"I am BlackDeaf Man": Deconstructing the Interplay of Multiple Identities in Theory and Reality

Mavis A. Clark
Georgia Perimeter College, USA

Follow this and additional works at: http://newprairiepress.org/aerc

Part of the Adult and Continuing Education Administration Commons

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 License

Recommended Citation

Clark, Mavis A. (2005). ""I am BlackDeaf Man": Deconstructing the Interplay of Multiple Identities in Theory and Reality," *Adult Education Research Conference.* http://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2005/papers/49

This is brought to you for free and open access by the Conferences at New Prairie Press. It has been accepted for inclusion in Adult Education Research Conference by an authorized administrator of New Prairie Press. For more information, please contact cads@k-state.edu.

"I am BlackDeaf Man": Deconstructing the Interplay of Multiple Identities in Theory and Reality

Mavis A. Clark
Georgia Perimeter College, USA

Abstract: *Identity development work shows that identities are socially constructed by the interplay between and within categorical boundaries of race, gender, and class. Research further shows that identity development and the social context are interconnected and produce theories of knowing. Relying on the theory of intersectionality for deconstructing the identity of Black Deaf and hard-of-hearing adult men, this discussion examines the interplay between race, gender, and deafness. Implications for adult education and practice are included.*

Introduction

More often than not, when I am discussing the Black Deaf experience, the question is raised, are Black Deaf people Black or Deaf first? The frequency in which this question arises is an interesting phenomenon. I have come to realized that pivotal to this question is the recognition that people who are Black and Deaf have multiple identification markers that are categorized into binary group statuses. However, the binary categorization of these groups is hierarchized into stratified patterns forcing a privileging of one group identity status over another. This paper discusses the identity question of Black Deaf or hard-of-hearing (BD/HOH) adult men, which was one of the research questions that guided this study. This paper also includes a discussion on the methodological process that was used to deconstruct the identity of the BD/HOH men who participated in this study and the findings that emerged from my analysis of their identity narratives.

Subjectivity Discussion

Six black deaf/hard-of-hearing men with different degrees of hearing loss and communication modalities participated in this study. They were also asked to share storied experiences (Richardson, 1990) that would help illustrate the meaning of their identity from their perspective. Incorporated in their storied experiences of identity were their personal reflective narratives (Rossiter, 1999) about living as Black Deaf or hard-of-hearing men within a society that marginalizes them because of their racial, gender and disability statues. Embedded within the participants' reflections and narratives of identity was their interpretation of the meaning of their BlackDeaf identity (Clark, 2003). This study placed at the center the men and their narratives, and in doing so, affirmed their voice authority (Riessman, 1993), and authenticated their storied narratives. By centering the participants and their storied narratives, I acquired new knowledge and understanding of a community of men that exist beyond the margins of marginalized minorities (Anderson & Grace, 1991).

While deconstructing and analyzing the participants' identity, it became apparent that each man's interpretation of his identity was unique to the social context of his specific hearing disability experiences, language use (sign vs. oral language), familial/parental involvement in relationship to his hearing loss, past and present socio-

historical influences of watershed events that shaped the lives of both Black and Deaf Americans, and his educational placement (Turkington & Sussman, 1992) within his K-12 schooling experiences. Furthermore, I began to appreciate more the significance of W.E.B DuBois' (circa 1903/1989) work on double consciousness with respect to how the men in this study understood and interpreted the meaning of their identity. Not only did each participant have an emic understanding and interpretation of the meaning of his own identity, but each man was also aware that society's interpretation of his identity was incongruent with how he understood his identity and that each individual was aware that society's perception of his identity was contextually shaped and bounded by the metanarratives of race, gender, abled-bodied statuses (McRuer, 2002), and class.

My study reaffirmed my subjective analysis on the intersectionality (Williams-Crenshaw, 1995) of race, gender and deafness -- that being that race, gender, able-bodied statuses, and class have separate but discursive meanings and interpretations in and of themselves. Yet, when they braid into the category of deafness, a new interpretative meaning emerges which disrupts the existing paradigmatic framework that we use to construct meaning of a particular social context (Harley, Jolivette, McCormick, & Tice, 2002; Merriam, Johnson-Bailey, & Lee, et al., 2001; Regan, 2002; Wade, 1996).

Literature Review

Disability (along with race, gender, class, etc.,) discourse contextualizes society's perception (Barnes, Mercer, & Shakespeare, 1999) about people who are disabled. Scheer (1994) anthropologically denotes that disability discourse stigmatizes the body as different because it does not conform to society's standards of normal. This perception is reconstituted in interpretation as abnormal or deviant (Garland-Thompson, 1997). Cultural narratives of the abnormal body experiences show that the stigmatization of the body is not an isolated biomedical event that happens to an individual with a disability but rather a continuing experience of social oppression, alienation, and marginalization (Mitchell & Snyder, 1997).

Within a biomedical paradigm, Deaf and hard-of-hearing are considered disabled (Paul, 1998). The biomedical paradigm frames a disability as a medical condition in need of medical and technological intervention (Kirby, 2004). But what distinguishes people who are Deaf or hard-of-hearing from the community of disabled people are the audiological concerns and language and communication politics of American Sign Language (ASL) vs. oral speech (Lucas, 1995). Deafness scholars contesting the biomedical paradigm argue that Deaf and hard-of-hearing people are not disabled (Lane, 1993; Padden, 1989). Instead they are visually linguistically different (Davis, 1995). Intrinsic to their argument is their stance that the audiological and language concerns inherent to hearing loss is not constrained to the "human body, but rather to the human voice," which is essential to social and interpersonal relationships (Malone, 1986, p. 8). In short, they argued that deafness should not be perceived as a disability, but rather as an identifying feature of a Deaf identity.

Discussions on the intersectionality of race, gender, ethnicity, and disability are minimally discussed within American disability scholarship (Albrecht, Seelman, Bury, 2001) and are almost absent within deafness literature. However sparse the literature may be on discussions of intersecting identity markers and deafness/disability, it consistently points to two thematic critiques. The first theme shows that when race and disability

intersect within the lives of disabled Black Americans, it functions as "inseparable parts" (Alston, Bell, & Feist-Price, 1996, pg. 13) and is the filter with which disabled African Americans interpret their living experiences. Secondly, Black disabled people are viewed as different and outsiders by non-disabled Black people, marginalized by non-disabled White people, and co-jointly misunderstood by disabled and Deaf communities (Valentine, 1996). Thus, Black disabled people's experiences can be best understood as living and negotiating within and between multiple oppressions. Multiple oppression is referred to as the "effect of being attributed several stigmatised identities [which] are often …exacerbated…[and] experienced simultaneously and singularly depending on the context" (Vernon, 1999, p. 395).

The identity of African American men is constructed differently both positionally and socially than White American men. Wade (1996) examined the reason in the gender and racial role and identity differences between African American and White American men. He learned that African American men's social reality and masculinity identity has been forged within the context of slavery, oppression, and racism. Cullen (1999) concurs as he historically traces and connects the transformation of Black male gender role status from slave to manhood, beginning with the civil war and as a result of serving and "dying on the battlefield" (p. 497). Ross-Gordon (1999) shares the same view as she notes that Black adult men have two cultural interpretations of masculinity identification, which are inherently conflictual. Adult African American males must negotiate between their masculine identities as constructed by European mainstream values and their masculine identities as framed by African tradition. Her point about the conflictive nature of the gendered identities of African American adult men is an important one because it establishes a way for understanding the development of the intersecting and multiple identities of Black Deaf or hard-of-hearing adult men.

Methodological Framework

Philosophically, I chose narrative inquiry (Polkinghorne, 1988) because I saw it as being inherent to the purpose of my study, as well as being a benefit to deafness research. Much of the research on deafness is concerned with the structural properties of the visual language (ASL) within a cognitive context (e.g., language development or language and learning, etc.) (Martin, 1987). Furthermore, hearing deafness researchers often focus their investigative lenses on how to make oral/aural structures and properties of spoken English accessible to visually linguistic signers of American Sign Language (ASL). In the pursuit of their personal and/or political interests, these researchers fail to note the Deaf stories, which have been muted in the process. This study is a departure from many of the contemporary deafness inquiries because it is not concerned with validating the structure of the ASL language or its grammatical properties and/or lexicon. This study assumes that the ASL language is a linguistically valid modality for communication. This study is instead intensely interested in the lived experiences embedded within the narratives of BD/HOH adult men.

Data Collection and Analysis

An integrated strategy of purposeful sampling and snowballing technique (Merriam, 1998) was utilized in selecting six BD/HOH men as participants for this study. Criteria for participant selection were: each man had to have a significant hearing loss

that impacted his life; have six months or more working experience; have lived independently for six months or more; and have graduated with a high school diploma or have obtained his GED. Data was collected procedurally through a series of in-depth interviews and by utilizing a nationally certified sign language interpreter. Each interview session was recorded by using a video and audio tape recorder. The videotape was utilized for participants whose primary language was ASL, while the audiotape was used for participant(s) who relied on his oral speaking abilities.

The participants' stories were analyzed through visual and textual data, researcher's journal, field notes, and taxonomies (Glesne, 1999; LeCompte, 2000). This integrated analytical and methodological strategy allowed for a deeper analysis and understanding about the socio-cultural and socio-political context in which the stories of these men took place. The codes and connections that were induced from the analytical process produced thematic storyline categories (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Labov, 1972).

Findings

The findings that emerged upon the conclusion of this study showed that the socio-political context determines which identity (racial and deaf) of BD/HOH men will be privileged. Secondly, this study showed that neither the racial, gender, or deaf identities of BD/HOH men can maintain their master statuses, nor can they cancel each other out. Instead, BD/HOH adult men live out their racial, gender, and deaf identities intersectionally and positionally. Interconnected to this finding, the men in this study continually experience oppositional tension between their internal understanding of their identities and how their identities are externally perceived. Finally, this study revealed that BlackDeaf men are forced to negotiate the sociopolitical context in response to the identity being most impacted.

Implications for Practice

It is argued that people choose the most appropriate identity (for a given social setting), in order to adapt and negotiate the context in which they are situated (Pittinsky, Shih, and Ambady, 1999). This study does not correspond with this argument for African Americans who are Deaf/hard-of-hearing. Furthermore this study has illuminated an issue that has been unarticulated by identity construction theorists – that is – with the insertion of deafness, it can either change the interpretive lens with which an investigation is being conducted and/or disrupts the existing paradigmatic framework that we use to construct meaning of a particular social context.

Adult educators and practitioners alike should be mindful that issues related to deafness/disability cannot be understood in isolation to each other. It is also important to remember that when race and deafness intersect within the educational context, they will mutually reconstruct and/or reconstitute upon each other and therefore shape as well as constrain the learning experiences of Black Deaf and hard-of-hearing adult men.

References

Albrecht, G. L., Seelman, K. D., & Bury, M. (2001). The formation of disability
    studies. In G. L. Albrecht, K. D. Seelman, & M. Bury (Eds.), *Handbook of*

disability studies (pp.1-8). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.

Alston, R. J., Bell, T. J., & Feist-Price, S. (1996). Racial identity and African Americans with disabilities: Theoretical and practical considerations. *Journal of Rehabilitation, 629*(2), 11-15.

Anderson, G. B., & Grace, C. A. (1991). Black Deaf adolescents: A diverse and underserved population. *The Volta Review, 93*(5). 73-86.

Barnes, C., Mercer, G., & Shakespeare, T. (1999). *Exploring disability: A sociological introduction*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, Inc.

Clark, M. A. (2003). *The learning and schooling experiences of black deaf or hard-of-hearing adult male learners: A narrative analysis.* Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Georgia, Athens.

Coffey, A., & Atkinson, P. (1996). *Making sense of qualitative data: Complementary research strategies*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Cullen, J. (1999). "I's a man now": Gender and African American men. In D. C. Hine & E. Jenkins (Eds.), *A question of manhood: A reader in U. S. Black men's history and masculinity. "Manhood rights": The construction of Black male history and manhood, 1750-1870* (Vol. 1, pp. 489-501). Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

Davis, L. J. (1995). *Enforcing normalcy: Disability, deafness and the body*. New York, NY: Verso.

DuBois, W. E. B. (1903/1989). *Souls of Black folk*. New York, NY: Signet.

Garland-Thompson, R. (1997). *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring physical disability in American culture and literature*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.

Glesne, C. (1999). *In becoming qualitative researchers: An introduction.* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Addison Wesley Longman, Inc.

Harley, D. A., Jolivette, K., McCormick, K., & Tice, K. (2002). Race, class, and gender: A constellation of positionalities with implications for counseling. *Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development, 30*, 216-238.

Kirby, J. C. (2004). Disability and justice: A pluralistic account. *Social Theory and Practice, 30(2),* 229-246.

Labov, W. (1972). *Language in the inner city: Studies in the Black English vernacular*. PA: The University of Pennsylvania Press, Inc.

Lane, H. (1993). *The mask of benevolence: Disabling the Deaf community*. New York, NY: Vintage Books.

LeCompte, M. D. (2000). Analyzing qualitative data. *Theory in Practice, 39*(3), 146-154.

Lucas, C. (1995). *Socio-linguistics in Deaf communities*. Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press.

Malone, O. (1986). The adult deaf learner: A very neglected species. *Lifelong Learning: An Ominbus of Practice and Research, 10*(3), 8-11, & 23-24.

Martin, D. S. (1987). *Cognition, education, and deafness: Directions for research and instruction*. Washington, DC: Gallaudet University Press.

McRuer, R. (2002). Compulsory able-bodiedness and queer/disabled existence. In S. L. Snyder, B. J. Brueggemann, & R. Garland-Thomson (Eds.), *Disability studies: Enabling the humanities* (pp. 88-99). New York, NY: The Modern Language Association of America.

Merriam, S. B. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education.*

San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Merriam, S. B., Johnson-Bailey, J., Lee, M. Y., et al. (2001). Power and positionality: Negotiating insider/outsider status within and across cultures. *International Journal of Lifelong Education. 20*(5), 405-416.

Mitchell, D. T., & Snyder, S. L. (1997). Introduction: Disability studies and the double bind of representation. In D. T. Mitchell & S. L. Snyder (Eds.), *The body and physical difference: Discourses of disability* (4th ed., pp. 1-31). Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press.

Padden, C. (1989). The Deaf community and the culture of Deaf people. In S. Wilcox (Ed.). *American Deaf culture: An anthology*. Burtonsville, MD: Linstok Press.

Paul, P. V. (1998). *Literacy and deafness: The development of reading, writing, and literate thought.* Needham Heights, MA: Allyn and Bacon.

Pittinsky, T. I., Shih, M., & Ambady, N. (1999). Identity adaptiveness: Affect across multiple identities. *Journal of Social Issues, 55*(3), 503-518.

Polkinghorne, D. (1988). *Narrative knowing and the human sciences*. Albany, NY: State University of New York.

Regan, T. (2002). Toward an "Archeology of Deafness": Etic and emic constructions of identity in conflict. *Journal of Language, Identity, and Education,1*(1), 41-66.

Richardson, L. (1990). *Writing strategies: Reaching diverse audiences*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

Riessman, C. K. (1993). *Narrative analysis*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications.

Ross-Gordon, J. M. (1999). Gender development and gendered adult development. In M. C. Clark & R. S. Caffarella (Eds.), An update on adult development theory: New ways of thinking about the life course, (pp. 39-47). *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, No. 84,* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Rossiter, M. (1999). Understanding Adult Development as Narrative. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education,* 84, 77-85.

Scheer, J. (1994). Human diversity: Perspectives on people in context. In E. J. Trickett, R. Watts & D. Birman (Eds.), *Culture and disability: An anthropological point of view* (pp. 244-160). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Turkington, C., & Sussman, A. E. (1992). *The encyclopedia of deafness and hearing disorders*. New York, NY: Facts on File, Inc.

Valentine, V. (1996). Being Black and Deaf. *Emerge, 7*(3), 56-61.

Vernon, A. (1999). The dialectics of multiple identities and the disabled people's movement. *Disability & Society, 14*(3), 385-398.

Wade, J. C. (1996). African American men's gender role conflict: The significance of racial identity. *Sex Roles, 34*(1/2), 17-33.

Williams-Crenshaw, K. (1995). Mapping the margins: Intersectionality, identity politics, and violence against women of color. In K. Crenshaw, N. Gotanda, G. Peller, & K. Thomas (Eds.), *Critical race theory: The key writings that formed the movement (pp. 357-383).* New York, NY: The New Press.