

# Visual Research with Young d/Deaf people – An Investigation of the Transitional Experiences of d/Deaf Young People from Mainstream Schools using Auto-driven Photo-elicitation Interviews

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*This paper presents a review of the use of auto-driven photo-elicitation interviews in research with young d/Deaf people as a tool for equalising power imbalances caused by linguistic difference. A brief review of the ways in which other qualitative research methods have been adapted to attempt to make them more accessible to d/Deaf participants is offered. The method of auto-driven photo-elicitation interviews is then outlined with specific focus on its relevance to research with d/Deaf people, before presenting a background to the research project for which this method was used. This project examined the experiences of transition to adulthood and transition planning of eight young d/Deaf people from the South West of England. Finally, the advantages and disadvantages of auto-driven photo-elicitation interviews are discussed.*

*Keywords: Auto-driven Photo-elicitation Interviews, d/Deaf, Mainstream Education, Bourdieu, Transition*

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## Introduction

There has been much interest in the use of visual methods in recent years in the field of social research, but this has not, so far, been reflected in the field of Deaf studies or in research with d/Deaf people in other fields of social research. This article describes the advantages and disadvantages of taking a visual ap-

proach to qualitative research with d/Deaf young people. The importance of using visual methods in qualitative research with d/Deaf people will be discussed, with a review of the more commonly used adaptations made to more traditional qualitative research interviews to make them 'more accessible' to d/Deaf people. Visual research methods are

suggested as a means of introducing an important shift in perception of how best to engage with d/Deaf people in qualitative research. An evaluation of using auto-driven photo-elicitation interviews follows, with a review of the method being presented with reference to a recently completed PhD study by the author (O'Brien 2013), in which auto-driven photo-elicitation interviews were utilised with d/Deaf young people who were educated in mainstream schools to explore their experiences of the transition to adulthood.

Transition to adulthood is a complex, extended process, comprising of both biologically and socially mediated changes in status that young people go through to become recognised as 'adult' in their own society. It is also a process that is little researched or understood from the perspectives of d/Deaf young people, for whom such socially mediated changes can bring additional challenges compared to their hearing peers due to communication difficulties and access to information. It is to meet the challenge of these communication difficulties that visual methods were utilised for this research. This is discussed in more detail below.

It is the convention in the field of Deaf studies to differentiate between members of the Deaf community and deaf people who are not members of the Deaf community by use of capitalised and lower case 'D' and 'd' in the word d/Deaf. The capi-

talised version, 'Deaf', has come to refer to those who consider themselves to be part of the Deaf community, who are proud of their Deaf identity, and whose first or preferred language is sign language. The lower case 'deaf', on the other hand, refers to those who see their deafness as a hearing loss rather than a positive identity and prefer to live in the hearing world using a spoken language (Woodward 1972). However, this binary has become increasingly problematised in recent years due to its essentialism (Brueggemann 2009) and its potential for causing divisions within the community (Heuer 2007). Of the young d/Deaf people involved in the research discussed below, some were members of the Deaf community and others were not. Some felt they were in between the Deaf and hearing worlds, involved in both, but comfortable in neither. It was therefore decided to use the term d/Deaf to refer to these young people, to take into account this 'in between-ness' that many of them reported. However, when one or other meaning of the word 'deaf' is clearly indicated, the deaf/Deaf distinction is used.

### **The Problems of Traditional Qualitative Research Methods with d/Deaf Participants**

Traditional qualitative methods used in the social sciences include observation, interviews of varying levels of structure and questionnaires, among others. All of these

have been utilised with d/Deaf people with varying adaptations to accommodate their communication needs.

These communication needs are not just limited to access to spoken interaction, which could be provided by British Sign Language (BSL) interpreters, note-takers or lip-speakers, depending on the d/Deaf person's own individual preferences, but also access to written English in the case of questionnaires. This can lead to problems in trying to make traditional research methods accessible to d/Deaf people. Some of the adaptations used in previous research are explored below.

Use of written English to replace spoken English is often perceived as an acceptable adaptation when interviewing d/Deaf people as it provides a veneer of accessibility by replacing the spoken mode of English with the written form (see, for example, Dee 2006). However, many d/Deaf people suffer from low levels of literacy along with the challenges of listening to or lip-reading speech. Educational outcomes of d/Deaf young people consistently show that they leave school with much lower scores in English comprehension than their hearing peers (Harris and Terlektsi 2010; Kyle and Harris 2010; Wauters et al. 2006, Powers 2003). This could alienate both oral deaf people and signing Deaf people from the research, acting as a barrier to both populations of d/Deaf people.

Use of BSL/English interpreters is also often considered to be an acceptable adaptation to make traditional research methods more accessible to d/Deaf people (see, for example, Valentine and Skelton 2007). However, this has its own drawbacks. Firstly, it is only appropriate for signing Deaf people, who are relatively fluent and articulate in BSL. It will do nothing to increase accessibility to those d/Deaf people who prefer not to sign. Secondly, this approach relies on the interpreter's own ability in translating from English to BSL, and back again. While there is a national body for the registration of professional BSL interpreters in the UK, the standards and experience of individual interpreters varies. An interpreter who may be experienced and competent in a particular field of work, such as classroom interpreting, may be less adept at working within the sensitive and potentially emotionally charged environment of the qualitative research interview. With each interpretation, there is danger of information loss, of misunderstanding and of corruption of data. Not only that, the presence of another person in the interview unavoidably alters the dynamics of the situation; the participant may feel threatened or pressurised by the presence of two authoritative interlocutors asking them questions, leading to an interview in which the participants' responses are forced out of them rather than willingly volunteered.

A further problem associated with these two adaptations is the dominance of English, in its various forms, over other means of expression, such as sign language (Temple and Young 2004; Temple and Edwards 2002). Even in an interpreted interview, English is still the language of power in the interaction; it is the language in which the questions are written, the questions are asked, and the responses are translated into. This adds another dimension of power imbalance to the interview interaction, a dimension which is particularly oppressive to Deaf people who prefer to use BSL rather than English, and risks alienating them from the research.

d/Deaf researchers or d/Deaf research assistants often interview d/Deaf participants themselves in an attempt to equalise power relations within the research situation (see, for example, Emery 2011; Ladd 2003). However, this in itself is not unproblematic. Language competencies and abilities must be carefully matched to ensure that, for example, a monolingual Deaf BSL user is not attempting to interview a monolingual oral deaf person, or vice versa. Not only could such a situation lead to mutual incomprehension, but also complete alienation from the research project as participants could struggle to see the relevance of such an interview to their own experiences.

Finally, all of the above research tools rely on one common element,

that of linguistic competence. As mentioned above, due to inaccessible schooling, many d/Deaf people's comprehension of written and spoken English lags behind that of their hearing peers. Additionally, young d/Deaf people are unlikely to learn a sign language in childhood unless they are from a Deaf family. This can lead to communication problems within a research interview including misunderstanding of research questions or inability of participants and interviewers to express themselves fully and fluently in a common language, and therefore frustration and disaffection with the research process in general. This could also lead to a biased, or even a self-selecting, research group, in which the only participants able or willing to take part are those who have a high linguistic competence in the researcher's own preferred language, leading to a neglect or marginalisation of different groups of d/Deaf people.

Alternative approaches are needed that avoid these problems and ensure that research with d/Deaf people is accessible, equitable and empowering for participants. One such approach is through utilising visual research methods.

### **Visual Research with d/Deaf People**

It is often claimed by Deaf people themselves that they are very visual in nature. These claims are present in the traditional jokes and stories told in the Deaf community

(Bahan 2004), and in the way in which Deaf people use their signed languages and see the world (Lane 1992, 124). There is also empirical research that shows that Deaf people's brains process visual data in a qualitatively different way to hearing people (Campbell, MacSweeney and Waters 2008; Finney et al. 2003; Finney, Fine and Dobkins 2001), that people who were born deaf have better peripheral vision than hearing people (Bavelier et al. 2000; Neville and Lawson 1987), and that people who use sign language have better visual memories than people who do not (Emmory, Kosslyn and Bellugi 1993).

Use of visual research methods can utilise this visual nature of d/Deaf people, but also avoid the problems associated with traditional research methods that have been discussed above. Visual methods can avoid the problem of linguistic competence, because the images, the photographs or the videos produced in the research process become the focus of analysis (Collier and Collier 1986), or can be used to provide communication support and references within research interactions such as interviews that bypass the need to understand linguistically complex spoken or signed questions or prompts (Clark-Ibáñez 2004). Indeed, images or artefacts produced in the process of research can sometimes do away with the need for linguistic interaction altogether, as in photo-diaries (Latham

2004) or photo-novellas (Wang and Burris 1994), in which the photographs themselves are the objects of analysis, often with no further input from research participants.

However, there have been a few attempts to utilise or explore this visual nature in research. One exception to this was Ernst Thoutenhoofd's 1996 study of the 'occularcentrism' of the Deaf community. In this research, Deaf and hearing people were given disposable cameras to take photographs of events in their lives, and these were compared to look for qualitative differences in how Deaf and hearing people used images to capture their sense of reality. Thoutenhoofd also spent time in a Deaf club taking photographs as photo stories to capture the visual nature of the Deaf experience in the Deaf club.

Apart from this study, and some minor use of visual methods as small parts of other research projects (see, for example, Sheridan 2008), visual research methods remain a relatively untapped resource in research with d/Deaf people. This paper will explore the use of a particular visual research method, auto-driven photo-elicitation interviews, with d/Deaf young people to examine their experiences of the transition to adulthood.

### **Auto-driven Photo-elicitation Interviews**

Photo-elicitation, is, simply put, 'inserting a photograph into a re-

search interview' (Harper 2002, 13). These photographs could be stock photographs, photographs taken by the researcher, or photographs taken by the research participants. They are used in the research interview to elicit a response from the participant in a similar way to a spoken or signed question. In effect, they are used as visual questions and prompts within the interview. Examples of when stock or researcher-taken photographs are used could be when a researcher has a very specific research focus in mind, when participants are considered to be too young or otherwise unable to take photographs themselves (Epstein et al. 2006), or when large numbers of people are to be shown the same images, for example, to get a community response to an event of some kind (Byrne and Doyle 2004).

However, many see photo-elicitation interviews as an empowering method for the participants and instead prefer to ask participants to take their own photographs for the interview, focusing on what they think is important (Holm 2008; Clark 1999). This is often termed 'auto-driven photo-elicitation', in which the participant controls the subject of the photographs, and also controls the interview in which the photographs are discussed. This is considered to give the participant the power to control the interview, but also to draw the researcher's attention to elements of their lives

that the researcher may have considered to be inconsequential (Clark-Ibáñez 2007). Indeed, a risk of photo-elicitation interviews is that the researcher may decide to utilise 'visually arresting images' that, while making an impact on the researcher, actually mean little or nothing to the participant themselves. Instead, by allowing the research participant to control which photographs are taken and discussed, an auto-driven interview can 'break the researcher's frames' and allow them to see the world through the eyes of the participants, rather than imposing their own frames of reference on the participant's experiences and thus unfairly influencing the interpretation and analysis of interview data (Samuels 2007).

Not only does this method give the participant the freedom and the power to influence the interview in a way that most effectively reflects their own experiences and beliefs, but it can also avoid the problems of linguistic competency described above. By allowing the participants to take the photographs of what they believe is important, this method can allow d/Deaf people to visually express themselves about their beliefs and values without having to resort to languages in which they may not be fluent. Using a photograph as a starting point for such discussions and interviews means that the groundwork of explaining such deep-held beliefs can be done by reference to the images, rather

than relying on linguistic description. Using the photographs as visual reference points can also ease communication within the interview itself, making communication between interviewer and participant easier, with less scope for misunderstandings. The use of photographs in the interview removes the pressure from the participant by making the photograph the subject of the interview (Collier and Collier 1986). This distancing effect can make the participant more forthcoming and open about their experiences and their discussion of the images they captured.

However, there are also some disadvantages associated with this method. A major disadvantage is that by handing over the control of each interview to the participant involved, the researcher is not guaranteed data that can be compared between interviews. It is very possible that within a research project, no two interviews will cover the same topics, making it difficult to compare data between interviews, or build a unified picture of people's experiences from a collection of disparate auto-driven photo-elicitation interviews. Some researchers have attempted to circumvent this problem by the use of shooting scripts, specifying to a greater or lesser extent what sort of images they wish the participants to capture (Samuels 2004). While this can ensure that data collected from different interviews can be collated and

compared, it runs the risk of imposing the researcher's own frames of reference on the participants, which nullifies one of the great advantages of this method.

A related risk is that in order to meet the ethical requirements of research ethics boards, participants are often given stringent instructions on what they are and are not allowed to photograph. Such ethical requirements often include that subjects of photographs must be of age to give their consent to be photographed, they must agree to be photographed, and topics which are not to be photographed are often specified, such as sexual behaviour, substance abuse or criminal acts. However, such restrictions can be seen by participants as a breach of trust in the researcher-participant relationship, and can sometimes provoke deliberately antagonistic photographs in an attempt to challenge what could be seen as presumptions or stereotypes about participants' behaviour (Allen 2008).

### **Use of Auto-driven Photo-elicitation Interviews with d/Deaf Young People**

In the research discussed here, eight young d/Deaf people from England aged from their late teens to mid-twenties took part in a two-step interview process that involved an initial semi-structured interview and then a follow-up auto-driven photo-elicitation interview once the

young people had taken their photographs.

In all interviews, the choice of language was left entirely up to the young person. This meant that some interviews were conducted in spoken English, some in BSL, some in Sign Supported English (SSE), and others in a mixture of all three. The aim of this was to provide the young people with as close to an 'exceptional situation for communication' (Bourdieu 1999, 614) as was possible and to allow them to express themselves in the language in which they were most comfortable and possessed the most linguistic capital.

The initial semi-structured interview was intended to combat the problem of lack of comparative data without imposing a restrictive shooting script on the young people. This semi-structured interview enabled questions linked to educational experiences, family background, language choice – all subjects that were not guaranteed to arise within an auto-driven photo-elicitation interview – to be asked of all participants.

The semi-structured interview also allowed trust and understanding to be built between the researcher and participant. As mentioned above, careful language matching is essential in interviews with d/Deaf people to ensure that an unproblematic communication environment is created. In this research, all interviews were conducted by

the author, a d/Deaf man fluent in both BSL and spoken English. The semi-structured interview, in which an interview schedule was followed, allowed me to assess and meet the participants' language preferences. The structure provided by the interview schedule allowed us to familiarise ourselves with each other's language use and idiosyncrasies in a relatively secure communicative environment.

Meeting each other for the first time in the arguably more familiar situation of the semi-structured interview, a situation familiar to many young people through job interviews, careers service interviews, college entry interviews and other one-to-one interview situations (Holstein and Gubrium 2004), meant that this first meeting was a good opportunity to build rapport between interviewer and participant and encourage the trust needed for a successful auto-driven photo-elicitation interview. Auto-driven photo-elicitation interviews require a degree of trust to be successful, as taking photographs of personal life events can be very sensitive (Clark-Ibáñez 2004). The opportunity to get to know each other, provided by performing the semi-structured interview, allowed me to build up a level of rapport and trust with the participant, which I hoped would encourage them to take meaningful photographs for the next stage of interviews.

Finally, rather than providing a detailed shooting script, participants



were simply asked to take photographs of places or things that were important to them as they grew up. If they wished to take photographs of people, they were encouraged to take photographs that represented the people they wanted to show. This was to avoid the need to impose complex guidelines and rules about gaining consent of people photographed, making sure the subjects of the photographs were over 16, and so on. It was felt that this approach offered two advantages. Firstly, it was possible that excessively complex rules about who and what they could photograph could make participants reluctant to engage with the research. By stating that they should not photograph any identifiable people, the need for such rules was avoided. Secondly, by encouraging participants to take more abstract, representational photographs, it was hoped that the interview discussion about the photographs would be more in-depth and meaningful. The only other restriction imposed was a request that they did not photograph any illegal or sexual activity.

Once the semi-structured interview was completed, the young people were presented with a disposable camera with which to take photographs, and consent forms and guidelines for taking photographs were explained to them and signed. They were then asked to take the photographs they wanted and return the cameras in a stamped, ad-

dressed envelope that I provided. Arrangements to meet again for the auto-driven photo-elicitation interview were made via email once the photographs had been developed and a copy sent to the participants.

During the auto-driven photo-elicitation interview, participants were asked to go through the photographs at their own pace and explain them in their own words. As an interviewer, I limited my contributions in the interview to an initial 'Tell me about these photographs' at the start of the interview and to prompts or questions linked to their comments on each photograph. I did not introduce any new topics during the interview

All interviews, semi-structured and photo-elicitation, were recorded on a digital video-camera. Those conducted in spoken English were sent to a professional transcriptionist to be transcribed in written English for analysis. I translated and transcribed those conducted in BSL or SSE myself. While I am not a trained translator/interpreter, I hold a level 4 NVQ qualification in BSL and consider myself bilingual in BSL and English.

Before presenting some of the results of this research, it is important to provide some context; in particular, the concepts of mainstream education and the term 'transition' as used in government policy in the UK must be discussed. This discussion is presented in the following sections.

### **Mainstream Education for Young d/Deaf People**

Prior to the Warnock Report of 1978 and its recommendation that 'the majority of children with special educational needs will have to be ... helped within the ordinary school' (Warnock 1978, 95), most d/Deaf young people were educated in special schools or residential schools for d/Deaf children. However, following the Warnock Report and the Education Act of 1981 that followed, more and more d/Deaf young people received their education in mainstream schools. The current situation is that over 95 per cent of d/Deaf young people in the UK attend mainstream schools (Ladd 2003).

While this drive to mainstreaming was in keeping with the inclusional aims and objectives of the social model of disability (Oliver 1996), for many in the Deaf community it was a direct attack on their community and language (Lee 1986). The residential school, along with the Deaf club, had been a traditional foundation of the Deaf community, in which the language, values and traditions of the community had been passed from d/Deaf children of Deaf parents to d/Deaf children of hearing parents (Ladd 2003). Since deafness is of such low incidence (Fortnum et al. 2001; Fortnum et al. 2002), and more than 90 per cent of deaf children are born to hearing parents (Lucas and Schatz 2003), this horizontal transmission of community values from child to child

was particularly important. While it would usually be expected that vertical transmission of cultural values from parent to child would occur, this could not be the case in the Deaf community due to the relative scarcity of deaf children born to Deaf parents. Residential schools therefore held particular value for the Deaf community (Ladd 2003), which was damaged by the move to mainstreaming.

Not only did this drive to mainstreaming have a negative effect on the Deaf community, but d/Deaf children and young people were often isolated in classes in which they were the only d/Deaf person, with teachers with no training or understanding of how to effectively teach young d/Deaf people or include them in their lessons (Hopwood 2003; Gregory and Bishop 1989; Bishop 1979). As a result of this lack of training and knowledge, the educational achievements of young d/Deaf people have been consistently low, lagging some years behind their hearing peers (Harris and Terlektsi 2010; Kyle and Harris 2010; Wauters et al. 2006; Powers 2003). In terms of social inclusion and the social effects of mainstreaming, d/Deaf young people also suffered negative effects. It has been found that not only have d/Deaf people educated in mainstream schools consistently reported loneliness, lack of friends and bullying (Wauters and Knoors 2008; Angelides and Aravi 2006; DEX 2003; Jarvis 2007;

Musselman, Mootilal and Mackay 1996; Ladd 1991), but also that the rate of psychiatric disorder in d/Deaf young people in mainstream education, at 60.9%, is over 'one and a half times that of an equivalent inner city hearing population' (Hindley et al. 1994, 931).

While it has been argued that 'inclusional education' results in better educational outcomes, the concept of 'inclusion' remains little understood and widely debated, with very little consensus on its meaning (Allen 2008; Norwich 2008; Warnock 2005). This is particularly the case for d/Deaf young people, for whom 'inclusion' is far too often taken to mean simple physical presence in a shared classroom, with little consideration given to the teaching practices needed to make a young d/Deaf person truly included in the lesson, or, indeed, socially included in the school community (Marschark et al. 2002; Cigman, 2007; Jarvis 2007).

### **Transition**

The transition to adulthood is not a simple one-off event, but a complex and drawn out process that can occur over many years. Transition to adulthood itself is defined differently in different societies, but is often related to chronological age, particularly socially significant ages at which young people achieve 'criminal responsibility, sexual consent, voting rights ... and the giving of medical consent' (Read et al. 2006, 167).

This transition can often be extended or delayed for young people with disabilities or special educational needs (Clark and Hirst 1989; Hirst 1987). Most research in the field of Deaf studies has focused on Deaf people from Deaf schools, with little attention paid to those with less easily defined identities who attended mainstream schools. What research has been done on the experiences of young d/Deaf people from mainstream schools has been mostly autobiographical, anecdotal or quantitative in nature (see, for example, Oliva 2004; DEX 2003; Ladd 1991). Very little is therefore known about their transitions to adulthood and their personal feelings about this transition.

### **Transitional Experiences of Young d/Deaf People from Mainstream Schools**

For the majority of the young people involved in this research, transition to adulthood and independence was a long, drawn out and chaotic process. In this section I shall briefly recount three of the key themes that arose from the interviews. These are belonging, identity and independence. A lack of space prevents me from analysing more of the themes that arose in these interviews. The original language used in each interview will be noted in the quotes to draw attention to the fact that the English extracts presented here are translations.

## Belonging

A key theme that arose in all the interviews conducted was that of belonging. Many of the young people felt that they did not fully belong in either the hearing or the Deaf community. For many, this was due to their experiences in mainstream schools; they simply did not share the experiences of those in the Deaf community of residential schools for the Deaf or the fluency in BSL that was required for full membership of the Deaf community, and as such felt somewhat excluded. Similarly, they felt excluded from the hearing community, because, despite their oral education, they did not feel able

to socialise with hearing people due to communication problems. This built upon previous findings of loneliness and isolation reported in school (Wauters and Knoors 2008; Angelides and Aravi 2006; DEX 2003; Jarvis 2007; Musselman, Mootilal and Mackay 1996; Ladd 1991). It appeared that for some d/Deaf young people, this isolation persisted once they had left school and had begun work or further or higher education.

Photographs taken by two different young people, Zoe and Jen, illustrated where they found the feeling of belonging that they otherwise did not have.



'That's all the programmes I've collected when I go to concerts' (Zoe, English).



'That's at the football game, because [team name] I'm a really big supporter... But unfortunately that game was a really bad game and we lost' (Jen, English).

These photographs represented social events that were particularly important for these two young women: pop concerts for Zoe and football games for Jen. Both of them had reported that they found it difficult to fit into the mainstream, hearing social world that they had chosen to be part of:

I worry so much about my speech because I don't know if I speak very good, or rather [if] people understand me, you know, it may put them off. Because I know what people can be like when they don't understand me, they just ignore me and walk away. (Zoe, English)

I do find it difficult in the hearing world sometimes. I'm like in the middle, I'm not Deaf enough, but I'm not hearing enough so I'm in the middle. Sometimes, especially because it takes a lot of energy lip reading, it can be quite draining and then people think you're being rude, but you're just so tired you don't want to talk. It's like I have to explain it to them, it can be very frustrating because they can't see your side of things. It's so hard. (Jen, English)

Yet, neither of them felt comfortable in the Deaf community. For Jen, this reluctance to engage with the Deaf community came from her experiences of trying to fit in, but being rejected for being 'not Deaf enough'. Zoe, on the other hand,

was not aware of the existence of the Deaf community before our interview. Both of these young women, therefore, had limited opportunities to feel like they belonged in any social situation. However, in the communal nature of the social events pictured above, they found some sense of community, of togetherness, that did not depend on communication, whether signed or spoken. In these places, they were able to feel like they belonged, that they had a place in society, and they bypassed the struggle with communication that faced them in other social situations:

I just like watching other people sing their heart out! And being part of ... being part of the family in that arena, it's different. (Zoe, English)

Well watching it, it's like exciting because you're all together in the community, you're all watching it. Like, I like going to watch the game, because it's like you're all together and it's really loud, and everyone's like 'Oi!', cheering, and the atmosphere is really good. (Jen, English)

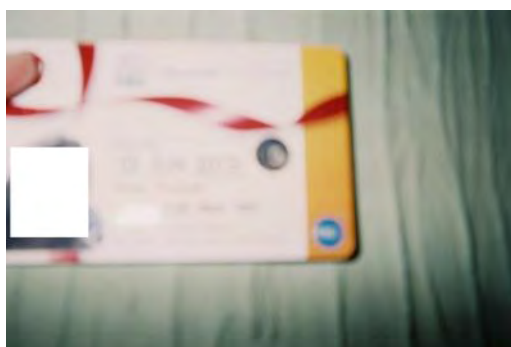
This discussion of 'fitting in' was inspired in these interviews by two very different photographs. While the initial focus of the photographs appeared to be simply social events or activities in which these young people enjoyed participating, deeper discussion revealed that this en-

joyment arose, at least in part, from the nature of these activities. The clear, unified purpose of the crowd at a football match or pop concert, the lack of need for negotiation or communication with their fellow attendees, meant that these young people found a sense of belonging at these events that they could not find elsewhere. Without the opportunity for discussion of these photographs provided by auto-driven photo-elicitation interviews, this deeper reason may have remained hidden.

### Identity

Another key theme that appeared in many of the interviews conducted was that of identity. Many of the young people struggled with defining their identity due to the lack of clear community involvement in either the Deaf or hearing communities that stemmed from their experiences of mainstream education and the so-

cial isolation that resulted. However, there were some photographs that inspired interesting discussion of the nature of their identities. The prevailing model of deafness and disability that these young people met in their everyday lives remained the medical model of disability: that their 'hearing loss' was something to be fixed, to be treated. This model was prevalent in education, employment and medical policy and practice, and so was the model that the young people came across most often. While most of the young people rejected this model as unrepresentative of their experiences of growing up d/Deaf, some were also reluctant to identify themselves with the Deaf community for various reasons. However, the complexity of these feelings about identity was not always easily captured in the photographs taken.



'This is a bus pass, because I always use a bus pass 'cause I always go on the bus to town all the time' (Zoe, English).



'This is the cup of water, it represents the interpreter, because it's something that belongs to them. So that's the interpreter' (Valerie, BSL).

Both of these photographs, from Zoe and Valerie respectively, could suggest that these young women agreed with the medical model of deafness. Both could suggest that they focused more on their 'impairment' rather than the positive aspects of being d/Deaf, by showing the kind of adjustments they required or the benefits they claimed to counteract the negative effects of their deafness. However, Zoe used her disabled bus pass because, as she said:

I always use a bus pass ... because it's very easy and it saves a lot of money! (Zoe, English)

For Zoe the bus pass was simply a pragmatic choice. She used it to save money and rejected the notion that holding a disabled bus pass could reflect on her identity. Indeed, she rejected any suggestion that she was disabled:

I can't see myself as disabled; I just can't hear that's all. I mean, there is nothing really wrong with me, I can still do things. (Zoe, English)

Instead, she felt a degree of confusion over her identity as a d/Deaf person. When asked directly how she would identify herself in those terms, she replied:

I dunno ... Sometimes I get embarrassed ... I dunno (laughs nervously). (Zoe, English)

Valerie had no such confusion about her identity. Initial analysis of the photograph without input from Valerie would reveal little about her reasons for taking this photograph. Once she revealed that the photograph represented the BSL/English interpreters who supported her in university lectures, one could draw the conclusion that she saw herself as disabled, and was drawing attention to the support provision she needed to access her course. However, Valerie revealed that this was not the case. Instead, she said that the photograph of the interpreter was meant to reveal that:

... Deaf people have our own language, and it's got nothing to do with disability. If we have the right communication, the right methods of communication that match d/Deaf people, it's the same as ... it's the same as ... it's like hearing people, they have different languages, like Spanish. If a Spanish person and an English person can't communicate with each other, that doesn't make them disabled. It's the same for Deaf people. BSL is just another language. (Valerie, BSL)

This was an outright rejection of the medical model of disability in favour of a cultural-linguistic model of Deaf identity (Ladd 2003), in which the use of sign language is seen as a much more central marker of identity than degree of hearing loss.

### **Independence**

A final theme that arose in all the interviews conducted was that of independence, an essential step towards making the transition to becoming an adult. Rather than focusing on individual photographs in this section, I shall illustrate this theme using an overview of all the photographs taken by two participants, Rob and Zoe.

Rob was in his late teens at the time of our interview, and he returned the camera having taken 28 photographs. Of these 28 photographs, 24 were taken outside, in different locations around his home town. These included his local gym and swimming pool, his favourite shops, his old college and the youth club he attended, and a photograph of his favourite car. These photographs gave an impression of independence on Rob's part, an impression that he was able to travel to different parts of his local area to take these photographs of the different activities he was involved in. However, on discussion of the photographs, a very different picture emerged. He had relied on his foster-mother to drive him around to these different locations to take the photographs, as he could not himself drive. The discussion also revealed that he normally went to many of the locations shown with his foster-parents, rather than on his own. So, the impression of independence given by the photographs in his case could be argued to be misleading.

Zoe, also in her late teens, re-

turned her camera having taken 19 photographs, all but one of which were taken in her bedroom. The sole photograph taken outside the confines of her room was taken from her driveway, and showed the window of her bedroom. These photographs showed such things as her favourite books and DVDs, programmes of different concerts she had attended, posters of her favourite football players, and her favourite clothes and shoes. On first viewing, these photographs may have suggested a degree of loneliness or isolation, suggesting that Zoe spent most of her time at home alone. However, it emerged from our talk that while she did find it difficult to find a sense of belonging in her life (discussed above), she was far from lonely or isolated in her social life and had a good friendship group. Many of the photographs she had taken were representational. The photographs of DVDs represented her love of films, and she went to the cinema with her friends every week. The photographs of concert programmes also represented her active social life, and a photograph of her disabled bus pass, rather than a comment on her deafness or identity (see above), showed how she was able to achieve a measure of independence without having to rely on her parents for transport.

### **An Evaluation of the Method**

The auto-driven photo-elicitation interviews that followed the semi-structured interviews were a quali-



fied success. Of the eight young people who took part in semi-structured interviews, only four then took part in the auto-driven photo-elicitation interviews. Of the four who did not take part, one participant's photographs were lost in the post when she tried to return them, and she did not have the time to re-take them. Two other participants had work and university pressures respectively, so were not able to commit the time required of them to complete the photo-elicitation stage of the research. The fourth participant went through a major transition after the completion of the semi-structured interview and had to withdraw from the project. It was unfortunate, and telling of the pressures that these young d/Deaf people were under during their respective transitions, that the commitment needed for this method was too much.

It was particularly unfortunate for a project that aimed to make use of visual research methods to tap into the visual nature of d/Deaf people that so few of the participants were able to complete the photo-elicitation stage of the interview process. This made it difficult to assess the impact that the use of this method had on the project. The initial semi-structured interviews therefore became the source of much of the data used and analysed for the project. However, the photo-elicitation interviews did provide valuable data and contributed to the project in other ways.

One of the main motivations for

using auto-driven photo-elicitation methods in this project was to give the young people the chance to control the interview situation and equalise, as far as possible, the power relations between us. I felt that this worked well, and the freedom and confidence this provided the young people allowed them to bring up topics within the interview that were of obvious importance to them, but that I would not have otherwise thought to ask about. However, these topics were not always of relevance to the main direction of my research into their transitional experiences. This meant that while some of the photo-elicitation interviews resulted in great depth of data, not all of this data was useful or relevant to the research questions posed in the research project. This does not invalidate the method in any way, but suggests that it may be better suited to a more flexible project with more loosely defined research questions or objectives.

The photo-elicitation interviews did not take longer to complete than the semi-structured interviews, as some have reported (for example, Meo 2010), but provided very different data. Some of the discussion resulting from the photographs was expansion on what had been discussed in the semi-structured interviews, but much of it was new and more personal information, because the use of photographs gave the young people a way of expressing themselves that they would not have otherwise had (Rose 2007). Other

researchers have found that use of photographs in interviews made communication easier, by providing a 'clear, tangible prompt' (Clark-Ibáñez 2004, 1512) to keep the interview flowing. This was certainly true, as the use of photographs as visual reference points made the interview much easier communication-wise for both participants and myself.

All four young people who completed the photo-elicitation stage reported that they enjoyed the process of taking photographs and using them to explain the important things in their lives. The use of photographs provoked discussion about the visual nature of d/Deaf people with the participants. The visual nature of d/Deaf people has been discussed in Deaf studies literature, usually in connection with members of the Deaf community whose first, or preferred, language was sign language (Hauser et al. 2010; Bahan 2004; Lane et al. 1996). However, some of the participants who preferred to communicate orally spontaneously commented on the visual nature of the photographs they had taken and the visual nature of their experiences. This suggested that it is not just those d/Deaf people who use sign languages who have this visual side to their nature.

A final advantage of conducting the photo-elicitation interviews was that during this second meeting, the young people were far more relaxed and confident in my company.

I was able to build up enough rapport in the semi-structured interviews that the young people trusted me enough to talk about their lives in more detail. This could also have been because focusing on the photographs in the interview removed the pressure from the young people, which made them more comfortable discussing their feelings and experiences (Collier and Collier 1986, 130). The success of these interviews provided rich, in-depth data about the young people's lives.

### **Conclusion**

The use of auto-driven photo-elicitation methods added greatly to the depth of the data collected in this project. It is felt, particularly with the current developments in the field of Deaf space and Deaf geographies (Gulliver 2009; Kusters 2011) in which traditional research methods such as archive research and anthropological interviewing have been used, that visual research methods such as auto-driven photo-elicitation interviews have a great deal to offer the field. The use of visual methods would allow more in-depth research of the spatial practices and beliefs of Deaf people, as well as visual documentation of space, which would offer exciting and innovative ways of exploring this area.

Visual research methods offer a productive way to work with d/Deaf people in other fields. Not only do they take advantage of the visual nature of d/Deaf people, but also of-

fer a way of easing communication within research interviews. With the increase in mainstreaming and the negative effects that this can have on the linguistic competence of young d/Deaf people in both English and BSL, communication can become a serious issue in research. Use of visual prompts and visual questions such as in photo-elicitation interviews can help to avoid these issues of lack of linguistic competence and ensure that d/Deaf people are not necessarily at a disadvantage in research interviews.

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