



# *Qualitative Sociology Review*

Volume V, Issue 2 – August 2009

---

Malin Åkerström & Katarina Jacobsson  
Lund University, Sweden

## Expressing and Examining Morality in Everyday Life: Social Comparisons among Swedish Parents of Deaf Children

### **Abstract**

Social comparisons, seeing oneself in relation to others, are universal, common, and perhaps even necessary. In a study of parents of deaf children, intense, open, and mutual examinations were voiced in parental groups, meetings between parents and professionals, and interviews. These comparisons were generated in a specific situation created by successful claims for separate milieus advocated by the Deaf movement. The local culture, “the deaf world,” was characterized by close proximity and a highly charged ideological moral climate.

With the central argument that strong integration breeds comparisons and examinations, we conclude that the integration of parents creates a situation perfect for drawing comparisons, creating not only cohesion, but also renewed separatist distinctions, expressed in terms of moral examinations, competition and envy. Studying the content and details of comparisons in any given field makes the particular morality that is bred, fed, and elaborated obvious.

### **Keywords**

Integration; Social comparisons; Morality; Everyday life; Identity work; Deaf culture; Hard-of-hearing; Sign language; Sweden.

*Each of us—noble or common, good or evil—continually compares his own value with that of others.... All jealousy, all ambition ... are full of such comparisons.*

Max Scheler 1992: 122-23

According to the classical sociologist Max Scheler, seeing oneself in relation to others is universal, common, and perhaps even necessary. Others become a yardstick: one is nicer or not so nice, wittier or less witty, smarter or maybe less smart. In an era as child-centered as this, which has been characterized since the late nineteenth century by a “sacralization of childhood” (Zelizer 1985), parenthood constitutes an important moral identity. In this moral context, examinations and comparisons arise: aren’t they a bit too hard on their kids, but maybe we’re too lenient? The comparisons are numerous but can differ in their explicitness and charge. Furthermore, in areas such as daycare, education, and medical care,

parental involvement is cherished and its positive effects are often taken for granted without much attention paid to what kinds of unintended effects it may cause.

To investigate these processes, parents of deaf children voicing intense, open, and mutual comparisons in parental groups, meetings between parents and professionals, and interviews were studied. In this local culture, parental morals are chiseled out through comparisons and critical examinations of one's own family as well as others', a form of identity work concerning who one is and what others are: friends or enemies, knowledgeable or ignorant, involved or uninvolved parents. In addition, social comparisons may serve as rhetorical tools when putting forward socio-political complaints.

Using the central argument that strong integration breeds comparisons and examinations, we consider the interviewees' use of social comparisons in two analytically distinguished contexts: first, in the context of "Deaf Culture ideology"<sup>41</sup> being translated into everyday practices and comparisons relating to individual morale; second, in situations where interviewees formulate socio-political arguments at a group level by comparing common rights.

Social comparison is a central theme in sociology and has been analyzed by several sociologists. Scheler (1992), as mentioned above, and others have commented on people's habitual comparisons and examinations of each other. Another classical sociologist, Georg Simmel (1971), claimed that poverty is not absolute but seen in relation to others. In a more limited analysis, Albert Cohen (1955) viewed juvenile delinquency as an expression of "relative deprivation." A few decades ago, Merton (1968) coined the term "reference groups," but this concept would seem to imply static group boundaries. Our analysis has been inspired, instead, by Scheler (1992) and Snow and Anderson's (1987) use of "social comparisons," a concept more easily associated with flexible relations in which actors are ascribed an active interpretative role. This creation of contrasts in relation to others is two-fold: one's own identity is expressed, as is one's dissociation from others.

The examinations and comparisons studied here were generated in a specific situation, the Swedish world of the deaf during the 1990s. This time was characterized by close proximity and a highly-charged ideological moral climate, a community of parents adhering to Deaf Culture, in which right and wrong in relation to sign language has been much debated. This study is not a study of Deaf Culture per se; it is used to illustrate how a situation of strong integration breeds distinctions and critical examinations in any community. To this aim, we were inspired by a Simmelean perspective with an emphasis on opposing forces (Sellerberg 1994); Simmel (1964):

Concord, harmony, co-efficacy, which are unquestionably held to be socializing forces, must nevertheless be interspersed with distance, competition, repulsion, in order to yield the actual configuration of society. (p. 315)

Parents of deaf and severely hard-of-hearing children have what Gluckman (1955: 18-29) called "multi-stranded relationships"; they see each other in a variety of settings. The father of the friend of one's child might also be a representative of the Deaf Children Association and, furthermore, be a member of the school board, of which one is also a member. Thus, parents meet each other in several contexts. This

---

<sup>41</sup> In the text, capital D in "Deaf," will be used when referring to a Deaf Culture-perspective, as "deaf" according to this perspective signifies only the medical perspective (see for instance Berbrrier 1998).

situation is because the Deaf movement's struggle for its own milieu has been successful in Sweden; deaf children are largely cared for in sign language pre-schools and taught in schools for children who are deaf or hard-of-hearing. One consequence of this separatist tendency is strong, mutual parental integration. Many families move to "deaf centers" (i.e. areas centered around one of the five national schools for the deaf and hard-of-hearing) and meet at sign language pre-schools, schools for the deaf, and deaf association meetings. Parental integration is reinforced through participation in sign language classes, and some parents become involved in one or more deaf associations (cf. Najarian 2006). Events such as parent meetings, sponsor families, and parent education constitute other forms through which parents gather.

Opinions, experiences, and choices of action are discussed in all of the above-mentioned settings. These settings are part of a local culture in which parental morals are examined and negotiated through comparisons, examples, and critical examinations.

### **Deaf Culture Ideology: A Background**

In this context, comparisons arise from a particular ideological, practical, and socio-political context. "Normalization" and "integration" have long been prestige words within treatment and educational ideologies for the disabled (see for example: *Normalization, Social Integration, and Community Services*, an influential anthology by Flynn and Nitsch 1980). The philosophy of integration entailed that the disabled should not be cared for in institutions but, instead, incorporated into society. Various practical aids, transportation services, and sloping curbs are physical, visible impressions of this philosophy. As Corker (1993: 145) points out, however, "Deaf people, whether they be children, young people or adults, have always posed something of a challenge to generalized policies of integration." The Deaf have demanded respect for the distinctive character of their group (e.g. Berbrier 1998, 2002; Davis 1995). With regard to the question of integration, the Deaf movement has been distinguished from the disability movement in general.<sup>42</sup>

For Deaf Culture activists, integration is associated with "oralism," an educational ideology whereby deaf individuals adjust to the rest of society – become "normalized" – through training in lip reading and speech production. The concept of "disability" itself has been called into question by the Deaf movement with the argument that Deaf people are not a medically disabled group, but a linguistic minority.

The Deaf community's demand to be considered a language minority is essential. In the politics of identity, such a definition would mean that society can be persuaded to invest in sign language interpreters, sign language schools, and pre-schools, among other payoffs. Thus, the question of identity is closely interwoven with socio-political institutions, subsidies, and actions. Within the Deaf movement, the survival of their own deaf milieu has been a central issue. For many deaf persons, schools and associations for the deaf have been an important social context, and the relationships developed there are sometimes presented as being on par with familial relationships.

---

<sup>42</sup> Their different outlooks caused such great problems that, in 1992, SDR (The National Swedish Organization for the Deaf) left the central organization for the disabled, HCK.

The ideology of integration has made its breakthrough into practice in most special schools, and institutions have been closed.<sup>43</sup> The exceptions are daycare facilities, pre-schools, and schools for deaf children (Gustavsson and Söder 1993).

Above, we described a struggle for separate schools and milieus. However, the activists do not strive for a situation of isolation. The recognition of Deaf Culture is constructed as a platform from which deaf people can be integrated into hearing society. The socio-psychological rhetoric states that one cannot face hearing society unless one is, as one activist put it, "strong and secure in one's Deaf identity." Thus, demands that interpreters, computers, and text telephones should be made available to deaf people are put forward as means of communicating with the surrounding world. Several changes during the 1980s and 1990s clearly show that this struggle has been successful: an increasing number of television programs were signed; schools for deaf and hard-of-hearing children invested in sign language competence; and the number of interpreters increased from 30 to 300 between 1981 and 1989 (SOU 1991:). Ten years later, the number was around 330 and a lack of sign language interpreters was reported (Socialstyrelsen 2001).

This change was accomplished through a continuous battle. In its own literature, the Deaf movement has, naturally, concentrated on conflicts with the outside world: struggles with educators, authorities, and physicians are described (Berbrier 1998; Lane 1984; Sacks 1989). Stories about the struggle, defeats, and victories belong to the writing of history and are an important part of identity construction (Engel 1993), but the internal battles have also been intense (Jacobsson 2000). Various issues have been strongly emotionally charged and people are said to belong to different wings. Even though the centrality of sign language and the importance of milieus for deaf people were generally accepted in Sweden throughout the 1990s, some actors were, at times, described as "oralists" by their accusers, and those on the other side were accused of being "sign fanatics" (ibidem). The threat of the oralist, once old-fashioned educators, was kept alive and transferred to people in favor of cochlear implants in deaf children - a medical procedure resulting in "artificial" hearing. Today's socio-political rhetoric and its impact are radically different given that, nowadays, most deaf children are subjects for cochlear implants. Yet, as a setting for our analysis, we use the Swedish world of the Deaf during the 1990s with the aim of investigating social comparisons in a strongly integrated local culture.

## Methods of Procedure

The material for this analysis was derived from a larger project on the immediate environment of deaf and hard-of-hearing people that started in 1990 and involved the authors as well as several graduate students (at the time, Jacobsson, was also a graduate student). Thus, we have been able to draw on a collection of investigations of ideological and practical changes in the care and education of deaf people in Sweden (see for example: Jacobsson 1999, 2000; Jacobsson and Åkerström 1997; Säwe 1999, 2004; Åkerström et al. 1995).

---

<sup>43</sup> Deinstitutionalization is one sign of this development, and the figures show the reality of this process. In 1970, in Sweden, 49% of mentally disabled children lived at home; the 1988 figure was 82%. Similarly, special classes and special schools in general have been reduced: in 1968, 95% of mentally disabled children attended special preschool classes; today, such classes hardly exist (Gustavsson and Söder 1993: 9).

Several kinds of empirical material have been collected during this long-term project: interviews, observations, and documents. More than a hundred unstructured taped interviews were carried out to reflect descriptive practices. The interviews averaged one and a half hour and were conversational in style. The interviews were transcribed verbatim, and the quotations used in this article were translated into English in a way that preserves the original meaning and style. Thus, the translation is not literal, and the word order has been altered to follow Standard English usage.

The interviewers and observers were all hearing Swedes, as were the majority of parents, despite approximately 10% of parents of deaf children being deaf themselves (Maxwell and Kraemer 1990). Conversations with the interviewees were originally conducted in Swedish. The two interviews with deaf parents were conducted with the help of a sign language interpreter.

Roughly twenty parental meetings were attended, during which we had access to deliberations and constructions concerning identities, culture, and decisions regarding choices of schools and medical treatment. Most of these meetings were also recorded with a tape recorder. Several conferences arranged for different professional groups dealing with deafness have also provided valuable observations. Field observations were made primarily to study the interaction between parents, medical staff, school staff, and different organizational parties at the conferences.

Additionally, documents considered to be "literature from within the movement" have been systematically collected for the last few decades. Journals from organizations for parents of deaf children and for the deaf and hard-of-hearing are significant voices in forming public opinion; as such, they work as integrating forces.

While the text presented here draws its background knowledge from the total of the collected material, the data included for analysis consists of interviews with thirty-four parents of deaf children. The parents were asked about their experiences of having a deaf child. This starting point most often led to discussions on themes such as their involvement in deaf issues and their relation to various professional categories and other parents within "the Deaf world," a concept its members use themselves.

## **Methodological Discussion**

Most of the interview material was collected in the southern part of Sweden where a so-called Deaf center, harboring day-care facilities, pre-schools, and schools for deaf children, is situated. Less material was collected in other regions containing Deaf centers. If we had conducted interviews geographically far from the Deaf centers, we would most likely have had rather different material at our disposal because parental and professional activities are not as intense there. Still, the majority of parents do live within the Deaf center regions. Furthermore, the ideological climate was concentrated not only in specific geographical regions, but also particular categories: parents of deaf children associated with one of the organizations, DHB<sup>44</sup>, and among deaf people, those who were born deaf. This difference in ideology was obvious when we interviewed adults who had turned deaf at a later stage in life and asked about their choice to have a cochlear implant. Many of these interviewees were ignorant of the fierce resistance against cochlear implants in children.

---

<sup>44</sup> Riksförbundet för döva, hörselskadade och språkstörda barn (DHB) - The Swedish National Association for Deaf, Hearing-Impaired and Language-Impaired Children

None of us, including the graduate students on the project, have personal involvement in deaf issues. Our intention has always been to remain outside and emphasize that fact in approaching the field. Generally, this approach was welcomed, although some met it with suspicion. For some, our lack of personal experiences with deaf people raised questions such as “What are they up to?” and “What if they hurt deaf people out of ignorance?” These reservations turned out to be useful during the interviews and while making observations because we were generally viewed as people who needed to be taught “how this world works.” Also, our research has been appreciated for not taking a stand on ideologically charged issues in the field.

## Findings

The following analysis takes two theoretical themes as points of departure: firstly, that separation demands integration; secondly, that integration breeds new separating distinctions. This article focuses on this last theme. We consider the separating distinctions by examining the specific comparisons made among the members with regard to sign language use and competence, as well as comparisons expressing socio-political resentment.

### Separation Demands Integration

As has been sketched above, within the Deaf movement it is argued that keeping exclusive milieus for deaf people is essential for maintaining the Deaf Culture and the identity of its members. The concept of “sign language environments” ties into the idea of places where deaf people are able to “just be themselves” without troublesome communication and reliance on technical devices.

In the discourse of the Deaf movement, parents (most of them hearing) are assigned the responsibility for seeing that children have access to environments in which they meet other deaf or hard-of-hearing children. Parents are encouraged to establish contact with other parents of deaf children so that their children can play on weekends and during vacations. If parents do not currently live in a Deaf center, a place with sign language pre-schools and schools for the deaf, of which Sweden currently has five, they are encouraged to move to one. Some families move to the same neighborhood so the children can play during their leisure time. A mother conveys the advantages of living in a “Deaf neighborhood”:

... we keep to the green area here (laugh). Within bicycling distance, you know. They come home, leave their school bags and say, “Now I’m going to his house or her house,” right. If they’re not home, then on to the next friend.

The mother quoted above has moved to a deaf center and is active in an association for parents of deaf children. Within this deaf center, the family has chosen a housing area in which several families with deaf children live. They are a typical example of families who maintain the value of a “separatist structure” and of the integration of parents that this demands. Parents such as this woman refer not only to the children’s fellowship in ordinary, practical, and joyous terms, but also to that of the parents: “We have guy nights and girl nights, just for the parents...” Through efforts to accomplish separate Deaf milieus, itself implying a critique of

normalization and integration, the outcome, paradoxically, is the celebration of normalcy (cf. Berbrier 2002). Such constructions of normalcy may be particularly desirable because of their de-stigmatizing power (Wästerfors 2008). The mother above is emphasizing that her family is a typical, normal, modern family by saying, in effect: we are like anyone else – we live in row houses, parents socialize, and the children stop by and play at each other's houses after school.

## **Integration Breeds Comparisons**

Happy and positive descriptions of the separate Deaf environments are common in interviews emphasizing solidarity and family-like community. However, descriptions containing ambivalence and dissociation vis-à-vis other parents are no less common. This intense integration fosters a series of comparisons and mutual examinations. People compare reactions, comments, and advice from professionals, relatives, and friends. Studies of patient and next-of-kin associations have shown how such organizations communicate a world view in which central actors are portrayed (Cain 1991; Karp 1992; Gubrium and Holstein 2002: 21-22). Parents in the Deaf world relate their own problems and solutions to, and get stories in return from, other parents. Parents often talk appreciatively about such interactions, "No one understands as well as someone in the same situation." Thus, comparisons voiced in integrated networks of people in separatist milieus, can serve to unite.

Furthermore, both Deaf activists and their critics can come together in complaining about circumstances distant in time and space, the situation for deaf people in the past and in other countries. Illustrative distant examples in time and space promote consensus of opinion that, in terms of the situation for deaf people, is often summarized by contending that the socio-political situation in Sweden is "way ahead."

Integration, however, also leads to conflict and thus, at times, to renewed separatist tendencies. Annoyance, condemnation, and dissociation – groupings and counter-groupings – can be observed at association meetings, interviews, and journals relating to deaf issues. Parents criticize one another for negligence and for being too ideological or too passive. When it comes to questions of a socio-political character, arguments are presented as group claims through comparisons or complaints about other parental groups. The following section will address how interviewees critically examine their own and others' ways of practicing Deaf Culture ideology. Thereafter, we will pay attention to comparisons of common socio-political rights.

## **Comparisons Breed New Separating Distinctions**

Critical examinations of others, uttered in interviews or overheard during field observations, do not address whether parents are for or against sign language. Currently, sign language as the main form of communication for deaf people is generally accepted in Sweden.<sup>45</sup> The comparisons are more specific. One theme concerns commitment. How much effort is put into signing? How involved are other

---

<sup>45</sup> This idea is challenged by the fact that many deaf children currently have cochlear implants (CI), and most of them can hear speech and benefit from practicing speech. However, the idea that deaf children without CI have sign language as a first language seems to be unthreatened.

parents in various associations, day-care institutions, or the schools? Some parents are attributed with over-involvement and others with under-involvement.

Different concrete and specific issues are treated as ideological questions. Standpoints concerning hearing aid use, speech training, and cochlear implantation give rise to pro and con formations. Parents view themselves and others in terms of the prevailing ideological climate. Through “examination rhetoric” (Hunt and Miller 1997), moral prescriptions can be highlighted, disarmed, or softened. Thus, social comparisons are made in regard to a variety of topics, but we concentrate our analysis on the main ingredient of Deaf Culture ideology: sign language.

Within the Deaf movement, the central ideological issue has concerned sign language and Deaf Culture on the one hand and oralism (i.e. a combination of speech training and medical aids) on the other (Berbrier 1998). Sign language is portrayed as the natural and right alternative, whereas medical technology and educational methods emphasizing speech and lip reading represent the artificial and unnatural (Jacobsson 2000). In everyday conversations and documents, hearing aids and cochlear implants are criticized by using ironic twists and turns. In deaf periodical cartoons, school situations or conferences with hard-of-hearing persons are pictured as absurd, a jumble of amplifiers, microphones, and hearing coils wrapped around people's heads and cables winding through the lecture halls. The fiercest attacks have concerned cochlear implants. The operation has been viewed as a symbolic attack on deaf people and as a signal that deafness per se is objectionable. Thus, for a long time, the implant was described as an “electric antennae in the skull” and the children as “guinea-pigs,” tacitly subordinate to the medical scientists' own ambitions.

Parents who instead of only relying on sign language, place hearing aids on their severely hard-of-hearing child can be viewed as parents who fail to “accept their child as he or she is” – this being particularly immoral parental conduct. The same is true of parents who choose the cochlear implant for their child. Such views have resulted in parents, physicians, and educators publicly asserting their sincerity when insisting on the necessity of sign language.<sup>46</sup> Yet, such declarations were met by suspicion and, at times, depicted as only paying lip service to the importance of signing. Moreover, medical/technical solutions (hearing aids or cochlear implants) were sometimes talked about as indicators that parents were acting in their own interest. This assertion is, of course, a serious critique because good parental morals are characterized by acting in the child's best interest. According to the above logic, certain parents break with these fundamental morals, as suggested by this mother:

A lot of times it's the parents' wish, you know. But this is about the child. “I want my child to hear but she doesn't, so hang a bunch of hearing aids on her and...” I mean the child didn't choose this; they [the parents] somehow just can't accept the child how they were born. Sometimes I think this is a question of some type of morals, ethics in a way.

### ***True Signing Commitment?***

All parents of deaf or severely hard-of-hearing children we met were positive to the sign language approach. They also followed the dictum of separatist recommendations: they lived in a deaf center, most placed their children at deaf pre-

---

<sup>46</sup> This is not necessarily the case in other countries. Parents are sometimes encouraged to not disrupt oral training with sign language (Noble 1997). In Sweden, various parties have reported that physicians initially assumed that the operation would improve hearing to such a degree that the implant could replace sign language.

schools and schools, attended various deaf association meeting, went to sign language classes, and so on. However, some of the strong advocates of signing suggest that not all parents are making the proper effort to teach themselves and their children, criticizing them for an insufficient commitment to their children. Even those who are said to be making an effort are criticized by some parents: people's motives for participation in sign language courses are questioned. Some parents are said, for instance, to enroll because they:

Just like to take classes. There are lots of parents of kids here that do it, too – run around to a bunch of goddamned signing classes.... You can do that just for yourself, to be able to say, "I've taken that class, signed up for everything, see." But the thing is you've got to use it later.

Sign language classes for parents or siblings are offered by various Swedish organizations. Some classes are publicly financed, whereas courses given by deaf or educational associations often require partial payment from the family. The care allowances given to parents of disabled children are intended to cover such costs. This situation gives rise to a socio-political surveillance of morals. For example, a father comments on the use of care allowances:

You know there are parents who don't — I mean both work full-time — don't go to a sign language class but buy a new car instead. I mean, somehow this money is supposed to be used for the children.

Many parents mentioned this particular priority with the car sometimes concretized as a "new Mercedes." Such an assertion can be viewed as an expression of a local, modern myth. Myths reflect a special sort of truth; they provide models of human behavior and give life meaning and worth (Engel 1993). Through myths, experiences are transformed into moral narratives. In light of this background, a luxury car can be seen as a metaphor representing the reprehensible. As such, the car is well chosen because the Mercedes constitutes the antithesis of those values that are celebrated. The car is used and enjoyed by the parents, and it consumes the funds that should be invested in sign language for the sake of the children. Whether such stories are true or not, the narrators tell these stories as uncontested facts, and thus create new distinctions among the collective of parents.

The "factuality" of the stories is based on a claimed insight into other people's handling of their allowances that the separate milieus provide, an insight we commonly cannot claim as work colleagues, neighbors, or parents. The Deaf world contains a specific feature that gives critics credibility in the eyes of their audience: insight into, and detailed knowledge of, others. One can observe the language competency and class participation of others. One has seen that the Andersons bought a new car, or they might tell you that they have taken a charter trip. Thus, in conversation, arguments based on such concrete events can appear credible (cf. Persson and Wästerfors 2009). Although the particulars of the regulations can be tricky, most people are, or become, quite familiar with what is offered: financial allowances, transportation services, school support, and contact families, among others. Thus, the above criticism can be made even more concrete, as when this interviewee exclaims, "My God, they get 5,000 kronor (about \$600) every month!" To someone who is unfamiliar with what rights and allowances the parents of deaf children have, it sounds reasonable that time off from work to take signing classes is too costly, but the initiated know better: "You know, they get monthly care allowances."

### ***“Do They Sign During Dinner?”***

Everyday situations are integrated into “distinction-markings” separating people who act according to the morally right, versus those who do not. For instance, one commonly voiced exhortation among Deaf Culture advocates is to always sign at home and those who do not are criticized. One father uses the example of parents watching television with the child and asks rhetorically, with a sarcastic tone of voice, “Do they translate to sign language? Well, we do. Others don’t in spite of ‘their great commitment.’”

Among professionals and parents, a frequently used everyday example is the meal situation, particularly dinner, which is probably not coincidental because dinner symbolizes family life as a whole (DeVault 1991). Some families describe signing during dinner as a matter of course, whereas other families talk about it as a difficulty. At times, one parent, often the mother, expresses a wish that other family members would learn more sign language (cf. Najarian 2006) but admits that she cannot change their attitudes or habits. Siblings would “rather play soccer than go to signing classes.” Still others argue that demands for using sign language should not be pushed too far. They refer to their general parental responsibility: “We have several children to consider, some of them are hearing.” Such claims about morally correct parenting include the argument that all of the children have to be cared for, including the ones who can hear. Other parents argue that the existence of hearing siblings is not a tenable argument. One interviewee admits that “it’s a situation of conflict” for most, but:

Mother: What they’re really saying is: exclude your deaf child on those occasions...

Interviewer: The child would feel left out?

Mother: Uh huh...then it’s better to take your hearing children and do something else, go out with just them.

The “We”, that was supposed to be the result of a separate milieu fostering an integrated Deaf culture collective, is replaced in comments as the above when the mother points to the moral failings of what “they” do: in this case “excluding your deaf child.”

### ***Competition for Signing Competence***

Language competence becomes apparent in the interplay among parents. All parents refer to mutual examinations: those who do not appear to be as capable and those who are more proficient. One difficult phase in sign language acquisition is said to be learning to read (i.e. understand the signing of others). Deficiencies become clear during joint classes as this mother relates:

When you go to signing classes you really feel that you must be able to read the signs. It’s hard and, well, I didn’t really get this part [reading others’ signs, as opposed to making one’s own signs]. Yeah, there are big demands, I felt that.

Deficiencies are thus said to be observed, creating distinctions among those who are competent and those who are less competent sign-language users. In the context of the open comparisons facilitated by meetings in language classes, those

who have put great effort into signing also talk about distinctions; they report that they are seen as too competent in relation to other, envious, parents. A father says:

We've felt that, I mean competition from other parents. We've been, well a bit, well we've made pretty good progress, you could say. Worked at it and ... I mean I think I've felt from other parents ... I don't know how to put it but ... a little envy somehow.

## **Socio-political Envy and Resentment**

Socio-political comparisons can be presented in relatively objective measures. How does the hearing care system work in a specific municipality? How much care allowance is given to hard-of-hearing children in comparison to deaf children? Such socio-political comparisons provide raw material for moral indignation and resentment. Envy per se includes what, in sociological terms, would be called relative deprivation. It is not a question of simply lacking something desirable; instead, desirability is viewed in relation to what other individuals or groups have. Socio-political envy entails something extra, notions of justice and social rights (Lyman, 1989); criticism is framed as legitimate moral indignation and comparisons are made across categories of people as well as across time.

## ***Comparisons Across Categories***

Perhaps it is natural that we find this type of envy in an area concerning the disabled, where several groups are involved in a socio-political struggle and compete for recognition of their particular problem (Sellerberg 1993). Moreover, the victories and defeats of at least some categories are mutually apparent. Other studies on parents of disabled children provide comments that illustrate such experiences. For example, Kristina Jarkman's (1996) study shows how parents of children with meningomyelocele end up in different care systems. Some parents experienced a more advantageous situation, causing others to ask, "Why not us?"

The "Deaf world" harbors more than one parental category; apart from parents of deaf children, there are parents of hard-of-hearing children, parents of children with cochlear implants, and parents of deaf children with other disabilities in addition to deafness. In the public discourse of the Deaf movement, all these categories were said to be welcomed into the Deaf culture and that they all benefit from using sign language. Deaf culture activists and professionals who advocated sign-language schools tried, for instance, to recruit hard-of-hearing children to these schools, and criticized parents who preferred to place their hard-of-hearing children in regular schools.

Still, socio-political discussions confirmed or even accentuated the various categories of parents in the field of the "deaf world." It was primarily parents of hard-of-hearing children who voiced criticism; they claimed that deaf children and their families have received too much attention. Although many parents of hard-of-hearing children, who sometimes are also placed in schools for the deaf, adopted the sign language approach, the perception was that certain concrete opportunities were reserved for deaf children. Deaf children were said, for example, to have better access to sign language instruction. A mother says:

Nobody's come to us straight out and asked, 'Would you like to have a sign language teacher in your home?' Like they (parents of deaf children) get, right, they have it once a week, a signing teacher at home ..."

As shown in this example, comparisons with the other group may be used as a tool in constructing injustice. Even the siblings of deaf children were said to receive instruction that was difficult to get for their own hard-of-hearing children: "It doesn't just go without saying." The parental groups act in the same social field; comparisons are made to see what "we" and "they" get. The rhetoric is formulated to convey a general criticism of the socio-political situation, appealing to the rights of the collective of *hard-of-hearing*; a criticism voiced within a context meant to integrate a collective of sign-language users.

### **Comparisons Across Time**

Parents who have "been around a while" and adopted the sign language approach sometimes talk about younger parents with a tone of bitterness, a form of what Scheler (1992) termed resentment. In this case, their own efforts are compared to those of people who "are handed everything." There is a particular duplicity in the arguments of parents advocating for the Deaf Culture perspective. On the one hand, socio-political improvements are emphasized – "we've come a long way" – implying a criticism of the previous situation. On the other hand, their own parental morals are expressed through the sacrifices they themselves have made. In other words, the previously criticized situation is utilized, "We didn't get any allowances, but we gave it our all anyway."

Resentment arises from this duplicity. One cannot criticize today's opportunities; they are the result of what one strived for, the aim of the struggle in the past. Instead, one's own sacrifices are viewed in relation to described attitudes or behavior of others. This tendency can be illustrated in the below conversation about a new system of publicly-financed sign language courses. The interviewee reveals moral indignation towards those he claims attend classes only when they are free of charge, whereas, classes subject to a fee were previously difficult to arrange as too few attended them. This tendency is seen in relation to one's own struggles to learn sign language:

Father: And then suddenly, I mean we've gone for classes.... and paid 20,000 kronor [about \$2,500] in fees and... we've.... scrimped and saved, our care allowances and all. And nobody else has attended.... But now that it's free all of a sudden. It's been impossible to arrange [sign language classes in the past]: "We can't take our vacation time," [but] now all of a sudden, all the parents go.

Interviewer: Because it's free?

Father: Yes, you make money on it. You earn more going to the training than staying home.

Descriptions of personal sacrifices can also entail efforts one has made on the part of others. Some parents claim to devote considerable time to planning association activities, arranging classes, participating in school activities, and so forth. Others, they state, cannot manage to drag themselves to such events. One father tells a story of how he has tried to get members to attend lectures he has arranged, "their response was to complain about the fee!"

## ***Resisting Deaf Culture Demands***

Another aspect of parental morals is honed in relation to activists' claims and criticism. Arguments are formed as Bahktinian dialogue in response to Deaf Culture discourse (Jacobsson 2000). For example, in response to the ideological stance favoring separatism, a formulation of normality different from that indicated above is used. In the interviews, parents related how they have essentially adopted the correct approach; they request more instruction in sign language and plan to place their child in a school for deaf children. However, they are not prepared to "adopt the Deaf Culture a hundred percent." The parents say they cannot give it their all when "four of five of us are hearing." One descriptive marking is that one "lives in the regular world." This way of reasoning keeps the parental morals intact, or may even be thought of as superior; you have to care for all of your children, deaf or not. Other parents display parental morals by contrasting descriptions, suggesting a broader supply of future opportunities for the deaf child, in order to illustrate the positive values of one's own approach, "We who choose cochlear implants give the children an alternative that Deaf activists deny them." Still other parents clearly formulate their distance to the well-integrated, active Deaf world. Illustrative stories or linguistic turns are used to picture the Deaf activists as unreasonably demanding. One socio-political proposal for a one year-long parent training class in which the entire family would move to a boarding-school was characterized, for instance, as "internment."<sup>47</sup> One mother wonders, "What siblings would want to leave their friends to live in a sign language Gulag?" Such statements paint a picture of the unreasonable, that which is a far cry from all things commonsensical.

Not all parents' statements were so directly oppositional. The parents adopt a framework in which they show that they have accepted the suggestions, but also that they cannot always follow them. This is a form of "accepting counter-rhetoric" (Ibarra and Kitsuse 1993). Criticism is not only aired behind closed doors. In this local culture, much is stated publicly or simply leaks out; as mentioned, it is a small world. Knowledge of others is the ammunition of criticism, but it also provides opportunities for framing counter-arguments.

## **Concluding Remarks**

Comparison situations between people are ever present, but they may be more or less marked or dense, more or less mutually visible, and more or less intensely moralized. The object of this study, the "Deaf world," concerns a crystallized form of "comparison situations." Such situations were established when the Swedish Deaf movement was successful in its "separatist ideology", encouraging specific sign-language milieus for deaf and hard-of-hearing people. Parents in this study lived in a<sup>48</sup> deaf center providing daycare, pre-schools and schools where sign language was used. This "separatism" constituted a context of intense integration among parents of deaf and hard-of-hearing children. Parents are integrated in neighborhoods, in language classes, through day-care and school meetings, and their integration concerns a highly moralized subject in today's society: our children. All in all, this situation invites and fosters various examinations of what is considered good or bad

---

<sup>47</sup> This proposal did not come from an individual sign language supporter but was presented in a publication from the Swedish Ministry of Education and Cultural Affairs (SOU 1996) entitled "Sign Language Education for Parents" (our translation).

parenting. The integration of parents creates a situation perfect for the drawing of comparisons, creating renewed separatist distinctions, based on sign language competition and socio-political resentment. Thus, the situation provided an opportunity to express belonging as well as dissociation.

One explanation for the intensity of these critical examinations is that the Deaf world is so small, thereby inviting such examinations. The more ties between people, the more intense the conflicts (Simmel 1971: 70-95). Everyone knows everyone, or at least is acquainted with everyone, in this world. Moreover, these acquaintances are not merely short-term or tied to just one aspect of life. The parents meet in several contexts and have to deal with multi-stranded relationships (Gluckman 1955: 18ff). These strands take the form of common experiences, memories, and gossip to be exchanged, agreed upon, or fought about. Comparisons and critical examination of others are, as argued here, inevitable and, as such, of a general interactionist theme. Separation creates a specific and more dense integration, which in turn creates renewed separatist tendencies. Studying the content and details of separating distinctions in any given field makes the particular morality that is bred, fed, and elaborated obvious.

## References

- Akerström, Malin; Katarina Eriksson and Birgitta Höglund (1995) *Dövvärlden i förändring* [A Changing World of the Deaf]. Department of Sociology, Lund University: Research Program in Medical Sociology.
- Berbrier, Mitch (1998) "Being Deaf has very little to do with one's ears': Boundary-Work in the Deaf Culture Movement." Pp. 70-100 in *Perspectives on Social Problems vol. 10*, edited by J. Holstein och G. Miller. London: JAI Press.
- (2002) "Making minorities: Cultural Space, Stigma Transformation Frames, and the Categorical Status Claims of Deaf, Gay and White Supremacist Activists in Late Twentieth Century America." *Sociological Forum* 17(4): 553-591
- Cain, Carole (1991) "Personal stories: Identity Acquisition and Self-Understanding in Alcoholic Anonymous." *Ethos* 19: 210-253.
- Cohen, Albert K. (1955) *Delinquent Boys*. New York: Free Press.
- Corker, Mairan (1993) "Integration and deaf people: the policy and power of enabling environments." Pp 145-154 in *Disabling Barriers - Enabling Environments*, edited by J. Swain, V. Finkelstein, S. French and M. Oliver. London: Sage.
- Davis, Lennard (1995) *Enforcing Normalcy. Disability, deafness and the body*. London: Verso.
- DeVault, Marjorie L. (1991) *Feeding the Family. The Social Organization of Caring as Gendered Work*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Engel, David (1993) "Origin Myths: Narratives of Authority, Resistance, Disability, and Law." *Law & Society Review*, 27: 785-826.
- Flynn.R.J. & K.E. Nitsch, eds. (1980) *Normalization, Social Integration and Community Services*. Baltimore, MD. University Park Press.
- Gluckman, Max (1955) *The Judicial Process: Among the Barotse of Northern Rhodesia*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

- Gubrium, Jaber F. and James A. Holstein (2002) "From the individual interview to the interview society." Pp. 3-32 in *Handbook of Interview Research*, edited by J. F. Gubrium and J. A. Holstein. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Gustavsson, Anders and Mårten Söder (1993) *Normalization and then ...? Stockholm College of Health and Caring Sciences*. Stockholm: FoU rapport nr 3.
- Hunt, Scott and Kimberly Miller (1997) "The Discourse of Dress and Appearance: Identity Talk and a Rhetoric of Review." *Symbolic Interaction* 20(1): 69-82.
- Ibarra, Peter and John Kitsuse (1993) "Vernacular Constituents of Moral discourse: An Interactionist Proposal for the Study of Social Problems." Pp. 21-53 in *Constructionist Controversies*, edited by G. Miller and J. Holstein. New York: Aldine de Gruyter.
- Jacobsson, Katarina (1999) "Conveying the Right Knowledge: Rhetorical Work With Families of the Deaf." Pp. 239-260 in *Perspectives on Social Problems*, vol 11, edited by J. A. Holstein & G. Miller. London: JAI Press.
- (2000) *Retoriska strider – konkurrerande sanningar i döv världen* [A Battle of Words – Competing Truths in the Deaf World]. Ph.D.dissertation. Lund: Palmkrons förlag.
- Jacobsson, Katarina and Åkerström, Malin (1997) "Villains, Fools and Heroes: Social Types in the Context of Swedish Deaf Education." *Disability & Society* 12: 557-571
- Jarkman, Kristina (1996) *Ett liv att leva*. [A life to live] Stockholm: Carlsson.
- Karp, David (1992) "Illness Ambiguity and the Search for Meaning: A Case Study of a Self-Help Group for Affective Disorders." *Contemporary Ethnography* 21: 139-170.
- Lane, Harlan (1984) *When the Mind Hears: a History of the Deaf*. New York: Random House.
- Lyman, Scott (1989) "Envy." Pp. 184- 209 in *In The Seven Deadly Sins: Society and Evil*. New York: General Hall.
- Maxwell, Madeline M. and Pam Kraemer (1990) "Speech and identity in the deaf narrative." *Text* 10(4): 339-363.
- Merton, Robert (1968) *Social Theory and Social Structure*. Enlarged Edition. New York: Free Press.
- Najarian, Cheryl G. (2006) *Between Worlds: Deaf Women, Work and the Intersection of Gender and Ability*. New York: Routledge.
- Noble, William (1997) "Social and material ecologies for hearing impairment." Pp. 92-10 in *Material Discourses of Health and Illness* edited by Lucy Yardley. London: Routledge.
- Persson, Tove and David Wästerfors (2009) "Such Trivial Matters: How staff account for restrictions of residents' influence in nursing homes." *Journal of Aging Studies*. 23(1): 1-11.
- Sacks, Oliver (1989) *Seeing Voices - A Journey into the World of the Deaf*. London: Pan Books.
- Scheler, Max (1992) *On Feeling, Knowing, and Valuing* edited by H. Bershady. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

- Sellerberg, Ann-Mari (1993) *Handikapp och organisering*. [Disability and Organizing] Research program in medical sociology 1993:7. Lund: Sociologiska institutionen, Lunds universitet.
- (1994). *A Blend of Contradictions. Georg Simmel in Theory and Practice*. New Jersey: Transaction Publishers.
- Simmel, Georg (1964) *The Sociology of Georg Simmel* edited by Kurt H. Wolff. New York: Free Press.
- (1971) *On Individuality and Social Forms* edited by D. Levine. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Snow, David A. and Leon Anderson (1987) "Identity Work among the Homeless: The Verbal Construction and Avowal of Personal Identities." *American Journal of Sociology* 92(6): 1336-1371.
- Socialstyrelsen (2001) *Uppföljning av landstingens tolktjänstverksamhet för barndomsdöva, dövblinda, vuxendöva och hörselskadade år 2000*. [The county councils' interpreter services for deaf and hard-of-hearing people: year 2000] Stockholm: National Board of Health and Welfare.
- SOU (1991) *En väg till delaktighet och inflytande* [Toward participation and involvement] No. 97. Stockholm: 46 Governmental Official Reports.
- (1996) *TUFF – teckenspråksutbildning för föräldrar* [Sign Language Education for Parents] No. 102. Stockholm: Governmental Official Reports.
- Säwe, Filippa (1999) *Samförstånd och konflikt*. [Collaboration and Conflict] Licentiate's Dissertation 1999:3. Lund: Department of sociology.
- (2004) *Att tala med, mot och förbi varandra*. [Speaking with, against and at cross purposes] PhD dissertation. Lund: Department of sociology.
- Zelizer, Viviana (1985) *Pricing the Priceless Child: The Changing Social Value of Children*. New York: Basic Books.
- Wästerfors, David (2008) "Doing Normalcy: Attractive Interactions for Teenage Boys with Disabilities." *International Journal of Sociological Research* 1(1):1-21.

## Citation

- Åkerström, Malin and Katarina Jacobsson (2009) "Expressing and Examining Morality in Everyday Life: Social Comparisons among Swedish Parents of Deaf Children." *Qualitative Sociology Review*, Vol. V Issue 2. Retrieved Month, Year ([http://www.qualitativesociologyreview.org/ENG/archive\\_eng.php](http://www.qualitativesociologyreview.org/ENG/archive_eng.php))