

# The barriers Deaf LGBT adults experience in accessing help for mental health problems

Gary Cutmore and

Helen Miller

With help from Rob Chalk and Claire Smith

# Plan of talk



- Deaf awareness
- Double minority
- Deaf LGBT history – Gay Sign Variant (GSV)
- Deaf LGBT and mental health
- Deaf LGBT and access to health services

# Some Deaf facts

- Severe to profound hearing loss
- Can't hear spoken speech even with aids
- Cochlear implants do not make deaf children hearing
- 90% of deaf children are born to hearing families

# Deaf Awareness

- Understand we need to use our eyes to communicate
- Be aware of Deaf with a capital D
- Don't cover your mouth, talk normally and don't shout.
- Be careful of the lighting and background
- Be patient and repeat things
- Don't assume we can read and write



# Some more Deaf facts

- Associations with poverty and ethnic minorities
- 1/3<sup>rd</sup> home language is not English
- Delayed/ deprived access to language impacts on development
- Poor educational attainment (because of poor education!) and high rates of unemployment.

# Deaf people

- Communication happens in visual / spatial / gestural modality.
- Have a visual perspective on the world not an auditory one
- BSL is a visual language
- May miss out on information because they cant overhear
- May have poor literacy
- May have a narrow or incomplete world view

# The forest of misunderstandings

- Deafness is the same as other disabilities
- Cochlear implants cure Deafness
- Working with a BSL interpreter is like working with any foreign language interpreter
- Deaf people can lip read really well
- Deaf people are dumb
- It is impossible to have an intellectual conversation in BSL
- Deaf people cant drive



# A path through the forest

- Deaf with a capital D: view self part of minority group with shared language, culture and history.
- Don't view Deafness as a disability.
- Take pride in being Deaf and in BSL.
- Don't want to be hearing.





# Deaf and LGBT: a double-minority

- While most people have interacted with members of a minority group, very few have insight into the challenges of being a "double-minority."
- Many double-minority members have few places where they feel truly welcome.
- It can be a lonely experience
- There is a lack of role models or media/ literature depictions of your experiences/ challenges

# Deaf and LGBT

**'I grew up with the idea that I had two strikes against me.** I have had to face discrimination from all directions: hearing, Deaf, straight, and gay. The straight and hearing worlds require no explanation. In the gay world, guys have shied away from me because of my immersion in American Sign Language (ASL) and Deaf culture, a concept so unfamiliar to most. In the Deaf community, I have sometimes felt unwelcome for not being "Deaf enough" because I wear a cochlear implant to hear.'

Connor R McLaren

‘I thought I was the only one’



# Personal Accounts

- I spent most of my high school years in a vain search for friends and partners who shared my DNA. The gene pool of Deaf and gay individuals was a null set.' Connor R McLaren
- "I grew up deaf but didn't come out [until] much later, because it was especially frightening to consider myself a double minority: deaf and gay, it felt overwhelming."

Josh Feldman

# Deaf LGBT History



- The Deaf community initially rejected people who were deaf and LGBT
- Deaf people who were LGBT were frightened they would lose their support from social workers and the Deaf community

# Early experiences



- Deaf LGBT people recall experiencing prejudice hostility and violence from the Deaf community.
- Deaf LGBT were frightened to come out.

# Deaf Community



- 1978 David Moller founded the Brothers and Sisters club for LGBT people in London
- They met in a pub in Islington
- They ran lectures on topics like safe sex
- Regional Deaf LGBT clubs followed



# 1987 BDA banned discrimination of Deaf LGBT





# Gay Sign Variant (GSV)



This one was used to tell someone that the person over there was gay.

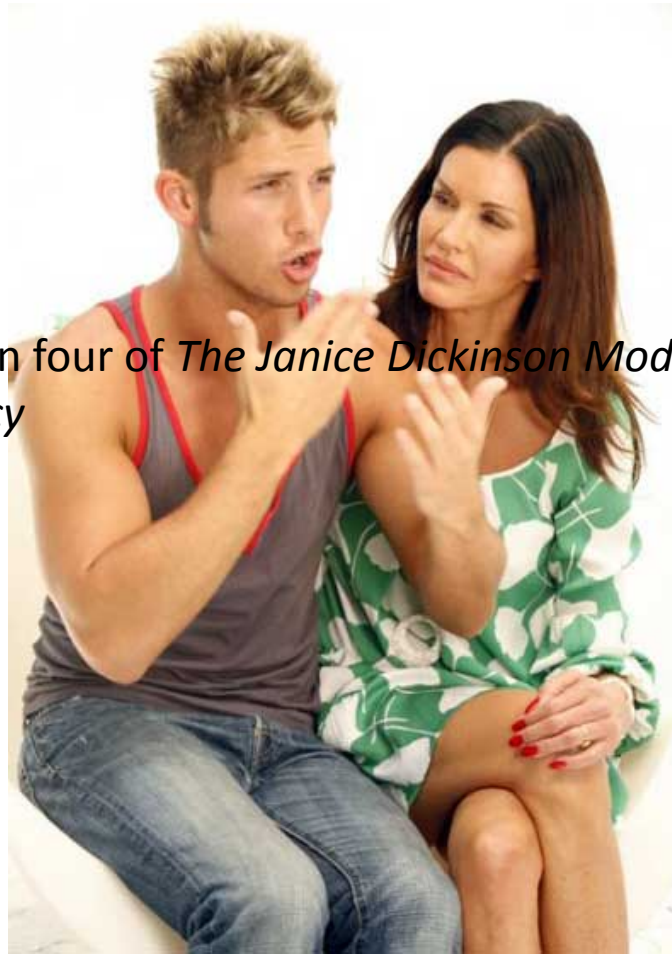
# GSV was a secret language



- Only Deaf LGBT people knew it; straight Deaf people could not understand it!
- Now Deaf LGBT are accepted it is not used and some of the signs have become part of mainstream BSL

# Famous Deaf LGBT: Martin Ritchie

Season four of *The Janice Dickinson Modeling Agency*



# Sharon Duchesneau and Candy McCullough

- Deaf lesbian couple
- Both had traumatic early lives because of their deafness
- Met at Gallaudet University
- Wanted a Deaf child to share their culture and identity
- Found a Deaf sperm donor (sperm donation clinics exclude Deaf men!)



# They said

- “A hearing baby would be a blessing. A deaf baby would be a special blessing”
- ‘We are culturally Deaf (Deaf with a capital D) and we want our children to share our language and culture’
- 'As Deaf Americans we get the advantage of experiencing the world in a different way. With an enhanced sense of smell, touch and sight Gauvin is not disabled, he is blessed.'

# Their critics said

- “To intentionally give a child a disability, in addition to all the disadvantages that come as a result of being raised in a homosexual household, is incredibly selfish’
- 'Why would anyone want to bring a disabled child into this world.'
- 'Surely it's every baby's right to be born perfect.'

# Common Truth

‘I find that, for the most part, the general population has a harder time understanding my deafness than my sexual orientation’

Rachelle





# The Future

- Now there are a number of (mainly American) sites such as [deafqueer.org](http://deafqueer.org) and rainbow alliances which provide education and support for Deaf LGBT adults.
- And clips and blogs on mainstream Deaf sites such as BSL Zone and Limping chicken.
- ‘Older Deaf LGBT remember the oppression but young enjoy the social scene’

David Pilkington



# Its not all negative

- Deaf gay men are very likely to join organizations and gay rights groups and deaf gay men are happier in their relationships and have more positive self-images than hearing gay men.
- There is a general lack of knowledge of LGBT issues among straight deaf individuals which impacts on their parenting of deaf and hearing LGBT children (communication about relationships, etc)

Daniel B. Swartz, 1995

# But...

- Deaf LGBT persons are more likely to be victims of sexual, physical, and psychological abuse or assault.
- The Deaf population has higher rates of emotional and behavioral problems.
- Lack of early access to language and limited incidental learning may result in limited emotional vocabulary and awareness of mental illness.

# Deaf LGBT and access to health services

- Deaf LGBT experience multiple marginalization's and exclusions.
- They particularly cited communication with HCPs and access to services as problematic.
- They have poor access to key support networks (social and more formal)

University of Brighton, 2008

# The current state of play

- Funding for deaf IAPT services has been slashed.
- Massive cuts to Social Workers for the deaf.
- Hearing mental health services struggle to meet the needs of Deaf patients.
- Deaf mental health services do not cover the whole country and do not provide the same range of services hearing people have access too.

# Some problems

- Deaf Trans report problems in interpreter provision for clinic appointments; travel to center of excellence and then when arrive no interpreter.
- Deaf LGBT partners may find themselves excluded from their partner's care; hearing hospitals don't book interpreters for them.
- Over protective parents and families.....

# And some more problems...

- Deaf LGBT community is small so patients and health care professionals may know each other socially: issues of trust and concerns over confidentiality.
- Small therapists pool so Deaf LGBT who wish Deaf LGBT therapists will find this difficult to find.
- No help with travel costs to attend specialist Deaf mental health services.

# Deaf LGBT

- For men and women..., greater social services are needed to help them acclimate to a world that is different from them. Their experiences are distinctive, and their success is contingent upon society providing them with the information and tools needed to succeed. No one I've spoken to wants a free-hand or feels that the world owes them anything because of their sexual orientation or disability; what they would like is an even-playing field.
- For a civilized society, that shouldn't be so hard to achieve.

