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Michael S. Stinson

National Technical Institute for the Deaf- Rochester Institute of Technology

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RESEARCH ON DEAF INDIVIDUALS BY HEARING PERSONS: ONE DEAF RESEARCHER'S PERSPECTIVE

MICHAEL S. STINSON

**National Technical Institute for the Deaf
Rochester Institute of Technology
Rochester, New York**

Abstract

This paper discusses four issues regarding the potential for research to be misguided when white, hearing persons, who are members of the majority culture, conduct investigations on members of two minority cultures, deaf and Asian-Pacific people. One potential danger is that researchers may draw conclusions that facilitate inappropriate stereotyping of deaf and Asian-Pacific persons. In addition, there are potential problems regarding credibility when researchers who are members of the majority culture write about individuals in a minority culture. Misguided work is less likely to occur when researchers who belong to the majority group are involved in the minority culture. However, involvement by such researchers is not enough; it is also important to have more researchers who are themselves members of deaf and Asian-Pacific minority groups.

The papers by Akamatsu (1994) and Foster (1994) provide fascinating discussions about researchers who are "outsiders," that is white, hearing individuals who are part of the majority or dominant culture, conducting research on minority cultures or groups, in this instance Asian-Pacific and deaf people. Before turning to these papers, I will say a few words about my own research work environment because it has influenced my

perspective as a deaf person conducting research on deaf individuals. I work as an educational researcher at the National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID), where approximately 15-20% of the faculty and staff are also deaf, and that is good. Furthermore, virtually everyone who works at NTID, as well as a substantial majority of the students, know how to sign. NTID is a kinder, more supportive environment than the "hearing world," where one almost never sees someone who is deaf, and where very few people know how to sign. When I attend large professional conferences that do not have a focus on deafness, such as the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Association, it is one of the occasional forays into the working world of the larger hearing community; that is, into the "real world."

In reading and thinking about the papers by Akamatsu (1994) and Foster (1994), four critical issues stood out: (a) tendencies of research to stereotype people in the minority group; (b) problems with credibility of research done by members of the majority group; (c) importance of involvement of researchers from the majority culture in the minority group; and (d) involvement of researchers belonging to the majority culture is not enough. The following discussion is not so much part of the search for "truth," in the sense that a scientific study is; rather, it is something more subjective, more personal.

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Stereotyping

There is a potentially dangerous tendency for oversimplification and stereotyping when researchers from the dominant culture try to describe and understand a minority culture. In any research, a goal is to make generalizations to identify what is common. A key issue in the research process is to decide how specific or complex these generalizations should be. When outsiders look into the "backyard" of a minority group, they may tend to emphasize too strongly simplistic generalizations when greater complexity might be a more appropriate, natural description of a phenomena or process. Researchers who are members of the minority group looking at their own group may be more sensitive to certain specificities and complexities. For example, many hearing people have divided deaf people into the "manualists" and "oralists;" whereas such a dichotomy is really a gross oversimplification of the variety of styles and ways that deaf people communicate depending on who is doing the communicating, who it is with, and the setting (Kannapell, 1989; Long, Stinson, Saur, & Liu, 1993; Newell, Stinson, Castle, Mallery-Ruganis, & Holcomb, 1990).

Both Akamatsu (1993) and Foster (1993) consider the problem of making overly simplistic generalizations in their papers. Akamatsu (1993) complains about the lack of available statistics on Asian-Pacific deaf people. I think this lack reflects partly the limited sensitivity to the diversity of Asian-Pacific and deaf people. It is possible that hearing, white census workers who decided on what statistics should be collected on deaf or on Asian-Pacific people thought that knowing how many Asian-Pacific people are deaf or knowing how many deaf people are Asian-Pacific was not important information (Moore, 1987). Within deafness, the major focus among hearing professionals has traditionally been on how much hearing you have, although this is not much of a

concern among deaf people (Padden & Humphries, 1988). Such a focus, of course, reduces attention to other dimensions of deaf individuals.

Foster (1993) addresses the importance of avoiding simplistic generalizations in her discussion of trying to understand deaf people's identities. She tells how, as a result of working with and interviewing various deaf individuals in a variety of situations, she learned that these people varied in how they saw themselves and in how they behaved; furthermore, each of these individuals could describe how they would function and see themselves very differently in one situation compared to another. A simplistic description of an individual's identity that portrays one dimension as always dominant is clearly inappropriate; rather, as Foster (1993) describes, understanding a person's identity is like a complex puzzle with many pieces.

Both Akamatsu (1993) and Foster (1993) advocate using ethnography as a means for researchers to reduce bias due to being a member of the majority culture and to increase sensitivity to the perspectives of people in the minority culture. As a researcher who uses both qualitative and quantitative methodologies, I agree that ethnographic methodologies are helpful in encouraging sensitivity to and in capturing the perspectives of "other" cultures. At the same time, a researcher who carefully and judiciously employs quantitative methodologies can be every bit as sensitive to the perspectives of other cultures and the knowledge yielded can be just as valuable.

Credibility

When a researcher, who is a member of the majority culture, writes about the minority culture, questions arise regarding the credibility of what the writer says. Akamatsu (1993) discusses how she can take the perspective of herself as a member of a "privileged" group that writes about a "handicapped" group, deaf people. One can argue

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that much, if not most, writing about deafness has been that of hearing people sharing their own perspectives with other hearing people. Furthermore, for a variety of reasons, deaf people's contributions to writings that further the understanding of deafness have been quite limited. One reason, which I hope occurs rarely, is that, intentionally or unintentionally, hearing people discourage deaf people from contributing. One time my own deafness became an issue in the rejection of a research article. The editor of the journal told the consultant responsible for reviewing my article that I was deaf. In his critique of the article, the reviewer, in addition to recommending rejection, wrote that he thought I had no future in a research career. (The article was subsequently published in another journal.)

Akamatsu (1993) recognizes the potential limitations of perspectives of members of the majority group writing about a minority group. There is another perspective that is of at least equal, and perhaps greater, validity and that is the one of minority persons writing about their own group—this is what Akamatsu means when she talks about “the other side of the coin.” As an Asian-Pacific individual herself she says that she gives more weight to writings by fellow Asian-Pacific individuals than to those who are not members of this group. Extending this thinking to the study of deaf individuals, one would wonder whether persons involved in the study of deaf people, such as Akamatsu and Foster, extend the same standard for evaluating research and writings about deaf people that Akamatsu uses for her own minority group—that is, gives greater weight to writings by deaf individuals. If researchers such as Akamatsu do not use the same standard with deaf people, why not? As a deaf researcher, I seem to have a weighing system where if something is written by a person who is deaf, it receives extra weight because of the commonality of the deaf experience, even if I disagree with the particular writer's perspective. At the same time, relying

predominantly on writings by deaf people for information and theory to guide research is an unaffordable luxury. The contributions of deaf writers are currently quite a small segment of the research literature; furthermore, hearing writers do make valid contributions.

In their papers Akamatsu (1993) and Foster (1993) seem to agonize about whether what they say and write about deaf people has credibility with these individuals. Good! Hearing researchers need to constantly check the credibility of their work with deaf people.

Involvement in the Deaf Community

Researchers investigating cultures of which they are not members are responsible for being knowledgeable about and involved with the culture and community that they are studying. In her paper, Foster (1993) shares ways in which she has involved herself with deaf people, including having co-investigators who are deaf, having a deaf advisory group for a project, and asking deaf persons to provide critiques of her work. Akamatsu and Foster are two hearing researchers who have been diligent in their efforts to become personally involved, and the efforts of researcher's such as themselves are a significant step in increasing the sensitivity of research to the perspectives of deaf people. There is a real need for more researchers investigating deaf individuals to make such efforts. Foster (1993) is right in suggesting that reading about deafness and conducting research on deaf subjects are not enough; neither is simply teaching deaf students. While it is obviously important for researchers to be knowledgeable of the pertinent literature and to be doing research, researchers have greater credibility when they can sign well, when they have deaf friends, and when they participate in activities of the deaf community.

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Furthermore, if a researcher is deaf, it does not necessarily mean that he or she will do research that is appropriately sensitive to the perspectives of various deaf people. As with hearing researchers, it is desirable for those who are deaf to personally know deaf people with a diversity of perspectives, to become skilled in communicating with those with various communication preferences (Kannapell, 1989), and to involve other deaf persons in the research, such as including a deaf advisory group (Foster, 1993).

Involvement is Not Enough

There needs to be more deaf individuals leading the research investigations of deaf people. As Akamatsu (1993) and Foster (1993) have made clear, it is desirable to improve the sensitivity and quality of the investigations conducted by hearing researchers with deaf individuals. It is important, however, that the context in which these efforts occur be one where there are also significant numbers of deaf persons directing research. To illustrate the small number of deaf persons currently involved, let us consider the number of deaf investigators presenting at a recent international conference. The presentations sponsored by the special interest group on the education of deaf people at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association are one of the major forums where research on the education of deaf individuals is presented. In the 1993 Meeting, of the 34 authors and co-authors presenting papers sponsored by the special interest group, only two of them were deaf (6 percent) and only one of them attended the meeting.

Researchers who belong to other minority groups, such as African-Americans and Asian-Pacific persons, might well be uncomfortable if only 6 percent of the authors of research papers about their minority group were members of the minority group. (Perhaps researchers who are

white and from middle class backgrounds might also feel better if there were a greater proportion of minority group researchers.) These researchers who are members of minority groups might think that the research would more accurately capture the experience of minority group individuals if a significant proportion of these researchers had the minority group experience themselves. In line with this thinking, if a greater number of persons doing research on deafness were themselves deaf, the overall quality of research in the field might improve and its sensitivity to deaf individuals might increase.

The lack of deaf researchers is an issue that has not been adequately addressed. One reason that there are so few deaf researchers is that in achieving the training and establishing oneself as a researcher the deaf individual is likely to encounter significant barriers and to receive little support. There is an especially good chance of this situation occurring when the student participates in a graduate program where all or almost all other participants are hearing. In a recent essay in *Scientific American*, a black scientist described his difficulties in establishing a career as a microbiologist (Johnson, 1993). He said that he believes powerful efforts – including in his case intervention by the president of his university – are necessary to enable black scholars to become successful researchers. The prospective deaf researcher may well face even greater difficulties. Difficulties that both minority groups often encounter, such as lack of role models in graduate school and lack of encouragement to participate in scientific professional organizations, are compounded for the deaf person because of communication barriers. Thus, powerful steps also need to be taken to enable deaf persons to have research careers; but the field is not now taking enough steps to put deaf persons in major roles in research. It is time for the field to take seriously the involvement of deaf people in research on deafness.

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