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**Sounding out d/Deafness: The experiences of d/Deaf prisoners**

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# Sounding out d/Deafness: The experiences of d/Deaf prisoners

## Structured Abstract

**Purpose:** The purpose of this paper is to provide an insight into the lived realities of d/Deaf prisoners in England and Wales, and to explore previous claims that they suffer disproportionately during their time in custody.

**Design/Methodology/Approach:** For the purposes of this study a qualitative approach was taken. As part of this, 28 semi-structured interviews were carried out at seven adult male prisons in England with a sample of male hard of hearing/d/Deaf prisoners, and staff members who had worked with them. The interviews were recorded using a Dictaphone, and then transcribed as close to verbatim as possible. From this the transcriptions were analysed using thematic analysis. In addition to interviews, observations were made at each establishment, and later recorded in a fieldwork journal.

**Findings:** Findings from the study showed that the way a d/Deaf person experiences prison depends strongly on the way in which they identify with their d/Deafness. However, it was also shown that there is little room for either deafness or Deafness in prison, with severely deaf and culturally and linguistically Deaf prisoners commonly experiencing the pains of imprisonment more severely than their hearing peers as a result the Prison Service's inability to accommodate such difference.

**Originality/Value:** This study fused together the fields of Deaf Studies and prison studies in a way that had not been done before, considering d/Deafness in prison on both an audiological and cultural level. Moreover, excluding small-scale unpublished undergraduate dissertations, it was the first empirical study about d/Deaf prisoners in England and Wales to carry out face-to-face interviews with these prisoners. Finally, as the most in-depth research yet to be carried out about these particular prisoners in England and Wales, a greater level of insight was provided than previously available.

The majority of existing prison research has been focused on the type of prisoner that prison was initially designed for and continues primarily to contain; the young able bodied lower class male (Cheney, 2005). However, increasing attention is now being given to individuals who do not fit this mould, including female, older and foreign national prisoners (see, for example, Scott and Codd, 2010, Philips, 2012, Moore and Scraton, 2013, Mann, 2016). As a result of this, it has become apparent that these prisoners experience prison differently and often feel the pains of imprisonment more intensely than their peers, despite being theoretically protected by the Equality Act 2010 which places a legal duty on public bodies such as the Prison Service to exercise their functions in a way that is designed to reduce inequality. Although the experiences of certain minority groups in prison have already been examined at length, meaningful consideration is rarely given to the lived realities of prisoners who are hard of hearing (HoH) or d/Deaf. This article focuses on the experiences of these prisoners, using findings from doctoral research which examined the topic of d/Deafness in prison.

The use of 'd/D' is important here, as while many hearing people view those who are d/Deaf as simply having the misfortune to live in a world without sound (Lane et al, 1996, Ladd, 2003), d/Deafness is in fact much more complex than this. The extent to which a person is d/Deaf varies significantly from those whose hearing is only slightly impaired, to individuals who are severely deaf, and finally to those who are profoundly and culturally Deaf. Although there are different ways of categorising these levels of d/Deafness, in this context HoH refers to individuals with mild to moderate hearing loss who may have difficulty following speech without the use of hearing aids. Severely deaf refers to those with little or no functional hearing, who usually need to rely on lip reading even with hearing aids, and Deaf to individuals who identify as being culturally and linguistically Deaf, and commonly use British Sign Language (BSL) to communicate. The lives of those who are d/Deaf have been studied at length within the academic discipline of Deaf Studies, where individuals who identify as being *deaf* are commonly shown to view their deafness negatively and to feel stigmatised by it (Higgins, 1980), and where *Deaf* people are seen as being part of a distinct group known as the Deaf Community which is comprised of people who are proud to be Deaf and share the same language, values and life experiences (Baker and Padden, 1978, Higgins, 2002).

Individuals who are culturally and linguistically Deaf often spend their childhoods being isolated, stigmatised and confused, existing as part of hearing families and commonly attending mainstream schools (Ladd, 1991). These experiences can contribute to a sense of resentment towards the hearing world once they become aware of the existence of a Deaf culture; a culture within which they are often able to feel 'normal' for the first time (Lane et al, 1996). Exposure to Deaf life reveals to individuals that it is possible to live full lives without sound, and introduces them to visual and tactile ways of behaving, including using touch to express warmth and friendliness, and for getting people's attention (Leigh, 2009). At this point, individuals also commonly become aware of the availability of specialised equipment that can help them to live without sound during their day to day lives, such as vibrating alarm clocks, flashing fire alarms, and minicoms (McCulloch, 2010).

While scholars in the field of Deaf studies have examined the experiences of d/Deaf people in a variety of hearing oriented settings such as the workplace and schools, they have yet to meaningfully consider their lives in prison. However, a small amount of empirical academic literature about d/Deaf prisoners in England and Wales has been published outside of the realm of Deaf studies (Ackerman, 1998, Gahir et al, 2011, McCulloch, 2012). This research, in addition to findings from other source types such as unpublished dissertations, charity documents, inspection reports and individual case studies, indicates that prisons are ill-equipped to meet the needs of d/Deaf people in prison, with communication barriers, inadequate provision of BSL interpreters or specialist equipment, and a lack of d/Deaf awareness being highlighted as key reasons for this (Fisken, 1994,

Royal National Institute for the Deaf, 1995, Ackerman, 1998, Gibbs and Ackerman, 1998, Young et al, 2000, Gerrard, 2001, Izycky and Gahir, 2007, McCulloch, 2010, Gahir et al, 2011). In a report carried out on behalf of the Howard League for Penal Reform based on findings from his Masters dissertation, McCulloch (2012) concluded that as a result of the aforementioned issues, the treatment of d/Deaf people in prisons throughout England and Wales equates to a violation of the Equality Act 2010. As part of this, he asserted that the Prison Service was violating its legal requirement to make reasonable adjustments to ensure that those with a protected characteristic such as d/Deafness are not discriminated against.

Existing literature indicates that an inability to meet the needs of d/Deaf people on the part of the Prison Service, causes them to experience disproportionate punishment during their time in custody, with their lives in prison being shown to become characterised by confusion, isolation and anxiety (Fisken, 1994, Ackerman, 1998, Rickford and Edgar, 2005, Churchill, 2008, McCulloch, 2010, 2012). In their review of existing literature relating to Deaf people with mental health needs in the criminal justice system, Young et al (2000) argued that the issues faced by Deaf prisoners can contribute to them being disproportionately at risk of developing mental health problems in prison. This is built on by Izycky and Gahir (2007) who, in their case study of a Deaf person who had previously been in prison, found that the individual in question reported self-harming and feeling depressed and paranoid because he was not able to communicate meaningfully during his time there, due to a lack of BSL interpreters or staff awareness.

Despite providing an indication of the position of d/Deaf prisoners within the prison world, existing literature in this area is limited for a number of reasons. Firstly, the majority of sources were published/written before the introduction of the Equality Act 2010, which suggests they do not necessarily paint an accurate picture of the lived realities of d/Deaf prisoners who are currently incarcerated in prisons across England and Wales. Secondly, much of the literature in question is either anecdotal and story-like (see O'Rourke and Reed, 2007 for discussions on this), or based on extremely small samples of either one or two d/Deaf people; both of which inhibit generalisability (this latter point applies to Fisken, 1994, Ackerman, 1998, Izycky and Gahir, 2007, Churchill 2008). It is important to acknowledge that this second limitation is not as applicable to McCulloch's (2010, 2012) study, as he incorporates findings from a larger sample. However, as a consequence of access issues and time constraints, he collected his data by writing letters to d/Deaf prisoners as opposed to carrying out interviews or observation, which could have impeded the richness of the data (Ibid).

Furthermore, while McCulloch (2010, 2012) provides the most comprehensive account of the problems faced by d/Deaf prisoners in the UK, throughout his study he fails to differentiate between

the experiences of prisoners who are deaf, and those who are culturally and linguistically Deaf, something which is also a flaw in a number of other studies (for example, Gahir et al, 2011). This lack of differentiation is problematic as it undermines the complexity of d/Deafness and fails to recognise the fact that the needs of prisoners who are severely deaf may indeed be very different to those who are culturally Deaf, as the former are more likely to rely on hearing aids to hear, and the latter to communicate in BSL and to need access to BSL interpreters in many everyday contexts. A final limitation of existing sources relates to the fact that they do not meaningfully engage with literature about the experiences of prisoners more broadly (for example, Sykes, 1958), and consequently fail to provide any meaningful context as to how the d/Deaf prisoner experience does/does not differ from that of other prisoners.

With the aforementioned limitations in mind, this research was carried out using a qualitative research approach, using semi-structured interviews with HoH/d/Deaf prisoners and staff members who had worked with them as the primary method of data collection. This approach was deemed as most appropriate given the fact that so little empirical research has been carried out with this particular group; thus making an in-depth exploratory approach necessary (Mason, 2002). In doing this, the research was able to provide a more detailed and rigorous study of the lives of d/Deaf people in prisons in England and Wales than was already available.

In order to expand on existing knowledge, a key aim of the research was to meaningfully consider the role of 'imported' identity in prison and to examine the experiences of *deaf* and *Deaf* prisoners separately, thus grounding the findings in the field of Deaf studies. As well applying ideas from Deaf studies, the research also aimed to compare the experiences of d/Deaf prisoners to those of other prisoners by using existing prison studies as an experiential baseline from which to ground the lives of those who are d/Deaf. The final aim of the research was to further explore existing claims that d/Deaf prisoners suffer disproportionately in prison, giving particular focus to McCulloch's (2012) claim that the Prison Service is failing to adhere to the legal duty imposed by the Equality Act 2010 in this particular context.

## Method

### *Sample*

A purposive sampling frame was adopted during the research, which is defined as "A form of non-probability sample in which the researcher aims to sample cases/participants in a strategic way, so that those sampled are relevant to the research questions that are being posed" (Bryman, 2012: 714). This approach was deemed as being the most appropriate because it allowed the researcher to

remain focused upon the lynch pin of the research; d/Deaf prisoners. The suitability of this sampling frame in the context of this research is backed up by Richie et al (2003: 79) who argue that a purposive sampling frame ought to be used when carrying out studies that are small scale and in-depth because it allows for the detailed investigation of a particular social phenomenon.

The process of locating a sample was extremely difficult, and fraught with challenges, as there is currently no statutory requirement for prisons to record d/Deaf prisoner numbers in England and Wales. Without such information it was difficult to locate appropriate research participants. In order to overcome this, letters requesting information about d/Deaf prisoner numbers were sent to the governor of every establishment in England and Wales. Around 70 establishments responded to the request for information, however, many did not know how many d/Deaf people were confined there, and of the establishments that were able to provide figures, most were unclear about how d/Deaf individuals were. After extensive communication with a number of establishments over a period of months, the researcher was able to locate appropriate research participants and to successfully negotiate access. The final sample was made up of 27 participants, which included seven culturally and linguistically Deaf prisoners, five severely deaf prisoners, five HoH prisoners, and ten staff members who had experience of working with such prisoners. Participants were located within seven male prisons across England, five of which were Category B security prisons and two being Category C.

*Data collection*

In a similar vein to many other prison studies (see, for example Jewkes, 2002, Scott, 2006, Phillips, 2012), the research took a qualitative line of enquiry, with the majority of the data being collected via the use of face to face semi-structured interviews, 27 of which were carried out on an individual basis, and one as a group. The group interview involved four Deaf prisoners from HMP Bowdon<sup>1</sup>, each who had also been interviewed individually. All interviews were recorded using a Dictaphone<sup>2</sup>, and in instances where a participant's first language was BSL, a BSL interpreter was present who had been briefed about the research and the remit of their role. Two interpreters were used during the research process, both of whom were fully qualified and registered with the *National Registers of Communication Professionals working with Deaf and Deafblind People* (NRCPD).

Two interview schedules were used in the interviews; one for staff members and one for prisoners. First of all, prisoners were asked about their d/Deafness, including when they became HoH/d/Deaf

<sup>1</sup> The names of all the establishments included in the study were changed for the purposes of confidentiality and anonymity.

<sup>2</sup> In the context of the interviews with Deaf prisoners a visual recording device would have been preferable. However, none of the establishments included in the research were willing to allow the researcher to bring in a video recorder.

and what their life had been like prior to entering prison. This allowed the researcher to gain an understanding of the way they identified with their d/Deafness, something which was central to the research. They were then asked about their experiences in prison. This included questions relating to their relationships with others, their day to day routine and their access to resources, all being topics which featured prominently in existing literature. In terms of staff members, interviews were split into two main sections, the first of which was devoted to discussing their job role and their experience of working in prison. This was important as staff members have been shown to have a profound impact on the way that prisoners experience prison (Crawley, 2004, Liebling, 2011), and therefore in order to understand why HoH/d/Deaf prisoners experience prison the way they do it was vital to consider the position and beliefs of the staff members they were surrounded by. The second part of the staff member interview schedule was focused around their experience of working with, and their views about d/Deaf prisoners. This was beneficial, as on numerous occasions the data these questions generated reinforced the data collected from the prisoners, thus strengthening the validity of the research.

The other research method utilised when collecting the data was observation. Throughout the fieldwork process, the researcher carefully observed the environment of each prison establishment, and the interactions that took place in her presence. Using observation to supplement interviews enhanced the quality of the research in that it helped the researcher to gain a richer understanding about prison life (for similar findings, see also Scott, 2006, Crewe, 2009). In order to keep track of these observations a journal was kept throughout the duration of the fieldwork process, which provided a detailed account of the researcher's time at each prison, including details about sights, sounds, interactions and relationships.

#### *Data Analysis*

The data collected from the interviews was transcribed as close to verbatim as possible, with all establishment/individual names being anonymised in the process. From this the transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis, as defined by Braun and Clarke (2006). As part of this, the researcher read through each transcript and highlighted the relevant material, briefly commented on it, and used the comments to create descriptive codes. The codes that shared a common meaning were then grouped together, and then overarching themes in the data were identified (King and Horrocks, 2010).

#### *Ethics*

In the context of this research, confidentiality, anonymity, sensitivity and the welfare of participants were all important ethical considerations. Ethical approval to carry out the research was obtained from the National Offender Management Service (NOMS) in October 2014, and the University of Central Lancashire in November 2014. All relevant ethical guidelines were followed during the research process, and all participants gave informed consent to be interviewed.

**Results**

After subjecting the interview transcripts to thematic analysis, a number of overarching themes and sub-themes emerged. Main themes included; the prison environment, difference, identity, sound, resources, pain and isolation. The richness of the data made it possible to draw out similarities between the experiences of HoH/d/Deaf prisoners, and prisoners more broadly, as well as highlighting instances of experiential difference and disproportionate ‘pain’ felt by this specific section of the prisoner population. During the analysis it became apparent that the extent of this difference/extra pain varied based on the level to which an individual was d/Deaf. With this in mind, the findings from this research will now be presented in a way that highlights these differences. The role of difference in prison will be discussed first of all. This arose as a clear theme in the data collected from prisoners and staff members, with all participants discussing the way that the Prison Service responds to prisoners who do not necessarily fit the mould of ‘normal’ or ‘usual’ in the prison setting. This sets the scene for discussions about the specific difference of d/Deafness in prison, with findings then being presented from HoH/deaf and then Deaf prisoners respectively about their experiences in prison. As part of this, consideration will be given to themes such as identity, sound, communication and resources here. Splitting the findings based on how participants identified with their d/Deafness is important as it highlights the extent of the influence of ‘imported’ identity in this context.

*Difference in prison*

When discussing prisoners who are 'different', reference is being made to individuals for whom prison was not necessarily originally designed to contain, which, according to Cheney (2005) includes all those who deviate from the stereotype of a young, able-bodied, man. The fact that the prison population actually represents a diverse cross section of the wider population (Leech, 2014) means that many prisoners do not fit this mould. However, findings from the interview data and the researcher’s observations indicated that despite such difference, “batch living” (Goffman, 1961: 22) was an expectation in all of the prisons included in the research, with prisoners commonly being expected to be able to automatically adjust to the regime and the requirements

of their prisoner role. This is highlighted below by one staff member who was discussing issues relating to the interpretation of equality:

Even the other day we had a bit of a workshop about people being treated decently, and one of the things that came out of that was about people being treated consistently. But what people here don't understand is that in order for people to have equality and equal access, they sometimes need different things. I think they would [react negatively to treating prisoners differently] mainly because it is easier for them to enforce rules when it is a rule for everybody

Furthermore, while most of the staff members interviewed were eager to provide assurance that the issue of equality was at the forefront of prison procedure and practice, it became clear that in reality there were a number of practical obstacles preventing this from being the case. These obstacles included a lack of resources and funding, a lack of awareness about the needs of minority group prisoners, and a lack of staff time to ensure that adjustments are made. Staff members advised that such issues were particularly prominent in a climate where recent benchmarking and staff cuts (NOMS, 2014) have made prisoners who are 'different' even less of a funding priority, as shown here:

It is hard to fight for things if you don't actually have it. For example, if I was to say that we need more translators and more BSL trained staff, they would be like 'Okay how many d/Deaf people have you got in who sign?', and if I was like 'None', they would think that we didn't really need it. It is very much about budget these days unfortunately, so it is hard for me to fight that corner until there is someone who is d/Deaf.

Findings from the interviews with both staff members and prisoners mapped on to other literature about minority groups in prison (see, for example Scott and Codd, 2010, Moore and Scraton, 2013, Mann, 2016), showing that in consequence of the aforementioned issues, prisoners who are 'different' often become institutionally deficient despite the legal stipulations of the Equality Act 2010. This inevitably had an impact upon the experiences of the HoH/d/Deaf prisoners included in the research, as will be discussed shortly.

Consideration will now briefly be given to the way that the specific 'difference' of d/Deafness is viewed within the prison system. This is important as findings from the data showed that institutional understandings about d/Deafness had a significant impact on the lived realities of a number of the prisoners included in the research. While some of the staff members interviewed were Deaf aware to a certain extent, the data indicated that prison officials commonly present views

which sit in line with the predominant societal interpretation of deafness as being an impairment that has a negative influence on an individual's life (Lane et al, 1996, Moore and Levitan, 1998, Ladd, 2003). This is illustrated by one staff member who stated that "They are no different to anybody else, they just have the misfortune to not hear" and another who said:

Some days, if he was on his own I would take him over to see some of the other elderly prisoners; we've got a few disabled prisoners, and I would ask them to sit and have a chat with him. And they were really good with him, they would talk to him, engage him in their conversation, make him a cup of tea.

This quote signifies a deeply entrenched perception of deafness as weakness, because although the staff member appears to be implying that the Deaf prisoner was elderly, in reality he was actually in his early thirties. Such a view is further highlighted the same staff member who then went on to say:

If you were to write a list down, and if it was an animal you would put it to sleep. He has got a mental age of 13 or something like that. He has got really bad diabetes. He has got bi polar. He is deaf, and he is dumb.

It became apparent that this tendency to associate Deafness with disability was often a by-product of a lack of Deaf awareness, with many of the staff members interviewed failing to acknowledge the existence of the Deaf community, or seeing BSL as being a 'real' alternative to spoken language. This proved important given the extent of the power imbalance that exists between staff members and prisoners (Crewe, 2009), and had a dramatic impact on the Deaf prisoners as such perceptions clashed profoundly with their own. While this ideological collision also exists between the hearing and Deaf worlds more broadly (Lane et al, 1996), its dimensions were altered in prison where the Deaf prisoners were disempowered by their role, as to be discussed later.

*Little d deaf prisoners*

All of the severely deaf/HoH prisoners viewed themselves as being part of a hearing culture, and felt stigmatised by their hearing loss. To them, an ability to hear had always been a key component of their identities, and as such, with hearing loss came a sense of inferiority, and a desire to be seen as hearing wherever possible. This had a profound impact on their behaviour in prison, with all such interviewees attempting to conform to "batch living" (Goffman, 1961: 22) by behaving as though they were hearing, either by wearing hearing aids or through methods of concealment. Although this desire to be seen as 'normal' was not unique to the prison environment, it was seen by all of the

deaf/HoH prisoners as being particularly important there, where they felt that any sign of weakness made them vulnerable to bullying, thus mapping onto existing sources (for example, Sykes, 1958, Durcan, 2008, Crewe, 2009) which pose that aversion to weakness is a key feature in prison culture. This is highlighted in the below extract from one of the participants:

Participant: I don't think that it's wise to advertise the fact that you've got disabilities.

Interviewer: Why?

Participant: I am also really disabled in the fact that my shoulders dislocate, and defending myself is obviously affected by that. So I don't go around advertising the fact that 'Oh I get in to a fight and my shoulder pops out of its socket which would render me useless and someone could kick the fuck out of me'. Why would I go and display that, you can't can you?

Interviewer: What do you think would happen if you displayed the fact that you couldn't hear in one ear?

Participant: Well, I would imagine. Well people take the piss anyway, but you know, I'm a piss taking kind of guy myself so I take it all in my stride

Interviewer: Have you ever been given the option to wear a hearing aid?

Participant: No. No. Well when I was in Broadmoor, they sent me for this test thing, and they said that I could have something that went from the back of my head to there [points to ear], and I just thought that I'd rather cope with it as it is.

While this highlights the importance of the role played by imported identity in prison, it became apparent that the interviewees were, for the most part, failing to fulfil their imported desires to be seen as 'normal' hearing prisoners. On the contrary, the data showed that an inability to adapt on both an individual or institutional level meant that they were having difficulty adhering to the conditions of their role, and were subsequently becoming isolated from the "batch" (Goffman, 1961: 17). This notion of institutional inadaptability links back to the broader argument that the Prison Service is unable to accommodate the needs of prisoners who are 'different', as in line with this, prisons were shown to be largely failing to consistently provide adequate hearing aids for those who required them, or to give them access to vibrating alarm clocks, flashing fire alarms, minicomms or other such equipment, thus mapping on to findings from Her Majesty's Prison Service (1996), HMIP (2009) and McCulloch (2010, 2012)

In addition to this, it was then shown that those who were attempting to behave as ‘normal’ hearing prisoners by concealing their hearing loss were also failing due to the fact that sound is so important in the penal environment. Findings from the interviews and researcher’s observations showed that sound rules in the prison environment, with prisons being reliant on sound in order to run (for discussions on sound in prison, see also, Rice, 2016). While sound is also key in wider society (Higgins, 1980), it is even more important in prison where it is used to regulate the “batch” (Goffman, 1961: 17) of prisoners and to guide them through their daily routine. Consequently, it was shown that full participation in the prison regime automatically becomes harder without the capacity to hear fully, with individuals becoming more isolated the less they are able to hear. There were a myriad of reasons for this, including, being unable to hear what was going on during rehabilitation and treatment programmes, to hear alarms and bells, to watch television without subtitles, to speak to their families on the phone, or to hear what prisoners and staff members were saying. In relation to the final point, sound oriented communication was viewed as being a central part of prison culture by all of the deaf/HoH prisoners, with one participant stating that:

Communication is really important in manmade volatile environments. And without a hearing aid I found it hard to communicate, so I found it difficult...If I didn’t have them it would be impossible. This environment more than any other is all about communication and without my hearing aids I literally don’t think I would be able to survive.

Furthermore, in accordance with the findings of McCulloch (2010, 2012), prisoners reported that problems with communication caused issues for them with regards to their relationships with staff members, as shown in the following quote:

There is no consciousness in the mind of the officers generally about just how difficult it is...The officers shout your name loud when you are needed usually, but you can’t hear it, you can’t distinguish it from other noise, and then when the message does get to you then you get in trouble. You get a roasting for not turning up.

From this, the data indicated that as a consequence of their lack of access to sound (including speech, tannoys, bells, and alarms amongst other things), the deaf prisoners were experiencing a number of the pains of imprisonment (Sykes, 1958) both differently and more intensely their peers, and were often withdrawing from prison life as a consequence of this. This is highlighted in the below extract from an interview with a severely deaf prisoner who wanted hearing aids but did not have access to them:

Participant: I don't try to take myself away from a situation, or put myself in a situation where I'm going to have problems. I just keep away from the system; I've got no choice. It's my only way of getting on.

Interviewer: Do you think it is changing the way you feel about yourself?

Participant: Most definitely. I'm withdrawn. It's only on a one to one basis that I talk so much. Out in the public I don't interact.

Interviewer: Right okay. What about other prisoners on the wing?

Participant: I don't interact with them because when it is association, it is a load of noise, and I'm not good in a noisy situation.

Interviewer: How do they react to you then?

Participant: I don't know, because I don't stay around long enough. If I don't hear something I move on. It's pointless to try and keep a conversation with somebody if you can't hear what they are saying...

Interviewer: Okay

Participant: I'm in a double prison in a position of losing, so I just try not to get to get in that position...I don't really have relationships with other prisoners because of my condition.

### *Big D Deaf prisoners*

The experiences of the Deaf participants were much more distinct than those who were deaf/HoH, which means that in order to provide an authentic and accurate representation of their lived realities more data must be presented. Of the seven culturally and linguistically Deaf prisoners interviewed as part of the research, five were situated in one establishment (HMP Bowdon), and the remaining two were the only Deaf prisoners at their respective prisons (HMP Sale and HMP Wilmslow). All of these individuals communicated using BSL, were happy to be Deaf and utilised common Deaf behaviours such as touching and prolonged eye contact. They saw themselves as being intrinsically different to hearing people, preferring to be with other Deaf people, and viewing the hearing world with hostility and resentment as a consequence of their experiences in wider society, as highlighted here by one participant:

Hearing seem to look down at me... They think I am simple because I can't interact on their level. They think that I'm no good to them, they don't want to know. I get that all the time, that's why I walk away from them. Don't get me wrong, there are good hearing who have got time and patience to listen to me. There are good, but there are also bad.

These perceptions and behaviours had a profound impact on the way these individuals experienced prison, with all seven prisoners attempting to maintain their cultural and linguistic Deaf identities throughout their time in custody. Evidence of this was provided in the fact that they continued to communicate in BSL, to use culturally distinct Deaf behaviours, to gravitate towards other Deaf prisoners (where possible), and to view hearing people (be it prisoners or staff members) negatively. This final point is highlighted by one Deaf participant who stated that “They [hearing people] are dangerous so I don’t mix with them”, and another who said “Sometimes they want me to join in with their things and I’m like ‘No thank you’. They’ve got their ways, and their ways can be quite dangerous and I don’t want to get involved in any of that”.

Despite attempting to remain culturally and linguistically Deaf, it became clear that there was little room for such profound difference in prison. There were a number of reasons for this, the first being that as mentioned earlier, like sound, verbal communication also plays a key part in the penal regime. Therefore, in order to adapt to their designated prisoner role, Deaf prisoners also require regular provision of qualified BSL interpreters, as well as access to other prisoners/staff members who can communicate fluently in BSL. However, establishments were shown to be largely ill-equipped to adapt their regimes to accommodate Deafness, and mapping on to findings from existing literature (see, for example Gerrard, 2001, McCulloch, 2010, 2012), were not providing the prisoners with access to BSL interpreters or specialist equipment in any consistent way. While this was slightly less isolating for the prisoners at HMP Bowdon because they had other Deaf people to communicate with (at times), for the remaining two Deaf prisoners who had no one else with whom to communicate, this lack of provision led to almost total communication isolation, as shown here:

In the gym they all go round together; the Russians, the Romanians, the Latvians, the Africans, the Blacks. Everybody’s in their own little groups, and I’m just on my own in there. If there was a Deaf group I know I would be part of it, but there isn’t one so I’m on my own... Everybody else talks to each other but I don’t know what they are talking about, and it’s really difficult depending on the situation. Nobody signs, so I just keep myself to myself really. I have brief chats with people with paper and pen but it’s very brief. To get anything out, and to communicate, that would be great. It would help me sleep better.

Issues relating to Deaf awareness on the part of staff members were found to be key to this lack of provision, as without a certain level of understanding about the complexity of d/Deafness and the needs of Deaf people, prison officials failed to understand how to appropriately respond to these prisoners. While problems relating to Deaf awareness have

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2  
3 been raised in existing sources (see for example, Gerrard, 2001), by interviewing prisoners and  
4 staff members this research was able to build on what was already known. It was shown that  
5  
6 in the absence of such awareness, staff members often left Deaf prisoners to their own  
7  
8 devices, as highlighted below by one staff member, who spoke about the treatment that the  
9  
10 Deaf prisoner under her watch received while she was off sick for six weeks:

11  
12 So I came back from the sick and... in that time, again, he has been  
13 neglected. When I came back he were like a vagrant; you can't walk in  
14 his cell, you walk in and it is like horrific, the smell... It does upset me to  
15 see him just festering there. So when I came back the other day, I were  
16 like "Oh my god". He just gets left, it is like horrific, horrific.  
17  
18  
19

20 Other staff members attempted to communicate with Deaf prisoners in a variety of largely  
21 ineffective and at times inappropriate ways. Strategies for communication ranged from  
22  
23 speaking louder and writing things down (many Deaf people cannot read), to attempting to  
24  
25 use staff members with low levels of BSL comprehension as interpreters, to finally using a Deaf  
26  
27 prisoner who could sign and speak as an interpreter. This final strategy was perhaps the most  
28  
29 concerning, as it gave this prisoner an unprecedented level of power without any means of  
30  
31 monitoring the accuracy of his interpretations.

32 As HMP Bowdon was the only prison included in the research that was holding multiple Deaf  
33  
34 prisoners, it had been anticipated that the interviewees there would have had less difficulty  
35  
36 behaving as culturally and linguistically Deaf. However, it became apparent that a lack of Deaf  
37  
38 awareness on the part of staff members inhibited the maintenance of such difference. Officials  
39  
40 had little understanding about why it could have been beneficial to keep them on the same  
41  
42 wing, and often viewed Deaf behaviour such as signing and touching as being suspicious or  
43  
44 inappropriate, as shown here by one prisoner:

45  
46 One time we were signing, and we were talking about a new  
47 programme, thinking about some ideas so we could pass them on to  
48 psychology, and we were talking about it being a big jump. And we  
49 signed it like a frog jumping over a rock or something. And when people  
50 look at it, they wrote down our names and said that we were trying to  
51 escape, because they'd seen us signing this sign, and it looked like we  
52 were jumping over.  
53  
54

55 Just like the severely deaf interviewees, those who were culturally and linguistically Deaf  
56  
57 became isolated from the penal regime. However, for them, this isolation was intensified  
58  
59  
60

because their imported perceptions and characteristics deviated more profoundly from the prescribed prisoner role than those of the deaf prisoners, which meant that they became institutionally deficient on a greater level. In addition to an inability to hear, their preference for a visual language in an environment where verbal communication is central contributed to almost complete isolation from the penal regime. In line with existing literature (see, for example McCulloch, 2010) the Deaf prisoners were shown to be largely unable to partake in education, training or rehabilitative programmes, to access medical assistance or legal aid with an interpreter, or to gain a meaningful understanding of the penal regime or the expectations of their prisoner role. This, combined with a lack of access to other Deaf people meant that the pains of imprisonment were being experienced differently and much more intensely by the Deaf interviewees, to the point that they were often living in a continual form of solitary confinement through no fault of their own. In a similar vein to other sources, the data showed that Deaf people are certainly punished disproportionately in prison, to the extent that it could have a negative impact on their mental health. This is highlighted by the fact that all of the Deaf prisoners appeared anxious, lonely, fearful, frustrated and stressed during their interviews, as highlighted here in a quote from a Deaf participant (this individual was the only Deaf person at HMP Wilmslow):

My son emailed me and said 'Don't worry'. He is a doctor and he said that I must be strong, I must be patient, I must be strong. And I must read the Quran and pray every day. So I am trying to be patient and do that. But it is very difficult because there is no communication. Who do I talk to? With my colleagues there is a barrier between us and I can't communicate with them, they just leave me alone... Inside and mentally I feel that I want to communicate, I want to get stuff out, but I can't. And even with jokes, humour, there's nothing. I get very emotional... Very stressed. I want to get it out, and I don't want to get mentally ill, but I have to keep it all inside and be patient. That's all I can do.

**Discussion**

Findings from this research certainly reinforce the previous literature, showing clearly that the d/Deaf prisoners included in the sample were indeed suffering disproportionately during their time in custody. A myriad of reasons for this were highlighted which also map on to existing sources. These include a lack of resources, awareness, or access to others who could communicate in BSL, all of which contributed to participants being isolated from prison life; a place where sound and verbal communication are central. Although existing sources have alluded to issues relating to a lack of sound (see, for example McCulloch, 2012), this research developed this, highlighting the importance

of the role of sound in prison. It was shown that, in addition to being young, able bodied, English speaking and male, prisoners must also be able to hear if they are to comply with the expectations of the prisoner role. While this creates issues for both deaf and Deaf prisoners due to their lack of hearing, this study went beyond what was previously known by highlighting the importance of imported identity in this context. It was demonstrated that the way a d/Deaf person experiences prison depends strongly on the way in which they identify with their d/Deafness, with the responses of severely deaf prisoners to the prison environment being very different to those who are Deaf, thus creating experiential variations.

While there were overlaps between the lived realities of d/Deaf prisoners and prisoners more broadly given the nature of the environment, this study showed that there is little room for either deafness or Deafness in prison, with these prisoners often experiencing the pains of imprisonment more severely than their hearing peers as a result the Prison Service's inability to accommodate such difference, or meet their unique needs. However, the fact that prisoners who are Deaf import cultural and linguistic Deaf identities into prison as well as an inability to hear, means that they are more profoundly different than severely deaf prisoners, and often become institutionally deficient to a greater degree. The inclusion of an establishment where numerous Deaf prisoners were situated was particularly interesting, as despite initial predictions that these individuals may have less difficulty behaving as culturally and linguistically Deaf in prison, it was shown that a lack of Deaf awareness on the part of staff members created further issues for them, and did not significantly alter their institutional deficiency.

As stated earlier, existing literature on the topic of d/Deaf prisoners in England and Wales has not been grounded in the field of Deaf studies. By looking at the data through the lens of Deaf Studies literature, this study was able to draw links between the experiences of d/Deaf people inside and outside of prison. In terms of the deaf/HoH participants, many of the problems these prisoners face are not actually distinct to the penal environment, and rather, on many levels, mirror their experiences in wider society where sound is also key, hearing loss also deviates from what is 'normal' and their lives are still characterized by stigma (Higgins, 1980). Subsequently, it can be argued that instead of creating the problems faced by these prisoners, prison compounds them; with deaf/HoH people often being imprisoned by deafness whether they are in prison or not. In terms of the Deaf participants, the findings from this research resonate strongly with the experiences of deaf children who are born to hearing parents/attend mainstream schools. Like deaf children (Ladd, 2003), Deaf prisoners often become isolated from a hearing way of life which is continually enforced upon them but not designed to contain them. As a consequence of being

disempowered by their role, the freedom to be Deaf is often taken away from Deaf prisoners, who are consequently forced to revert back to the “the subservience of youth” (Sykes, 1958: 76).

This research maps on to that of McCulloch (2012) showing clearly that, at the time of writing, the Prison Service was clearly failing to meet the needs of these prisoners in any consistent way, and in consequence was violating the legal duty imposed by the Equality Act 2010. With this in mind, in order to ensure that establishments are able to comply with the legal stipulations of the Equality Act 2010 and to implement the necessary reasonable adjustments for d/Deaf prisoners, a set of recommendations for change for the Prison Service were outlined as part of this research. These include:

1. Making it a statutory requirement for establishments to record d/Deaf prisoner numbers.
2. Acknowledging the importance of sound in prison, and making it standard practice for HoH/d/Deaf prisoners to be provided with equipment that converts sound into an accessible format.
3. Ensuring that BSL is treated as an official language in prison.
4. Providing Deaf prisoners with regular access to qualified BSL interpreters.
5. Providing nationwide d/Deaf awareness training for prison staff.
6. Providing a standardised set of guidelines for prison establishments and other responsible agencies.

**Limitations of the study**

A primary methodological limitation of the research was the relatively small sample of prisoners interviewed, as this impedes the generalisability of the findings. A second limitation related to the extent that access to the prison environment was restricted at a number of the prisons entered. Such restrictions made it difficult to gain an understanding about the nature of the prison environment there, and inhibited the ability to make observations.

**Suggestions for further research**

This research could be repeated in other prisons throughout England and Wales, in order to examine similarities and differences between the lived realities of HoH/d/Deaf prisoners at different establishments. Secondly, the dimensions of the research could be extended to include those such as HoH/d/Deaf young offenders and Hoh/d/Deaf female prisoners. By doing this an understanding could then be gained about how different types of difference intertwine.

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## Legislation

The Equality Act 2010