

## Why deaf identity matters

Deaf people have long protested against a disability view of deafness as an impairment that should be cured, and argued for Deaf culture as a unique culture and for sign languages as unique languages. Parallel to the development of minority ethnic identifications following recognition and experience of oppression, four identity types have been researched: deaf identity (signifying identification as Deaf and perception of deafness as a distinct culture), hearing identity (signifying identification with the hearing culture and perception of deafness as a disability), bicultural identity (signifying a cross-cultural identity and identification with both the hearing and Deaf cultures), and marginal identity (signifying a lack of identification with both the hearing and Deaf cultures).

In this study the issue of deaf identity and its significance for self-concept and well-being was analyzed by use of data from a national survey of Danish deaf adults. The study found that identity was significant for psychological well-being. Specifically, marginal identity was associated with significantly lower levels of well-being than the other groups. These levels signified poor psychological well-being overall. There were no significant differences between the other three identity groups, which all reported good levels of psychological well-being overall.

The social groups to which we belong are of central importance to our self-concept and social behavior. This is the seemingly simple but originally groundbreaking contention of social identity theory (SIT) developed by Henri Tajfel and John Turner in the 1970s. SIT put issues of identity, emotional attachment to groups and the symbolic resources of group membership at the heart of our understanding of social and intergroup behavior. Scholars have used SIT productively ever since to explore not only intergroup biases but also how threatened or minority social identities (for example, gender and minority ethnic identities) use various strategies to respond to threat. Few, however, have turned their attention to the dynamics of deaf social identity (and other disability identities) despite the importance of supporting identity development among deaf children and adolescents.

SIT furthers understanding of how minority or threatened identities engage different strategies to achieve positive social identity. One of the strategies advanced is social creativity, which encompasses processes of positively representing group identity in order to achieve “positive distinctiveness”. In terms of Deaf identity, which this study found to be associated with positive well-being despite reporting of relatively high levels of discrimination, these processes are recognizable in the accentuation of the positive uniqueness of Deaf culture and sign language. The study’s finding of low psychological well-being for those with a marginal identity is also in line with this account. Identifying with neither the deaf nor hearing culture, those with a marginal identity do not have a strategy to achieve positive identity. SIT can also help explain the findings for hearing and bicultural identity, which were both associated with good levels of psychological well-being. An alternative strategy that SIT posits for threatened identity is social mobility, involving individual dissociation from the threatened group and membership of a higher-status or majority group. Positive identification as hearing (and dissociation from deaf identity) is possible for some deaf

individuals. Identifying as bicultural may have elements of both strategies of social mobility and social creativity. It can be conjectured that a bicultural identity helps achieve positive distinctiveness through the construction of a fluid cross-cultural identity that is socially mobile and secures protection from threat on the basis of a singular identification.

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