it much easier communicating with other Deaf people but also in the courses and training that I have done I've been able to realize that if I can't see the interpreter clearly, then I've been able to rely on the signer.

First, the problems here are named immediately, in turn 1, *not* as a problem of the participant's learning, a point clearly punctuated by her self-correction in turn 4 ("so, it's, they make it difficult for me"). The participant explicitly orients to the logistic difficulties arising from the actions and habits of others; she does not wish to attribute these difficulties to any problems originating from her or her membership of the category "hearing-impaired." Rather, the problem appears related directly to the category distinction between Deaf and hearing-impaired people, a distinction that assumes importance in this account. The statement can be heard as a complaint about the provision, but the participant notes the distinction and the difficulties it caused her not necessarily to recommend any change, but rather to highlight the distinctiveness of the group "in the middle," in between deaf and hearing. Departing from that point, she describes her own learning of sign language as a process of multiplying her communicative, and thus learning, options in the training classes.

In an important sense, the two excerpts above demonstrate the cost of typifying people into categories of Deaf and hearing that are apparent, knowable, and, thus, in an educational sense, able to be provided for. Even if these distinctions had some unequivocally measurable criteria, they nonetheless have only an indeterminate relationship to the lived histories of the people they claim to describe. The point here from this participant is that the distinctiveness of those individual lived histories, and the residual communicative capabilities and dispositions they have given these people, bears directly on the relevance and value of such public provisions as interpreters in classrooms.

These lived histories, as narrated by the participants, display the happenstance and, in many cases, the fragility of their developing communicative capabilities. Most of the participants described the story of their lives as students and workers, in a sense orienting to the function of this interview, as lives characterized by unanticipated twists and turns that had significant implications for their opportunities to learn lipreading, signed English, or Auslan. Certain domestic, educational, and vocational settings have demanded multiple communication capabilities from these participants. But their life chances in these respects were presented

as haphazard, often relying on chance acquaintances in their social or work lives, which in turn they often described as leaving them in problematic communicative relations with those around them. Example 7 is a typical instance of this theme, one that arose frequently in the interviews.

Example 7

1. Interviewer: Okay, the personal questions are over and done with now. Something about the language you prefer to use at home. Do you use English or Auslan or a combination or what?

2. Interviewee: At home we use English, oral English at home because my parents won't allow me to sign in the house so I've been oral because my parents think I have good skills orally, so they think it'd be better for me to be oral but outside with my friends who are Deaf I use Auslan, so I use both. Before I used full signed English in casual conversation, but now in casual conversation I use Auslan. My brother, who's deaf, is oral. We were both strong oral because our parents insisted on it, and he's still very much like that so I've accepted that, that's all.

3. Interviewer: Your brother uses Auslan or is he oral?

4. Interviewee: Oh, in the past he was very strongly oral. He loved that but now I'm not so sure. Sometimes he signs a little bit, but he's not really very professional at it, just a little bit.

5. Interviewer: So, he's not fluent.

6. Interviewee: No, he's a bit like a robot when he signs because he's got a girlfriend in Sydney C- C- [name].

7. Interviewer: Oh! Yeah I know her.

8. Interviewee: Well, she insisted that he signs. So my brother signs a little bit but he's not yet really a brilliant signer. I've only seen him a few times signing, that's all.

9. Interviewer: So when you and your brother talk to each other do you talk or sign?

10. Interviewee: Oh, we talk because sometimes if I sign he doesn't understand me very well. If I talk he understands me.

This exchange documents a story that, with various inflections, is not uncommon among the descriptions given by the participants in this study: the by now well-known restrictions placed by family members on young people's use of sign language. This participant notes the discontinuity in communication patterns between his domestic context and the context of his social life with Deaf people. A further point to note, however, concerns his brother, who is hard of hearing. The story of this brother is presented as a matter of sheer happenstance. He happened to meet this girlfriend in Sydney who "insisted that he sign," and this began to open up a potentially multiple set of communication capabilities with his own brother.

Many participants noted this circumstantial onset of the learning of a new language, and its social and cultural consequences. Often, they described the story of their interrupted learning of sign language or their loss of that capability, as in example 8.

Example 8

1. Interviewer: So, did you grow up oral and learn to sign later.

2. Interviewee: Yes, I learned to sign when I was 14 but I have lost a lot of my skills. I have forgotten them because I am always at home and I mix only with hearing people. My husband said that I should start to go out with Deaf people and he has encouraged me to improve my signing.

3. Interviewer: What grade did you get to?

4. Interviewee: I got to about third grade. I left because my mother couldn't afford for me to board at school. My father drank and there were six children so there was a lot of things for the money to go around. And also, I lived a fair way from school, near M- [town], so it was quite a way for me to travel, and my mother couldn't afford the time for me to be away, so it was better for me to be at home. So once I came home I lost all my signing, so I have come to learn here.

Again we note a narrative of loss, missing, encouragement, and the effort to rediscover both the language and the community to which it provides access. We also note the interplay between institutional provision and domestic circumstances, in this case, disturbances to the development of the participant's sign language and to her educational career more generally. In her final turn, the participant elaborated the details of the domestic circumstances that led to her withdrawal from a school in which she was able to improve her sign lan-

guage skills. Her current domestic circumstances also militate against this because she mixes *only with hearing people,* presumably none of whom use sign language. We include this example here to demonstrate again the consequences of disruptions to young people's development as language users, whether sign language or otherwise, for their educational careers, their social and cultural contacts, and their abilities and inclinations to expand on their knowledge base. It is clear from these participants' accounts that sign language, because of the comparatively small number of people who use it, and because it is still not a prevalent communication channel in a variety of mainstream institutions, is particularly vulnerable to any disturbances that may come from individuals' domestic lives or from their institutional movements.

Conclusions

In these participants' production of the "Deaf self" as the resource platform from which to build the exchanges in the interview, we found three inflections of "Deafness": (1) as disability, impairment, disorder, or ailment; (2) as a logistic problem, especially in their contacts with hearing community; and (3) as a social community/culture in its own right. Variants on these themes are evident in most of the interviews we examined, but speakers will generally rely more on one than the others to develop life stories or to state troubles. The middle inflection is associated with many descriptions of the multiplicity of perspective and communicative channels that Deaf people face daily. This multiplicity is inflected in two distinctive ways: the participants use it to explain difficulties with inappropriate or nonexistent provision, a lack of understanding in the community, and thus an account of the first view of deafness listed above—as a disability. However, we also find more positive inflections of the issue of communicative multiplicity, whereby speakers present it as a source of social or occupational learning, a way of acquiring different perspectives and learning new things. In this sense, the particular use of multiplicity connects it with the third view of deafness: as a community/cultural matter. Thus, the respondents' experiences of the multiple, potentially fragmented nature of their daily sociocultural experiences can directly orient them to either the disability discourse or to the cultural discourse on deafness.

The choice, however, has more than descriptive or linguistic consequences. Each view locates Deaf people in a distinctive moral and political position within the larger society. From each flows a distinctive set of implications about how a society can reason about the treatment, management, opinions, and needs of Deaf or hearing-impaired people, and who can speak authoritatively and productively about these people.

These three discursive forms evident in the talk of Deaf people as they construct versions of their circumstances in interview settings speak first to their productivity as ways of reasoning about deafness, and second to the interactive resourcefulness of these interviewees. We do not suggest here that one or more of these discursive positions is more or less empirically supportable or morally and culturally acceptable. As Smith (1987) has pointed out, medical, sociological, psychological, legal, and folk wisdoms have presented Deaf people with a powerful array of explanatory and descriptive discourses for describing themselves. In particular, we find that the discursive device we have labeled "logistic problems related to access" pertains to the multiplicity of communicative demands facing Deaf people and those with whom they communicate. This multiplicity, we find, can be read, over the course of an individual's life, as a set of difficulties, thereby reinforcing the "disability/ailment" category as an interpretive framework for their lives' events. In contrast, if that multiplicity is read as a set of opportunities, then we find speakers more likely to lead their talk toward the category of "cultural and communal" opportunities and to describe their life history in these ways.

A notable feature of the talk of these participants is the cycle of losing, missing, and finding of not only the communicative technology of Auslan but also the particular cultural and communal settings closed and opened by the workings of this cycle. This group of participants was involved in postschooling education and training. In that respect, these people cannot be said, even in the remotest sense, to be "representative" of young Deaf or hearing-impaired adults. They have (re)discovered a variety of languages and the cultural settings they afford and initiated engagement with that discovery. Many others have not. Others' views of

young Deaf or hearing-impaired people are shaped by the discourses of disability and logistic difficulty. These, combined with parents' and friends' efforts to "normalize" these people by encouraging perhaps fragmented and partial communicative capabilities, can lead to circumstances that do not afford, or indeed "morally" permit, involvement in the kinds of education and training programs from which we recruited this sample.

Coda: The Trouble With Interviews

The premise of an interview is the construction of a mutually intelligible platform to seek truth. Both interviewer and interviewee need to refine estimations of the other's domain of interest and forms of intelligibility. At first glance, we may regard negotiations around those estimations as "playing the interview game" or "saying what the interviewer can, wants to, or needs to hear." Even if we confirm that argument, our data are still informative: we see the formulations, by this particular group of people, of what they take to be culturally available accounts of the lives of Deaf people (i.e., themselves). Unless we assume that spoken formulations are transparently and generally true in a wide variety of contexts, we would still need to infer about what is spoken in other interactive social settings. This raises two serious challenges to the naive acceptance of the proposition that a speaker "plays" with a core of formulated truth. First, the question of the ways in which things are spoken in other settings is empirical; second, such a view assumes that the opinions, life histories, or accounts of these people exist in some other truthful state outside of the social contexts of their formulation.

Nonetheless, it is clear that the interview does indeed posit certain interactive rights and responsibilities. One is an acknowledgment that one of the speakers is an object of curiosity. In interview settings, the phenomenon or person of interest needs to be interactively negotiated, located, and characterized, site by site. By asking questions about mundane aspects of the interviewees' everyday lives, we place their "curiousness" as persons in the foreground.. The interviews show many examples of this process, as in example 9, in which discussion about reading and communication in social life appears.

Example 9

1. Interviewer: Do you read books?
2. Interviewee: Oh, yes my husband reads a lot of books. But I don't have a lot of time. It's difficult.
3. Interviewer: What about with your children, do you sit them beside them and read books?
4. Interviewee: Yes, if there is easy English words, if there is baby words, for the kids, yes.
5. Interviewer: Do you read well?
6. Interviewee: Oh, yeah, but hard words I have trouble understanding. Sometimes when I'm reading a book I might look in the dictionary, to find out what the words mean.
7. Interviewer: Now when you are reading and you don't understand what a word is, you will get the dictionary and have a look?
8. Interviewee: Yes, that's right, so I can understand.
9. Interviewer: So, when you are meeting hearing people, and your husband is with you, he talks with the hearing person and then tells you what the hearing person has said. What about if you're on your own.
10. Interviewee: Well, if my husband is there I would talk through him. It's easier for me. But if I'm on my own, I'll read, I'll write.
11. Interviewer: What happens if there are long words?
12. Interviewee: Oh, I'll write things down on the paper, if there are long words and I don't understand what they are saying, I'll ask, and they will explain it to me. They might write more.
13. Interviewer: When you are reading a book and you are reading away and you find a word that is difficult, what do you do?
14. Interviewee: I look in the dictionary.
15. Interviewer: Do you do other things or do you always look in the dictionary or sometimes do you not worry about it?
16. Interviewee: Sometimes I don't worry about looking the word up. I look in the dictionary, but a lot of times I ask my husband. He gets fed up with me asking what words mean.

The intricate combination of circumstances that the interviewer used to interrogate this Deaf person shows how the mundane can be made exotic. Many of the answers by the participants here could also have been given by a hearing person learning to read or attempting to expand his or her reading repertoire. It is clear that this participant's reliance on her husband relates directly to her limited reading and writing experience. However, the routines she claims to use to overcome this, largely through the use of literacy practices, are rendered "curious" by the degree of intrusiveness of the interviewer's questions and the pursuit of a range of hypothetical difficulties—strategies that characterize the standard interview protocol. This point is not insignificant when we consider how thoroughly many research areas rely on the interview as the primary format in compiling their empirical bases (see Clavarino, Najman, & Silverman, 1994).

A direct outcome of this "exoticizing" methodology is the further alienating and compartmentalizing from the ordinariness of social life of the category of interest, in our case, Deaf people. It thereby further de-historicizes the individual of interest. By collecting sets of apparent generalizations and then abstracting them to produce applicability across the entire sample, researchers can exaggerate the representativeness of each apparent display of the category "Deaf."

There is no time-out from being Deaf in a hearing-dominated society. Even when the interviewee signs and is either Deaf or was reared by Deaf people and, in a cultural sense, as a Deaf person, the distinctiveness of Deafness is a fundamental relevance, assuming the status of a social fact in the management of daily life, just as surely as in the management of an interview. In appreciating this, we see the significance of the competing discourses available about Deafness and thus available for the Deaf about themselves. Institutions, even those with flexible organizations for education and training provision and with a sensitivity to the communicative needs of Deaf people, operate on principles of standardized curricular needs met in pedagogical circumstances that are in turn based on the delivery of cohorts to sites. In those respects, the individuals who are the idealized recipients of education and training programs are de-historicized. Our point here has been to document at least three ways (and there may be others) in which Deafness is heard and lived. Just as there are different ways of becoming Deaf and different levels of deafness, there are many ways in which deafness is meaningful in the lives of Deaf or hearing-impaired people.

Received April 23, 1999; revision received August 15, 2000; accepted September 25, 2000

References

Baker, C. D. (1997). Membership categorization and interview accounts. In D. Silverman (Ed.), *Qualitative methods: Theory, method and practice.* (pp. 130–143). London: Sage Press.

Clavarino, A. M., Najman, J., & Silverman, D. (1994). The quality of qualitative data: Two strategies for analyzing medical interviews. *Qualitative Inquiry, 1,* 223–242.

Clayman, S. (1994). Footing in the achievement of neutrality: The case of news-interview discourse. In P. Drew & J. Heritage (Eds.), *Talk at work: Interaction in institutional settings* (pp. 163–198). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Eglin, P., & Hester, S. (1992). Category, predicate and task: The pragmatics of practical action. *Semiotica, 3,* 243–268.

Foster, S. (1987). *Social alienation and peer identification: A dialectal model of the development of the deaf community.* Technical report. Rochester, NY: Rochester Institute of Technology, National Technical Institute for the Deaf, Office of Postsecondary Career Studies and Institutional Research.

Freebody, P., Forrest, T., & Gunn, G. (2000). Accounting and silencing in interviews: Smooth running through the "problem of schooling the disadvantaged." In P. Freebody, S. Muspratt, & B. Dwyer (Eds.), *Difference, silence, and textual practice: Studies in critical literacy* (pp. 119–151). Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.

Freebody, P., & Power, D. (1998). Adult literacy by hand and eye: Lessons from the Auslan classroom. *Australian Journal of Education of the Deaf, 4,* 5–9.

Gee, J. (1991). *Social linguistics and literacies: Ideology in discourses.* London: Falmer Press.

Hester, S. (1992). Recognizing references to deviance in referral talk. In G. Watson & R. M. Seiler (Eds.), *Text in context: Contributions to Ethnomethodology* (pp. 156–174). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Holstein, J. A., & Gubrium, J. F. (1997). Active interviewing. In D. Silverman (Ed.), *Qualitative methods: Theory, method and practice* (pp. 113–129). London: Sage Press.

Hyde, M., & Muspratt, S. (1998). An examination of the literacy of deaf students in four adult educational settings. *Australian Journal of Education of the Deaf, 4,* 10–15.

Jayyusi, L. (1984). *Categorization and the moral order.* London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Jayyusi, L. (1991). Values and moral judgement: Communicative praxis as a moral order. In G. Button (Ed.), *Ethnomethodol-*

ogy and the human sciences (pp. 227–251). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Lee, J. R. F. (1991). Language and culture: The linguistic analysis of culture. In G. Button (Ed.), *Ethnomethodology and the human sciences* (pp. 196–226). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Padden, C., & Humphries, T. (1988). *Deaf in America: Voices from a culture.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Power, D. (1994). Deaf and hard of hearing children. In A. Ashman & J. Elkins (Eds.), *Educating children with special needs* (pp. 387–432). Sydney: Prentice-Hall.

Power, D., & Leigh, G. (2000). Principles and practices of literacy for deaf learners: A historical overview. *Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education, 5,* 3–8.

Schegloff, E. A. (1991). Reflections on talk and social structure. In D. Boden & D. H. Zimmerman (Eds.), *Talk and social structure: Studies in ethnomethodology and conversational analysis* (pp. 44–71). Berkeley: University of California Press.

Smith, D. (1987). *The everyday world as problematic.* Toronto: University of Toronto Press.