

Deaf or [insert ethnicity here]? The impact of South African Sign Language and Deaf community membership on the ethnic identities of three Deaf students in Cape Town

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Abstract:

South African Sign Language (SASL) is the language used by most members of the Deaf community in South Africa. SASL, much like other signed languages, has a long history of development, acceptance, and non-acceptance. The history of SASL is undeniably intertwined and affected by the political history of South Africa. The Apartheid era in South Africa segregated the country by race. South Africa's many languages each became associated with certain racial or ethnic groups. And yet, SASL is not tied to any racial or ethnic group. This project examined the relationship between ethnicity, language, and identity in the context of SASL and the Deaf community. It explored how the use of SASL as one's native language can affect identity and identification with a particular racial group. Perspectives and stories of individual members of the Deaf community in Cape Town were gathered to address the initial research question: Does regular use of SASL and membership in the Deaf community affect one's identity with a racial or ethnic group? The participants in this study were three Deaf students at a major university in Cape Town. Information was obtained through individual interviews and an identity ranking worksheet. An SASL interpreter was available for each interview. Each participant identified strongly as uppercase "D" Deaf, meaning that they identified with the Deaf community as a cultural group. Furthermore, each of the participants held their Deaf identity as one of the most important parts of their identity, more important even than their ethnic or racial identity. There were a few common themes identified in the interviews. One was that the struggle of living as a Deaf person in a world designed for hearing people created connections within the Deaf community; the community bonded over common struggles. Another common theme was the importance of SASL as a first or native language. The participants cited SASL as having a big impact on their life and identity. It was important to them because it gives them membership and a sense of belonging in the Deaf community, something that language does not always provide for them in their racial or ethnic communities. A third common theme had to do with the way the participants spoke about race. They spoke about race from a distance, as if it was something that other people talk and think about. They had realistic ideas of how race and racism affect their lives, but it seemed that for these individuals race was simply an unnecessary annoyance. Ultimately, these individuals saw themselves as Deaf above any other identity, and they saw a difference between the way they identified with a racial or ethnic group and the way hearing people do. This research is only the starting point for research that can be done to understand the nuances of identity and intersectionality within the Deaf community. It can be expanded and built upon by getting a wider variety and greater number of participants from the South African Deaf community.