

# Studying the Population You Serve: Exploring Deaf Issues as a Hearing, Dual-role Researcher

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## Abstract

It is not uncommon for social work scholars to be currently or formerly practicing social workers. Qualitative social work research can, for methodological and logistical purposes, involve researchers with dual roles as service providers. This article examines the ethically complex arena of researching ones 'own' service population through the lens of the author's research with Deaf restaurant workers and their hearing managers. It discusses the challenges and benefits of being a dual-role researcher in the context of contemporary social work ethics and research methods.

*Keywords:* Dual roles, research ethics, bracketing, hearing, Deaf

## Introduction

Dual relationships can be difficult to navigate in qualitative social work research (Adler & Adler, 1987; Asselin, 2003; Greene, 2014), though they are not necessarily off-limits like they would be in social work practice. Particularly with purposive sampling among small, relatively inaccessible populations, holding more than one role may be inevitable for the researcher (Eckhardt & Anastas, 2007). The Deaf community is a low-incidence minority population that experiences challenges

with access into mainstream society on account of linguistic and cultural barriers (Dickinson, 2010; Padden & Humphries, 1988; Turner, 2006). These same barriers create challenges with access from the outside in—namely, for social science researchers. The following article explores this arena through the lens of a project examining the managers of Deaf people who received assistance from the researcher in becoming employed. After a brief discussion of research issues specifically germane to Deaf populations, three angles of dual-role research will be discussed as they relate to ethics and methodological design. The strategic use of bracketing as a phenomenological method will be highlighted as a viable strategy for dual-role research with special populations.

## The Culturally Deaf Community

While there are many types and degrees of hearing loss, particularly among older adults, the Gallaudet Research Institute (2015) roughly estimates that the number of people who cannot hear or understand speech is slightly over 552,000. Only a fraction of that population uses American Sign Language (ASL) as a primary means of communication—ASL is not even common enough to be listed as a language option on the United States Census (Bureau of the Census, 2011). Many members of this ASL-using fraction claim

the identity of Deaf, denoted by a capital “D”. The word “Deaf” refers to a group of people who share both a culture and a language: American Sign Language (Padden & Humphries, 1988; Turner, 2006). Most persons with hearing loss are not members of the capital “D” Deaf community, as physical, audiological abilities are not the primary determinants of Deaf identity (McEntee, 2006). As such, people who identify as Deaf and use manual communication are few and far between and constitute a small minority in a research context (Dickinson, 2010; Foster & MacLeod, 2003).

The Deaf community is a small sliver of the U.S. population about which little is known in academic and employment contexts. The impetus to produce more literature in the area of deafness and employment is strong. As of 2011, only 47.9% of deaf adults were employed, compared with a 70% employment rate for hearing adults. (U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, 2011). Despite the need for strategies and resources to increase Deaf adult employment, there are few studies that engage both employers and Deaf workers (Foster, 1992; Friedner, 2013; Zahari et al., 2010). In order to add to available literature, investigators must not only be trained in effective research methods, they must also possess effective language skills (ASL) and cultural competencies (Deaf culture). It is most common for people to possess this eclectic skill combination purely as a direct result of Deaf community involvement, either as a member of the Deaf community or as a service provider.

### **Researching Deaf Issues While Serving Deaf People**

In the case of the particular study discussed herein, the researcher was not in any way new to or removed from the sample population. She served as an employment specialist and advocate for Deaf workers throughout the duration of the research study and possessed over ten years of experience serving the Deaf community. Working directly with hearing restaurant and business managers to facilitate job placement for Deaf adults, she is

what Adler and Adler (1987) would call an “active member researcher,” heavily involved with the population but not identifying as Deaf herself. While these career details and personal identity features inevitably influenced her perception of the research process, the same details situated the researcher as one of few persons with the access and expertise required for this study.

The objectives of the study discussed herein were better to understand the experiences of hearing managers of Deaf restaurant employees, as well as to compare their experiences with those of their Deaf workers. Experiences were operationalized into two major categories: accommodations and social integration. Accommodations, as defined by the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990), are “modifications or adjustments to the work environment, or to the manner or circumstances under which the position held or desired is customarily performed, that enable a qualified individual with a disability to perform the essential functions of that position”. Social integration as a formalized concept was first introduced by sociologist Émile Durkheim, who defined it as the means through which people interact, validate, and accept each other within a community or specific social context (1897/1951). The researcher adapted this definition by categorizing the workplace as a social community.

Hearing managers ( $n = 6$ ) and their Deaf workers ( $n = 6$ ) were interviewed as dyads and were asked questions about both disability accommodation and social integration in their workplaces. Because the foci of the study are experiences and perceptions, a phenomenological framework was employed. Phenomenology is the study of a concept or phenomenon, such as the psychological meaning of an interaction (Creswell, 2007) and involves inherent subjectivity (Husserl, 1931; Moustakas, 1994). Thus, both the lens through which the Deaf-hearing experience is examined and the formidable limitations on access to the minority Deaf population render the service-provider-as-researcher scenario appropriate.

With low-incidence populations like

the Deaf community, it is practical—and often necessary—to incorporate accessible participants (Creswell, 2007; Eckhardt & Anastas, 2007). The author's study design dictated that all Deaf employee participants (1) worked as non-managers in high-volume restaurant settings, (2) used American Sign Language as a primary mode of communication, and (3) did not use speech and speech reading as a primary mode of communication. As mentioned earlier in the discussion of why researchers of Deaf populations often have dual roles, all Deaf workers interviewed were former job placement clients, and all hearing managers interviewed were their managers.

Convenience sampling in a population one serves is also in line with phenomenological traditions (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). If one's goal is specialized understandings of a specific phenomenon among unique individuals, one must go to where the phenomenon occurs. When it comes to Deaf adults, this place is often the service arena (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Dickinson, 2010). The means to obtaining an appropriate sample is usually by taking advantage of social and professional connections (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009), and finding referrals through community members already linked to services. Wearing that hat of both a service provider and a researcher may be more complex than having a pristine sample of strangers, but it is often necessary.

### **The Pros and Cons of Role Overlap**

Research procedural issues with role duality are highly situational. When conducting research, social workers must regularly consider their dual statuses as researchers and practitioners. These considerations are important to research ethics and to methodological strength in equal measure. Indeed, the appropriateness of methodological choices is partially based on ethical considerations (Mertens, 2014). Dual-role research can be explored from three primary angles.

First, one must determine on a case by case basis whether outsider or insider researcher status

is preferable, and also determine what is meant by *insider* and *outsider*. On one hand, contemporary research strives for some measure of objectivity and often adopts control measures from the science world to combat bias. Being outside of, or removed from, a sample population buffers against the tendency for the researcher to be sympathetic to or biased toward the group during data collection and analysis stages (Taylor, 2011). On the other hand, ample studies have shown that being a full or peripheral member of a studied community can increase access and foster trust among participants (Adler & Adler, 1987; Al-Makhamreh & Lewando-Hundt, 2008; Dwyer & Buckle, 2009).

Kanuha (2000) uses the term “insider research” when describing studies conducted by a member of the community being studied. She notes that the affinities between the researcher and the participants by virtue of shared culture and identity add texture to the interpretations in the study that could otherwise not be provided by an “outsider” researcher: “whereas all researchers necessarily reflect on their relationship to the research project, the native researcher is grounded implicitly and situated at all moments in the dual and mutual status of subject-object” (Kanuha, p. 441).

Insider and outsider research roles are not oppositional or contradictory approaches to research. Rather, they are two frames of reference which must both be considered in tandem to make appropriate ethical and methodological choices. Either approach to design and data collection should be clearly identifiable, and researchers must reflexively describe their processes (Creswell, 2007).

The study discussed herein relates to—but does not cleanly fit—the definition for insider research. Although the researcher serves the Deaf community and is relatively well-known by its members in their metropolitan area, she is not, herself, Deaf. As such, the chosen methodology resembles more similarly that of an insider researcher than an outsider researcher. While the modality of the study design is insider research, the personal identity of the researcher (discussed heavily in phenomenological investigations), is not

that of a full insider. Thus, the researcher engages in two delicate balancing acts: that of researcher and service provider, and that of hearing person and Deaf community ally. As stated earlier, roles that are complex are not necessarily contradictory or counter-productive in research, provided that complexities are openly acknowledged.

The second question that arises in the consideration of dual-role researchers is whether it is even *possible* to be outside of a sample population, as an unbiased bystander. Through observation and interaction, all humans form opinions about each other through the filter of their own worldviews and psyches (Heidegger, 1962; Merlau-Ponty, 1962). Phenomenology embraces the idea that, despite any secondary roles or relationships the researcher may have with the person she studies, objectivity is impossible. The important thing is to acknowledge, describe, and explore multiple roles and their impact on research.

Appropriate work as a researcher is more challenging when a sample population already has a clear understanding of the researcher in service provider role due to the active nature of both service provision and research (Al-Makhamreh & Lewando-Hundt, 2008). When one is nominally a member of an ethnic group, for example, but has not directly engaged with other members of the ethnic group before studying them, their membership manifests as a passive role. When one has provided direct assistance to the sample population, then engages them directly in data collection, the nature of one's role is amplified through action and interaction (2008).

As an active member researcher (Adler & Adler, 1987), the researcher in the current study was not only known to all Deaf participants as an advocate, she was directly responsible for helping them obtain the jobs they held at the time of research. They had worked together actively toward a common goal, and experienced shared success and satisfaction in the employment rehabilitation context. The past role the researcher played for participants experiencing a common Deaf community struggle can arguably not be separated from her role as a researcher (Mertens, 2014; Turner,

2006). Another identity that may be inextricable from the research milieu is the researcher's personal identity as a hearing individual. As enthusiastically as participants might engage with her for research purposes as an extension of a former professional relationship, they are also aware of historic oppression of deaf minorities by the hearing majority (Dickinson, 2010; Padden & Humphries, 1988; Turner, 2006). As with the first consideration of dual-role research among Deaf populations, the symbolic intersections traversed jointly by the hearing researcher and the Deaf participants can never be separated or simplified.

A third consideration with researcher role is not merely the circumstantial duality of role, but also the competency of the researcher. In the Deaf community, appropriate engagement depends not only on proficient use of American Sign Language, but also on culturally knowledgeable involvement in Deaf community life. (Padden & Humphries, 1988; Turner, 2006). A researcher lacking in either area is likely to miss or misinterpret data at both collection and interpretation stages. When participants are aware of a researcher's competencies vis-a-vis other known roles they have held, they may even display higher levels of trust and willingness to participate in the research (Magnus et al., 2014).

In addition to a decade of direct social work practice in the Deaf community, the language skills of the researcher in the current study were formally assessed using the American Sign Language Proficiency Interview (ASLPI), a standardized instrument for gaging ASL fluency (Jacobowitz, 2005). She was also audited by a culturally Deaf researcher while designing the study, transcribing and translating participant interviews, and interpreting results. The ethics of the study were also evaluated by the Institutional Review Board of the researcher's affiliated university. All of these elements served as measurable assurances of researcher competency, at once fortifying study methodology and meeting ethical standards for research (Dickinson, 2010; Eckhardt & Anastas, 2007).

All interviews with Deaf employees were conducted using American Sign Language (ASL), a language in which few social work researchers are

proficient. Qualitative interviewing also necessitates a comprehensive knowledge of the subject being studied, which puts an employment service provider at a distinct advantage. As such, the scarcity of available participants for this study is matched by a scarcity of ASL-competent researchers, making role overlap a likely scenario.

### **Bracketing as a Strategy of the Dual-role Researcher**

“No knowledge is innocent,” wrote Michel Foucault (1980), during a time when social work research was becoming increasingly—and controversially—positivistic and scientific (Pieper, 1989; Tyson, 1992). Acknowledging that researchers continually exposed to difficult aspects of social life will likely respond on an emotional level, the technique of bracketing is often used to help distill research responses and personal responses to data. (Creswell, 2007; Husserl, 1931; Polkinghorne, 1989; Tufford & Newman, 2012). Bracketing involves setting aside natural attitudes and preconceived notions about populations or phenomena (Keen, 1975). This process is often employed through the use of journaling or other expressive processing kept separate from collected study data.

While researchers need not be members of the community of people they are studying, it is critical that they be aware of their position as researchers (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). As a hearing social worker with Deaf populations, and [dually] a hearing social work researcher of Deaf populations, the bracketing process was immensely important for the researcher’s integrity in the study discussed herein. The process involved both acknowledging and setting aside prejudice before, after, and during the qualitative research process, particularly with respect to interviews. Journaling as a means of bracketing was performed both before and after data collection (individual interviews), to manage personal feelings, opinions, and expectations.

Keen (1975) refers to bracketed thoughts and feelings in phenomenological research as

natural attitudes. In the case of the current study, it would be quite *unnatural* for an employment specialist for Deaf adults to have no thoughts on the matter, and the phenomenological frame on this study’s methods reflect this idea. As a practitioner, the researcher has long been invested in serving the interests of both hearing managers and Deaf workers, and knowledge and feelings that stem from my practice experience can never be fully ‘eradicating’ (Heidegger, 1962). Bracketing proved integral to allowing the dual-role researcher to be reflexive and to maintain ethical standards of research.

### **Conclusion**

Holding a dual role as researcher and service provider presses social work scholars to examine themselves and their choices. This is especially true in low-incidence populations such as the Deaf community, where few researchers are equipped with the necessary language skills and cultural competencies without engaging directly with Deaf individuals in another capacity. The benefits and definitions of insider vs. outsider status, the extent to which objectivity in research is possible, and the requisite abilities of the dual-role researcher must be carefully considered. Through bracketing, role reflexivity, and thoughtful decision making regarding ethics, it is possible to engage in meaningful scholarship while still retaining the active identity of “social worker.”

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