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Towards an Understanding of the Experiences of Deaf Gay Men:

An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis to an Intersectional View

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Abstract

Similarities between developing a deaf identity and a sexual minority identity have been postulated upon the parallel experience of oppressed minority positions. Sign language interviews with eight deaf gay British men explored their intersectional understanding of deaf-gay lived experiences, analyzed through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis. During their adolescence deaf gay men sometimes experienced being in a position where they were trying hard to be something they were not: oral and heterosexual for hearing non-signing others (including heterosexual members of their family of origin). Participants spoke of increasingly being drawn towards a welcoming signing cultural world that supported them against deaf minority stress. Coming out as gay presented not only potential family of origin difficulties, but also threatened connection with the deaf community, leaving participants intensely fearful of gay visibility and stigma. Self-fulfillment and community building was sought through positions that ranged from oralist-heteronormativity through to the deaf-gay community. Along the way these journeys included experiences of pride and success alongside those of struggle. Our findings extend research on intersectionality by presenting a distinct set of obstacles, caveats, and nuances to identity conjunction.

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Key words: Deaf culture, gay men, identity, interpretative phenomenological analysis, intersectionality, qualitative, sign language

One aspect of gay men's identity that is often overlooked in sexuality studies is that gay men's interactions are spoken, heard, and take place in an oral context. Likewise, in the D/deaf studies literature sexuality is rarely mentioned and presumed to be heterosexual. More generally only a few authors have taken up the invitation to use crip theory as envisaged by McRuer to critically consider compulsory able-bodiedness that produces disability and the compulsory heterosexuality that frames queerness (McRuer, 2006). To date much of the work that has considered both deaf and queer positions has been from a personal perspective and within a cultural studies framework. For example, as a Black, Deaf, Queer woman, Moges has highlighted contributions within the deaf queer literature and archives that can empower and challenge an able-bodied heteronormative narrative (Moges, 2017). Collaboratively, Moges has performed a signed renga poem intersecting Queer, Deaf and African identities (Morgan, Moges, Meletse & Maasdorp 2020). Other authors have provided intersectional commentaries considering the simultaneous complexity of white Deaf Queer performances seen in the reality TV show appearances of Nyle DiMarco (Moreman & Briones, 2018). Alternatively, authors have provided a case history accounts of the experiences, such as such as Sinecka's (2008) paper concerning the experiences of one deaf gay man in the Czech Republic (racial identity unstated). Our aim in the present study was to widen the consideration of intersecting queer and deaf identities through systematically researching the varied understandings of gay and deaf identity intersections through the lived experiences of by eight cis-gender white and college educated deaf gay men.

Identities, intersectionality, and experiencing stigma

The literature relating to identity has grown rapidly over the last few decades, recognizing the significance of identity on the psychological life of individuals and its importance for communities and in society (Bauman, 1996; Cote, 1996; Schachter & Galliher 2018). Nevertheless, the term 'identity' is ubiquitous and has varied definitions. Goffman

(1963) originally described identity as being when someone feels pride in the very thing that makes them distinct, giving identity a positive spin. Other definitions remain neutral, for example, Cote and Levine (2014) describe identity as being a member of a collective group with its own rules and way of being. As well as a plethora of publications trying to define identity there are many studies exploring experiences associated with specific identities such as LGBTQ+ identities, racial, ethnic and religious identities, social class, and identity issues in relation to deafness and disabilities. Yet the lived experience of any one identity is often crucially contextualized by its intersection with one or more other identities (Crenshaw, 1989).

Black feminist scholarship has been influential in highlighting the importance of identity intersectionality. Crenshaw (1989) first coined the term intersectionality when considering the position of African-American women noting that studies did not recognize the crucial intersections of multiple identities or the implications of these. Subsequently, intersectionality theory has fostered engagement with the complexity of experience rather than parsing experience into singular constructed identities that are assumed to be generic (Crisp, 2014; Gunaratam, 2003). Thus, studies employing an intersectional framework have aimed to highlight the thoughts and processes involved when two (or sometimes more) identities intersect to discern how impacts are magnified to produce distinctive experiences and causal effects that would not be evident from each identity alone (Bright, Malinsky & Thompson, 2015). Furthermore, Cho, Crenshaw and McCall (2013) have urged researchers to look beyond what intersectionality *is* and to consider what intersectionality *does* in terms of empowering or precluding opportunities.

Within gender and sexuality studies a growing field of research has sprung forth on LGBTQ+ people of color (POC). For example, studies have indicated that connections to the LGBTQ+ community play a less significant role in mediating experiences of stigma and

stress for sexual minority POC than for White people (Bowleg, 2013; McConnell, Janulis, Phillips, Truong & Birkett, 2018). As yet only a few research studies have explored intersectionality involving race and gender along with other identities, such as those involving disabilities (Moodley & Graham, 2015; Shaw, Chan & McMahon, 2012). Yep (2013, 2015) has emphasized the need to consider thicker intersectionalities to unpack the complex interwoven nature of intercultural communication of identities not simply by employing a list of identity categories but also by considering multiple positionality; an approach adopted, for example, by Moreman and Briones (2018) in their media case study of DiMarco's personae.

Deaf culture

Formal recognition of deaf culture and identity began in the 1970s when the role of deaf boarding schools within the deaf community was recognized in promoting deaf culture through sign language and unique ways of interacting with the world in terms of shared values and experiences (Padden & Humphries, 1988, 2005). Many deaf people reject the 'disabled' label in favor of a linguistic and affirmative cultural construction distinct from other 'disabilities' or 'illnesses' (Ladd & Lane, 2013). Deaf culture, however, is suppressed in mainstream oral society that often views deafness as a disability to be overcome because audiocentric perceptions and attitudes grant supremacy to speech and fails to listen to deaf people (Eckert & Rowley, 2013; Humphries, 1993; Lane, 2002). Following the work of Kusters, De Meulder and O'Brien (2017) who criticize the exclusive cultural positioning of Deafness with use of sign language, we do not use Deaf with a capital D as has been used by others to denote a culturally Deaf person. Thus, in our study of the lived experience of deaf gay men we considered a variety of deaf identity positions regarding engagement with sign language and involvement in the oral world (Skelton & Valentine, 2003).

Given this rich process of cultural empowerment, deaf people often report a pride in holding a deaf identity, a process characterized as deaf gain (Bauman & Murray, 2014). Furthermore, recent evidence has indicated that deaf gain may mitigate at least some of the harmful association between minority stigma and psychological well-being. For example, in a survey of students and recent alumni at a deaf higher education facility Mousley and Chaudoir found that levels of anticipated or internalized minority stigma were generally low and not related to self-reported psychological well-being (Mousley & Chaudoir, 2018). Nonetheless, levels of enacted stigma – the direct experience of events involving prejudice and discrimination -- were associated with reduced levels of psychological well-being as reported by Mousley & Chaudoir's participants.

Identity parallels: Growing up Gay and Growing up Deaf

Sexual minority deaf people have been largely neglected in deaf research (Ladd, 2003). However, deaf gay men can be seen as forming a distinct cultural grouping within the signing world through the development of Gay Sign Variation (GSV) a lexicon used by some deaf gay men and their allies. GSV has not been considered as a complete language in its own right since its use is invariably interwoven with British Sign Language, nevertheless it can be seen as a distinctive form of linguistic code mixing (Michaels, 2010). GSV is little known academically although it has been around for a long time and has parallels with Polari a widely used slang used by gay men until the 1960s (Baker, 2003).

The relationship between developing a deaf identity and developing a gay identity is little known, although some parallels have been suggested (Glickman & Harvey, 2013). We focus on three main parallels: 1) minority status differs from that of other family of origin members; 2) within each minority group there is considerable within group variation; 3) the pressures of normativity and the experience of minority stress on identity formation.

Minority status differs from that of other family of origin members. Both deaf and LGBTQ people are likely to have grown up in families in which neither their parents nor their siblings in their family of origin share their minority identity status. It has been calculated that 90% of deaf babies are born to hearing parents (Mitchell & Karchmer, 2004) thus, deaf children are not usually born into families within the orbit of deaf culture (Hall, Smith, Sutter, DeWindt & Vye, 2018). Instead, there is a process of acculturation and identification that needs to occur often formally or informally via the school system (Ladd, 2003). Ladd and Lane (2013) described being culturally deaf as partaking in a collective identity in that group members need to associate together and interact. Similarly, most people who identify as LGBTQ+ grow up in families with one or two heterosexual parents (Bailey, Nothnagel & Wolfe, 1995) although this is not always the case (Kuvalanka & Goldberg, 2009).

Within each minority group there is considerable within group variation. A variety of fluid identity positions can be taken up by young deaf adults (Skelton & Valentine, 2003) in terms of their attitudes toward, and use of, speech or sign. Likewise, a complex array and multidimensional processes characterize sexual identity formation enabling the uptake of diverse gay identities (Morgan, 2013). Grov, Redina and Parsons (2018) noted that while a majority of gay and bisexual men in their US national sample (over 80%) reported self-awareness of their attraction to other men around age 10 years, a minority did not either notice or experience attraction until later in their teenage years. Furthermore, gay and bisexual men who reported later awareness of attraction moved past sexual identity milestones of self-awareness, self-acceptance, disclosure to others, and having sex with another man in a diverse order compared to Grov et al.'s majority group.

The pressures of normativity and the experience of minority stress. Sexual and gender minorities experience the pressures of heteronormativity and cisnormativity -- the

cultural and social pressures to conform to, or at least fit in with, mainstream sociocultural heterosexual and cis-gender values (Allen & Mendez, 2018; Warner, 1993). Heteronormativity exerts pressure on sexual minority people to conform to couple relationships that mirror the ideal of marriage (Lasio, Serri, Ibba & De Oliveira, 2018; Rosenfeld, 2009; Tasker, Moller, Clarke and Hayfield, 2018). Likewise, deaf people experience oralism – a pressure to be part of the oral-aural community – particularly as children within the education system (Hutchison, 2007). For both sets of communities there are concurrent themes of medicalization, oppression, and discrimination (Klinger 2007). For example, in the U.S., Canada, and western Europe homosexuality was once pathologized as a deviance from heterosexual norm to be "cured", then moved to becoming culturally recognized through same-sex marriage or partnership legislation. Nevertheless, social acceptance and equal rights legislation is still not universal (International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association Europe, 2021). In a similar way many hearing people still view deafness as an illness or as a disability, with cochlear implants seen as a way to circumvent this (Hall, 2017).

For deaf and/or LGBTQ+ people minority stress is often entailed in membership of a minority cultural group, whose experiences, perspectives, and needs are often misunderstood or overlooked by dominant groups (Pearlin, 1989). In particular, minority stress can be aroused in members of groups facing a cultural legacy of medicalization, oppression, and discrimination. In gender and sexuality studies, and particularly within psychological research, the minority stress model has become a prominent theoretical framework for examining sexual minority health risk with associations indicated with both psychological well-being (Myer, 2003) and physical health behaviors (Dentato, 2012; Hamilton & Mahalik, 2009). Intriguingly, sexual minority stress also has been considered in relation to the intersection of other minority stressors and resiliency processes. For example, McConnell and

colleagues concluded that minority stress and community resilience possibilities differ for men of color and White men: Black sexual minority men reported higher levels of racial-ethnic stigma in LGBTQ+-spaces than did sexual minority men from all other racial-ethnic groups (McConnell, Janulis, Phillips, Truong & Birkett, 2018). Furthermore, the extent of connection with the LGBTQ+ community was more involved in mediating the relationship between stigma and stress for White men than for men from other racial-ethnic minority backgrounds. Nevertheless, as Hamilton and Mahalik have concluded, sexual minority stress is one part of a broader health outcomes picture: "Gay men simultaneously experience stressors from identifying as one of a minority sexual orientation, pressures to enact traditional masculinity, and social information from salient reference groups; and all these variables appear to make unique contributions in explaining gay men's health behaviors" (Hamilton & Mahalik, 2009: 138).

Thus, existing studies on the experience of sexual minority stress prompt a broader focus on intersectionality and the necessity of considering the intersection of two identities in relation to social positioning vis-à-vis other identities too. An exclusive focus on deaf and gay identities plus the lack of consideration of the multiple positions of participants in relation to gender, race, social class, and education may at least in part explain why previous investigations have been inconclusive as to whether deaf LGBTQ+ people might be more or less accepted by other deaf people. On the one hand, Swartz proposed that the deaf community may be more accepting of LGBTQ+ people than most hearing people because deaf people are more aware of oppression, thus more tolerant of individual expression (Swartz, 1995). Swartz found that deaf men who were connected with signing communities came out as gay or bisexual earlier than did deaf men not connected into signing communities, which the author attributed to the facilitating role of already belonging to a minority signing community. Furthermore, it has been suggested that members of the deaf

community would be less likely to cut off contact with a gay member because of the close-knit nature of the deaf community and the impracticalities of doing so (Langholtz & Rendon, 1991/2019). In an early study Zakarewsky (1979) also noted how hearing gay men repeatedly have to decide whether to disclose their sexual orientation with every fresh encounter, whereas deaf people do not need to do this as 'everyone knows everyone' within a small deaf community. Therefore, owning a gay identity in the deaf community reduced the disclosure burden of constant decision making, although this gain maybe caveated by the potential cost of limited privacy.

On the other hand, Chapple (2019) has highlighted deaf people express varied views and without a wider appreciation of marginalization maybe as likely as non-deaf people to directly or indirectly express homonegativity. Other research surveying adolescents with disabilities has highlighted that the association between disability status and peer victimization was significantly increased in combination with other marginalized identities (McGee, 2014). Notably in McGee's study, disabled sexual minority male high school students experienced the greatest likelihood of abuse in comparison to all other groups. Observations by psychotherapists also have indicated how holding a double minority identity, such as being deaf and being gay, may be associated with particular feelings of low self-worth, loneliness, and disconnection (Glickman & Harvey, 2008).

Research Aim

A few published studies have considered deaf and gay identities yet these have lacked a detailed investigation of how both identities are experienced within the multiplex of identity positions ascribed in everyday lived experiences that include gender, race, ethnicity, and social class. The aim of our investigation was to explore the understandings and experiences of deaf gay men and how deaf and gay identity states co-exist and intersect to consider how such an intersection may empower or stress. While some research on intersectionality and

sexual minority peoples has been quantitative, such as that by McConnell et al. (2018), much has been qualitative, often with a phenomenological or experiential focus (Bowleg, 2008, 2013; Parent, DeBlaere & Moradi, 2013; Syed, 2010).

Our particular method of choice for analyzing the qualitative data from our exploratory interviews was Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA is an idiographic approach that investigates how people make sense of major life experiences (Smith, Flowers, Larkin, 2009) and is therefore suited to an exploration of how people understand experience in relation to identity (Reid, Flowers & Larkin, 2005). Previously, IPA has been used to explore the personal meanings attached to the lived experiences of gay men in relation to identity formation, disclosure, stigma, and HIV (Flowers, Smith, Sheeran & Beail, 1998; Flowers, McGregor Davis, Larkin, Church & Marriott, 2011; Skinta & Brandett, 2016, 2020). For example, Skinta and Brandrett's detailed research with a small sample of three gay men explored how emotions and thoughts about self are connected to experience and social context. Furthermore, IPA authors have emphasized how using patterns of convergence across cases can thematically organize data, while also encouraging case by case exploration of divergence to reveal nuanced individual perceptions of experience (Smith, 2011a). The attention given to this convergence – divergence thematic balance seemed to fit particularly well with our concern to explore Yep's (2015) concept of thick(er) intersectionalities. Specifically, we considered how nuanced distinctions in self-presentational concerns may arise for individual participants depending on the experiences they encounter. Thus, we were keen to explore not only the intersection of deaf and gay identities but also how this played out for individuals in conjunction with their other held identities, personal histories of life experiences, and trajectories of future hopes.

Method

The focal point for our study was the intersection of deaf and gay identities in the lived experiences of white college educated deaf gay men in the UK. Sample sizes in IPA studies have varied but are generally small because of the methodological emphasis on idiographic engagement via in-depth interviews, which are then followed by a case-by-case analysis (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). IPA researchers have emphasized homogeneity in sampling to ensure that the research has a clear focal point since within this tight framework both commonalities and differences between the individual experiences of participants can become strikingly apparent (Noon, 2018). In revisiting our initial case-by-case analyses to consider convergence and divergence of themes across cases we particularly considered the role that gender, race and class privilege played in participants' lives. Nevertheless, when extrapolating from our analyses of data from a small homogeneous sample, our findings necessarily say nothing about the experiences of gay men of color or those who are not college educated.

Participants

Eight deaf white cis-gender gay men aged between 28 and 41 years old who used British Sign Language (BSL) as their preferred language were recruited for interview. All participants had been educated to college degree level and were in full-time employment at the time of interview in professional occupations. Three men in the sample were proficient and native sign language users. One participant was born to deaf parents and the two participants had hearing parents, but had close family members who were deaf or who were proficient BSL signers. The other five men were born to hearing parents and were late learners of sign language; four of this group considered themselves to be fluent BSL signers when interviewed. All participants were either born deaf or deafened soon after birth (pre-lingually deaf). One man had been in mainstream schooling entirely without a designated Hearing Impaired Unit (HIU). The remaining seven went to both deaf schools and

mainstream schools with HIU's. None went to a deaf school for the entirety of their education. Two men were each in separate long-term relationships; one of these men described his relationship as an open relationship. The remaining six men were single.

The men were recruited through snowballing from initial contacts the first author had through her involvement in deaf community. We employed the principle of third degree removed friend of a friend contact thus excluding from the recruitment process anyone who might have known either author personally (Owton & Allen-Collinson, 2014). The selection criteria employed in this study specified the recruitment of men over the age of 18 years old men, who identified as both deaf and gay. The information sheet specified the selection criteria and stated that the interviews would be held in British Sign Language (BSL) and video recorded.

Potential participants were given an information sheet about the project, which included a list of the main questions asked at interview. Following good practice guidelines for working with deaf people, participants were offered the option of having the information sheet signed to them. Potential participants then emailed the first author to express their interest in participating. Written consent was obtained prior to interview. A deaf and bilingual English and BSL counsellor agreed to act as a back-up consultant to the research if any participants had required additional support (but none requested this). The study was given ethical approval by the Institutional Review Board at the authors' university.

Interviews

The interviews took place at a university research center, or in a hired studio, to enable high quality video recording. Prior to interview, and after reaffirming consent to video recording, participants were given a brief questionnaire to complete. Alongside demographic questions the questionnaire also included questions on BSL proficiency, educational history (within the oral mainstream or at a specialist unit) and whether close family members signed,

identified as deaf, or had hearing loss. Participants also were asked to choose a pseudonym. Each interview lasted approximately an hour and half. Consent for inclusion of the interview into the dataset was reaffirmed at the end of the interview.

The interviews were semi-structured such that interview questions followed the flow of conversation to focus on the examples and defining moments given by participants. The interview style was non- directive enabling the participant to develop their own narrative, with the interviewer (first author) reflecting on what was said and gently exploring to encourage clarity of shared understanding (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). The interviewer initially asked general questions: how each man first became aware of his hearing loss and how his deaf identity developed; how each man became aware of their feelings of attraction to other men; how his sense of gay identity developed. Participants were then asked about the intersections of deaf and gay: what their thoughts were about being a deaf gay man in a mostly heterosexual deaf community; their thoughts about being a deaf gay man in a mostly hearing gay community; whether they thought there were any parallels between deaf and gay identities.

Each interview was recorded on two video cameras on tripods. One video camera recorded the interviewer and the other video camera recorded the participant. Each interview was translated and transcribed from British Sign Language to English by the author as a qualified Member of Registered Sign Language Translators (MRSLT). Each interview produced on average 1.5 hours of footage of BSL and then carefully translated into a written English transcript. Each sentence of the interview was viewed, transcribed, and then viewed again in the light of other sentences until the transcriber was confident that the most meaningfully accurate translation had been obtained within the overall interview context. Although we were unable to provide an independent video-to-transcript translation check, each participant was sent a copy of their own transcript with identifying details disguised.

Each participant was then given a two-week period to edit the transcript for accuracy, redact text, or to withdraw consent for data to be included in the study. Of the six men who responded to our invitation to transcript check, minor changes were requested by one participant and none withdrew from the study.

Analysis

The analysis of each transcript followed the process as suggested by Smith, Larkin and Flowers (2009) and both authors had previously attended IPA workshops. Each interview transcript was analyzed in full before moving on to that of the next participant. After several re-readings of the transcript, initial exploratory notes or open-codes were made on the left-hand side with a clear phenomenological focus. Notes were refined and edited into descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual emergent themes. Emergent themes were then clustered together to develop into a subtheme and subthemes were further grouped to form superordinate themes. Next further thematic iterations were made in the light of reviewing the transcript and initial analyses to produce a final table of themes for that participant. This process was repeated for each participant's transcript. The interviewer (first author) conducted the initial analysis of all 8 interviews. The second author (an experienced researcher familiar with IPA and other qualitative methods) reviewed four of the interview transcripts and then overviewed the analyses of the remaining four interviews. Both authors then reviewed participants' themes in relation to each other to generate the final IPA analysis across all eight participants to produce a master table of superordinate themes across participants. Following the recommendations of Morse and colleagues (Morse, Barrett, Mayan, Olson & Spiers, 2002) regarding validity we invited participants and an independent researcher (with expertise in researching the everyday lives of deaf people) to comment on a draft report of the study. The feedback we received then resulted in minor alterations, in particular it drew our attention to the variety of deaf identity positions regarding integration

into the signing and / or hearing world. We also employed Smith's (2011 a & b) guidelines for ensuring the rigor of our IPA analysis: we kept our thematic focus on the topic of intersectionality, we chose transcript extracts to represent the breadth of the theme as presented across the sample and to capture the extent to which participants both converged and diverged with regard to each theme. We also present our interpretation of the transcript extract in relation to each theme and note relevant contextual factors for the reader.

Results

Three superordinate themes were identified from the interview transcripts using the principle of recurrence, i.e. the superordinate theme occurring in more than half of the participants (Smith & Osborne, 2008). Each superordinate theme is detailed below and delineated along with their respective participant subthemes and pseudonymised transcript extracts (using ellipses to denote places where we edited quotes to condense them). Our three superordinate themes seemed to reveal an underlying chronological story arc: initially reflecting the intensity of the struggle of trying to become oral and heterosexual, while increasingly becoming aware of their attraction to men and the inviting visual world of sign; subsequently reflecting upon their engagement with the deaf or gay communities, and then trying to create their own intersectional conceptualization of self as a deaf gay (white and college educated) man. Nevertheless, we remain cautious in storying the themes for two reasons. Each theme could be seen intermingled in the transcripts at various points in the interviews. Furthermore, participants diverged in the stance they adopted in relation to each theme reflecting their own particular experiential journey.

Trying to be something I'm not: Growing up not being the man they want me to be

The struggle of oralism indicated what seemed to be the beginning of adversity for each deaf gay man growing up in a society that promotes oral over visual language communication. Participants often described hearing parents motivating them to

communicate orally. Excelsior described how his mother had insisted upon using spoken speech and how with hindsight he felt he had wasted time on this: "She had said it would be better for me to be oral that I would achieve more opportunities compared to me signing but really that wasn't the case." (Lines 79-81).

Martin and Scott both described ongoing insecurities about using their voices, since it is extremely difficult to gauge how clear your words are, or indeed how loud you are being, when you are without feedback from hearing your own speech. Martin described oralism as having two sides: it was beneficial in terms of involvement with the hearing community, but also had a downside in that struggling to hear and speak could hamper communication making you feel uncomfortable and unable to express yourself fully. Martin said:

> Oralism is a good thing for being a part of the hearing community. But at the same time, my sort of learning was challenged. Because I had to learn how to speak words properly, so that the hearing community could understand me clearly…So I think oralism is not a negative thing, no. But at the same time, when I sign, I feel totally comfortable, I feel much better, it just feels right for me. But being oral I'm not, I won't say it feels right for me. (Martin, L80-88).

Compared to their early memories of feeling different because of their deafness, awareness that they were not growing up heterosexual happened more slowly for participants. The deaf gay men in the sample spoke of the lack of gay role models that they could look up to when growing up and this meant that it was difficult to pinpoint and positively identify their own feelings for other boys or men. For example, James said: "…locally there was hardly anything, I probably felt like the only gay in the village!" (Line 102-103). While Sam described his desperate experience of trying to be straight for his family: "Trying to be straight, straight, straight. It wasn't easy. I was always fighting, fighting and fighting. And for many years I was hiding it. I'm not completely proud and waving my hands about it – no. I

try to be straight" (L385-387). Sam described coming out to his family in traumatic terms: "She [Sam's mother] asked me again 'Are you gay?' and I was panicking and I sat down and said 'yes.'. And she was really shocked. Just in shock. Like I had disgraced her. And she said 'oh my god, your brother is going to be so angry.'" (L 142-145). Steffen did not describe his experience of coming out to his family in traumatic terms, but did emphasize how difficult it was to disclose to his parents: "I didn't have any problems like other people who had been kicked out or been traumatized. But it just was not a nice experience, you feel it's not allowed … Because everyone's idea of you is that you're straight. And you're not the person that they want you to be." (L146-152). For six of the men in the sample part of their unhappiness at identifying their sexual desire for other men was because they knew that family members would respond negatively. As Sam simply stated: "For my family being straight is right and being gay is wrong." (L387). Of the eight men in our sample only Scott and Joseph met with a positive response from core family members: "My father was like you're gay, I love you just the way you are. You're my son. If you're happy, I'm happy" (Scott, L196-197).

Hiding or passing was not simply done for other members of the participant's family. Steffen indicated that he had not wanted to be seen as gay when out and about in public, an anxiety which we thought may also have derived from personal safety concerns since hearing loss and deaf stigma might make someone more vulnerable as a target for homophobia at a time when when rates of homophobic hate crime were rapidly increasing according to UK police reports (Hunte, 2020). Steffen referred to hiding both his deaf and gay identities in the following way: "Deafness is kind of hidden and gayness is kind of hidden. So growing up thinking: oh I'm gay – hide it; being deaf – hide that. And that's a lot of hiding (smiles) but a part of that is to protect yourself because if you're walking down the street you don't want to make it obvious." (Steffen, L399-405).

Trying to find a community: feeling the enjoyment of engagement with people like me yet feeling unready to be visibly gay and/or not feeling deaf enough to join in fully

On balance participants spoke positively specifically in terms of engaging with the deaf gay community. Steffen felt that he would have never been the person he is today without internet technology opening the door to interaction with the deaf and gay communities. Without internet created opportunities, Steffen thought that he would still be trying to be the person his family wanted him to be: "If it wasn't for the internet, I would be still (be) pretending to be straight. I would be still in the hearing world. I probably wouldn't have met deaf people or gay people. So, I would have probably been trying to do what my family wanted me to do." (L524-528). Instead of internet created opportunities, James talked about the joys of face-to-face socializing and how a deaf gay group formed an enjoyable and protective barrier to the responses of outsiders: "Like recently we went to the deaf Gay, Lesbian, Bi, Trans, etc group, it's on every two months, and we all had a good chat together and we don't take any notice whatsoever of anyone else around us – they're invisible" (L443-448). Martin spoke about how the deaf gay community supported him and had helped increase his confidence: "The deaf gay community is just so positive … it's just been totally positive. I really enjoy it, it's really a big thanks to them all as they've all helped me, with my confidence. I'm much more involved. I go out much more … it's been amazing to have them as role models" (Martin, L696-700).

Notwithstanding the benefits of involvement with the deaf gay community, there were huge perceived obstacles to involvement. For example, Martin described meeting members of the deaf gay community as an extremely difficult yet pivotal moment because in joining them he in effect came out as a gay man to others in the deaf community too:

Because I was nervous … I was panicking. Because I envisaged as this was the deaf community that it would spread like wildfire, the news would spread fast. That was

my fear… because it was deaf plus gay so it meant that it's definitely going to be a very small community… means that people get to know to each other very quickly… So it meant when I got in this group, we all met each other and got to know each other very fast. I realize that because at that time I hadn't come out yet, well really not come out. I had already come out, but only to a few people, so to join this group was actually a big jump, really a big jump. (Martin, L553-566)

In his interview Sam described the dilemma of becoming involved in the deaf gay community from the other side of the closet to Martin – taking a risk of being outed in a small world. Sam said: "a deaf man and he's gay – it's harder for him to come out in the deaf community. Because once you come out, everyone knows. But in the hearing community, when you come out – only a few people know. It's harder in the deaf community" (Sam, L632-636). Sam also worried about any issue that might out him publicly. For example, when talking about dating other men he quickly moved on to his concern about "catching things" that would label him as gay by linking contracting HIV to being sexually active in the gay community as opposed to engaging in the health risk behavior itself. Yet at some level we thought that Sam also saw and recognized his fear as being disproportionate as he said at a "paranoid" or "phobic" level:

"Plus (pause) with gay men, when I meet someone through Grindr or somewhere else I'm paranoid that I will catch diseases. Because a high percentage of straight people are fine but with gay men, that's another reason that puts me off. Catching things. HIV. Its life changing, life threatening. It means, if I catch it, I always play safe, because if you catch it, your life, it means you get low immunity and you can't travel around the world, you can't donate blood, you can't…well it's an extra label. You can't. It frightens me too. It's my phobia" (Sam, L293-301).

Some participants felt that they not only floundered in an oral context but also in a signing environment because they were not deaf enough; as Steffen summarized: "I'm deaf in the hearing world and I'm hearing in the deaf world" (L380). Time taken up with their childhood struggle to be oral left some of the men in the sample feeling that they had missed out on learning to sign with self-assurance. Steffen said: "If I had grown up deaf and signing, I'd be more confident, comfortable in big groups … because my signing is limited, I don't feel as comfortable in a big group. Equally signing or talking. It's the same in the hearing world, I don't feel comfortable talking to a big group" (Steffen, L360-366).

The challenge of defining my own deaf gay route: harmonizing both identities, tolerating or promoting identity prominence, and experiencing the appeal of acceptance via oralist heteronormativity

During their interview participants were not directly asked which identity they experienced as most salient to their sense of self. Nevertheless, when considering each man's interview it became apparent that one identity had a propensity to predominate self-presentation. In seven of our eight participants a sense of self as deaf tended to be uppermost in their presentation of self during the interview; we thought this reflected ease of communication. For instance, James described himself becoming immersed in the signing world when he had the opportunity upon moving to London: "I had hearing friends before and I just couldn't be bothered really: hearing people they have to learn sign language, how to communicate with me … I have to teach them and so on" (L33-36). Other men in the sample had grown up with deaf friends. For example, in answer to a question about whether he thought his identity had changed, Excelsior said he enjoyed the company of long-standing deaf friends, some of whom were friends from school and then went on to describe his career success. For Excelsior his stable network of supportive friendships within the deaf community provided a context that helped him to exude feelings of self-worth and pride in

who he had become and this was positioned alongside his professional achievements as a

signing deaf person. Excelsior referred only obliquely to his gay identity (what I want and

who I choose) then topped this by repeating that he was happy with who he is, implying a

holistic sense of self to encompass satisfaction with all aspects of his identity:

> "I've had the same friends for a long time but like just meeting anyone, through
>
> Facebook invitations, I just don't like it. … I am sure of who I am. I know what I
>
> want and I can't let anyone change me. I decide what I want. Who I choose. I'm
>
> definitely proud to be deaf. I have a job, a full-time job. I have two interpreters … I
>
> started as a junior… and finally I got promoted to be a senior … I'm happy with who
>
> I am. I'm also happy with my identity." (Excelsior, L87-98).

Of the eight men interviewed only Steffen felt that he was "not deaf every day" but

expressed an outward pride in his gay identity. Thinking of himself as deaf through

connecting with deaf people and culture was not something that Steffen mostly thought of.

Steffen instead set aside his actual experience of hearing loss because he had worked hard to

compensate for this and managed to integrate into the hearing mainstream particularly during

his school years. Steffen was also a late sign language learner. However, Steffen was proud

of his gay identity, which he felt he had tailor-made for himself. Steffen said: "I made that

(gay identity) when I was 18 or 19, and it's been the same I wake up every day and I'm gay

every day. I'm not deaf every day" (L271-273).

In contrast to the context supporting the formation of their deaf identity, most

participants did not experience a similar sense of support promoting self-confidence or pride

upon becoming aware of feelings for men. For example, in the following extract we thought

Sam marginalized his gay identity both in terms of his feelings and experience against a

backdrop of peer silence and perhaps a fear of being discarded as a person:

"I tried to pull girls but no girl wanted me. … I found it easy to pull boys. So when I was at school, I was naughty, yes. I enjoyed it. And that (was) how I started to look inside myself as being gay. I was confused … And for many years I was hiding it … My friends knew that I was gay but said nothing… I always said that I was bisexual. And I don't see myself as gay. I'm just (pause) me. I don't think of myself as a gay person, not at all. It's just a word …

Interviewer: Can you tell me more about that word?

Because in the past, being gay, makes people label you. Like people say with a book, you don't judge the book by its cover, it's what's inside. If you just read the cover you might discard it without realizing what's inside and see the real me. Being gay is just a sexuality ... It doesn't define who you are." (Sam, L51-74).

Most participants presented a position that they were: "Happy. Proud to be fully Deaf really" (Martin, L266) and that gay identity milestones of self-awareness of their sexual attraction to men and coming out to others as a gay man were later realizations for them. For example, when Joseph positioned his identities mid-way through his interview he contrasted his felt certainty of growing up with a deaf identity with his less clear sense of self as a gay young man in his late teenage years. Joseph said:

"With deaf identity it starts at a specific time. Like I was diagnosed at one or two [years] so [to] me deaf identity was a specific time. Like with being black, you're already black. You already have a black identity because you've grown up being black from birth and all the way up. But with being gay it can happen anytime. That's my view anyway, maybe people will disagree with me… I realized I liked, well actually thought I liked both, I didn't have a gay identity … When I was not sure about men, I was about 11, 12, 13 [years], was it identity? No. I just wasn't sure and I just got on with it. Then I finally came out when I was 17, because at that point I just

knew … I'd been with a woman and I'd been with a man … I was with a woman before and it was fine. But then when I got together with a man it was different. And there it was I knew my answer. So, I definitely don't have a gay identity… maybe other people have, but with my deaf identity, of course I have a deaf identity… Being gay means two men that love each other, same sex couple, or two women together. … That's it – that's what it means" (Joseph, L293 – 328).

Some participants seemed to us to be more comfortable than others were about expressing their sexual feelings and engaging in clubbing and dating. For example, James confidently referred to checking out dates met through dating apps: "it's easier to say to meet at a sex place or a club and then -, or a park, or whatever, and then you can meet the person and you know it's definitely them as you've seen them… you can have a look at them first. Yeah, so it's better" (James, L490-498). Jon described more mixed feelings regarding his experience of the gay chemsex party scene, which had both attracted and panicked him. Jon explained: "Dancing, partying, lots of cocaine for the sex parties. … Hearing people. I'll look at someone, someone my type … The hottest men ever. … It was a regular weekend thing, partying.… And good friends that I knew in the clubbing community kept dying. Too many drugs. … I became paranoid that I would be next… and I got scared and I stopped." (Jon, L368-378).

During the interviews some participants indicated elements of dissatisfaction with both the deaf community and the gay community. For example, James was disconcerted when he found himself contrasting hearing people and deaf people:

"So, hearing people are more…er intelligent? Eeek, maybe that's the wrong word to use, intelligent? Maybe not intelligent but informed and just getting on with it and they have proper conversations, right that's them and then deaf people, I feel like that the standard is lower I mean maybe I'm wrong but I feel like all deaf are… Oh gosh

this is tough! I'm trying to think of a way of how to explain, so deaf people, yes deaf

people… (laughs and sighs) … deaf people it's easy for them to gossip, and they tell

people things about you" (James, L116-123).

For us as researchers, tones of disparagement both regarding the deaf community and the gay community were often hard to comprehend. Nonetheless, reflecting upon the presentational issues underlying the concerns expressed by our participants indicated to us how challenging the intersection of developing a gay identity was when participants were working hard to maintain a position within the already marginalized deaf community. In a louder echo to their somewhat critical response when describing the deaf community, a stronger condemnation of the gay community, or the deaf gay community, was apparent at points in some interview transcripts. Scott said: "That's the deaf gay community, always in groups, backstabbing each other. Bitching about each other, gosh (looks away) I'm disappointed about that" (L750-752). Another participant seemed to us to express a tone of moral condemnation of what they saw as a "bad" scene in the gay community (conveyed emphatically through the repeated signing of bad): "I do feel that it's really bad, really. They're bad role models. Because taking drugs, why take drugs? Getting drunk, why get drunk? Unprotected sex, why? You ask them why this is happening, could it be better than that? Could you do better things?" (Martin, L787-790).

A desire to be someone who was accepted in everyday life as "normal", and who happened to be a gay man, was evident in some form in most participants' accounts. For example, Martin described what he aspired to with a partner: "Oh it would be nice to spend time with my family and his family, having Christmases together. Meals. And all their attitudes all positive. Like with straight couples. Just normal, become 'normal', just integrating well." (L823-826). We also saw within Martin's portrait of a happy multi-generational family Christmas meal a particular vision: Martin accepted not simply as a gay

man but as a gay man in a couple relationship – specifically denoted by "like with straight couples" and more ambiguously perhaps by use of the term "integrating well". Thus, it could be said that Martin aspired to see himself in a normative way in a couple relationship albeit with a same-gender partner.

Participants also seemed to prioritize presenting a normative masculine self-image. Camp was referred to in different interviews in different ways, yet participants mostly tended to distance themselves from a camp image as a gay man and were critical of what they saw as camp displays, particularly through the medium of sign language. For example, Martin seemed pleased that he could "act like he was straight" because he mostly did not use GSV: "I can change my register in my languages and say (GSV) 'fab' in a gay way and then most of the time I can act like I'm straight and that's fine. You know, just normal, lots of people think I'm straight" (L897-900). We also noted the underlying spin of equating normal with straight that Martin appeared to make and we speculated what social message saying "fab in a gay way" Martin thought that his intended audience would receive and why this might be challenging for him in some situations. Other participants were explicit about not wanting to appear camp – either to avoid signifying gay in public or to present themselves as a masculine gay man. Excelsior said that he avoided walking down the street with some gay friends because he said did not want to be identified with them as gay. Excelsior explained that he himself did not look gay because he did not act in a camp way: "When I meet someone and I don't know them and I tell them I'm gay, they're shocked and they tell me 'you don't look like one'. I don't look gay. You know most gays they say things like (camp) 'Oh, never!' (laughs) and that's not me – I'm straight acting" (L181 -185). For Steffen simply using sign language could signify his gay identity because he perceived that the visual expressiveness of sign could be read as a camp display:

"I went to university and did level one BSL and I felt ooh you have to use facial expressions. Feck, how do I do that but not in a gay way! I don't want to be like (camp) 'Oh yes!' Like what do I do with my arms, I need to stiffen them and sign in a masculine way (laughs). So I was really confused as to how to sign (laughs). I wanted to sign in a straight way and not in a gay way (laughs)" (L477-483).

Discussion

The aim of our qualitative investigation was to further the understanding of intersectionality through investigating the intersection of deaf and gay identities through exploring eight deaf gay men's understanding of their experience. The personal stories we received from the interview were often ones of struggle but we also found clear indications of intense pride and personal fulfillment in being able to express identity as both a gay man and a deaf person. We found that cis-gender men's experience of identifying as gay in the UK was deeply affected by their sense of their deaf identity which had formed earlier in childhood and provided an intersectional prism through which diverse deaf gay experiences were processed as suggested by Kusters et al. (2017). Thus, deaf gay men's experience was closely bound up with connecting with the deaf community through the intense visual world of sign language, their sense of the deaf community as a small world, and the possibility of double stigma. While feeling different from peers has been noted as a key issue for many young people identifying as LGBTQ+ (Savin-Williams & Cohen, 2015), the gay men in our study already felt different from their peers for much of their childhood as they were set apart by deafness and an emergent deaf identity. Therefore, when these pre-lingual deaf men began to be aware of the significance of their feelings of attraction toward other men this was experienced as yet another difference. Connecting with other deaf gay men through signing opened up new possibilities of open communication and authenticity, notwithstanding

troublesome challenges of a perceived increase in visibility arising from the intersection of two distinct identity states and the social opprobrium attached to them.

The experience of men's deaf gay men's identity intersection seemed similar to yet distinct from that of gay men of color whose family members shared the same racial-ethnic identity but not sexual minority identity. Studies of GB men of color have pointed to the primacy of racial-ethnic identity and strong pressures of masculinity (Bowleg, 2013). GB men of color's racial-ethnic identity would usually be congruent with that of most members of their family of origin and therefore their childhood experience would be of a racial-ethnic identity supportive home environment. However, most of the deaf men in our study were born into hearing family environments, as indeed most deaf people are, thus they differed from family not only in terms of sexual identity but also in their deaf status. Nevertheless, the deaf gay men in our study felt a strong allegiance to the relatively small and supportive deaf community that they had become a part of and in this respect felt an added pressure to be part of the heteronormative mainstream. Unlike some of the trail-blazing literature and chronicles of Deaf Queer activists (Moges, 2017) our participants' accounts described everyday lives that rarely contained moments of empowerment against a backdrop of intersectional stress.

Our interview schedule asked the men in the sample when they first became aware of their deaf and their gay identity and explored the self-definitional memories that participants presented. We did not specifically investigate coming out, or inquire for experiences connected with either deaf or gay prejudice or minority stress. Yet we saw that for these men coming out as gay to (heterosexual) family members often tended to be complicated by the pre-existing feeling that they were struggling to fully join in with the oral world that their hearing family wanted them to be a part of. As Moges (2017) succinctly described: "Deaf Queer people come out twice" (p. 220). Thus, identifying as gay positioned our participants

further outside their known (hearing heterosexual) family orbit of experience. Over half the men in our study expressed having felt some elements of regret that they had not grown up to be the man their family wanted them to be, even if they now felt differently. While any association needs to be fully explored in future research, this legacy of regret experienced by deaf gay men in the current study could be associated with the loneliness and low self-worth expressed by other deaf gay men in psychotherapy (for example see Glickman & Harvey, 2008; 2013). Furthermore, it would be useful to explore for parental identity congruence in relation to at least one identity aspect, thus systematically considering the experience of deaf identity and coming out gay to deaf parents or LGB parents and to what extent a legacy of regret was manifest in those cases.

Possibly the feeling of not growing up to be the man others (often specifically, family) wanted me to be was still connected with some deaf gay men's wistful thinking about future ideals, since this vision still seemed to sometimes hold attraction for some participants. Thus, the ideal way of being gay expressed in some interviews was apparently living in a committed relationship with a man within a normative lifestyle that fitted in with the mainstream, or as one participant said the only point of divergence being their private intimate relationship in the bedroom. In addition, this normative vision of a gay relationship future was complemented by intersection with an "oral-normative" future, since the ideal partner sought by some participants was a hearing man. Thus, the heteronormative pull towards normative same-gender relationships, which other authors have noted (Lasio et al., 2018; Rosenfeld, 2009; Tasker et al., 2018), was further recast in intersection with a society that promotes oral over visual communication through a push towards oral-normativity. Elsewhere in their respective writing from social work or Deaf studies backgrounds, both Chapple (2019) and Moges (2017) have drawn attention to the pressure from compulsory normalcy to focus on one identity to assimilate within one community: Black, Deaf, or

Queer. Pressures to prioritize a deaf identity over a queer identity, or alternatively to fit in with oral-normativity, appeared to feature as a cultural undercurrent in our sample in the theme "the challenge of defining my own deaf gay route".

The legacy of deaf difference in childhood and the sheer struggle of trying to join in with the oral culture of the education system were emphasized by our participants, echoing the observations made by previous authors (Kusters et al., 2017; Padden & Humphries, 1993, 2005). Seven of the eight participants in our study were born to hearing parents with some parents clearly favoring an oral educational route for their deaf son. All had been educated in hearing impaired units attached to the mainstream education system for at least some of their time at school. Awareness from childhood onwards of their marginalization through oralism meant that these deaf gay men to varying degrees seemed already to have been affected by other people's negative views of deafness and felt the need to protect a dented sense of self against further stigma. Most began to become aware of feelings toward other boys or men later on against this backdrop of deaf marginalization and a growing awareness of societal homonegativity. Morgan (2013) previously highlighted the difficulties for young adults of developing intersecting minority identities, for example, when transgender, gender nonconforming, racial, or ethnic identities are also developing.

In addition, our participants had all attained positions of socioeconomic status and enjoyed privileges associated with white identity. Thus, our participants were in positions of social privilege (from gender, race and class) while also being positions of vulnerability through owning both a deaf and a gay identity. Weighing up this potential loss of privilege by the double disclosure of deaf and gay marginalized identities could have been part of the intersectional challenge that participants faced. Thus, the deaf men in our study had a lot to lose from attracting further stigma associated with owning a gay identity, leading them to note and worry about the visibility of being identified as gay or the visibility of campness in

their signing style. Uncomfortable instances within the interview data pointed to the men feeling troubled or worried about being in the company of other gay men and therefore being identified as gay by others. Thus, the men in our study were sometimes men who could be critical of other gay men for, as participants saw it, being too queer or camp for company possibly because these signified gay or feminine to straight others. Gay Sign Variation was often not just portrayed as a liberating linguistic register that could aid communication and connection, but also seen as a potential marker attracting stigma, paralleling the findings of Fasoli and colleagues on gay men's vigilance with respect to "gay-sounding" spoken voices among gay men who believed themselves to have a masculine-sounding voice (Fasoli, Heggarty & Frost, 2021). In other occasional instances, we saw participants in our study being strongly critical of a gay scene of sex parties with dancing, drink, and drugs. When concerns surfaced these seemed to be about tainting, for example, giving gay a "bad" reputation, or concern about the personal acquisition of a stigmatizing label.

Among our participants stigma, worries, and fearful concerns limited opportunities to meet up with gay men, particularly when deaf gay men felt marginalized within either the gay or signing communities. Employing an intersectional framework focused on empowerment or disempowerment opportunities (Cho et al., 2013; Kusters et al., 2017), directed our attention to data that suggested that participants with sign language fluency (socially privileged in the deaf community) seemed more comfortable in accessing deaf gay community support. For example, participants who were comfortable with sign could become absorbed into the intense visual signing world created by an LGBTQ+ deaf group, which could obliterate any external hostility encountered on social outings or as James described in his interview "they're invisible".

Our research study using IPA has contributed some insights into the experiences of deaf gay men who live at the intersection of two marginalized identities. Nevertheless, it is

important to remember that our findings were produced from interview data from only eight white British college-educated deaf gay cisgender men. The combined perspectives of the authors allowed the interviews to be conducted and interpreted through British Sign Language and to retain both insider and outsider perspectives on sexual identity minority status. However, as two white and middleclass cisgender women we may not have fully appreciated issues of masculinity as they arose for participants. Our sample recruitment also began from networking within the Deaf community and this may have foregrounded deaf identity issues in our interview data. Our findings are presented as a starting point and our interpretations remain tentative and open to replication and extension in future investigations. Additional research is certainly warranted into LGBTQ deaf identity development, including a wider consideration of gender, race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status.

Conclusion

The themes found represent an in-depth view of the intersectional prism that led to the development of diverse deaf gay identities. The pre-lingual deaf gay men in our study had from early childhood often experienced pressure to join in with the oral world. Therefore, the men mainly experienced coming out as gay against the prior background of their struggle to find deaf support. Identifying as gay was a difficult process for deaf gay men as they struggled with hearing loss vulnerability in the mainstream and stigmatizing concerns in a seemingly small signing world. Only occasionally did it seem as if the men in our study were protected from further minority stress because they had already developed successful strategies for coping with deaf minority stress. Notwithstanding the cutting edges of intersectional minority stress, participants also conveyed confidence and agency in telling us about success in their lives and in the triumphs of identity achievement.

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