

ANALYSING THE CONCEPT OF DEAF IDENTITY

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Abstract: This study explored the identity styles of twenty prelingually deaf adults in Greece, through semi-structured interviews. Three emerged identities were identified among the participants, including the culturally Deaf, the culturally hearing and the bicultural participants. The identity styles of the participants reflect their views regarding their cultural identification, their language preferences and their social and personal relationships, which are analysed and discussed. Finally, special emphasis is given to the participants with a bicultural identity and their struggle to balance among different worlds.

Key words: Culture, Deaf, Identity.

INTRODUCTION

Identity is a complicated social construction that arises through the impact of and interaction with various social and cultural contexts (Andrews, Leigh, & Weiner, 2004; Harter, 1997; Israelite, Ower, & Goldstein, 2002). Persons may form different identities depending on the environment where they grow and live as well as what is salient in their life at a specific period (Andrews et al., 2004). The construction of deaf¹ identity depends on

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¹ In this paper the term 'Deaf' concerns a group of deaf people who share a common language and culture (Padden & Humphries, 1988), while the term 'deaf' is either used for deaf participants who communicated orally or to refer to the general population of deaf people. Furthermore, the term "deaf" is used in the participants' comments, because during the interview the participants did not define whether they referred to the cultural term "Deaf" or the audiological term "deaf".

several factors such as the attitudes of the majority society towards deaf persons and sign language, the size of deaf population and the life opportunities available to deaf persons (Woll & Ladd, 2003). Foster and Kinuthia (2003) suggest that internal/foundational or external/conditional factors act together to produce a sense of identity among deaf individuals. The foundational factors include individual characteristics, while the conditional factors concern situational, social and societal conditions.

Deaf persons, who are grown up within an environment with opportunities to learn and use sign language and get familiar with the Deaf community, are likely to develop a Deaf identity, which indicates a social construction of identity and an involvement in Deaf culture. If deaf persons are grown up within an environment where they interact with hearing adults and peers orally, they are likely to develop a hearing identity, which reflects an audiological dimension of being deaf and an involvement in the hearing world. Sometimes, deaf persons may develop a bicultural identity and feel immersed and comfortable within both the Deaf and the hearing world. Other times, though, deaf persons may develop a marginal identity and feel uncomfortable within the deaf or the hearing world (Andrews et al., 2004; Bat-Chava, 2000; Foster & Kinuthia, 2003; Glickman, 1996; Israelite et al., 2002; Leigh, 1999; Maxwell-McCaw, 2001; Maxwell-McCaw, Leigh, & Marcus, 2000; Nikolarazi & Hadjidakou, in press; Padden, 1998).

During the last years, the exploration of deaf identity has been on the focus of the research on deaf people. Glickman (1996) developed the Deaf Identity Developmental Scale (DIDS), based on the racial identity developmental theory, and identified four identities among deaf people: (a) the hearing identity, (b) the marginal identity, (c) the Deaf identity, and (d) the bicultural identity. Bat-Chava (2000) – based on four cluster variables: (a) importance of sign, (b) importance of speech, (c) group identification, and (d) attitudes towards deaf people – identified three types of identity including the culturally Deaf, the culturally hearing, the bicultural, and a very small number of negative identities. Furthermore, Maxwell-McCaw (2001) constructed the Deaf Acculturation Scale (DAS) based on the acculturation approach and identified four cultural identities among deaf individuals: (a) hearing acculturated identity, (b) marginal cultural identity, (c) Deaf acculturated identity, and (d) bicultural identity. Sari (2005) explored the identities of deaf adolescents in Turkey with the Deaf Identity Scale and identified three identities including a culturally hearing, a culturally Deaf, and a bicultural identity. Finally, Breivik (2005) explored the emerging identities of

Norwegian Deaf people based on a narrative perspective and in-depth accounts through which critical themes regarding identity are approached from different points of view. All participants underlined that involvement within the Deaf community is very important and necessary for the development of deaf identity.

Most of the above studies identified and described the identity types of deaf persons based on written scales and questionnaires which were then analysed with quantitative methods. Although these studies provided us with very important information that improved our understanding of deaf identity, there is still need for further research based on qualitative research methods which could enable an in-depth look into deaf persons' identities. Breivik's (2005) study recognised this need offering insight into deaf Norwegians' emerging identities and also pointing out the value of international perspectives on deaf identity.

However, in Greece, there has not been any research on deaf identity. Based on previous research, the most prevalent identities among deaf persons should include a culturally Deaf, a culturally hearing, a bicultural and a marginal identity. These identities reflect cultural differences among the deaf people (Israelite et al., 2002; Leigh, 1999), as identity is driven by difference and the construction of oppositions (Woodward, 1997). Considering that identity is an essential dimension of one's well being, psychological functioning and personal development (Higgins & Nash, 1996; Leigh, 1999; Waterman, 1992), an initial research attempt was made to explore deaf adults' identity in Greece. The main research hypothesis in the study was that the deaf identity types that were identified in other countries should be present in Greek deaf adults. Furthermore, the construction of oppositions would form the basis of deaf identities among deaf adults in Greece.

METHOD

Participants

Twenty ($N = 20$) prelingually deaf persons – i.e., with onset of his/her hearing loss before the age of 3 – participated in the study. They were 9 men and 11 women. Their audiological tests could not be checked but they all described that they had a mean degree of hearing loss which ranged from severe to profound, that is, from 70 to 120 dB. The age of the participants

Table 1. The frequency of educational setting per gender

Gender	General school	School for the deaf	Both settings	Total
Women	5	2	3	10 (50%)
Men	4	3	3	10 (50%)
Total	9 (45%)	5 (25%)	6 (30%)	20 (100%)

ranged from 22 to 47 years old ($M = 32.30$, $SD = 6.91$). All participants had hearing parents. Nine (45%) participants had attended general schools, six (30%) participants had attended schools for the deaf and five participants (25%) had attended both settings. Regarding the mode of communication in the above settings, 12 (60%) participants were educated orally, 2 (10%) participants through Total Communication, and 6 (30%) participants were educated orally during the first years of their education and through Total Communication in the later years of their education (see Table 1). Total communication was introduced in Greece in 1984, while before only spoken language was used in the education of the deaf. Therefore, many participants were trained orally because there was no other communication option in any educational setting (Lampropoulou, 1999).

Instrument

A semi-structured in-depth interview was conducted based on an interview guide which was developed and used for a larger study that explored deaf identity in Greece and in Cyprus (Nikolarazi & Hadjidakou, 2005; Nikolarazi & Hadjidakou, in press) (see also Appendix 1). The interview guide involved questions regarding cultural identification, knowledge, involvement and preferences, which are considered as the most critical indicators for deaf identity, as also indicated in all previous studies (Bat-Chava, 2000; Foster & Kinuthia, 2003; Glickman, 1996; Maxwell-McCaw, 2001; Nikolarazi & Hadjidakou, in press).

Procedure

The researchers informed the Associations of Deaf or hard of hearing persons and also professionals who were involved with deaf persons about the study. In this way, twenty deaf participants from the north and south Greece voluntarily participated in the study. All participants met the following criteria: (a) they were all prelingually deaf, (b) they could be interviewed either

orally in Greek or in Greek Sign Language (GSL), (c) they were from different organisations, which favoured either sign or spoken language. In particular, 7 participants were traced through Association for the Hard of Hearing, which favoured oral communication, 10 participants were traced through Associations for the deaf which favoured sign language, and 5 participants were traced through professionals who worked with deaf persons. In all interviews that took place in GSL, a certified interpreter was present. With the participants' permission the interviews were videotaped. Each interview lasted approximately one hour.

Analysis

The interviews were transcribed and the researcher read the transcriptions repeatedly to achieve familiarity with the transcripts. Following, 25% of the transcriptions were given to the participants who judged the accuracy of the transcription in Greek. There were very minimal corrections in the accuracy of the transcription. By reading the transcripts the comments that were informative to the aims of the study and formed the meaningful units of the study were highlighted (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996). Based on these highlighted information the initial code categories were created, which were also guided by the questions of the study (Foster & Kinuthia, 2003; Nikolarazi & Hadjidakou, in press). Following, two researchers read the transcripts several times and assigned sections of the interviews to these code categories. Then, connections and similarities between these categories were explored with the use of the constant comparative method (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). For example, sometimes, the interview sections were assigned to very narrow categories while there was a need for broader categories (see Appendix 2). In this way, the following final thematic categories were developed and are going to be analysed: (a) cultural identification, (b) language preferences, and (c) social and personal preferences. The researchers developed the thematic categories independently. However, they also met to discuss any disagreement that occurred. Disagreements were resolved through discussion. Inter-rater reliability was .85 and was calculated by dividing the total number of agreements by the total number of agreements and disagreements.

RESULTS

Based on the qualitative analysis of the interview data the initial hypothesis regarding the existence of various identity types was confirmed. Specifically, three deaf identity types were identified among the participants, including 9 (45%) participants with a Deaf identity, 5 (25%) with a hearing identity and 6 (30%) with a bicultural identity. The identification of the participants' identity was based on the following criteria: their views about their (a) cultural identification, (b) language preferences, and (c) social and personal preferences (Nikolaraizi & Hadjikakou, in press), which have been identified as salient in deaf identity (Bat-Chava, 2000; Glickman, 1996; Kannapell, 1994; Leigh, 1999; Maxwell-McCaw, 2001; Woodward, 1997). Two researchers reached their decision on the identity type of each participant independently. Inter-rater reliability for the three identity types was .90 and was calculated by dividing the total number of agreements by the total number of agreements and disagreements.

The participants with a Deaf identity were educated totally or for most of their years in schools for the deaf. They all chose to be interviewed in GSL. They described themselves as deaf, communicated in GSL and their social as well as their personal relationships included Deaf persons.

The participants with a hearing identity were educated for most of the years in general schools. They all chose to be interviewed in Greek. They described themselves as hard of hearing, communicated in Greek and their social as well as their personal relationships included hearing people.

Among the participants with a bicultural identity four of them had attended only general schools and two of them had attended mostly general schools and for a few years schools for the deaf. Four of them chose to be interviewed in GSL and two in Greek. They all described themselves as deaf except one participant who described himself as hard of hearing. They were involved within the hearing and Deaf world, they communicated in Greek and in GSL, and their social and personal relationships included both hearing and Deaf people (see Tables 2 and 3).

Following, the results are analyzed based on the emerged themes and according to the participants' identities. It is important to note that, although a numerical description of the identity types of the participants was provided above, the emphasis is placed on the importance and the power of individual responses in defining and evaluating reality, which is

Table 2. The participants' emerged identity patterns

Identity	Interview language	Cultural identification	Language preferences	Social and personal preferences
Hearing	Greek	Hard of hearing	Greek	Hearing persons
Deaf	GSL	Deaf	GSL	Deaf persons
Bicultural	Half of them in Greek and half of them in GSL	Deaf or Hard of hearing	Greek and GSL	Deaf and hearing persons

Note. Greek Sign Language (GSL).

Table 3. Frequencies of participants as a function of identities and educational settings they attended

Identity	General schools	Schools for the Deaf	Both settings	Total
Hearing	5	--	--	5 (25%)
Deaf	--	5	4	9 (45%)
Bicultural	4	--	2	6 (30%)
Total	9 (45%)	5 (25%)	6 (30%)	20 (100%)

an essential element in the qualitative research (Nikolarazi, 2000). Through this analysis, the oppositions that form the basis of the different identity types were found.

Deaf identity

Cultural identification. All participants with a Deaf identity felt that there were differences between deaf and hard of hearing persons. One of their differences concerned their residual hearing. In particular, as one of the following representative comments indicates, the ability to speak on the phone is considered as a strong indicator of one's residual hearing and subsequently one's description as deaf or hard of hearing. Another difference was associated with the language of communication, meaning that deaf persons communicated in GSL and felt that they could not communicate orally, in contrast with hard of hearing people who wanted to communicate orally in Greek. Finally, a difference between deaf and hard of hearing people concerned the fact that hard of hearing persons feel sometimes confused about themselves and about where they belong, while deaf persons feel certain that they belong to the Deaf world and also they feel comfortable when they communicate in GSL and interact with Deaf persons.

"A hard of hearing person is the one who can speak on the phone and has intelligible speech. A deaf person cannot hear. Hard of hearing people are confused and do not know where they belong. When they grow older they enter the Deaf world but they cannot integrate in the Deaf community. They try to learn GSL but it is difficult for them. On the contrary, deaf people feel strong, they go to Deaf clubs and they communicate in GSL." (D22)²

"I feel more comfortable among Deaf persons. I rarely approach a hearing person. If hearing persons approach me and try to communicate with me in GSL, I may interact with them. Otherwise, it is quite difficult to communicate with them because they don't know GSL. Also, if they don't know GSL they usually do not accept deaf persons. Of course, there is no way that I can communicate with them in Greek." (D6)

Language preferences. The participants with a Deaf identity acknowledged that both Greek and GSL were important languages. However, based on the following comments, it is evident that GSL is their language. They stressed that they used Greek under certain social circumstances to communicate orally with hearing people who did not know GSL pointing out, though, the various problems that such a communication entails.

"GSL is very important because it allows rich communication. In Greek, I can hardly understand and I lose so much time just to pick up the meaning. When somebody speaks I just try to pick up the general meaning. The hearing persons sometimes understand me but if they don't, I write the message to them." (D2)

"If I need to interact with hearing persons in everyday life, I mostly rely on written language. Also, I become very expressive, in order to communicate with them. However, I find it difficult to lipread everything that they say." (D6)

"I communicate with my wife and my children in GSL. I can also communicate orally. I sign or speak depending on the person with whom I communicate. Of course, I can communicate in a better way

² The code 'D' stands for Deaf, the code 'H' for hearing and the code 'B' for bicultural.

in GSL while in spoken language I need to make a great effort to lipread somebody. Fortunately, nowadays, things are different and the society is more open to sign language." (D7)

"Deaf persons must use GSL as their first language but also learn to read and write very well in Greek, otherwise they cannot communicate with hearing persons." (D22)

Social and personal preferences. Most participants with a Deaf identity had or chose to have deaf friends or partners, stressing that real and full communication could only be established only through GSL. Furthermore, the participants who had in the past affairs with hearing men or women faced communication problems and sometimes felt socially excluded in certain conditions, since they could not communicate fluently in Greek.

"I had affairs with hearing women. However, when we went out with her hearing friends, I felt alone. In contrast when I had an affair with a deaf woman, all our friends were Deaf and I felt nice. Now, I have a Deaf partner and I am very happy with her." (D7)

"I prefer to go out with deaf persons. I feel comfortable with them, while I get bored with hearing persons" ... "In the past I had deaf and hearing partners. It was extremely difficult to cope with the hearing partners, since we could not communicate. At the beginning everything seemed so perfect, but gradually my partners got tired and they broke the relationship. Also, I did not feel equal with them and comfortable." (D14)

Hearing identity

Cultural identification. The participants with a hearing identity indicated that they were identified with the hearing world. They considered themselves as hard of hearing and as can also be seen in the following comments, they differed from deaf people persons regarding their better residual hearing. Also, they referred to the different communication and socialization preferences since hard of hearing persons relied on oral communication and preferred to socialize with hearing peers, while deaf people communicated in GSL and preferred to socialize with deaf peers. Also, the following comments indicate that the participants with a hearing identity disliked small

communities such as the Deaf community, where everybody interacted with other deaf persons and they felt that it was more interesting to have the opportunity for broader social relationships with hearing people.

"When somebody uses GSL, I call him deaf...I feel closer to the hearing persons and to the hard of hearing. Deaf people live within their own small world and they do not want to meet any hearing persons. I hate such small social groups. I prefer to be independent and to be able to socialize with a variety of persons, rather than belonging to a certain social group, such as Deaf persons." (H5)

"I am hard of hearing. I feel closer to the hearing and hard of hearing persons. The world of Deaf is difficult, because deaf persons use GSL and they live in their own world. They have their own language and their own mentality. Within hearing world I feel free, I can share so many things. I really struggled to enter the world of hearing and I feel happy about it...Deaf persons communicate in GSL and if I enter their world I have to communicate only in GSL. If I try to communicate in Greek, it may insult them. Also, I hate the fact that deaf persons love gossip. It is such a small community and there is no personal life. There is no privacy." (H8)

"I am hard of hearing. Deaf persons are different than hard of hearing ones. They want to go out only with deaf persons and they isolate themselves. In contrast, hard of hearing persons want to be with hearing persons. We try, of course, to be with hearing persons. I don't say that it is easy. Still, though, we try and we want to be with them, while deaf persons do not try." (H10).

Language preferences. The participants with a hearing identity communicated in their everyday life in Greek. Nevertheless, they commented that sometimes communication could become a bit difficult, considering that constant visual contact and lipreading was required. It is important to note that three of the five participants with a hearing identity learnt GSL as their second language, which they used in certain cases such as to have access to information or to respond to their job's requirement.

"I communicate in Greek. When I speak with somebody who has a moustache I find it difficult to lipread him. Also, if there is no enough

light, or if somebody speaks quickly, it is difficult for me to understand him. I usually ask people to speak a bit slower or to repeat. I learnt GSL much later in my life, because it was important for my job. However, I communicate in Greek." (H4)

"I communicate orally but when I meet somebody I need some time to get adjusted to the way that he talks. I also know GSL which helps me when I attend a seminar and there is a GSL interpreter." (H8)

"Everybody tell me that my speech is quite intelligible. I don't think that they don't understand me. Sometimes, when I am tired my voice gets worse. I tried to learn GSL, but I did not manage to learn it well because I don't have any spare time to visit Deaf clubs in order to do some practice. I liked GSL, but to tell you the truth I prefer spoken language. I do not want to underestimate GSL, but I feel that it is better to communicate in a spoken language, because you can communicate easier in another country, talk on the phone, and do your everyday jobs. GSL, however, is important for everybody who cannot communicate in a spoken language." (H17)

Social and personal preferences. The personal and social relationships of the participants with a hearing identity involved mostly hearing persons that they have known since their school years.

"I have never met any hard of hearing or deaf persons until the age of 18. I have always been among hearing persons and therefore most of my friends are hearing. However, I wouldn't mind if my friends were also hard of hearing or deaf." (H16)

"Most of my friends are hearing that I have known for many years from school. When I was 20 years old I met some hard of hearing persons and then I acquired a few hard of hearing friends. However, I prefer to be with hearing persons." (H9)

Regarding their partners, they expressed their preference for a hearing partner. Their choice was partly linked to the fact that for most of their life they had mostly socialized with hearing people and consequently they felt

more comfortable with hearing partners. Also, their choice for a hearing partner was also associated with their need to feel more secure in their everyday life.

"Most of my partners, so far, were hearing. I have never had any problem with hearing men. Nobody turned me down, because I am hard of hearing. Everything was ok. Also, it is important for me to have a hearing partner because he can help me by answering the phone, listening to the doorbell. Also, later when I have a baby I am going to feel more secure with a hearing partner. I would not like to have a Deaf partner because I do not know GSL." (H9)

"I prefer a hearing partner because she will help me with the phone, with the TV. Sometimes, I think that I could have a hard of hearing partner, but not a Deaf. I don't know GSL and we would not be able to communicate with each other. My first priority is to be with a hearing partner." (H17)

Bicultural identity

Cultural identification. Thee participants with a bicultural identity considered themselves as deaf apart from one participant who described himself as hard of hearing because he could communicate orally quite fluently, although his residual hearing was not helpful. All participants commented that they had less residual hearing than hard of hearing persons and admitted that they had a hearing loss.

"I would say that I belong both to the world of deaf and to the world of hearing...I am deaf. Even if I wear my hearing aids I can only hear some car noises or very loud voices. I have to look somebody in order to lipread him and understand me. Hard of hearing persons have more residual hearing. However, we are all the same human beings." (B3)

"A deaf person is the one who cannot hear and uses sign language, while a hard of hearing person is the one who can hear better and uses spoken language." "I feel that I belong to both worlds, the world of hearing and the world of deaf." (B12)

"Medically, I am deaf but I can also call myself 'hard of hearing' because although I cannot hear I communicate perfectly orally." (B16)

Language preferences. It is very interesting that all the participants with a bicultural identity felt comfortable both with Greek as well as with GSL. For most of them, Greek was their first language, since they learnt GSL later as adults. Still, though, they felt that GSL enabled their full access to communication.

"At the beginning when I saw other people signing I found it very strange. I wondered why they did not want to speak. Also, some of them signed and spoke at the same time. It was difficult for me to learn GSL but gradually I learnt GSL through my daily interactions with deaf persons. I truly believe that GSL is the language of Deaf persons. I like both Greek and GSL. When I communicate with hearing persons that do not know GSL I lipread them and I speak. Sometimes I can easily communicate in Greek, but other times it is difficult. When I cannot communicate, my mother helps me. When I communicate with Deaf persons I use GSL. Now, that I know GSL, I can easily communicate with deaf persons." (B4)

"When I was a child I was among hearing people, because I attended a general education setting. When I grew up, however, I did not have any friends, I was rather alone and my mother asked me whether I wanted to learn sign language. Since the moment that I started to interact with deaf people in sign language, I felt so much better and strong." (B12)

Social and personal preferences. As mentioned above, the participants with a bicultural identity interacted both with hearing as well as with deaf people. Most of them were grown up in a hearing-centered environment and, consequently, their older friends were their ex-hearing classmates from general schools, but later in their life when they met deaf people and got involved in Deaf culture, they acquired deaf friends.

"I have both hearing and deaf friends. However, when I was a child most of my friends at school were hearing." (B12)

Regarding their partners, two participants felt disappointed from their relationships with hearing partners and they preferred to have a deaf partner.

"In the past I had some affairs with hearing people. However, these relationships did not satisfy me. Communication was difficult, I could not understand them and they could not understand me. I felt isolated and most of all I felt that they wanted me to be obedient. Now, I have an affair with a deaf person and I feel so much better." (B12)

The following participant pointed out that the most important condition for a successful relationship was for the two partners to communicate and understand each other.

"It does not matter whether I have a deaf or a hearing partner. I believe that what counts for me is to be able to communicate with my partner." (B3)

DISCUSSION

Based on the results of the study, three identity types were identified in this study: the culturally Deaf, the culturally hearing and the bicultural identity, which were also among the prominent identities in previous studies (Bat-Chava, 2000; Glickman, 1996; Maxwell-McCaw, 2001; Nikolarazi & Hadjikakou, in press; Sari, 2005). Although our original hypothesis was verified regarding the variety of identity types, it is important to note that the absence of a marginal identity may be due to the fact that biculturalism can be closely associated with marginalism (Emerton, 1998), considering that biculturally deaf persons may be involved but also navigate between different cultural groups and try to conceive boundaries between contradictory beliefs and activities in the lives of hearing and Deaf people (Emerton, 1998; Padden, 1998).

For many years, being "bicultural" was a rare phenomenon – possibly due to the linguistic and cultural pressures that the Deaf community as well as other minority groups faced (Lane, Hoffmeister, & Bahan, 1996). This kept Deaf and hearing persons away from each other. During the last decades, though, this phenomenon has started to change, since several social, educational and legal changes such as the inclusive movement, the recognition of Sign Language as a real and official language, the fights and the passing

of laws that defended the rights of minority groups as well as technology's involvement all may have acted to increase contact of Deaf and hearing persons and enable a move from the cultural to the bicultural (Nikolarazi & Makri, 2004/05; Padden, 1998).

An interesting result concerned the fact that although the participants with different identity types had mostly different views, which is in accordance with the view that identity is driven by difference (Leigh, 1999; Woodward, 1997), they also seemed to agree on particular issues. Specifically, they all agreed about the features that differentiated hard of hearing from deaf persons. Most participants, regardless of their identity, felt that hard of hearing persons differed from deaf persons audiologically, namely the existence of more or less residual hearing and also culturally, namely their language, social and personal preferences. It is important to note that the social model of Deaf identity does not deny the audiological state of being deaf, but stresses that the negative social attitudes and the negative impact of the environment can make one with a hearing loss feel as disabled. Specifically, a deaf person is likely to feel as audiologically deaf in a hearing context where communication is oral-based, while in a Deaf context where communication is based on sign language deaf persons are more likely to feel as Deaf (Skelton & Valentine, 2003). This was also found in our study, particularly for the participants with a bicultural identity, who stressed that according to their social interactions, with hearing or deaf people, they felt as audiologically deaf, as impaired, or as Deaf. Such feelings are well understood, considering that the boundaries between deaf and Deaf identities can sometimes be fluid and in different contexts people may feel either as culturally Deaf or as audiologically deaf (Skelton & Valentine, 2003).

Regarding their language preferences, the participants with the hearing identity felt more comfortable communicating in Greek, although they sometimes faced a few difficulties in their communication interactions. It is worth considering that all participants with a hearing identity were raised and educated within an oral hearing-centred environment, where the focus was probably placed on residual hearing and spoken language. It is not a surprise that they all wore their hearing aids. Under such circumstances deaf persons believe that one of the basic features of their identity, which also distances them from Deaf individuals, is the use of oral language (Israelite et al., 2002; Leigh, 1999; Nikolarazi & Hatjikakou, 2005, in press). Therefore, as adults they cannot easily abandon their internalized values about the importance of hearing culture and oral language (Nikolarazi & Makri,

2004/05), which may also help us to understand the language preferences of the participants with a hearing identity.

In contrast, the participants with a Deaf identity underlined that GSL was their first language which allowed them access to full communication. Although they stressed that they could communicate in Greek when this was necessary, they stated that such communication was tiring and did not permit them to communicate fluently. Also, most of them did not wear their hearing aids. It is important to stress that all participants with a Deaf culture attended schools for the deaf either totally or partially but for the biggest part of their school life. In schools for the deaf, students have the opportunity to interact with deaf children and learn sign language either inside or outside the classrooms and in general to get familiar with Deaf culture (Bat-Chava, 2000; Janesick & Moores, 1992; Nikolaraizi & Hadjidakou, in press).

The participants with a bicultural identity attributed both to GSL and Greek an important role. These participants were grown up in a hearing-centred environment where the focus was placed on residual hearing and spoken language. Also, most of the participants with a bicultural identity wore their hearing aids. However, either as adolescents or as adults, they learnt GSL and discovered Deaf culture which was a fulfilling experience, as also indicated in previous studies (Breivick, 2005; Nikolaraizi & Hadjidakou, in press; Skelton & Valentine, 2003).

Regarding their social and personal preferences, the participants with a hearing identity socialized mostly with hearing persons, whom they had known for many years, from school, and they also preferred to have a hearing partner. Relating to the hearing world appeared to be important for the sense of identity of deaf people who are raised within an oral based environment and therefore they mostly try to associate with hearing persons (Israelite et al., 2002). Some of the participants with a hearing identity learnt GSL as adults, but they could not cope socially with deaf persons, possibly because they could not get easily adjusted within the Deaf culture. According to Johnson and Erting (1989) paternity and patrimony factors seem to be important for one's acceptance within the Deaf culture. Paternity factors are involuntarily chosen and/or are biological in nature, such as being born into a Deaf family or attending a residential program. Patrimony factors, on the other hand, are voluntarily chosen, such as behaviors or cultural attitudes involving participation within the Deaf community and communicating in sign language. The participants with a hearing identity were grown up in a hearing-centred environment and although they learnt GSL as adults,

they neither had Deaf experience, nor Deaf knowledge, which could influence and facilitate their membership in the Deaf culture (Bahan, 1994).

The participants with a Deaf identity chose to have deaf friends and partners underlining the critical issue of communication. Their comments revealed that they did not reject hearing friendships; however, most of the time communication with hearing persons was not effective and therefore impeded them from developing true relationships. Finally, the participants with a bicultural identity socialized with deaf friends, but they also maintained their old hearing friendships from school. Later, though, as adults or adolescents they met Deaf role models and started to learn GSL. Nevertheless, as also Bat-Chava (2000) indicated, these participants did not abandon their old values such as communicating orally or socializing with their old hearing friends and in parallel they developed relationships with deaf persons with whom they communicated in GSL. However, regarding their more personal relationships they were more concerned and stated that it was important for them to have a partner with whom they could communicate or share similar experiences so that they could understand each other. Furthermore, two participants with a bicultural identity chose to have a deaf partner, because in the past they had experienced communication difficulties but also negative attitudes from their ex-hearing partners and they believed that a true balanced relationship could be achieved only with a deaf partner.

Conclusions

Concluding, this paper has presented the identity patterns of Greek individuals, as they appeared based on the participants' views about their cultural identification, their language and their personal and social preferences. Based on the results of this study three identities were identified, involving the culturally Deaf, the culturally hearing and the bicultural participants. The results of this study provided a rough assessment for the determination and specific types of deaf identity. There is no intention to imply, though, that these are the only identities among deaf individuals or that these results can be generalised for the wider population of the deaf in Greece. The number of the participants has to be extended through the use of quantitative research methods to enable the testing of research hypotheses or through the use of mixed research methods to enable a better and deeper understanding. These issues mentioned in this study can be addressed and exploited in future research to arrive at robust conclusions.

Furthermore, an important conclusion of this study, which is in line with

Bat-Chava's position (2000), concerns the fact that deaf identities are not static and may change depending on the context within deaf people live. In our study, an identity shift had occurred for the participants with a bicultural identity, who were grown up and educated orally, but meeting Deaf persons and learning GSL contributed to the development of their bicultural identity. Certainly, no claim can be made, whether these participants had a hearing identity before they acquire the Deaf one, or whether they had struggled with their identity until they became bicultural. Future studies could further explore the feelings and the experiences of deaf persons who are involved within hearing and Deaf cultures and increase our understanding about deaf biculturalism.

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APPENDIX 1

Interview guide

1. Tell us about your social relationships. Do you interact mostly with deaf or hearing persons? What sort of relationships do you have with them?
2. What do you know about Deaf culture and persons who are members of the Deaf community?
3. What are your views about the role of the associations for the Deaf or hard of hearing persons? Do you often visit such associations and why?
4. In which way do you communicate in your daily life and how do you feel about this?
5. What do you know about Greek Sign Language? Does it play any role in your life?
6. What is your opinion about cochlear implants?
7. How do you feel about your identity?
8. How would you describe your self? (Deaf, deaf or hard of hearing person) and why? Are there any differences between deaf, Deaf or hard of hearing persons?
9. Could you tell us a few things about your partner/husband? Would you like to have a deaf or a hearing partner and if so, why?

APPENDIX 2

Development of categories

The following comment is presented in the results under the section 'language preferences'.

"I communicate with my wife and my children in GSL. I can also communicate orally. I sign or speak depending on the person with whom I communicate. Of course, I can communicate in a better way in GSL while in spoken language I need to make a great effort to lipread somebody. Fortunately, nowadays, things are different and the society is more open to sign language."(GH7)

Initially, the interview data in the above comment was organized as following:

The comment "I communicate with my wife and my children in GSL. I can also communicate orally. I sign or speak depending on the person with whom I communicate." was assigned to the code category 'Communication choices'.

The comment "Of course, I can communicate in a better way in GSL while in spoken language I need to make a great effort to lipread somebody" was assigned to the code category 'Language competency'.

The comment "Fortunately, nowadays, things are different and the society is more open to sign language" was assigned to the code category code 'Society's attitudes'.

Through reading the transcript several times, the three code categories were inserted in the thematic category "Language preferences", because in this way the analysis of the results would be more meaningful.