Defining Academia Influences on Mobility, Identity, and Culture of Deaf Scholars in Higher Education

Deaf Studies Conference Transformations Proceedings

Trisha Houston
California State University, Fresno, www.csufresno.edu
trishah@csufresno.edu

Abstract

The purpose of the study was to explore Deaf faculty experiences in higher education to identify the common themes related to barriers and successes. Social Phenomenology Theory and Deaf Critical Theory were used to discover common themes regarding accessibility problems and academic mobility in higher education environments. Factors of academic mobility was broken down into several groups including faculty struggles, faculty barriers and successes, their desire to continue teaching, and ability to collaborate with Deaf and Hearing colleagues. The explanatory sequential mixed methods study included Deaf faculty as participants who were teaching in colleges and universities across U.S. and some other regions not in the United States. Coding and triangulation were then used to discover recurring themes from the survey and interviews. The data revealed frequent associations regarding access to interpreters and if it was or was not provided equitably, the need for mentoring, and the issue of onboarding – organizational socialization.

Keywords
Deaf studies, academic mobility, higher education, identity, accessibility

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Presentation Transcript

(Slide 1)
All right. This is my dissertation topic.

(Slide 2)
I analyzed Deaf faculty and their experiences navigating their workplace. I have heard many stories — or rather, I should say I "saw" — many people, and noticed similarities when they talked about their experiences, their struggles, and their successes. As I detected the similarities, I became curious. I wanted to see and understand that sense of frustration, what frustrated and motivated them to continue to teach. Along the way, there were a lot of stories that really touched my heart as a researcher and as a teacher. I myself have undergone some hard times. I work at a hearing university. In my roles, there have been numerous times when I felt conflicted. I specifically wanted to know what worked and what didn't. That was what drove my curiosity. That became the definitive topic for my dissertation.

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The background of my study started with a literature review that analyzed the existing literature. During that review, I noticed more works available by Deaf scholars. This reflected what I saw when I attended conferences, with more and more Deaf scholars in attendance. I had heard a renowned story that someone told me about a certain conference and how it was predominantly attended by hearing people, and discouraged me from attending. I went ahead and attended the conference because I wanted to see for myself what it was like. There were actually more Deaf scholars than I had expected, and I told that person, naming the Deaf scholars who had attended. That person was surprised. Research shows that there has been an increase of Deaf scholars obtaining degrees. There are more and more Deaf people doing that, which makes me happy. That's a very positive thing. So, that created a problem: where was the data? Concrete, actual data? I didn't see it. I did research trying to find this information, and the documents I saw were mostly anecdotal narratives. That was fine, but where were the numbers? Where were the solid data and empirical evidence? I wanted that data. I wanted numbers, because that data would strengthen future discussions. I realized there was a great lack of information in the literature and research. We were missing that numerical data, and it bothered me on a personal level.

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Another topic often discussed is fear. Typically, this takes place via visualization. "If I hire you, I'll have to pay for an interpreter — oh, wait, two interpreters?! That means I'll have to hire three people: the teacher and then two interpreters? Okay, it's not worth hiring you." That's how hearing universities visualize this. And this happens often. The next thing has to do with money. "If I hire you, I may open myself up to lawsuits. I have to pay you or you will sue me." These are the things hearing universities fear. I want to remove these fears and provide a positive foundation. We need to reduce fears.

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Next, I'll talk about the framework. Interestingly, there were three main theories that I examined. The first one, social phenomenology, focused on experiences. Experiences are important to me, and I wanted to examine experiences. Next was Deaf Critical Theory, which has been discussed a lot. I wanted to reframe our experiences and preferences through a social justice lens via our own stories. The third one was epistemology, because as a Deaf researcher and as a Deaf person, I was aware of my own biases and what I would bring to the research, how I would interpret the results, and how I perceived the information. These composed the core of what I brought to the table, and was how I analyzed the data for my dissertation.

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I really wanted to narrow down my population. I really focused on those who used sign language, and wanted to keep that focus because I saw a handful of researchers who fell under a more general category, such as those who were late-deafened or had hearing loss. They mostly spoke, not signed, but I wanted those who were signers. I wanted to narrow the focus to people who signed. That was a challenge, I'm telling you.

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So that research process, its timeframe was from December until — wow, yeah, March 2018. Time went by in the blink of an eye. Throughout that process, I decided to use the sequential explanation methodology, which is a mixed methodology. When I first started, I disseminated a survey and then from the data I collected, I conducted interviews with people. That was my initial goal, but that was a really rough bump in the road. As I worked on this, it was a struggle because I had to constantly chase people down, especially with the time limit I had. I had to constantly try to get people to share information. There was a lot of resistance. Deaf people are a sensitive group, I understand that; we're sensitive people, but I really needed that data. It was a real struggle, and I ended up getting 55 responses. That's not a bad number, but I had to take what I could. Out of the 55, I interviewed seven, actually, eight people, which again isn't bad. Interestingly, the themes that emerged were similar across the board from the survey until the research, so that was a good thing. Let's see, what else. Yes, as I neared the end of my timeframe, a few people asked to participate at the last minute. But I had already closed that phase, so I couldn't do that — I had to swallow that. Let's proceed with discussing my findings.

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I found a correlation in my analyses. I noticed that most people were more likely to continue teaching if the barriers were minimal, or if they were motivated to continue teaching. Another correlation was that when Deaf faculty felt comfortable with coworkers, they were more likely to work with hearing faculty and would interact with them. Another finding was that the more barriers that existed, the more the Deaf faculty were dejected and lacked confidence. That was something quite explicit in the data. So clearly there is something in the data, yes.

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Near the end of the survey, I asked about what successes and barriers they experienced. Most participants responded positively about the support they received from their university/college. That is positive, because that indicated that both hearing and Deaf universities supported their faculty. However, a negative had to do with accessibility: constantly having to fight for accommodations such as interpreters, and their rights to different types of accommodations. That was a consistent comment that came up in the answers. Interestingly, most Deaf faculty agreed that there was a need for a higher degree for success. Also, most agreed that published works were also necessary for success. The responses were consistent in that area. The responses across the 55 participants were similar, mostly, which I thought was good.

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One heart-breaking aspect, for me as a Deaf researcher, was this fact: Deaf faculty working with Deaf faculty is not always an optimal experience as we'd expect. That data was high: 47%. That's a pretty large number of faculty who already had experienced marginalization. That was surprising to me, and I thought about that a lot. What was up with that? I also felt really conflicted about that because I'm a researcher and this is my own world. So when I saw that, that bothered me. But it's a fact that's there in the data. But that was that. Let's proceed to the qualitative part, because the survey had 55 respondents, but the survey itself had 33 items. Seven of the questions were open-ended so the participants could type their own comments.

This was in addition to the seven interviews I did, and then I combined the data. I examined the survey questions before I looked at the interviews.

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So with these two data sources, I examined them via coding, starting with open coding. That meant I simply read through the responses, which took hours and hours. I began noticing certain things, so I used axial coding and saw themes emerging throughout the data. It took a lot of figuring out to determine which data fit in which theme and it was a lot of work to ensure that the data were appropriately categorized. Through that, I realized how much of an impact ASL and English had on the data. I interviewed eight people in ASL, and some of the signs I had to try and figure out what the best English words should be used to correctly convey the meaning and message. I struggled with that at times, and asked community members and interpreters, and had numerous discussions, because different transcriptions could really affect the theme coding. I had to be extremely cautious about that, and it was a new experience for me. I have a newfound respect for interpreters, that's for sure. I was really overwhelmed by the differences in the two languages, but I kept going.

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The first theme that emerged was cultural competence. There were several subthemes, but cultural competence itself means an awareness of how to interact and having the skills to interact with others and their experiences. A subtheme of cultural competency was accessibility, where there were many problems with the lack of interpreters and accessibility, and probably the quality of interpreters, too. Another challenge was audism. One commented that in their department, a coworker repeatedly asked, "Ever thought of getting a cochlear implant?" This person asked this not once, but repeatedly over time. Why did this happen? It's understandable if someone asks that, but time after time? Some people think that's not a big deal, but it's not quite okay. The second theme, burden, was categorized into two roles: academic and administration, which I'll expand upon. The first has to do with academic writing. Many respondents said they didn't feel their English writing skills were on par with hearing peers. Another comment was about teaching a class without an interpreter because the person could speak therefore they did not need an interpreter and could teach the class just fine. But that individual was frustrated by this gap in building relationships with students. The university didn't support the need for an interpreter, and the teacher felt deprived. For administration, respondents felt they had more work in having to educate others on how to use interpreters or how to hire. Every time there's a new dean, they have to educate the dean all over again. If a new chair comes in, they have to educate the chair again. And with new coworkers, they have to repeat that cycle, which becomes exhausting for them. The expectations for that level are quite high, which is understandable. The next subtheme is the concept of "good enough." This was an oft-mentioned issue. Many universities would bring in a "warm body" for an interpreter, thinking that was adequate. Many of the respondents complained that the interpreters were not at the same intellectual level as them, nor did the interpreters know the terminology or use the appropriate word choices. So they struggled with the interpreters, who were making them sound unintelligent, ignorant, and even as if they knew nothing. A lot of negative words were used about that. Next, the subtheme of proxy had a positive connotation. This is the sign I use, two people facing each other. This word is the concept of someone in a position of power acting on my behalf as a Deaf faculty, fighting for

me, supporting me. That proxy might sign, or maybe not; that doesn't matter. That individual usually will go ahead and advocate and try new things, and help open doors for you, creating opportunities. That was interesting. The next main theme was economic issues, which mostly had to do with how interpreters were hired. Many talked about writing grant requests to hire interpreters, which astonished me. This created a difficult, long process just to get an interpreter. Why would they have to write a grant? Wow. Another issue was being told, "You're too expensive. I've had to spend a lot of money on you." A respondent reported that one supervisor actually said, "You're expensive." That dismayed me. The next theme is a bit sensitive.

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"You are not Deaf enough." This phrase was repeated in several comments. What's going on here? Why would anyone say that? Another comment, the second one you see here on the screen, saying, "You must take a Deafhood class to decolonize yourself. Stop that!" This was shared with me both during an interview and on the survey. I was quite taken aback by that, by how Deaf people criticized each other. But it wasn't just about being Deaf. There were other things, such as gender inequality and the lack of people of color. There is a need for more Deaf people of color faculty to meet the diversity among students. I'm a white teacher, and I have no idea of a student of color's culture, background, and experiences. I have no right to that. In fact, 85% of the survey respondents were white. Interviewees were all white except for one. But 85% of the survey respondents were white, which is profound. Two of the survey respondents identified as different races, and one from the interviews, making three. This clearly demonstrates we don't have enough people of color. We don't have enough. So that was a notable aspect. However, there were indeed some positive comments.

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Collaboration was the most positive and wonderful comment, which touched my heart. The research showed that many people really appreciate collaboration with people who you can work with, deaf or hearing. The important thing is understanding each other and understanding "deaf-heart." That was key. Being able to work with people who feel equal, and look at each other as equals without any power shifts, really working together. That was the most successful aspect of a collaboration, and many expressed enthusiasm about collaboration. Most of the responses stated that collaboration was essential. So that was a repeated positive comment. The data provided some examples, such as fighting for the department to move from Communication Sciences to Modern Languages. That was a good example of working together, or even having another department welcoming that program's integration. That was a good example of collaboration, and there were many more. But it was overall positive. The only negative was the continued power inequality, but collaboration was more positive.

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The primary concerns that came up in the data I analyzed was accessibility. There was heavy weight on that, especially in regards to the process of hiring interpreters. That has to improve, especially in how the interpreters align with the deaf person. As a teacher myself, I often teach hearing classes that require an interpreter. When the class laughs at my punchlines, then I know the interpreter is doing a good job. But if the interpreter says exactly what I say, without appropriate inflection and the class doesn't laugh, then I know it's not working. Many of the

respondents echoed my concerns about how crucial interpreter quality is, and timely services. We sometimes need immediate access to an interpreter, rather than having to try and find one especially with the two-week advance notice requirements. We need to expand the interpreter pool, so we can better work together.

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Cultural competency -- actually, it's all people, not just hearing people. This is true for deaf people, too. They should learn how to determine and manage understanding of their skills, abilities, knowledge, and attitude overall, which all create cultural competency. We need to be able to analyze ourselves and determine how we can convey ourselves. Like that "not deaf enough" comment — that shouldn't have been said. It should have been expressed as a different message. Cultural competency needs to be practiced, and there needs to be training specializing in Deaf cultural competency. We have diversity trainings, but none that specialize in Deaf people. Many colleges lack that, and we need that greatly. And then when human resources hire people who work with Deaf people, they should provide onboarding and training support for that. If a new dean is hired, human resources should prepare that person to work with Deaf people. Training is needed also for how to hire interpreters, and do what is necessary for appropriate accommodation. This all should take place early in the process so that people can be prepared to work with Deaf faculty, rather than struggling or even placing that burden upon Deaf faculty. The university should absorb that responsibility away from the Deaf faculty.

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Mentoring and partnerships: there are a lot of successful relationships, and many Deaf scholars have discussed the need for mentors. Some said it might be excessive reliance, but really, in general, we need mentoring regardless of experience or race, because that's how we engage in open dialogue and open communication and achieve an understanding, through exchange of knowledge. That knowledge exchange becomes merged into a rich experience, and your sources become precious. That partnership through mentoring is greatly needed, and we need more mentors. Some older people who have retired could serve as mentors to younger people. When those younger scholars traverse through their college years, they might miss out on critical information that could be filled in by their mentors. There may be things missed – critical information that may not be shared with them but if they had mentors, that information would then come from those mentors. That would allow them to do better. Mentors are crucial.

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My final message has to do with a proxy, which I think is key. The difference between a proxy and an ally is that an ally is someone who collaborates with a person through the experience of oppression and understanding and fighting for issues. A proxy typically doesn't go through that. A proxy might know sign language, maybe not; either way it's fine. A proxy is a person in a position of power who can do something to open doors for us, and we should take that opportunity. Let me share an example through a story. My dissertation chair was a hearing woman who knew nothing about deaf people. Absolutely nothing. She knew nothing, nothing at all. As we began working together, we couldn't find an interpreter, so she said, "Forget interpreters, we'll work together directly." I was willing to try that, so we used Zoom where we could see each other as we gestured or typed to each other in the chat box. We held up papers to

the camera and compared information, shared feedback, and discussed so many things. It got to the point where my children would pop in to say hello. We had direct communication with each other. She's a very powerful woman, and I had struggles with one of my committee members. I had two members in addition to my chair. One member was impossible to get ahold of, and I'd email and call, but would never hear back. I worked so hard to try and get ahold of that person, and there was a scheduling mishap. My chair decided to go ahead and take care of this matter. I stayed with her as she called that person, and got things done. We were chuckling as she spoke to the member and instructed them to proceed. She had a beautiful way of gesturing; she had a beautiful heart. She said, "Let's do it," and then told me, "Got it! Go to that office now!" She had made the member meet me immediately, so I ran over to the office. That person was an expert statistician, so it was important — but it was hard to chase that person down. Also, they wouldn't meet with me without an interpreter, but time was of the essence for my research. The member didn't know how to communicate with me, even though I pleaded and tried to get a meeting. Finally, my chair told the member, "You can write back and forth! That's fine!" That member obliged, and we ended up having a witty banter to the point where we even finished each other's sentences. That was a learning experience for them. Later, during the summer, my chair and I kept in touch even though I had completed my dissertation. She told me about how she went camping and saw a deaf person on the next site struggling with setting up a tent. She said her husband and she helped, and she remembered how there were many types of Deaf people and realized she had to keep that in mind. So she asked that Deaf person, "What can I do?" She let that Deaf person take the lead, and they worked together. She said she had thought of me because I had taught her a lot. I thought that was terrific. She pushed me to submit my research for publication. That was a proxy who had power. It doesn't matter if that person knows signs or not. It can even be a Deaf person, or it could be a hearing person, who serves as a proxy. We must grab that opportunity and make use of it. Don't be intimidated. Instead, go ahead and take a step forward, and walk together as you work together. Don't do it from time to time; instead, stay together as you walk down the full path. That is my message to help you transform your thinking. Work with anyone, regardless of different opinions or views. Go ahead and work together with each other. We need them for the future of Deaf research. Thank you.

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