

## Rethinking deafness

[Chloe Alexander](#) attends the 15th World Congress of the World Federation of the Deaf

Saturday 6 October 2007

Many facets of identity are influenced by being in the majority or minority. One that not many people consider is your ability to hear. For Deaf people being a cultural minority shapes their sense of self. Whilst I am hearing, I sit complacently in the majority. The world is, in this respect, designed for me. Its languages, technology and institutions assume an ability to hear. This changed when I arrived in a Madrid conference centre in July. The world became Deaf and I had to try and fit in.

In July, Spain hosted the 15th World Congress of the World Federation of the Deaf that takes place every four years. I attended with my family and was forced to rethink subjects that I thought I understood. I have encountered and lived through issues of deaf-hearing relations for eighteen years. My sister is profoundly deaf and her first language is British Sign Language (BSL). My family is bilingual. We have all learned to sign as a requirement of having a full relationship with Megan, my sister. This may sound obvious but from experience I can tell you that a large number of families have not approached it this way. Through meeting Megan's peers I have seen that few families of deaf children sign. Fewer still sign to a level that is adequate to a child, then a teenager, then an adult. It is common for hearing siblings or parents not to be able to sign. They cannot communicate with a family member in their first language. This impairs the child's language acquisition, affecting their ability to access education. They are also cut off from family life, its decision-making and developments. They are isolated in their own families. This can be the starting point for isolation at school and in the community.

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The theme of the conference was 'Human Rights through sign languages' which left me slightly puzzled. Firstly I didn't find the connection between the two subjects, rights and language, an obvious one. Secondly, sign languages? I had never heard it in the plural before. This jarred after feeling so in the know about sign language and deaf culture (a teenage superiority hangover I would guess). But this was just the thin end of the wedge. Soon I would be facing a conference centre full of international sign languages and international sign at full speed. My grasp of BSL seemed quite inadequate, not something I had felt before in the Deaf world. Each conversation would be a challenge, though a rewarding one. I would often have to rely on my sister or friends to facilitate between myself and would be conversationalists. Information was not presented in a comfortable format. Navigating through this world required a lot more effort than I was used to putting in. I slept like a log each night.

That was all before I had even gone to any of the seminars. The conference was organised by different commission. The subjects of these were human rights, bioethics, education, women, linguistics, and developing countries. The combination of them helped me build up a picture of what issue's deaf people faced and their approach to them. Something particularly noticeable was pride. This was evident in

discussions of their languages, communities and culture. Linguists, philosophers, social scientists, activists, teachers and many others made this clear in their presentations. Attendees raised it in their questions. The numbers attending from around the world also made the point quite simply. The majority were proud to be deaf and would not want to be hearing. That includes my sister. Although I know her well and have seen the ways she embraced the deaf world, I have never fully understood that she wants to be deaf. Partly this is because I have seen the obstacles she encounters as a deaf person with wider family members, with family acquaintances and in the education system. Yet, hearing these discussions on deaf identity and the many areas in which it effects the life of a deaf person it was clear that it was not discussed as an unfortunate condition to be normalised, it was a community to which they belong and love.

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The majority of people at the conference were proud to be deaf and would not want to be hearing

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Harlan Lane reinforced this point by asking us to see the Deaf world as an ethnic group. He identified Deaf people's strong sense of community evident in the fact that the Deaf world has the highest intermarriage rate of any ethnic group at 90%. There exists a strong language oriented identity. Also Deaf people have cultural specific knowledge; a hearing person unfamiliar with Deaf people would not know who presents See Hear on the BBC or how to get the attention of a room full of deaf people looking in different directions (turns the lights on and off). Lane showed how the current labelling of Deaf people as 'disabled' is inappropriate and dangerous. Firstly, Deaf people don't see Deafness as a disability at all and commonly want their children to be Deaf. Then, Deaf children of hearing parents can be labelled as disabled by doctors on diagnosis and as a result face language deprivation. Speech is encouraged and sign language suppressed. This seems counter-intuitive when you drop the idea of Deafness being a disability. Why would you discourage the use of sign language when it is the one most suitable for Deaf people? For many Deaf children this means that their language is delayed and impedes their development and education. Increasingly Deaf children risk being put forward for surgery, particularly cochlear implantation, to be 'fixed'. The response that is encourage by the use of the term disabled is to eradicate that group, maybe through genetics or traditionally through oral education where the language of teaching is spoken English. What you can see is a fixation on what Deaf people can't do. Only hearing people would create such a system. Lane ended by saying that a hearing baby is a healthy baby, a black baby is a healthy baby and a Deaf baby is a healthy baby.

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Alongside the academic programme was a cultural one with exhibitions, comedy shows and drama. I was lucky to see two fantastic different plays. There was a Norwegian theatre group's interpretation of Mary Shelley's Frankenstein, injecting it with the concept of cochlear implants. By this point my international sign was a tad improved and the acting was fantastic so I grasped possibly even 70%. It was a cleverly constructed and captivating. Nonetheless I couldn't get away from the idea that it was designed for someone whose primary way of receiving information was through their eyes. Furthermore the use of sound effects was for people with hearing ranging from slight to non-existent. The latter would pick up the vibrations. By the end of the performance my ears were ringing from the volume of the music. My sister was delighted by the clever use of visual effects where as I was left slightly overwhelmed. The other play was a fairy tale performed by a Ugandan drama group. Before the performance they handed out a leaflet about their history and aims. These included showing hearing parents that their deaf children deserved to be educated.

Although Madrid was infused with deaf people who were attending the conference there were a significant number of visitors who were there purely for the social side. An international gathering is something that deaf people relish. 'Deaf Pub' took place every night and was a sight to behold. An impossible number of people crammed into an O'Neill's pub in the centre of Madrid. Another multitude spilled out of the building so far as to block the road. The beeping of car horns didn't bother them. This was the case late into the night. One night I went with my sister and a family friend of ours, Paddy Ladd, who was speaking with the human rights commission. We wove our way into the club and awaiting that evening's performance- Finnish deaf rap. I didn't think that it would be my thing but it shows what I know. It was fantastic. The speed of the signing took your breath away. The lyrics were punchy and passionate. The rapper frequently returned to the idea of knocking down discrimination and the power of Deaf people. The only problem was a stupid cameraman who was filming the show, blocking the view of the audience. This isn't clever if the language of delivery is a visual one. You see- sometimes the world is stupidly irritating to Deaf people. Nonetheless the tiny club was buzzing with people seeing something innovative and full of energy. That evening I left the venue feeling the same as I would feel a few days later when I left the conference: ashamed at my initial scepticism and wanting more.



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## 8 comments

Fintan

6 Oct '07 at 11:37 pm

Reading this from a hearing persons view was refreshing indeed :-)

9 out 10 Deaf people are born to hearing parents and we are spread everywhere no Deaf equivalents of a Chinatown hence your isolation bit! that is why we tend use events like that like a social club and why not :-)

Its too much an effort for family to learn sign language to say a wheel chair user where they are more than happy to move house build a ramp to accommodate wheel chair.

As for the bit you wrote "Only hearing people would create such a system."

Hearing Parents, doctors think they know what's best for us and that "charity" called the RNID (Royal National Institute for Deaf People) is made up of Hearing people who thinks they know what's best for us :::sigh:::

[Report](#)

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Rob Wilks

6 Oct '07 at 11:56 pm

I just wanted to say thank you for such an illuminating and succinct post. Coming from a hearing person gives it an altogether stronger impact.

What you have just said makes me rather proud to be Deaf :-)

[Report](#)

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jen

8 Oct '07 at 11:00 am

Wow, excellent post! Was very interesting to read. Thank you for that. I will pass it on to my own sister!

[Report](#)

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Michelle

9 Oct '07 at 10:34 pm

Great article, many thanks for sharing your views.

I am hearing, I've worked as a CSW for Deaf students. It has always amazed me the number of parents of Deaf children who have never bothered learn to sign.

Fintan, interesting to hear your views of the charities.

[▲ Report](#)

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steven

10 Oct '07 at 11:09 am

Thanks Chloe, this is a really interesting read, and some of it quite surprising (although somewhat obvious, now that you've made it clear). Keep writing :)

[▲ Report](#)

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Bobbie

18 Oct '07 at 10:18 pm

An amazingly insightful article. Thank you, sincerely, for sharing your experiences with us Charlotte and thank you Fintan for bringing this to the attention of the BSL Learners Group.

[▲ Report](#)

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Philippa

8 May '08 at 3:18 pm

Wow this is really good article, I am Deaf myself and I cannot describe how I feel about this, and am really proud that this article shows the positive of Deaf Community and international deaf events. So i hope that you will continue to attend more international Deaf events.

[▲ Report](#)

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[Being Deaf | North of the Stupid Line](#)

12 Apr '14 at 5:16 pm

[...] was just reading this post, which provides an extremely insightful account of a hearing person's experience of the [...]

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