No longer free to be Deaf: Cultural, medical and social understandings of d/Deafness in Prison

Dr Laura Kelly-Corless

Senior Lecturer in Criminology

University of Central Lancashire

LKelly-corless@uclan.ac.uk

Twitter: @DrLauraMargaret

ORCID Id: 0000-0002-4712-5850

Abstract

Culturally and linguistically Deaf people experience disproportionate suffering and deprivation in prison settings globally (Zidenberg 2021).This article uses the medical and social models of disability to highlight some of the underlying reasons for this. Deaf people view their Deafness through a cultural lens and usually disassociate from views which align with these models (Lane 1995). However, they are prominent across society and in relevant equality legislation, and thus impact the Deaf Community significantly (Obasi 2008). This article explores how the nature of the prison environment – a hostile, disempowering place, designed for similarity, changes and heightens the impact of perspectives which align with the medical and social models. Throughout, findings are presented from qualitative research involving interviews with Deaf prisoners and hearing staff members in England, showing that there is little room for a cultural model of Deafness in prison, and in consequence, prison becomes medically deafening for Deaf prisoners.

Keywords

Deaf; prisoner; disability; model; medical; social

Points of Interest

- The Deaf Community is a culturally distinct group comprised of people who value their Deafness and commonly use sign language to communicate.
- Hearing people generally view deafness as a medical problem and have little understanding of the Deaf Community. This creates difficulties for Deaf people because the Deaf world is part of a wider hearing world.
- The hearing world is more oppressive in prison because it is hostile, disempowering and designed for people who can easily adjust to the regime. There is a lack of Deaf awareness across the prison system, and appropriate adjustments are rarely made for Deaf prisoners.

- Relevant equality legislation can create further challenges for Deaf prisoners because it does not recognise the needs of the Deaf Community, and its stipulations are too ambiguous to be effective in prisons.
- There is little room for cultural Deafness in prison, and Deaf prisoners suffer disproportionately in consequence.

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The experiences of culturally and linguistically Deaf people in prison settings are defined by pain, isolation and deprivation far beyond the 'expected' punishment inflicted by the prison sentence (Kelly 2017, 2018; Zidenburg 2021). This article contends that the medical and social models of disability can be used as important theoretical tools for understanding the underlying causes of this disproportionate punishment. While these models are increasingly seen as being more like complex sets of relational approaches (Andrews 2016, Berghs et al 2019), findings from qualitative research with Deaf prisoners and surrounding staff members at multiple adult prisons in England are presented throughout which demonstrate that the foundational principles underpinning these models are dominant in the prison system and significantly impact the lives of Deaf prisoners, who do not view their Deafness as per either model. Instead, this population view their Deafness culturally, with the capital D here referring to members of the Deaf community, made up of people who usually communicate in British Sign Language (BSL), and utilise visual and tactile cultural behaviours including using touch to get people's attention and to express friendliness (Baker and Padden 1978; Padden 1980; Woodward 1972). Deaf people value their Deafness and commonly prefer to associate with other Deaf people in social and personal contexts (Corker 1996; Leigh 2009). Whereas deafness with a lowercase d denotes the audiological condition (Hearing Link 2021) and is used here to identify people who have a significant hearing problem, who view their deafness medically and commonly wish to 'fix' it (Higgins 1991). While conceptions of d/Deafness are more complex than these definitions imply (Kusters et al 2017; Mcilroy and Storbeck, 2011; Turner 1994), it is beyond the scope of this article to articulate these further.

Most of society are unaware of the Deaf community, instead viewing deafness as a terrifying prospect characterised by isolation and as a medical problem requiring pity/sympathy (Ladd 2003). These views are underpinned by the medical model of disability, where disability is viewed as 'An individual defect lodged in the person, a defect that must be cured…if the person is to achieve full capacity as a human' (Siebers 2008, 3). Views relating to this model dominate across many areas of society (Lane 2005), which is problematic because it creates low expectations of d/Deaf and disabled people, who in consequence lose independence, choice and control (Shakespeare 1998).

In response to the medical model, disabled people created the social model of disability and commonly incorporate d/Deafness into definitions of disability here (Shakespeare 1998). In this model, disability is viewed 'not as an individual defect but as the product of social injustice, one that requires...significant changes in the social and built environment' (Siebers 2008, 3). Key here is the removing of barriers for disabled people to ensure inclusion, integration and access to healthcare (Lane 2005, Hughes 2010). It has contributed to significant improvements in the lives of disabled people and has been instrumental to many protests for equal rights (Lane 1995; 2005). It has also been used to underpin government guidance and policies which promote the social inclusion of disabled people, including some elements of the Equality Act 2010, which legally obligates public services to make adjustments to ensure that disabled people are not discriminated against (Hughes 2010, Attfield 2013). This is significant given that d/Deafness is included in the umbrella of disability there (see Equality Act 2010, s6), as discussed in more depth later.

While the social model of disability has been valuable for the Deaf Community in some ways, it has also been a driving factor in decisions that have disadvantaged them and their culture (Lane 1995; Samaha 2007). Examples here include lobbying to integrate Deaf children into mainstream schools and the promotion of oral language over sign language in schools (Attfield, 2013; Snoddon and Underwood, 2017). Deaf Studies scholars contend that another model which centralises their distinct culture is needed if their rights are to be upheld (Ladd 2003, Lane 1995; Attfield 2013). To Deaf people, equality does not mean inclusion or integration, it means an acceptance of their unique cultural and linguistic difference and the provision of services to allow them to communicate in BSL (Obasi, 2008; Snoddon and Underwood 2013). While models have been created in this vein, they are yet to be 'recognised or awarded weight in mainstream terms' (Attfield 2013, 12). However, for the purposes of this article, a cultural linguistic third model of Deafness is referred to which aligns with the values underpinned by Deaf culture (see Ladd 2003).

Acknowledgement of the different ways of understanding d/Deafness is vital when seeking to understand the lives of Deaf people both in society and in custody. The fact that the Deaf world and the hearing world overlap significantly means that their lives are impacted by conceptions of d/Deafness which align with the social and medical models of disability (Obasi 2008). Because

members of the hearing world hold most of the decision-making power in society, this can be catastrophic for Deaf people, who can feel as though they are being oppressed by those whose ideas are underpinned by models of disability with which they disagree (Ladd 2003; Obasi 2008). Scholars have considered the impact that this can have for Deaf people in settings such as education (Simms and Thumann 2007) and employment (Nunn 2017), showing that in these contexts individuals are forced to navigate vicariously between two worlds, compromising and chameleonizing to get by.

This article makes a significant contribution to knowledge by extending the gaze to the prison setting via the presentation of data from semi-structured interviews with Deaf prisoners and staff members who had experience of working with them across six adult male prisons in England (Kelly 2017, 2018; Kelly-Corless 2020). Attention is focused throughout on the interaction between the different models of disability and understandings of d/Deafness in punitive carceral spaces which are hostile, framed around similarity and designed for a young, hearing, English speaking male (Goffman 1961, Cheney 2005, Kelly 2017). The article centralises the concept of power (Crewe 2009), as prisoners become disempowered by their role; demoted to a child-like state where their autonomy is restricted and their movements are controlled by staff (Sykes 1958; Irwin and Owen 2005). Data will be presented which shows that for Deaf prisoners, this power imbalance can be culturally catastrophic because staff members often understand d/Deafness via the medical model of disability. While this ideological collision also exists between the Deaf and hearing worlds more generally, it is exacerbated in prison due to the power imbalances inherent there. As such the cultural and linguistic identities of Deaf prisoners become subordinate to the disabling, medicalising and stigmatising perceptions of staff members, which has dramatic implications for their day-to-day lives. Importantly, perspectives of d/Deafness which align with the social model can contribute to these issues too, as can relevant legislation which is theoretically expected to prevent discrimination, rendering ‘protective’ mechanisms counterproductive at times.

The article begins by providing context of the position of Deaf people in society, and the interplay between medical, social and cultural understandings of d/Deafness in different scenarios. To provide an understanding of the carceral environment that Deaf people enter when imprisoned, prison life is briefly discussed. Information about the methodology used in the research is then provided.

Data is then presented in relation to the following themes: the cultural identities of Deaf prisoners and the impact that their Deafness has on their behaviour in prison; the key roles of the medical and social models of disability in prison both organisationally and individually; and the complex and problematic interactions between these different understandings of d/Deafness in carceral settings, and the implications that this has for imprisoned Deaf people.

Deafness and society

This section outlines some key contexts where the lives of d/Deaf people are affected by views, practice and policies that align with the medical and social models of disability. This is important because many of the themes discussed here affect the lived realities of Deaf prisoners too.

For deaf children (who are yet to identify as Deaf), life is commonly oriented around understandings of deafness which align with the medical model (Ladd 2003). 90% of deaf children are born to hearing parents who often view deafness through this lens and react negatively to the diagnosis (Corker 1996; Lane 2005; Snoddon and Underwood 2017). Although d/Deaf children can have positive home lives with the right support/resources, such provision is often lacking, and parents are commonly given medical advice that aligns with the medical model (Marschark 2009; Snoddon and Underwood 2013). Consequently, deaf children tend to develop 'stigmatized identities' (Leigh 2009, 65), feeling out of place, isolated, and confused (Lane, Hoffmeister and Bahan 1996; Snoddon, 2014). While Deaf adults can disassociate from these experiences in many contexts, in prison the medical model becomes much more encompassing again, as discussed later.

The fact that most deaf children attend mainstream schools without specialist support means that these stigmatized identities are often ingrained further (Anglin-Jaffe 2020; British Deaf Association 2015; National Deaf Children's Society 2020). While there are increasing arguments for all d/Deaf children to have access to sign language/culturally inclusive learning spaces (Snoddon and Underwood, 2017), practice is yet to meaningfully shift. This is shown via the fact that dedicated Deaf schools are being closed and mainstream schools are usually unable to ensure the full inclusion of a d/Deaf child (Leigh 2009; NDCS 2020; Snoddon and Underwood, 2017; Wilks 2019).

Once deaf individuals become aware of the Deaf world, their lives usually improve significantly (Ladd, 2003). However, it is common for feelings of anger/resentment towards anyone they perceive to have inhibited their access to Deaf life to arise here too (Corker 1996; Lane, Hoffmeister and Bahan 1996). This can culminate in resentment towards the hearing world more broadly, which is discussed later in the context of prison, where the hearing world is enforced on them. Negative experiences with hearing people often continue throughout the adult lives of Deaf people, with stigmatising perceptions that align with the medical model hindering their opportunities and progression in contexts like work (Nunn 2017; O'Connell 2021; Wilks 2019). This demonstrates that d/Deafness can be disabling irrespective of how someone identifies with it (Lane 2005, Leigh 2009) - a theme which is explored throughout in the context of prison.

Deaf people commonly face significant practical challenges in hearing-oriented settings as well given the prominence of sound/verbal communication. Activities including work, various appointments and being hospitalised can be hard without significant adjustments, including sound converting equipment and BSL interpreters (Ladd 2003; Nunn 2017; Kersten-Parrish 2021; Wilks 2019). The Equality Act 2010 (s20.5) stipulates that as far as is 'reasonable', service providers must provide 'reasonable adjustments' to their service to avoid discriminating against individuals with a protected characteristic such as disability, where d/Deafness is placed. While this legal protection theoretically should ensure that adjustments are made for d/Deaf people in England and Wales, evidence suggests that this is not always the case (BDA 2015; Wilks 2019). The ambiguity of the language used contributes to the limitations of its practical application, given that what is 'reasonable' is not defined, nor is a 'reasonable adjustment' – leaving this open to interpretation by service providers (BDA 2015, McCulloch 2012). This is important here given that equality legislation has such a significant role in prisons (Kelly 2017).

While the Equality Act 2010 represents an increase in the rights of d/Deaf people and stipulates adjustments that align with the social model, other parts of the Act have been subject to widespread critique from the Deaf and disabled communities for perpetuating problematic narratives which align with the medical model (Wilks 2019). The Act defines disability as "A physical or mental impairment... [that] has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on a person's ability to carry out

normal day to day activities" (Equality Act, 2010: 6.1). For the Deaf Community to be included in this definition represents absolute denial of their culture, as does being forced to position themselves in the disability category of the framework if they are to be legally protected by it (Oliver and Barnes 2011, Wilks 2019). The Deaf legal dilemma (Wilks 2019) is encapsulated perfectly by Lane (2005, 297) who states that people can either 'Retain some important rights as members of their society at the expense of being mischaracterised by that society and government or surrender some of those rights in the hope of gradually undermining that misconstruction'. To Obasi (2008) then, well-meaning advocates of the social model of disability have inadvertently become complicit in the construction of Deafness as a disability, and help to further ingrain this label in legal, political and social contexts. Importantly, this is not about implying that Deaf people are superior to disabled people whose culture and lives are reflected in the social model, but rather that they are equal but different (Wilks 2019). As such, the role of the social model in prison and the impact that this has on imprisoned Deaf people is also considered later.

Imprisonment

To understand how different conceptions of d/Deafness interact in prison settings and how these shape the lives of Deaf prisoners, some context about prison life must be provided. Prison is an environment which is designed to punish and constrain (Crewe 2011), where the regime is highly regulated and strictly regimented, and runs largely based on sound - tannoys, alarms, bells, voices and so on (Kelly 2017, 2018; Herrity 2019). By its very nature prison deprives individuals of many freedoms and rights, including liberty, control and privacy, and restricts access to loved ones and goods and services amongst many other things (see Sykes 1958). The environment is commonly characterised by hostility, violence, chaos and pain, as highlighted by Sim (2010, Vii) who calls it 'Psychologically corrosive, culturally toxic, institutionally mendacious [and] materially desperate' for prisoners.

Prison staff are intrinsic to prison life – they enforce the regime and are the face of the state for prisoners, whose carceral experiences are significantly influenced by their relationships with them (Drake 2012; Liebling 2011; Schmidt 2016). As stated earlier, a key characteristic of this relationship

is power (Crewe 2009), and indeed the power imbalance that exists between the two groups – by the very nature of their roles, prison staff and prisoners are forced into a hostile dichotomy, where it is 'Us' versus 'Them' (Goffman 1961). Of course, there are significant nuances here, and in practice that dichotomy is blurred and even oxymoronic - although prisoners may feel hostility towards staff, they are also reliant on them for many things, including information, adjustments and moving around the prison.

Prisons are largely designed for young, non-disabled, English-speaking males (Cheney 2005), and individuals who do not fit this mould commonly experience extra layers of harm and deprivation there (see Crewe, Hulley and Wright, 2017; Gormley, 2022; Rogers, 2020; Philips 2012). While adjustments could (and sometimes are) made to the regime to support these people, evidence suggests that prisoners are expected to be able to automatically behave in accordance with the expectations of their role, and to exist as part of a 'batch' of similar others (Goffman 1961, 17), and if they cannot do this then prison life becomes harder.

Turning here to Deaf prisoners, for whom most available knowledge is either North American or from England and Wales. While most literature fails to meaningfully differentiate between the different layers and levels of d/Deafness, a universally common theme is the fact that Deaf (and indeed deaf) people experience disproportionate pain, isolation and deprivation whilst incarcerated (see Kelly 2017, 2018; Tamura and Gunnison 2019; Zidenberg 2021). It is clear that penal systems across the world are not meeting their needs or adhering to relevant equality legalisation (Kelly 2017; McCulloch 2012; Tamura and Gunnison 2019). The study around which this article is based shows clearly that being able to hear and to communicate verbally are expected parts of the prisoner role (see Kelly 2018), and because of this, Deaf prisoners need access to significant resources to integrate into prison life and to behave as part of the 'batch' (Goffman 1961, 17). However, the allocation of resources hinges on awareness, understanding and inclination on the part of staff, which are usually minimal (Kelly 2017, 2018; Cobb 2016; Gerrard 2001, McCulloch 2012; O'Rourke and Reed 2007; Tamura and Gunnison 2019; Vernon and Miller 2005; Young, Monteiro and Ridgeway 2000). As such, there is little room for Deafness in a setting like prison, and throughout the remainder of this

article it is shown that the medical and social models of disability can be used as important theoretical tools for understanding why this is.

Method

The data presented in this article were collected during research which explored the experiences of d/Deaf prisoners in England and Wales. The study was exploratory in nature, aiming to increase understanding about the lives of this largely hidden population, and thus a qualitative methodology was deemed most appropriate. Semi-structured interviews were used as the main form of data collection, with 28 interviews being carried out altogether – 18 with d/Deaf prisoners and 10 with staff members who had worked with them. A purposive sampling frame was used to locate participants, whereby letters were sent to all prisons in England and Wales asking how many d/Deaf prisoners were being held there, and if they would be interested in being involved in the research. The process of locating the sample was littered with challenges, and a lack of legal obligation to record how d/Deaf someone is or which prison they are in made it extremely difficult to locate Deaf participants, who were initially the intended focus of the study (Kelly-Corless 2020). Because of this the sample remit changed to include hard of hearing and deaf participants, which was beneficial in that it highlighted the extent that identity impacts an individual's prison experience.

It is the data collected from the seven culturally and linguistically Deaf participants and 10 staff members that had worked with a Deaf prisoner which is referred to in this article. While the small sample size is a limitation of the study, the data collected were rich and extended previous understanding significantly. Although the sample spanned six adult male prisons, the Deaf participants were situated in three establishments; two as the only Deaf person there and five residing in the same establishment - HMP Bowdon (all prison and participant names are pseudonyms). An interview was carried out with each participant individually, and a further group interview was carried out with four of the participants at HMP Bowdon. All participant names have been anonymised via a coding system whereby P stands for prisoner and SM for staff member. The number that follows relates to the order that participants were interviewed, and the letter correlates with the first letter of the anonymised prison name.

I must recognise my position as a researcher here. I am a hearing person with limited understanding of BSL, which made it harder to ensure that the Deaf voice was not lost in the research findings (Wilson and Winiarczyk 2014). To maximise authenticity, a qualified BSL interpreter was used in interviews with Deaf participants. While I requested to use a visual recording device during interviews (see Stone and West 2012; Wilson and Winiarczyk 2014 for important discussion here), this was denied by the National Research Committee, who stated that for security reasons, only a Dictaphone would be allowed. Thus, I could only record the interpreter's interpretation of the Deaf participants' answers rather than the raw data (see Kelly-Corless 2020), which was complicated further by the fact that some of the Deaf participants verbalised loudly whilst signing, making it harder to decipher the interpreter. Consequently, while the interviews were transcribed as close to verbatim as was possible – at times excerpts had to be deleted. Transcriptions were analysed using thematic analysis as defined by Braun and Clarke (2006), with the themes chosen aligning with those most prominent in the data. Confidentiality, participant welfare, anonymity and consent were all important ethical considerations, and ethical approval was obtained from the University of Central Lancashire.

The research process outlined briefly here was complex and fraught with obstacles and has been documented in significant depth in Kelly-Corless (2020).

Findings

Data is now presented in relation to various key themes from the research. First, some context is provided as to the broader life experiences and identities of the Deaf participants. After this, consideration is given as to how these things impacted their behaviour in prison. Focus turns then to prison staff and the prominence of understandings aligning with the medical model. Findings are then outlined which focus on the role and interpretation of equality legislation and the relevance of the social model. After highlighting the toxic ways that the different models of disability interact in prisons, data is presented which highlights the significant consequences that this has for Deaf prisoners.

Life before prison and Deaf identity

The Deaf participants were aged between approximately 30 and 65 and were all born to hearing parents. They unanimously described their childhoods as being characterised by different layers of isolation, as is highlighted by P5B who felt that he had 'grown up alone' because he could not communicate with family members, and P2B who stated:

> All of my family are hearing…I'm just the one person who is Deaf…When I was a little boy I really didn't have any relationships with d/Deaf people you know. My parents went to work. We'd meet with the family and it was really difficult for me because I didn't know anything about Deaf club at that time. I didn't really sign a lot either, and it was just like a silent upbringing.

Several participants remained isolated from their families throughout adulthood, with individuals reporting that their family members still viewed deafness through the medical model and failed to see BSL as a 'real' language. P4B claimed to have severed all ties with his family because he felt that they had displayed a complete lack of understanding about Deafness throughout his life, as shown here:

> I have stayed away because they didn't want to know. They don't want to know about Deaf people within the family...They just kind of disowned me because they put all of the hearing members of the family first. They didn't communicate with me.

Distinctions in the life histories of the participants emerged when they discussed their schooling. Individuals who went to Deaf schools viewed their education positively – as the place where they were introduced to the Deaf world, whereas themes of isolation and difficulty were central to the interviews with participants who attended mainstream schools. Individuals discussed feeling as though their only option was to attempt to behave as hearing there, as highlighted by P5B who stated, 'When we were little we were that desperate to be hearing, desperate to come in the hearing world. We were pretending...Obviously, it didn't work'.

All of the participants viewed their Deafness as a valuable part of their identity, and self-identified as being part of the Deaf community. P4B highlighted this by stating ‘My children are not deaf... I was praying that my son or daughter would be deaf, but they are hearing, so it was a bit of a shock actually because I am proud of [it]’. This was furthered by P1W who said:

> The Deaf way of life is very important to me…when I married a Deaf woman it just like formed my Deaf identity, and I was really happy then because I was in the Deaf world and it was so easy to communicate. I had lots of friends, it was brilliant; it was a much better life.

Furthermore, they all reported feeling different to hearing people because of the visual nature of their language and culture, as shown here by P5B:

> I’m more confident with Deaf people...I do talk to hearing people, but it is always basic…I can't picture what they are saying, and I will just say 'Okay, yeah okay, yeah stop now, okay, stop now', I just can't do it. But when I am with Deaf people they get into depth… I can stand there and I can talk with them for a long, long time…With the hearing, they talk, and I can't see the picture that they are talking about, and it's like what do you mean?...It's too much for me!

Preferring to spend time with other Deaf people was key too, with P5B stating ‘To be with hearing is very difficult. Deaf on Deaf, that's great; you get laughs, you get jokes... you’re good to each other, you get on well’. While Goffman (1961) discussed there being an ‘Us’ versus ‘Them’ divide within institutions like prison where there is a discord in power, this arguably applies to Deaf people more generally given the power imbalance that exists between Deaf and hearing people in society (Ladd 2003). Like existing literature, the data indicated that because the Deaf world does not exist autonomously from the hearing world, and because the norms of the hearing world are more pervasive, in everyday life the Deaf participants had little choice but to adhere with a set of cultural values that contradicted their own. They discussed feeling resentful about this, and unhappy about the

way they were treated within the hearing world, with P3B stating that ‘If you are Deaf, you just kind of get the elbow, it’s frustrating’.

The perceptions of all of the Deaf participants were clearly aligned with a cultural model of Deafness, and to some extent the social model of disability (without the association with disability), given that they felt that any difficulties they faced as a result of their Deafness were a consequence of external forces.

The Deaf world in prison

All of the Deaf participants discussed having negative feelings about hearing prisoners and staff members and being suspicious of them, with P4B stating, ‘I don't trust them, I don't trust what they are saying’. The interviewees were attempting to maintain the ‘Us’ versus ‘Them’ divide that existed outside of prison, with all participants wishing to avoid hearing prisoners and feeling as though they should not be imprisoned with them at all. Examples of this are provided by P3B who began crying when talking about having to be in prison with hearing people and stated, ‘Between hearing and Deaf, it's not right. I am not feeling comfortable’, and P5B who said:

> I am on my own with no one to talk to. I don't shout, I’m not aggressive, and once they worked that out, the hearing guys worked as a team to gang up on me and do something, like, steal from me... We don't get on...I'm in a cell with a hearing person right now, and...I just need to keep my head down. I’ll be getting my own cell soon. Deaf people should not share with hearing...Don't get me wrong, there are good hearing people and there are bad. It's just a handful that are good, the majority are bad.

The Deaf interviewees all wanted to be in an establishment with other Deaf people. While this was not an option for P1W or P1S who were the only Deaf prisoners at their respective establishments, there were six Deaf prisoners at HMP Bowdon, and for them the maintenance of the ‘Us’ versus ‘Them’ divide also meant gravitating towards the available Deaf population. This is shown by P3B who felt that ‘When we had others that were Deaf...we were signing to each other and we could

understand each other, it was like being back in the Deaf world...We could relax', and by P5B who remarked:

> I felt more alive, more confident, more happier now I've got a Deaf person to talk with...All of a sudden we are laughing. Before I was isolated, and I was sad, I felt like it was the end of the world, like there was nothing here.

Clearly then, their embodiment of a cultural model of Deafness significantly impacted the behaviour of the participants during their time in custody. However, although Deaf people often perceive the social model of disability as being irrelevant to their Deaf identities, the interviewees were eager to highlight the fact that they were a protected population as per the Equality Act 2010, even though deafness is classified as a disability there. This shows that Deaf individuals must accept definitions of deafness that clash with their personal identities if they are to receive necessary support (Lane 2005), leading to the argument that 'social oppression can be further compounded through state legislation that offers no alternative choice' (Obasi 2008, 460), as discussed further below.

Staff perceptions and the medical model

The research indicated that there was a lack of Deaf awareness across the Prison Service. This began with the fact that at the time of research, the systems used to record numbers of prisoners with different conditions only had one relevant category where Deaf people could sit - 'Hearing Difficulties', a categorisation which is clearly underpinned by the medical model. Of the 10 staff members interviewed, a number were Deaf aware, however, it was clear that prison officials usually view d/Deafness medically, as shown by SM1A who stated that 'They are no different to anybody else, they just have the misfortune to not hear' and SM4C who referred to deafness as a 'communication disability'. A particularly shocking example of Deafness being viewed problematically, potentially eugenically even, is shown here by SM1A:

> If you were to write a list down, and if it was an animal you would put it to sleep. He has got a mental age of 13 or something like that. He has got really bad diabetes. He has got bipolar. He is deaf, and he is dumb.

The use of 'deaf and dumb' here also highlights a lack of Deaf awareness given that this is viewed as an offensive phrase by the Deaf community because of its association of Deafness with low intellect (Ladd 2003). This association was made by other staff members too with SM2B saying, 'I don't think they would treat them any differently to someone who has low IQ'. Connections were also made between Deafness and mental illness, as per the following example provided by SM3B:

> The only way that a lot of people would deal with a Deaf prisoner was to send them to Downton [a secure psychiatric hospital] or something like that. They were having problems because they are Deaf, so we had a team of probation officers who said, 'No we can't give them their own course, so we'll send them to Downton to get them assessed'. Why would you send them to Downton...He doesn't have mental health problems!

While several interviewees were keen to stress that practice like this no longer took place at HMP Bowdon, SM4B, a forensic psychologist, suggested otherwise. She advised that there had been some disagreements about the treatment of one Deaf prisoner - She believed that he should remain in prison, however others felt that admission to a psychiatric hospital would be more appropriate. The details of this are discussed here:

> The only criteria under which he would be sectioned would be sexual deviance due to his offence…but there is no other mental health issues or disorders. Which to me seems a bit like okay he is not coping particularly well in prison, but on the other hand, sectioned under the Mental Health Act! I wanted him to be really clear in understanding about what that might mean for him, because that might be more difficult for him to be released.

Equality legislation and the social model

All staff interviewed were asked about equality and the Equality Act, and the majority felt strongly that equality was a key priority across the Prison Service. When asked about the role of equality legislation, several participants expressed that their day-to-day job was significantly affected by it, as shown here; 'We are ruled by it. We have to abide by the blinking rules and regulations because, these lot know every right that they have got; some of them could be solicitors'. However, the research showed that even when staff members do devote time to equality related matters, their understanding of the term significantly impacts whether the needs of prisoners with certain characteristics are met. Even though the Equality Act 2010 stipulates that reasonable adjustments must be made, in reality staff understanding of equality appears to reflect Goffman's (1961, 22) notion of 'batch living'. For example, consistency was often perceived as being vital to the process, questions about equality and difference were met with resentment and disdain by some interviewees, and adjustments were often seen as unfairly giving some people 'more' than others.

While these views might be less impactful in other public settings where day-to-day life is public facing and there are clearer procedures in place to ensure accountability, the data indicated that in prison, staff are often able to interpret the legislation as they wish/understand it with little consequence because of the nature of the carceral environment, the power differentials there and the ambiguity of the legislation. Thus, although the existence of equality legislation that incorporates disabled/d/Deaf people is an outcome of well-intentioned advocates of the social model and has led to significant improvements in the treatment of many groups (Hughes 2010), in prison it can instead act as a protective tool which legitimises problematic behaviour. The lived reality of P1S is important here, as his personal officer reported that on her return from a six-week period of sick leave it was apparent that he had been 'left to fester' and was 'like a vagrant' because other staff had not attempted to meet his needs or communicate with him because they did not view it as being part of their role. Importantly, there had been no consequences for staff or the establishment because of this.

This not only applies to interpretations of the notion of equality, but also to staff perceptions of what reasonable adjustments ought to be made. In many instances staff considered the adjustments needed for Deaf prisoners through a medical lens and made changes such as speaking louder and writing things down when interacting with them, as opposed to ensuring that BSL interpreters were

provided – something which was rare. As stated earlier, resource allocation was irregular and inconsistent, with none of the Deaf participants being given access to adjustments that would allow them to integrate into prison life. There was also an instance where a staff member reported regularly taking a Deaf prisoner over to spend time with a group of older prisoners so that he could socialise with them. She clearly viewed his deafness as an age-related vulnerability, when in fact he was in his thirties and was culturally Deaf. Crucially then, a legislative framework that situates Deafness in the disability category and does not adequately define 'reasonable', can in a prison setting, devalue Deafness and legitimise decisions which inappropriately embody the medical model of disability.

Prison is deafening for Deaf prisoners

The research showed clearly that the nature of the prison environment made it almost impossible for the Deaf participants to behave in line with their identities. As such, it is argued that prison is in fact deafening for Deaf people, as although they viewed their Deafness positively, there was little conception of this institutionally. While this resonates with literature which looks at the impact of ideological collisions on the lives of Deaf people in society, the fact that the power imbalance is larger in prison means that the label of deaf was being enforced upon individuals who were culturally and linguistically Deaf.

An abundance of relevant data were collected at HMP Bowdon which was initially surprising given that there were multiple Deaf prisoners there. It had been anticipated that these individuals would have more freedom to be Deaf because of this, and while this was true to some degree, the fact that most staff viewed deafness via the medical model meant that they failed to understand why it would be beneficial to place Deaf prisoners on wings together and often separated them unnecessarily. This separation further ingrained the resentment already felt towards the hearing world, and intensified feelings of powerlessness and frustration. The consequences of this were discussed by P5B, who recalled an instance where a Deaf prisoner 'Locked himself in his cell and said "I'm not coming out"...because he didn't want to be part of the hearing' when he was separated other Deaf prisoners.

All staff interviewees were asked their thoughts about grouping d/Deaf prisoners together in contexts where there were multiple d/Deaf people at one prison. Those who were Deaf aware thought that this would be an important improvement for members of the Deaf Community. However, interviewees who had little conception of cultural Deafness saw little value in this, with one staff member stating, “I don't think you should just have a prison for deaf people, because that is also isolating. They need to be integrated into the rest of the prison community” and another arguing, “I think it is good to let them mix normally… We are very much pro mixing, letting them being normal and socialising with the general public”. The language used here clearly resonates with the social model given that integration and inclusion are being given precedence over the preservation of cultural identity.

Not only did staff members fail to understand Deaf behaviour in any meaningful way, the hostile nature of the prison environment combined with the fact that prisoners and staff are forced into an ‘Us’ versus ‘Them’ dichotomy meant that they also became mistrustful of it. An example here is the suspicion that was often felt towards the prisoners using BSL, as shown by SM4B who stated that ‘because they [uniformed staff] can’t understand what they are saying or what’s happening, [they worry] that they might be able to group together and make plans and plot’. This is evidenced further in this quote from P1B who was discussing a time where he went to get a BSL book from the library to teach others how to sign:

> When I went to the library... they said, “We've stopped doing that now”, and I said “Why?”. They said, “They don't want you reading it... They're worried about you passing code on” because the officers don't understand us. And I said, “What about India[n language], what about other people who you can't understand?”... They say we can't have it for security reasons... That is discrimination and that's why I made a complaint, and I've never had an answer back to that.

The extent to which the freedom to be Deaf had been restricted was shown by P5B who claimed that the Deaf prisoners had been attempting to sign to each other ‘in secret’ to avoid provoking suspicion.

This shows a significant difference from the outside world where Deaf people usually have the freedom to sign with others in most situations - because they were disempowered by their role as prisoners, that freedom had been removed. This was also true with regards to their use of touch to get attention, with security and authority being cited as reasons why it was inappropriate for prisoners to touch officers. In instances where the Deaf prisoners touched other prisoners it was seen as being an indication of 'trouble to come', which is shown in the following extract from the group interview at HMP Bowdon:

> P1B: We'll be messing about, and then because there's CCTV you've got officers running and shouting, 'What's going on?', and its actually part of Deaf culture.
>
> P4B: We use our bodies to act to explain expression, and that's why the officers take it the wrong way, thinking that we are being violent or attacking each other, and that's why they take it the wrong way.
>
> P1B: Yeah, yeah.
>
> P4B: They don't understand, that's the problem, they don't understand us. And that's what we keep trying to say, they don't understand us at all.
>
> P1B: You know I was saying that people like us, we sometimes make big movements when we sign, and sometimes we tap each other to get people's attention. The staff would run up and say "You aren't allowed to touch each other; you aren't allowed to do that".... Everything is just so over the top…When I went outside [one day] I had a newspaper in my hand, and there were two Deaf guys just stood there, and they were signing, and I was talking to Ian, and I wanted to say something to the others so I tapped one of their shoulders with the newspaper and the two officers run to me and grab me and told us "You shouldn't be doing

> that, you will bruise him". So, they said to Paul who I tapped "Did he bully you? Did he bully you?".

This lack of Deaf awareness, combined with the ineffectiveness of the Equality Act 2010, the prominence of the medical model of disability and the nature of the penal environment creates a toxic setting for Deaf prisoners, who become almost completely isolated from prison life. The data showed that they are subject to a harrowing array of pains, and feel chronically confused, frustrated, anxious and unheard (for further discussion see Kelly 2017, 2018). P2B went as far as to say that he would rather be in a secure psychiatric hospital than in prison, and stated:

> I've been crying, really upset because I don't want to stay in prison. I'm worried that I am going to have a mental breakdown if I stay here... I can't sleep at night…I want to have good health, and I want to be able to go do courses and move on... My brother is really worried about me because I am sitting here twiddling my thumbs... I don't know what's happening all the time... What I'd like to do is to improve my IQ, I'd like to be keeping my mind active. What's happening is, my mind's dying because I am just not being stimulated at all.

The lack of access to Deaf life and other Deaf people was another key theme here, as highlighted below by P1W:

> P1W: It's a real problem for me inside. I keep it in. We are communicating now at this appointment, and I was EXCITED to come here. I was excited to see you because I knew I would be communicating with people. But out there I have to hold it all in, and I really do struggle.
>
> Interviewer: So, is it nice to have somebody that you can sign with then?
>
> P1W: Yeah. It is.

Interviewer: Okay. Just a couple of questions, I know I've kept you for ages so thank you.

P1W: *Starts crying*

Staff: I'll go and get a tissue.

Interviewer: Oh no, are you okay? Are you alright?

P1W: Yeah, I just get upset because I need to communicate. If I was in a Deaf prison, I would be able to communicate so it is really emotional for me.

These feelings of isolation resonate with the experiences of deaf children discussed earlier, with it becoming apparent that for the Deaf prisoners, the prison world was acting as a more concentrated version of the hearing world that they had grown up in, where deafness was a medical affliction and their lives were also characterised by isolation and separation. This is shown below in an extract from my fieldwork journal from HMP Bowdon:

> When they were taking part in the day-to-day activities in the prison it seemed as though they were being stripped of their Deafness and reverting back to the isolated subordinated deaf people that they were as children. This was interesting because it indicated that the experience of Deaf people in prison was much the same as it would be in wider society, except that in prison the 'hearing way' was being continually enforced upon them, with little option to retreat (19th February 2015).

Evidence of this was provided by P1W who stated, 'You are free outside. You've got Deaf football, Deaf sports. [Here] it's like living in my mind, like now I'm in like a little box' and P4B who became very upset during his interview and said:

> I feel like I've been thrown in a box in the corner, and I feel like they are getting all these boxes of paper and piling them on top of the Deaf. It just feels like we've been trapped in and stuck in, and Deaf culture is broken.

It is clear then that Deaf prisoners are disempowered by the nature of their prisoner role to such a degree that they are unable to behave as Deaf. However, their Deaf characteristics also mean that they are unable to behave as per the expectations of 'batch living' (Goffman 1961, 22), and in consequence they become isolated from the Deaf world and the prison world.

Discussion and concluding remarks

Deaf people may find the medical and social models of disability unhelpful because they do not align with their own understandings of their Deafness, however, these models are of vital importance for researchers when seeking to understand the lived realities of Deaf prisoners. My findings show that prison, like many other hearing-oriented places, is dominated by medicalised understandings of deafness, with Deaf individuals being seen as impaired, un-intelligent, old and/or mentally ill. However, the impact that such perceptions have on Deaf people in prison is different than in other settings because of its very nature - a hostile, highly regimented place where 'batch living' (Goffman 1961, 22) is the norm, staff members and prisoners are forced into an 'Us' versus 'Them' type dichotomy, prisoners are disempowered, and where accountability is impeded by the closed environment. In this research, these factors combined to make it almost impossible to behave as per a cultural model of Deafness, with the Deaf identities of participants becoming subordinate to and often overridden by the medicalised perceptions of staff members.

While ideological collisions between the hearing and Deaf worlds in wider society do significantly affect the lived realities of Deaf people, their adult status gives them freedom to act as Deaf in many contexts. However, for Deaf prisoners this freedom is restricted and at times purposefully obstructed by staff members who view Deafness not only medically but suspiciously too. Thus, prison clearly changes the way that the different models and understandings of d/Deafness

interact and indeed magnifies power differentials between the hearing and Deaf worlds. In this research the constraints of the prisoner role transported the incarcerated Deaf people back to their lives as isolated, stigmatised children, who endured existences oriented around a hearing way of life organised via the medical model. Indeed, in the words of Goffman (1961, 43) they became 'radically demoted in the age grading system' - but in this context, the age demotion extends to incorporate a reversion to social, emotional and cultural isolation too.

While the medical and social models of disability are often pitted against each other in the literature, in prison both can have consequences for Deaf people. Although the social model of disability was created with the equal treatment of disabled people in mind, in this context parts of equality legislation which are underpinned by it can act as a veil of legitimacy to protect the Prison Service organisationally and staff members individually from being accountable for decisions they make which have negative and often traumatic consequences for imprisoned Deaf people. While it is important to acknowledge that the Equality Act 2010 can (and does) help to improve the lives of Deaf prisoners when it is interpreted appropriately, the ambiguity of 'reasonable' in its wording and the categorising of deafness as a disability makes it possible for staff members to 'legitimately' interpret its stipulations inappropriately, and often as per the medical model of disability, thus meaning that in this context the social and medical models of disability can in fact be mutually reinforcing.

Clearly then, existing legislation is not enough to protect the rights and cultural identities of Deaf prisoners. To make steps to meeting their needs, strategies should be implemented to create space for a cultural model of Deafness in prison. Firstly, a change in the legislation is needed where Deafness is acknowledged as a separate characteristic, and 'reasonable' is defined more clearly. The publication of guidance which details the expected adjustments for Deaf prisoners would also be valuable, as this would remove some of the ambiguity surrounding notions of equality in this context. While the nature of the environment creates issues here, meaningful training around understandings of equality and Deafness could be helpful, as would BSL training. Importantly, the BSL Act 2022 has recently been enacted in England and Wales, which could make some of these changes more likely. This is a landmark piece of legislation which legally recognises BSL as a language of England, Scotland and Wales for the first time (BDA 2022). It requires the government to issue guidance to

public services and government departments on how to meet the needs of BSL users (BSL Act 2022). While the Act does not place a statutory obligation on public services to change their practice, it does represent a significant shift in the legal/political narrative in that it acknowledges the existence of the Deaf Community (BDA 2022). Theoretically then, this could provide more space for a cultural model of Deafness to exist in prison.

This article makes an original and significant contribution to the literature by extending existing understanding to cover the interrelationship between different models of disability and d/Deafness in prison too. Although the data presented comes from interviews with a small number of prisoners and relates to the prison estate in England and Wales, the fact that Deaf prisoners suffer disproportionately globally and are universally isolated from prison life, means that the findings are relevant in other jurisdictions too. Throughout it has been shown that the models can be used as valuable theoretical tools to help understand the reasons why Deaf people experience difficulties in prison. Future researchers could expand on this by examining the lives of Deaf prisoners through the lens of intersectionality, exploring how other elements of an individual's identity affect the way the models interact. Key here would be to look at the experiences of female prisoners who are Deaf, a population that was missing from this study. Another important avenue for future research would be to consider the impact of the BSL Act 2022 on Prison Service practice and procedure, interpretations of the Equality Act 2010, and the lives of Deaf prisoners. Findings from this article indicate that without legal obligation, meaningful accountability or clear guidance, there is unlikely to be any seismic shift to make space for a cultural model of Deafness, however it may be the case that even the smallest of changes could alter the influence of the medical and social models of disability in this context – making further study important and necessary.

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