Deaf Identity Movements in Japan
Disability Discourse and the Politics of Identity

Research Objective

The past ten years have witnessed a tremendous boom in the visibility of the deaf in Japan and an efflorescence of what is being labelled “Deaf culture” (defu kâručâ or rôbunkâ). For example, the state television network NHK has begun broadcasting a Japanese Sign Language (JSL) interpreted news hour, and two romantic mini-series catapulted Deaf awareness into the hearts and homes of millions of hearing Japanese. Housewives are joining JSL clubs in large numbers and becoming volunteer interpreters for the deaf while a mainstream “intellectual” journal devoted an entire issue (410 pages) to “Deaf culture.” Within the deaf community itself, an activist group called D-Pro has been promoting what it calls a “cultural Deaf” position, one that at face value looks as if it has been derived almost wholly from American Deaf identity politics. Even the relatively conservative Japanese Federation of the Deaf has taken up the issue of “Deaf Culture”, making it one of the central platforms of their 1996 Annual Board Meeting.

Such a broadly-successful, identity-based “new social movement” (Melucci 1980) appears to be unique in the history of Japan. Although there are at least three significant minority groups, the Ainu, Burakumin, and Koreans, they have largely been unable to elicit a positive cultural attitude towards themselves from the mainstream, and their effect has been local at best. For example, there is no extant notion of a “Burakumin culture”, no emergent Korean-Japanese culture is discussed in the mainstream press, and Ainu culture (while still alive) is safely encased behind museum glass in the popular consciousness. Other new social movements such as environmentalism, feminism, and the gay rights movement have also struggled to have more than a local impact. In contrast, the cultural Deaf movement in Japan appears to have succeeded in raising the issue of “Deaf culture,” in promoting Japanese Sign Language as a distinctive language form, and, most importantly, in attaining significant civil rights and social acceptance over the past ten years.

Anthropology has been a late-comer to the question of identity, instead focusing more on the question of culture. Yet I believe that anthropology can bring in its traditional concerns with culture, history, social change, and power into discussions on identity and politics. Individual identity is embedded within a lattice of social, historical, institutional, and biomedical forces. Although there is a clear physical basis to deafness caused by various physical and epidemiological factors, being “Deaf” or maintaining that identity is a cultural performance (Butler 1993; Morris 1995) and practice (Bourdieu 1972). Although it is tempting to move unilinearly from the physical to the social (audiological deafness to culturally Deaf), analyses must be more dialectical than simply causative because social forms, material conditions, and cultural practice are intimately interlinked. In order to understand deaf social and political movements in Japan, a close ethnographic approach to culture and identity must be infused with a consideration of social, historical, institutional, and economic
factors. In my research, I would like to show how historical, social, economic, and political forces have created the concept of a Deaf identity or identities and how deaf people themselves come to understand themselves as Deaf.

**Theoretical Significance**

The blooming of identities has also brought about contestation over the meaning of “deafness.” This dissertation project looks at the construction, maintenance, and contestation of these deaf identities by close ethnographic exploration of deaf lives. The biomedical category of “hearing impairment” is a spectrum of cultural identifications (Deaf, hard of hearing, and hearing impaired) that has little to do with the degree of hearing loss itself. Deafness differs from ethnic identity in that one’s parents are rarely Deaf themselves, and the process of enculturation within schooling and biomedical systems strongly determines one’s later identity. In Japan, there is an active struggle over who is Deaf, the existence of “Deaf culture,” and a “pure Japanese Sign Language.” We can read this search for purity against a similar concern in mainstream (hearing) Japan for the location of the traditional (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983; Ivy 1988), native (Robertson 1991), or a sense of nostalgia for the past (Kelly 1986), and we can similarly politicize it as a form of cultural legitimation and the interplay of power and history.

The concept of “Deaf culture” itself remains underspecified and carries disparate implicit references: from ethnic minority to simply not being able to hear the doorbell. Members of D-Pro openly espouse an American Deaf identify (defu aidentiti), call themselves defu or “D” (using the capitalized roman letter), and have been suggesting that only those who have signed from childhood are really Deaf. This has caused a stir among the members of the Japanese Federation of the Deaf who identify as the older category of rōa or rōasha (loosely: deaf-mute) and many of whom lipread and speak. Amidst this clash, the growing population of those who consider themselves as “hard of hearing” (nanchōsha) have begun to coalesce into their own political and social force.

**Research Plan**

The ethnographic fieldwork portion of my dissertation will be conducted over a period of twelve to fifteen months in Japan, focusing mainly in the Tokyo metropolitan area with excursions to Kyoto/Osaka and other regions as funds allow. The central component of my project is understanding the process by which my informants construct and view their identity as Deaf and how such constructions are articulated in political and social arenas. A significant portion of the data will be in the form of autobiographical life histories. I will focus on several key groups: the leadership and members of D-Pro and the Japanese Federation of the Deaf; the leadership and members in the Japanese Association
of Hard of Hearing and Late-Deafened; and the students, faculty and parents at a school for the deaf. I will conduct participant-observation research of the various deaf groups teamed with focused interviews in individual and group settings. I am especially interested in the process by which people who previously identified as “hard of hearing” come to see themselves as “Deaf” — a phenomena jokingly labelled as the “U-Turn Deaf” (turning back to the Deaf world) or “Deaf Shock” (the shock of realization that one is indeed, Deaf).

The archival component of my research will take me to state and organizational archives in the Tokyo and Kyoto area. Much of the post-War demographic and epidemiological information concerning deaf individuals is readily available from the Ministry of Health and Social Welfare. I will also be looking at the institutional archives of the Japanese Federation of the Deaf; D-Pro; and other organizations.

This research will also analyze the broader social and historical context of the deaf movement. Many gains earned by deaf individuals in Japan may be less due to the political use of cultural/ethnic models of identity, and more to general populace’s anxiety concerning the “aging of Japan” (kôreika) and the growing question of the role of social welfare in a geriatric state. State policies towards the deaf and other handicapped groups in Japan often appear to be motivated by desires to act like a “modern” or “first world” nation. Significant social policy has occurred during three main periods in modern social history: Meiji restoration, post-War period, and Japan’s emergence as a major economic force and foreign aid donor nation. This project will seek to tie global processes and the local policy changes they effect with processes of individual identification and social strategies of protest.
Bibliography
Brand, David 1988 This is the Selma of the deaf: Gallaudet students demonstrate for a deaf college president. *Time*, March 21, 64.
Kelly, William W. 1986 Rationalization and nostalgia: cultural dynamics of


Padden, Carol and Tom Humphries 1988 Deaf in America: voices from a culture. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.


Woolard, Kathryn A.

Woolard, Kathryn A. and Bambi B. Schieffelin