
**Understanding Deafhood: In Search of Its Meanings**

The authors argue that *Deafhood* (a term coined by Dr. Paddy Ladd) is an open-ended concept with an essentialist core. They describe how deaf people who have attended their Deafhood lectures and workshops have perceived different aspects of the Deafhood concept, and compare the basic tenets of Deafhood and criticisms on Deafhood to theories and criticisms on feminist essentialisms. The authors find that the vagueness and wideness of the Deafhood concept is one of its strengths, though they also find that it is in some respects problematic to combine and unite ontology and liberation theory in one concept. They further suggest that the ontological aspects of Deafhood need to be foregrounded. The question of essentialism inherent in the Deafhood concept is also briefly discussed with regard to hearing people, the use of spoken language, and the use of amplification technology and cochlear implants.

**Keywords:** Deafhood, essentialism, feminism, ontology, liberation

*Deafhood* is a concept that aims to disrupt medically oriented and oppressive discourses, by offering a deaf-constructed model that grows out of deaf people’s own ontologies (i.e., deaf ways of being in the world), emphasizing positive, experience-oriented views of deaf people (Ladd, 2003). After the publication in 2003 of Paddy Ladd’s book *Understanding Deaf Culture: In Search of Deafhood*, the term became a “buzzword” that appeared to touch many deaf people. It was immortalized in tattoos on deaf peoples’ arms and feet and commercialized with Deafhood cups, T-shirts, bags, and buttons (see [http://shop.gehoerlosen-jugend.de/](http://shop.gehoerlosen-jugend.de/)). The concept has been used in political meetings and activism, and has been an inspiration for yoga (see [http://www.deaffoodyoga.com/](http://www.deaffoodyoga.com/)), plays (see [http://www.deaffoodmonologues.com/](http://www.deaffoodmonologues.com/)), and a charitable organization, the Deafhood Foundation ([http://www.deaffoodfoundation.org/Deafhood/Home.html](http://www.deaffoodfoundation.org/Deafhood/Home.html)). There are (or have been) Deafhood workshops, courses, conferences, reading groups, online discussion groups (e.g., [http://www.deaffooddiscourses.com/](http://www.deaffooddiscourses.com/)), and innumerable vlogs (e.g., [http://www.deaffooddiscourses.com/](http://www.deaffooddiscourses.com/)) and blogs.

However, the Deafhood concept is not free from criticism. The present article is based on discussions during...
Deafhood presentations and workshops during which it became clear that many participants struggled with questions linked to the nature of this concept. Since 2008 we have taught Deafhood, combining lecturing with workshops, to small groups of up to 25 people (with a few exceptions) in Finland (invited by the Finnish Deaf Association) and Denmark (invited by the Danish Deaf Association and the Frontrunners international deaf youth leadership training program), giving basic and advanced Deafhood courses of 1 to 3 days. We also have taught Deafhood to larger groups (up to 60 people) during camps organized by the World Federation of the Deaf Youth Section and the European Union of Deaf Youth. In Flanders—which we both are from—we have been teaching in a Deafhood consciousness-raising course, organized yearly by Fervlado (the Flemish Deaf Association) since 2009, taught by deaf people and aimed at deaf people only. It is a course organized on two levels (basic and advanced), spread over 10 months. While the Deafhood concept is the primary starting point and is used as a connecting thread throughout the course, the course takes on diverging subjects such as Deaf history, sign language, Deaf culture, Deaf art, and the future of the Deaf community, all taught by deaf teachers. Signing deaf people of all ages and backgrounds have registered for this course, which has significantly affected these people’s self-image, as we discuss in the present article.

During these short courses, participants have appeared to struggle with the rather vague articulation of the Deafhood concept and with its abstract nature. Therefore, we have often compared Deafhood with “feminism,” a comparison that has helped us articulate what Deafhood means, in comparison to and in contrast with feminism. Like Deafhood, feminist theories and ontologies have been powerful, moving people toward self-exploration and activism. Our course participants also have found that published explorations of the Deafhood concept (either academic or nonacademic) have been minimal and that Ladd’s own explanations are dispersed over several texts and often difficult to digest. The present article thus stems from a consideration of the participants’ feedback and concerns, and, as such, aims to offer an account of the lived experience of Deafhood as a concept, in itself and in comparison to feminist theories.

We start the present article by tracing the Deafhood concept back to Dr. Paddy Ladd (whom we introduce later in the text), arguing that Deafhood is an open-ended concept with an essentialist core, the core being the belief that sign language learning and knowledge and deaf socialization should be available to— and pursued by— every deaf person. We then describe how deaf people have perceived different aspects of the Deafhood concept. Subsequently, the basic tenets of Deafhood are compared to theories of feminist essentialisms. We set out which strands of feminism we are referring to, describe criticisms of Deafhood based on the workshops, and compare and contrast these criticisms with criticisms of certain feminist theories that address the issue of essentialism. We argue that the vagueness and breadth of the Deafhood concept is one of its strengths, although we also find that it is in some respects problematic to combine and unite ontology and liberation theory in one concept. This is because, first, it leads to confusion about what Deafhood actually (and primarily) “means,” and second, because it gives the impression that Deafhood is merely or mainly a reactionary concept, implying that the authoring of deaf ontologies is inspired solely by resistance to oppression. However, the ontological dimensions have proved to be most appealing to workshop participants. Hence, we suggest that the ontological aspects of Deafhood need to be situated in the foreground (recognizing that this is liberatory in itself), rather than the liberatory effect of “overcoming (mental) colonialism.” Finally, workshop participants have expressed strong concerns about concrete applications of the Deafhood concept. We discuss the question of essentialism inherent in the Deafhood concept below, with regard to concrete, everyday issues in Deaf communities such as the relationship with hearing people, the use of spoken language, and the use of technologies such as amplification and cochlear implants.

**Deafhood: Emergence and Adoption**

The Deafhood concept was first articulated in 1995 by the British Deaf activist and academic Dr. Paddy Ladd (1993b) in a chapter he contributed to a National Association of the Deaf publication (Ladd, 1993b); the chapter was republished, under a different title, in the proceedings of the Deaf Studies III conference (Ladd, 1993a). He further developed the concept in a dissertation on Deaf culture (Ladd, 1998) he wrote as part of his PhD program at the University of Bristol, in England. Worldwide dissemination of the Deafhood concept came with Ladd’s 2003 textbook *Understanding Deaf Culture: In Search of Deafhood*, which was based on his dissertation. In this book, Ladd actually argues for the validation of the Deaf culture concept (even though *Understanding Deaf Culture* is— misleadingly—known as “the Deafhood book”). Still, the Deafhood concept became a buzzword in both the academic and lay communi-
ties immediately after the book’s publication. While the Deafhood concept came into existence as an academic concept and frames academic programs such as the MSc in Deafhood studies at the University of Bristol and summer courses at Ohlone College in California, it has been, as we mention in the introductory section of the present article, inspiring and compelling to deaf people from many different backgrounds.

Between 2007 and 2011, Ladd’s book was translated into Japanese, German, and Spanish; a Portuguese translation is forthcoming. Attempts to translate the book into sign languages have been delayed for years due to lack of funding, but it has been in the process of being translated into American Sign Language (ASL) since 2011 (see the website “Deafhood Discussions,” www.deafhood.us/wp). However, in addition to the (written) language, the academic and encyclopedic style of writing in the book is a hurdle to many deaf people, for which Ladd has been criticized. Ladd himself has said that he understands the frustrations, but that the prime aim of his PhD dissertation (and the resulting publication) was to “hit” the hearing academic world and to “prove” the existence of Deaf culture (personal communication, September 12, 2008). When he learned about the success of the Deafhood concept, he started working on a website, the launching of which has been delayed for many years—again due to a lack of funding and personnel.

Because Ladd felt overwhelmed by the heavy demand for Deafhood courses and workshops, he started to delegate this work to people who had experienced his academic training and supervision, among whom are ourselves. Since being his students at the University of Bristol, we have been teaching about Deafhood in different contexts in different European countries since 2008, combining lectures with workshops.

**Ladd’s Explanation of Deafhood**

Ladd (2003, 2005, 2006) explains Deafhood in several different ways; hence, there is no one clear definition of what Deafhood is. One of Ladd’s explanations is that Deafhood is an English term to counter other (negative) English terms—such as hearing impaired and deafness—that describe deaf people within a pathological, medical model, implying that being deaf is a loss and that deaf people therefore are deficient beings in need of a cure. The Deafhood concept, on the contrary, aims to disrupt these medically oriented and oppressive discourses, by offering a deaf-constructed model that grows out of deaf people’s own ontologies. The concept does this by emphasizing positive, experience-oriented views of deaf people and by emphasizing deaf people’s possibilities, to ultimately identify their “larger Deaf selves” (Ladd, 2005, 2006).

This idea is also taken up by Bauman and Murray (2010) as part of their “Deaf-gain” concept. What Deaf people gain are enhanced cognitive skills such as increased peripheral recognition (Bavelier et al., 2000), increased facial recognition (Bettel et al., 1997), increased spatial cognition (Bellugi et al., 1989), visual alertness, and proficiency in visual learning and in the use of visual languages that are rich in “metaphoric iconicity” (Taub, 2001). In addition to these intrinsic arguments, there are also extrinsic arguments that demonstrate the contribution of deaf people and their language “for the greater good of humanity” (Bauman & Murray, 2010, p. 215). ASL is the second most frequently taught non-English language in 4-year colleges and universi-

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are patterns. The next step is to draw a line under Deaf culture as it is presently understood and say, “Yes, these are the Deaf traditions we have inherited following colonization. We respect them but we must also continue to aim to realize a larger Deaf self.” (pp. 247–248)

According to Ladd, the Deafhood concept, then, can help deaf people “to have a grasp of what we are aspiring towards and help that process along” (Ladd, 1993a, p. 211). The concept is thus not only designed as an ontology emphasizing “gain” but also as “a consciousness-raising strategy through which SLPs [Sign Language Peoples?] can examine their own experiences, re-empower themselves, and thus engage in the work of community regeneration” (P Ladd, personal communication, November 23, 2010).

Deafhood is thus a very broad concept, entailing ontology as well as a liberating, empowering philosophy and a counternarrative in response to hegemonic oralist and colonizing discourses. While one of the strengths of the Deafhood concept seems to be that it recognizes and validates deaf people’s ontologies and epistemologies, the fact that it serves as a kind of umbrella concept can be confusing as well, and the inherent essentialism has proved to be controversial. These two issues are addressed in the sections below, starting with a description of our workshops.

The Workshops and Deafhood as Ontology

As the Flemish course was taught 10 times over 10 months, and linked to various themes, participants had the time to link the philosophy behind the Deafhood concept to their daily lives. As such, Deafhood became a kind of ontological framework that returned throughout the course. While teaching, we felt that, for many participants, Deafhood was a very compelling term that seems to address them in their deepest being. (In the United States, this aspect has even led to Deafhood yoga courses; see http://www.deafhoodyoga.com/). A workshop technique we used at the end of our teaching sessions in Flanders was to place a chair in the middle of the classroom, state that the chair represented Deafhood, and ask people how they would position themselves in relation to this chair.4 Their answers were revealing:

- The chair as luggage, to take with you on your life journey
- The chair as the seat of a car: Deafhood as a way to start on the path of self-exploration
- Looking at the chair from a distance and moving toward it: Deafhood as a process—“I’ve found my way, I know where to go.”
- The chair as a campfire to give us warmth
- The chair to stand on, to widen your horizon
- Sitting “under” the chair: Deafhood as a second skin
- Sitting on the chair: “I’ve found my place, I feel good here.”

These answers point to the fact that thinking about Deafhood offered the participants opportunities for self-reflection: It opened the way to explore their lives and histories. Participants also said the Deafhood course increased their self-determination and their consciousness about being deaf in this world, and made them more tolerant toward, for example, incomprehension from hearing people. Recognizing a shared gut feeling and shared ontologies also generated a feeling of unity. Last but not least, the course caused a feeling of liberation. For example, one of the participants told us that the course had made him feel free, had given him wings.

However, at the same time, our course and workshop participants have repeatedly told us that they think Deafhood is too broad, too vague, and too hard to summarize, let alone explain to other people. If our participants try to explicate the concept, most of the time they discuss the ontological aspect, the gut feeling, connecting the recognition of this experience to the above-mentioned feeling of freedom. On the other hand, some hearing people who have been working with the Deaf community for a long time, and some deaf people who have not been enrolled in the course (yet), have told us (indirectly) that they feel that the course is a sort of breeding ground for deaf activism and even extremism. For them, the liberatory aspects of the concept have come to the fore, and these have been perceived as militant. This is an example of how the vagueness and wideness of the concept’s meaning have the potential to cause misunderstandings.

**Deafhood and Essentialism, and Feminist Essentialisms**

To summarize the previous sections, it appears that Deafhood is a very broad concept implying deaf ontologies and deaf epistemologies as well as being a liberating, empowering philosophy and a counternarrative toward hegemonic structures and discourses. As such, the Deafhood concept has a lot of similarities with feminisms.5 Because deaf people can in several respects be compared to women, in that they are “overpowered” by societal structures that are not produced by them or for them, and since they produce their own, different spaces, authoring their own ontologies and epistemologies (Kemp & Squires, 1997), we believe that a comparison...
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might help us to understand and articulate the specific nature of Deafhood and its inherent essentialism.

In the present article, we are not so much looking at feminism from its classical liberal rights perspective or at feminist activism, but rather at feminist trends in the 1980s and 1990s “to denounce totalizing theories, to celebrate difference, recognize ‘otherness,’ and acknowledge the multiplicity of feminisms” (Kemp & Squires, 1997, p. 4). We focus on the debate between social constructivist and essentialist theories regarding feminisms, citing leading feminists who have commented on the tension between the assertion of the existence of an essential “Womanness” and diverse, fluctuating subjectivities.

When, during our presentations and workshops, participants have asked us questions about Deafhood, these questions have almost always been framed within an essentialist rhetoric: a way of thinking characterized by questions such as “Who can have/can’t have Deafhood?” and “Who can experience/can’t experience Deafhood?” or “What do you need to do/to be to experience Deafhood?” Many participants have been in search of the core of the Deafhood concept, formulated as a set of characteristics or rules, and thus have thought in essentialist ways. For Ladd, when he was devising the concept, the primary commitment was to those who considered themselves members of Deaf communities and used sign language already; thus, the concept originally did not set out to clarify the above-mentioned questions (P. Ladd, personal communication, September 12, 2008). Still, our participants have expressed the belief that it is important to think about those topics with regard to Deafhood, following Ladd’s suggestion that the concept is not “finished” and that—perhaps paradoxically—the exploration of its meaning is part of the meaning of the Deafhood concept itself: “What Deafhood might mean within and to different sectors of the community is a valid cultural process in itself” (Ladd, 2003, p. 408).

Deafhood seems to imply the possibility of multiple pathways, but in fact is commencing from an essentialist core: “Deafhood comes from maintaining a clear focus on the seed itself” (Ladd, 2003, p. 407). More specifically, Deafhood is a certain ontological experience that relates to being biologically deaf. Such a focus on a “core” or a “seed” has also been maintained in feminist essentialisms: for example, by subjugating all women to a common essence, stating that there are properties shared by all women, such as being “carers,” “passive,” “subjected,” “emotional.” There are different kinds of feminist essentialisms—for instance, biological essentialism (as manifested, for example, by women’s possession of a womb and their child-bearing capacity). Other forms of feminisms have been sociological, for example, the belief that all women share similar social conditions or characteristics such as “domestic” or “nurturing” (Stone, 2004). Summarizing, Fuss (1989/1997) wrote that, as such, essentialism in feminist theories “appeals to a pure or original femininity, a female essence, outside the boundaries of the social and thereby untainted (though perhaps repressed) by a patriarchal order” (pp. 250–251). There is a parallel here with the Deafhood concept and the fact that the articulation of deaf people’s own ontologies and epistemologies has been repressed by colonialist structures (Ladd, 2003).

Singhellou (2007) compared Deafhood to the “performativity” concept of the well-known feminist Judith Butler, who has argued (Butler, 1990) that gender is not natural but habitual and learned, based on cultural norms of femininity and masculinity. Both the Deafhood concept and the performativity concept are poststructuralist theories, but Singhellou noted that, while Ladd’s concept has an essentialist core, Butler’s theory can be described as anti-essentialist. Both concepts imply a process of becoming, but unlike Butler, Ladd emphasizes that this construction “not only ‘permits’ a belief in cultural change but actually suggests directions towards which that change might orientate itself” (Ladd, 2003, p. 409, our emphasis). Also, while Butler speaks about “gender” in general, encompassing both male and female, Ladd’s conception of Deafhood is as a process meant for deaf people only. Butler’s becoming is an open-ended process that is not to be categorized into a binary opposition such as male/female (and thus is anti-essentialist), while Ladd’s Deafhood concept is, as suggested by Singhellou, an open-ended deaf becoming.

The suggested direction in which to move onward from this seed—the “deaf becoming”—is the “actualization” of the deaf biological state, by the use of sign language and socialization with other deaf people. The number of potential choices of different ways to experience Deafhood is thereby reduced. When we explained this dimension of the Deafhood concept in our courses, a number of participants felt that the Deafhood concept could be exclusive and divisional and therefore oppressive in a way that is not much different from the d/D categorization, which is exactly a categorization that the Deafhood concept seeks to transcend. After all, our participants stated, because Deafhood implies being biologically deaf, it potentially excludes Codas (children of deaf adults) and possibly people with only a slight hearing loss; and because it implies the use of sign language, it potentially excludes all those...
Deaf people who do not (yet) know or use sign language.

When Ladd (2005) states that all deaf people can experience Deafhood, he implies that those deaf people who do not know sign language could (and should), in order to develop their Deafhood, learn sign language and socialize within the Deaf community:

One learns to become a member of a culture, and in a similar way a child born deaf, even to deaf parents, has to learn to become “deaf,” that is, to become a responsible sign language–using member of a national community. (p. 14)

Ladd means that this is not just an option, but indeed the preferred path to follow, and the path that deaf people would follow were they not hampered in the development of their inherent potential (as is so often the case). In the next section, this Deafhood “requirement” of “being/becoming a signing deaf person” is discussed in depth.

(Hard of) Hearing People and Deafhood

Hirons (2009) believes that if one has to be audiologically deaf to experience Deafhood, this means that the concept is based on—or relies on—a medical deficiency model of deafness, while the Deafhood concept was coined to mean exactly the opposite. We believe that the medical model is confused with a purely biological viewpoint here: Instead of being understood as a “loss,” deafness could be regarded as a product of biodiversity. Hirons, however, makes a point when wondering about the point at which someone is “deaf enough” to be able to experience Deafhood. While it could be said that there could be a “continuum with flexible ends,” Hirons’s aim is in fact not to discuss which deaf (or hard of hearing) people can or cannot experience Deafhood, but, more radically, to draw people’s attention to being people such as Codas. If people with a sudden or light hearing loss would be able to experience Deafhood, so she claims, why would it be the case that people with no hearing loss at all—but who grew up in a deaf environment—could not experience Deafhood? Does the mere fact of being deaf have the potential to automatically create a certain consciousness, something one cannot experience when one is hearing?

Some participants in our workshops have felt threatened by the thought that hearing people could experience Deafhood, and we have repeatedly received comments from them such as “There are hearing people who know or learn our language, and who are included in our culture and community; that is fine, but the Deafhood experience? That’s ours only.” But at the same time, some participants have indicated that they are especially concerned about Codas, whom they associate with Deaf communities, cultures, and even identities, so we decided to look closer at Preston’s 1994 book about the experiences of Codas, Mother Father Deaf: Living Between Sound and Silence. Participants have been impressed and sometimes even baffled by the excerpts from the book that we shared with them. It appears that some Codas do not emphasize hearing or bicultural identities but see their deaf identity as their “real identity”:

When I’m sitting in a room or walking down the street, people look at me and they see this hearing person. That’s all they see. But just beneath the surface, there’s this deaf person. I’m not talking about hearing loss, I’m talking about a whole way of being. The real me is Deaf. (Preston, 1994, p. 216)

Deafness is our lifeline. You know, when you’re born, they cut the umbilical cord and you’re a separate person. Well, with deafness you can never cut the umbilical cord. Those of us who were raised in it, we can never leave it behind. (Preston, 1994, p. 255)

As a result of such experiences and the fact that some Codas never feel fully understood or accepted by either hearing or deaf people, it happens that Codas feel left out or excluded:

Ten years ago I think that deaf people tried to push me out. . . . But I got to the point where I started saying, “Wait a minute! You can’t get rid of your kids, and you can’t get rid of people that are part of Deaf culture. We are as much a part of Deaf culture. We’re not a hearing person coming in and telling you what to do. We’re your kids! We grew up in the same household. You cannot deny me that.” (Preston, 1994, p. 217)

Two of the quotes from Preston emphasize the natural, biological connection between Codas and their deaf parents; this leads to the question of whether the possibility of experiencing Deafhood can be seen as potentially inherent in the situation in which Codas grow up. The question, then, is which dimension of Deafhood constitutes the core of the concept: the fact of experiencing and overcoming barriers and oppression connected with being deaf—that is, the liberatory dimension—or the visuo-gestural-tactile skills that are also emphasized by the Deaf-gain concept (Bauman & Murray, 2010)—that is, the ontological dimension? This is a difficult issue because, as we have already mentioned, the Deafhood concept incorporates both elements. Oppression experienced by Codas is partially similar to and partially different from
oppression experienced by deaf people (Preston, 1994). Regarding the "ontological" aspects of Deafhood, Codas—when given the opportunity to develop their visuo-gestural skills—also have abilities such as well-developed spatial thinking and nativelike command of sign languages (Emmorey, Kosslyn, & Bellugi, 1993; Emmorey et al., 2005).

A suggestion that has often occurred during workshops is that Codas perhaps experience a kind of "Codahood," which could then partially overlap with Deafhood. It has also been suggested that Codas can have a kind of "Deafhood seed" as a potential inherent in the situation in which they grow up, that they can or cannot develop, just like deaf people who did not learn sign language during childhood. Hirons (2009) has more boldly concluded that hearing people (not just Codas) have the potential to experience Deafhood if they support "the deaf cause":

Fundamentally, if Deafhood is interpreted as a wider struggle for human dignity and empowerment, there seems to be little ideological justification for excluding hard of hearing and what Ladd terms "hearing allies" from the Deafhood process. If Deafhood is interpreted so as to only include audiologically deaf persons within its experience, Deafhood philosophy will simply perpetuate the divisiveness and exclusion found within some sectors of the Deaf community at present. (p. 4)

When arguing why to include hearing people, Hirons thus puts the emphasis on the empowerment or liberation aspects of Deafhood (rather than the ontological aspects). If a comparison may be made with feminist activism, it is imaginable that men could be feminists when they supported the feminist cause, so if Deafhood were seen as a "deaf analogue to feminist activism," a hearing person would indeed be able to experience a personal Deafhood process. But the question whether a man can experience (essential) womanhood/womanness is much trickier and more difficult to answer, especially when the experiences of transvestites and transsexuals are considered. We contend that the ontological experience should not become a "secondary prerequisite" to experiencing Deafhood, but that it is central to it. The sign for Deafhood in British Sign Language (made on the stomach) seems to imply an emphasis on ontology: Deafhood is not signed as "Deaf emancipation" or "Deaf process," but seems to indicate a "gut feeling." We therefore concur with Gulliver (2009), who criticized Ladd’s conceptualization of Deafhood as an explicitly contestatory concept, as a "counter-narrative," and as such problematizes the fact that ontology as well as emancipation are brought together in one concept.

To clarify our position: Although we understand our workshop participants’ concerns about hearing people and Deafhood and the potential divisiveness of the concept, we believe that Deafhood is not an appropriate term to use in analyzing the position of Codas and other hearing people in Deaf communities. Other concepts such as Sign Language Peoples (Batterbury, 2012; Batterbury et al., 2007) and viittomakielinen, "Sign Language Persons" (Jokinen, 2001), have the potential to be more useful for doing this. Moreover, it has never been Ladd’s intention to devise an all-encompassing concept to include hearing people’s experiences. The primary focus of the Deafhood concept is on deaf people, and it was devised as a tool for their individual and collective self-exploration.

### Strategic Essentialism

The warnings from Hirons (2009) about the potential divisiveness of the Deafhood concept concur with those of Moi (1989/1997), who stated that essentialism in feminism is oppressive, as it “always plays into the hands of those who want women to conform to predefined patterns of femininity” (p. 247). “The ‘feminist subject’ has been seen to be just as ethnocentric and exclusive, just as imperialist and bourgeois, as her male counterpart in claiming to speak on behalf of all women” (Gunew, 1988/1997, p. 239). Spelman (1988/1997) explained a further danger of essentialism: “If there is an essential womanness that all women have and have always had, then we won’t know anything about any woman in particular” (p. 236). The particularities of each woman’s individual life become unimportant, and thus unessential to the definition of womanhood. Differences between women are obscured and made subordinate to similarities between them. Gunew (1988/1997) suggested that women’s accounts should not be regarded as “a chorus of women’s voices blended in undifferentiated sisterhood” (p. 241). Summarizing the essentialist and anti-essentialist strands in feminism, Riley (1988/1997) stated that feminism has oscillated between over-feminization and under-feminization, between transcendence and deconstruction, between women as having fluctuating identities or sharing an essential "womanness."

Very similar concerns have been raised by our workshop participants: There is enormous diversity among deaf people, especially with regard to language use and language background, hearing status and use of hearing technologies, and educational background. The Deafhood theory says, though, that deaf people are in essence more visually oriented than...
hearing people, and therefore should be sign language–using people. Disregarding or ironing out inter-individual differences between deaf people, however, seems to threaten this diversity. Hirons (2009) thus rightfully pointed out the dangers of essentialism in Deafhood theory.

However, we regard Hirons’s (2009) argument that hearing people can experience a Deafhood process as extremely anti-essentialist. Similarly, Soper (1990/1997) argued that although great care should be taken with essentialism in feminism, the danger of anti-essentialism is extreme particularism and hyper-individualism. Soper stated that politics is a group affair, and that without a common cause, feminist political movements collapse. Similarly, extreme anti-essentialism would be disastrous for Deaf communities, as they are still fighting discrimination in the workplace, social welfare systems, the media, and elsewhere, and are still defending their right to use sign languages in a wide range of contexts, the right to education in sign language, and the right not to choose hearing technology such as cochlear implants (Ladd, 2003). Also, in oralist educational systems, deaf people are divided according to skills in speaking and hearing, and an essentialist concept such as “Deafhood” represents an effort to try to unify them (again).

Therefore, Ladd (2003) poses the idea that the rejection of essentialism is “unfortunate for groups like Deaf communities who are still struggling to conceptualize their postcolonial identity.” (p. 217). According to him, the timing of anti-essentialist discourses (i.e., their occurrence during the postmodernist era) is ironic:

At the very moment when the discourse of oppressed groups at last becomes visible and they are able to position themselves as a counter-narrative to White or Hearing supremacy . . . their discourses risk being dismissed along with the Grand Narratives themselves! (p. 80)

Ladd furthermore argues that people of color or women are in further stages of redefining themselves, “whereas Deaf communities are still either caught up in it or just embarking on resolving it” (p. 418).

With regard to feminist theories, Fuss (1989/1997) argued that a distinction should be made between “deploying” or “activating” essentialism and “falling into” or “lapsing into” essentialism (p. 257), explaining that the “danger” of using the concept depends on “who is utilizing it, how it is deployed, and where its effects are concentrated” (p. 267, emphasis in original). This corresponds with Spi-vak’s “strategic essentialism,” deployed by Ladd in the creation of his “Deafhood” concept. Ladd emphasizes that he is “mindful of the dangers of falling into essentialism” but defends the essentialism inherent in the Deafhood concept as being “at the least strategically viable for the foreseeable future” (Ladd, 2003, p. 217). He mentions that he hopes that “others may be able to develop readings which refine and de-essentialize this one” (p. 81). Hirons (2009) takes it even further:

When applied to collectivist cultures, essentialism should not in fact be only strategically deployed when no other option is available, but used as a valid way of understanding a culture through explicitly acknowledging and valuing its collectivist basis. (p. 10)

Regarding the need to be careful with essentialism in feminism, Kanneh (1992/1997) emphasized that it is highly important “to determine which aspects of this femininity should be held up for celebration, and to sort out just what would be the political ramifications of such a move” (p. 293, our emphasis). She also warned that it is important to distinguish “an inherently feminine essence” and “the direct results of social marginalization and intolerable sexual visibility” (p. 293). Kanneh criticized those feminists who find women incarcerated in the kitchen and therefore sing the kitchen’s praise. These remarks highly correspond with what Ladd explains as being the difference between Deaf culture(s) and Deafhood. Ladd found that destructive consequences of oppression in Deaf cultures are justified or explained away as being part of “the Deaf way,” “the Deaf culture” (Ladd, 2003). With his Deafhood concept, Ladd wants to move away from this way of thinking, allowing and encouraging Deaf cultures to change, rather than formulating a deaf analogue to “singing the kitchen’s praise.” Hence, while the Deaf culture and Deafhood concepts both can be seen as essentialist, interpretations of Deaf culture (such as “the Deaf way”) are often close ended and static, while Deafhood aims at being open ended and dynamic. In the next section of the present article, we consider what this flexibility on the part of Deafhood could entail.

Spoken Language, Hearing Aids, Cochlear Implants, Music: Taboos?

Ladd’s interpretation of Deafhood as an open-ended concept with an essentialist core can be summarized thus: Deaf people’s lives should commence from their “Deafhood seed” (i.e., using sign language and developing deaf sociality), and from there can develop in multiple ways, much like a tree with multiple roots and branches, which grows from a single seed. There remain many questions as to the
implementation of this interpretation in everyday life, particularly in the areas of communication and technology. During our courses, we have received the following questions: “Does Deafhood mean that you should sign in every context and should not speak?” “Does Deafhood mean that you could/should not enjoy listening to music?” “Does Deafhood mean that you should not use hearing aids or a cochlear implant?” We believe these issues could be seen—at least in some situations and by some people—as referring to “taboos” within the Deaf community. During our workshops, they have often been the subjects of heated debate.

Following Ladd’s suggestion that it is part of the Deafhood process to explore destructive or damaging results of discrimination and oppression, we argue that these “taboos” could be added to the list of such negative influences, that is, that they are remnants of feelings of oppression: Through abusive speech training and forced use of hearing aids, speech and hearing devices became associated with oppression. Ladd’s implementation of the Deafhood concept seems to suggest an open-ended essentialism with room for spoken language, hearing aids, cochlear implants, and the experience of music as individual choices that should be respected. Ladd seems to believe that the focus of activism should be on oppressive systems rather than on these individual choices. For example, using spoken language could be regarded as just using another language, rather than a betrayal of Deaf communities or even of the Deafhood concept. The Deafhood philosophy emphasizes the importance of reflection on one’s acts and attitudes. The contexts are more important than what one actually does: Our course participants often agreed with each other that using spoken language to communicate with one’s hearing family or partner is not the same as using spoken language in all-deaf contexts, for example, with the aim of “showing off” speech skills.

In essence, the discussion about taboos focuses on the question of if and how certain proclaimed “hearing things” can get a place in a person’s articulation as a deaf person. An important question, then, is, Why do we consider whether these things “fit” with being deaf? Is it because many deaf people tend to focus on one aspect of who they are (i.e., their being deaf), and treat this as separate from other facets of who they are (mainstreamed, a woman, Black, Muslim, gay, Belgian, socialist, a teacher, etc.)? According to Hirons (2009), “It is arguable that the Deafhood process appears to entail actualizing the ‘Deaf’ elements of one’s personality over other aspects” (p. 5). We do not believe that the essentialism inherent in Deafhood takes such an overarching form, and do not think that the Deafhood philosophy is implying that constant priority should be given to articulating one’s “Deaf identity.”

Conclusion

The Deafhood concept is a comprehensive philosophy encompassing ontology, epistemology, empowerment, and resistance. It could be argued that Deafhood attempts to embody too many different ideas or dimensions within a single concept, leading to confusion about its very ontological or liberatory character. We argue that although the philosophy behind the Deafhood concept has clearly been perceived as liberating, the ontological aspects of Deafhood need to be foregrounded, rather than its emancipatory and activist dimensions; we also argue that Deafhood is a concept primarily aimed at the individual and collective self-exploration of deaf people. On the other hand, many compelling philosophies are liable to different interpretations. As Ladd so often emphasizes, exploring the meaning of the Deafhood concept is a valid cultural process in itself, since this exploration leads us to attempts to (better) articulate our ontological experiences as deaf persons. Until now, no other concept has proved to have the same potential.

The present article has offered a tentative starting point in beginning to grasp the origins and meanings of the Deafhood concept. To deepen the Deafhood concept, it is necessary to identify, investigate, and consolidate deaf epistemologies and ontologies. There is a need for further in-depth exploration and analysis of the way the concept is used and understood, and of its individual, social, academic and political implications. For example, it is necessary to understand how the concept is used and understood in academic discourses, by deaf social and political organizations, and by individual deaf people with different backgrounds (with respect to family, education, work environment, deaf socialization, use of signed and spoken languages, and use of hearing technologies). A better understanding of the concept will foster individual and collective self-determination among Deaf communities and will enhance academic discourses not only in Deaf studies but in other social sciences. With regard to the latter, further research is needed into the parallels between the Deafhood concept and other liberatory and ontological concepts and worldviews, not only feminism but also, for example, Black consciousness, LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) pride, and the worldviews of people from other linguistic and cultural minorities.

Notes

1. We use the capital “D” only when referring to theoretical concepts such
as “Deaf studies,” “Deafhood,” “Deaf culture,” and “Deaf community” because, in the discipline of Deaf studies, this is the commonly accepted usage. We are reluctant, however, to adopt the politicized and divisive capital “D” with regard to deaf individuals. In our eyes, “deaf” with a small “d” does not merely point at an audiological pathology in opposition to “Deaf,” as is often argued, but should instead be understood as a biological condition to which being a signing person is complementary.


3. SLPs define themselves through the shared experience of, and membership in, physical and metaphysical aspects of language, culture, epistemology, and ontology (Batterbury, Ladd, & Gulliver, 2007).

4. We thank Maija Koivisto for introducing us to this workshop technique during the 2010 Deafhood weekend in Finland.

5. Kemp and Squires (1997) use the plural form “feminisms” because of the diversity in approach, motivation, method, experiences, positions, and strategies among various types of feminism.

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References


