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The Silent Frontier: Deaf people and their social use of Cell phones in Cape Town

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of the degree of Master of Social Science

Faculty of Humanities
University of Cape Town

2012

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ABSTRACT

This thesis seeks to understand the ways in which the Deaf negotiate and embrace the cell phone socially. The Deaf, who can be seen as a linguistic and sensory minority within the predominant hearing society, use the cell phone to negotiate their marginalised position as people living with a hearing impairment. By doing so, the Deaf are able to extend and intensify their social relationships, which are used to overcome language barriers. The cell phone also helps them to negotiate barriers of existing Deaf and hearing communities, through which the Deaf strategically move as ‘frontier people’.

Nevertheless, despite the creative use of the cell phone and the embracement of functions such as SMS (Short Text Message) and IM (Instant Message), there are many socio-economic barriers which cannot be overcome with the use of the cell phone. Therefore, the cell phone as a tool for Deaf people needs to be placed in a larger communication ecology, which explains the role of technology in combination with other forms of (mass) communication in order to understand the social impact of the cell phone on the lives of the Deaf in Cape Town.

Key-words:

Social mobility, (mass) communication, mobile technology, agency, identity, Deaf, community, citizenship.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

In this thesis, I want to argue that the Deaf in Cape Town use the cell phone successfully as a tool to move strategically between Deaf and hearing communities and to negotiate social relationships in accordance with their needs. In this way, the Deaf challenge their position as a sensory and linguistic minority and bend the borders and boundaries of existing communities. They challenge as well the hierarchical power structures within these communities. The deaf community is strongly informed by social hierarchies such as gender, race, age, place of birth, class and culture, and most importantly, the lack of hearing, which creates or compounds their marginalisation and victimhood. Nevertheless, the Deaf do not celebrate their victimhood. Rather, they use their agency and status to move between different social groups in the interest of their needs and aspirations. To this end, they effectively embrace cell phone technology and its possibilities. With the use of SMS (Short Message Service) for example, the Deaf question and redefine the visible and invisible borders and boundaries of communities, which are known, at least in theory, to be spatial ones. Therefore, the Deaf with their mobility can be understood as ‘frontier communities’ (Kopytoff, 1987), or as ‘strategic diasporic communities’, as they move between Deaf and hearing communities to negotiate their marginalised status. Using the cell phone, the Deaf are able to extend and negotiate their social relationships allowing them to increase their social mobility and move more effectively as ‘frontier people’.

The cell phone was originally developed as a technology for hearing people, but the Deaf constantly try to adapt it to fit their own needs. This entails seeking to overcome obstacles such as language, education, and the lack of hearing. By creatively negotiating these obstacles, the Deaf try to use the cell phone effectively but can still only partially adapt to the technology. The cell phone can only be partly used by the Deaf, due to the socio-economic barriers that marginalise the Deaf and because of their unequal access to education and illiteracy as a result of their marginalisation. These barriers prevent the Deaf from adopting the cell phone fully. To help the Deaf overcome obstacles which are experienced in the health-care system and beyond, many scientists and researchers are developing Deaf-friendly software which allows the Deaf to adapt better to the cell phone by providing them with

video-communication and translation programmes in English and in Sign language (Chininton, 2011; Glaser & Tucker, 2004).

The practical implication of this software, however, seems to be more complicated to implement in the Deaf community. Issues such as education, language and socio-economic circumstances need to be addressed before the cell phone – as the ‘hearing baby’ – can be adopted successfully. Therefore, the cell phone needs to be situated within a larger framework of ‘communicative ecology’ (Horst & Miller, 2006; Miller, 2010) which allows the technology to be understood in combination with other forms of communication. By doing this, one can observe that the Deaf use the cell phone to extend their social relationships meaningfully, but still need to negotiate their marginalised position within the larger hearing society.

1.2 Rationale for Research

Little anthropological research has been published on the social impact of the cell phone on people’s daily life. Within the available literature, marginalised groups such as the Deaf are barely addressed. The Deaf, among others, do not have equal access to cell phone technology as a communication device, but nevertheless do use cell phones within their own realm to address their needs. The social impact which cell phones have on the lives of Deaf people is still rarely discussed within the academic literature but is nevertheless important to explore. Among the Deaf, the cell phone can be used to provide equal access to information. Quantitative data is available about the use of cell phones among Deaf outside of Africa (Cavender, Ladner & Riskin, 2006; Power & Power, 2004; Okoyama & Iwai, 2011), but many of these data lack insights on the social shaping of the cell phone by the Deaf. This study is intended as a modest contribution towards understanding the extent and the ways in which the Deaf appropriate the cell phone, and how they use this new technology in shaping their identity. The study achieves this through a qualitative approach in the form of ethnographic fieldwork.

1.3 Research questions

Together with the Health and Human Rights programme of SOPHEM (School of Public Health and Family Medicine), UCT explores whether and how cell phone technology can

contribute to reducing the language and communication barriers experienced by Deaf people using South African Sign Language (SASL). With the guidance of Marion Heap and Anne Haricharan, both anthropologists from the UCT's Department of Public Health, I have conducted a nine-week period of fieldwork among a Deaf community in Cape Town. During this period, I investigated the ways in which the Deaf use cell phones to maintain their social networks and cross social boundaries between them and the hearing world by expanding, establishing and re-establishing their social networks with hearing people. My fieldwork also focused on how identity changes through the negotiation of social relationships, as well as on shifts in power relations and hierarchies influenced by the cell phone. Throughout this study, I have been guided by the following research questions:

- Do Deaf people use cell phones and, if so, to what extent?
- How do the Deaf adopt and adapt the cell phone ('hearing baby') to serve their own communication needs?
- Does the use of cell phones shape a sense of identity for Deaf people?

1.4 Chapter outline

Chapter One: Introduction

This introduces the study, the rationale for the research and the main findings, based on the proposed research questions.

Chapter Two: The borders of the 'Silent Frontier': the strategic essentialism of belonging to a community of the Deaf

This chapter gives a theoretical framework which explains why the Deaf move as 'frontier people' or 'strategic diasporic communities' within a larger hearing society. Furthermore, the chapter emphasizes the social movement of the Deaf and gives an understanding of the socio-economic barriers the Deaf need to negotiate, as they are still living as a marginalised minority within the hearing world.

Chapter Three: Being Deaf and understood: applying multi-sited fieldwork in an 'unbounded' world

This chapter emphasizes the barriers I experienced during my fieldwork. I claim that the Deaf can be seen as a spatially unbounded community, which has far-reaching consequences for

the construction of a field site as well as the methodology. I show why I chose to follow the movement of the Deaf and how I experienced this movement within the unbounded field. Furthermore, I describe the negotiation of language within my research and explain my own position in the field.

Chapter Four: The cell phone and the Deaf as ‘intimate strangers’: social implementation of the cell phone by Deaf users

Within this chapter, I show that the Deaf, despite their hearing impairment and other limitations, are able to adapt the cell phone meaningfully into their lives. The Deaf use SMS and ‘Please call me’s to communicate within both deaf and hearing communities, and thereby are able to extend their social relationships. When extending these relationships with the cell phone, the Deaf are able to increase their social mobility and move more strategically through the larger hearing society as ‘frontier people’.

Chapter Five: Adopting and adapting the ‘hearing baby’: the negotiation and navigation of the cell phone by the Deaf

In this chapter I show that, despite the fact the Deaf adapt the cell phone meaningfully to increase their social mobility, the technology still poses many obstacles for them. By shadowing an academic research project conducted among the Deaf, I was able to observe closely the practical implications of the cell phone within the daily lives of the Deaf. Even though researchers were developing a cell phone which diminishes language barriers in the health-care system by providing video-communication software, many socio-economic circumstances still prevent the cell phone from effectively taking over the role of the interpreter.

Chapter Six: Conclusion: “Being Deaf is what connects us”

In this concluding chapter I summarize the main findings of my fieldwork and provide a conclusion based on my initial research questions and experiences in the field. This chapter makes recommendations for further academic research which can be conducted in the anthropological field, as there were many aspects of the cell phone which I was not able to address within this work.

CHAPTER TWO

THE BORDERS OF THE SILENT FRONTIER: THE STRATEGIC ESSENTIALISM OF BELONGING TO A COMMUNITY OF THE DEAF IN SOUTH AFRICA

2.1 Introduction

In this chapter I argue that the Deaf, as a ‘sensory minority’ of people living with a hearing impairment within a world largely dominated by the hearing, negotiate their social relationships and identity by being part of and crossing over to different communities in order to shape their needs. The Deaf community is strongly informed by social hierarchies such as gender, race, age, place of birth, class and culture, and, most importantly, the lack of hearing. These contribute to their marginalisation and victimhood. Nevertheless, far from succumbing to this victimisation and marginalisation, the Deaf use their agency and status to move between different social, political, gendered, linguistic, sensory and religious communities. Within this chapter and throughout my thesis, I attempt to show how the Deaf use their agency and status to move across different communities. I also attempt to show how they survive in the dominant hearing world by strategically capitalising on their betwixt-and-between reality as ‘frontier people’ who negotiate and navigate myriad identity margins. The Deaf effectively embrace the cell phone to extend their social relationship and thereby increase their mobility. Through such flexibility, the Deaf are able to contest their position as a marginalised group as well as negotiate the borders and boundaries of existing communities. Nevertheless, as this thesis demonstrates, the Deaf also experience difficulties when trying to adapt to the cell phone because they do not have equal access to this technology, which was initially intended for the hearing. Socio-economic challenges and poor education are additional barriers they need to overcome in order to maximise access to and effective appropriation of cell phones in their lives.

I use Igor Kopytoff’s (1987) theoretical framework of ‘frontier communities’ in Africa to define the social movement of the Deaf and the effects of this movement on their feelings of identity, belonging and citizenship (1987:14). Kopytoff has argued that societies are products of the frontier because they are socially constructed and mostly arise as offshoots of old groups. He therefore re-interprets the classical explanation of the ‘frontier’ which is known to

be a geographically empty or sparsely occupied space (1987:11). According to Kopytoff, a 'frontier' can also define a socio-cultural space in which societies are created and institutionalised (1987:13). Kopytoff's work helps to explain and contextualise the different communities through which the Deaf move strategically. It criticises the understanding of the Deaf as only connected through language, suggesting an understanding of them also as travellers across other social spaces and, through that process, as a group constantly renegotiating and reinventing their identity and citizenship.

These different communities are hierarchically structured and therefore challenge the Deaf in their negotiation of deafness on different levels. I make the claim that even though the Deaf are sometimes depicted as marginalised or disabled, they negotiate their identity strategically in order to overcome their sensory impairment. They also effectively cross the borders to the hearing world when needed. They therefore become 'frontier people' who are constantly challenging the borders of communities. As well as supporting Kopytoff's notion of the Deaf as 'frontier people', I challenge the notion of the Deaf as a diasporic community, as they are not displaced within the hearing world but move strategically between different (deaf and hearing) communities. When trying to understand the Deaf as 'frontier people' but also as a 'strategic diasporic community', we need to revisit some literature about the construction of communities as well as the negotiation of borders and boundaries between and within these communities. I argue that the Deaf are not only connected through a communal language, but share a sense of identity due to a common form of heritage and belonging. In addition, their identity is based on education and a mutual hearing impairment. They use this identity to claim citizenship and belonging in other social groups. In this movement, the Deaf redefine and reinforce the 'borders' and 'boundaries' of 'traditional communities', which are (at least in theory) spatially bounded. This creative negotiation of spatial and social boundaries makes the Deaf 'border crossers' and a 'frontier people' in Igor Kopytoff's (1987) sense.

This chapter also seeks to make a compelling case for the Deaf as a 'strategic diasporic community', and discusses different understandings of the 'borders and boundaries' of Deaf communities. Furthermore, the chapter explains the different communities in which Deaf people move strategically, providing a solid analytical framework which will allow me to engage more deeply with the social effects of cell phones among Deaf people. That deeper engagement allows me a better understanding of the socio-economic place of the Deaf and the effects of their marginalised position in cell phone accessibility.

2.2 Constructing the Deaf as a ‘frontier community’

Kopytoff (1987: 14), who renegotiates Turner’s notion of the ‘frontier’¹ and focuses on the political character of borders on the African continent, validates communities via the ‘diffusionist model’. This model states that the far-reaching effects of common ideas, pasts, ethnicities and cultures have created a cultural unity in Sub-Saharan Africa and established current societies. Therefore, as he states, societies are products of the frontier: they are socially produced and mostly arise as offshoots of old groups, such as people who consider themselves victims, refugees, exiled or alienated in other ways from a bigger society, which he calls the ‘metropole’ (Kopytoff, 1987: 16). When focusing on the Deaf as a community, Kopytoff’s conception, among others’, of frontier communities is applicable to the Deaf, as they are united via a common impairment as well as by shared ideas and a similar history. Many of them are alienated from the hearing world, forming a new group of ‘frontier people’, who distinguish themselves via a unique language and way of living in ‘silence’ apart from the larger ‘hearing metropole’. Although this model might sound vindictive, with the ‘frontier people’ ostracized from the metropole, frontier people are adaptive when the circumstances demand it and easily negotiate relationships to preserve contact with other societies. The term ‘frontier people’ is often used in the literature on migrancy: migrants live in the uncertain peripheries of the world, within host communities, a situation always considered temporary but which does not convey a sense of home (Nyamnjoh, 2011: 706).

When observing the social relations of the Deaf, one can see that, as a minority, they also mobilise the communities in which they move. Kopytoff describes kinship as the main tie of ‘African’ societies. In my opinion, kinship of the Deaf exists, creating other social networks of people who share the same language and impairment. As argued in this thesis, the Deaf use cell phones to negotiate and expand their social relationships in order to survive in the dominant hearing world. This expansion of social networks has consequences for their marginalised position, as well as for their identity and feelings of belonging.

¹ According to Turner, the notion of the ‘frontier’ played a major role in shaping the American political character: it established liberty by releasing Americans from European mind-sets and ending prior customs of the 19th century (Kopytoff, 1987: 3).

2.3 Defining the Deaf as a ‘strategic diasporic community’

Using Kopytoff’s work and defining the Deaf as ‘frontier people’, I seek to complicate the notion of a deaf community by revisiting Marion Heap’s (2003) reference to the Deaf as a ‘sensory diasporic community’. According to Heap, the Deaf community in South Africa is a unique homogeneous group that is formed by people of different ages, races and genders and is not bounded by space, and therefore reflects the whole range of society. Nevertheless, even though Heap considers the Deaf as a homogenous group, the boundaries of the community are still created, not by space, but by the level of hearing and the use of language. When one does not use Sign language to communicate, one is never completely included in the Deaf community. A linguistic boundary exists and limits the understanding of the Deaf as spatially unbounded. Heap therefore compares the Deaf with ‘diasporic’ communities, the term used to describe local and translocal communities, unbounded in space but connected through identity, history, belief or language (Clifford, 1994). According to Heap (2003:17), due to the marginalised position of the Deaf, they can be seen as dwelling-in-displacement, and therefore diasporic within the hearing world. Heap chooses to use the term ‘diasporic’ or ‘dwelling-in-displacement’ to describe the Deaf as a social group that is connected via the senses (or the lack of a sense), and thus distinguishes the Deaf as a ‘sensory diasporic’ group. This is an instructive but certainly inadequate categorisation of the Deaf, particularly as the Deaf do not return to a homeland and are never internally displaced, but often chose strategically to move and place themselves beyond and within different social groups. In line with Kopytoff’s framework of ‘frontier people’ and ‘frontier communities’ I will decline the term ‘sensory diasporic community’ for the more appropriate term of ‘*strategic diasporic community*’. I argue that the Deaf often strategically negotiate the borders and boundaries of different communities as they cross back and forth between the ‘silent’ and the ‘hearing’ worlds which they simultaneously share and contest.

With the use of frameworks from Kopytoff (1987), Heap (2003) and other social scholars, I want to show that the Deaf as a sensory and linguistic minority not only move physically between Deaf and hearing spaces, but also strategically (re)negotiate their identity, social relationships and feelings of belonging when dwelling in and between different communities. Therefore, the Deaf can be perceived as a ‘strategic diasporic community’ who draw on and reflect flexibility in culture and belonging by their constant movement into, out of, between and within groups. To support this claim I will discuss the different constructions and

understandings of communities and elaborate on the significance of the ‘borders and boundaries’ of these communities, which simultaneously constrain and enable the movement of the Deaf as a ‘strategic diasporic community’. I will furthermore use this framework to contextualise the social mobility of the Deaf, as well as their position of marginality within the hearing world. Doing this allows me to support my data when focusing on the social use of the cell phone among the Deaf, and to understand better the socio-economic barriers that are experienced by the Deaf when trying to embrace the cell phone effectively according to their needs.

2.4 Understanding different notions of communities

When focusing on deafness in a socio-cultural sense, the use of terms such as community and identity need to be explained thoroughly, as they are negotiated both individually and communally, depending on the context. Many scholars have tried to explain the Deaf community as a social group that uses a different language – Sign language – but is also connected through a shared identity and feeling of belonging. The word ‘community’, however, is, to a certain extent, problematic as defined by dictionaries such as the Oxford². The Deaf are not a spatially contiguous community and do not always share the same history and beliefs, but are united through language. Reagan (2008) argues:

“The deaf population can be subdivided into a wide range of different groups, categorised, partially, by degree of hearing loss, but also according to language preference, educational experience, and relative integration into either the Deaf world, or the hearing world.” (168)

Many scholars prefer to explain the Deaf community as a linguistic minority because Deaf people share a common language which is traceable locally as well as internationally. According to Soogaard-Andersen (2004: 135), “Deaf people all over the world view themselves as belonging to a linguistic minority with its own culture and language. Deaf culture has its own history, shared values, social norms, customs and technology, which are transferred from generation to generation.”³

² According to this dictionary, a community is: A body of people or things viewed collectively. “Community”. OED Online. 2012. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Available <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/37337?redirectedFrom=community#eid> [2012, February 7].

³ KNAD document/leaflet 1998. Used in article M. Sogaard-Anderson (2004), Deaf Culture: Problems of recognition in contemporary Kenyan politics.

Communities are defined, within the anthropological discourse and beyond, as a group of people who are connected through a common sense of belonging, a shared identity and universal values and norms. These make people interconnected and form a sense of boundedness. This belief of belonging is strongly rooted within everyday life and is expressed on a micro-scale, such as in language (Hamilton, 1985: 8).

Cohen (1985) urges us not to focus only on the fact that communities actually exist, but to also investigate how they are connected and what this connection means. Therefore, when one tries to understand how the Deaf move within and between different communities, it is important both to identify the different social groups, and also to find the connection to larger political and social networks which pervade these communities.

As has been argued above, the Deaf do not belong to a singular community but move strategically between different social groups as ‘frontier people’ who are part of a larger political and social system that is based on hearing people. The Deaf therefore stress the ‘traditional’ understanding of communities (which were defined spatially) and bend the boundaries of communities when moving as ‘strategic diasporic communities’ within the larger hearing world. In order to understand the movement of the Deaf and their behaviour as ‘frontier people’, we first need to understand the ways in which the Deaf strategically negotiate the borders and boundaries of communities. Thereafter, we can continue to explore the different communities through which the Deaf travel, such as linguistic, political and sensory communities.

2.4.1 Borders and boundaries of communities

One of the defining concepts of a community hinges on ideas of inclusion and exclusion, which create boundaries. The interpretation of boundaries and borders varies greatly, especially within the social sciences (Barth, 1968; Gupta and Ferguson 1992; Mbembe, 2000; Newman, 2006; Shimoni, 2006). According to Newman (2006:144), in the traditional understanding, borders are visible lines of separation between political, social and economic spaces. Van Houtum and Nearssen (2001: 126) argue that borders do not represent fixed points in space and time, but rather symbolise the social practice of spatial differentiation. Anthropologists are particularly interested in the personal, often invisible borders which

determine daily practices to a much greater extent than national borders (Van Houtum & Nearssen, 2001: 148). Mostly, academic literature defines *borders* as tangible, as the separation between two places or spaces. *Boundaries*, by contrast, are not space-dependent but rather apply to imaginary phenomena and can be indicated by the extent to which people want to keep or change what they perceive as ‘cultural borders’ (Shimoni, 2006: 217).

The different explanations and understandings of borders and boundaries by social scholars proves the fascination as well as the complexity of the subject matter and the different levels on which people are influenced by the restriction and/or possibilities created by borders and boundaries. Due to their hearing impairment, the Deaf experience daily barriers, which are highly embodied and create a form of ‘border experience’ that is distinctive to ‘frontier people’. Gelies (2009: 601) introduced the term ‘border experience’ within his work on migrant transnationalism within the borderlands of Germany and Holland. He states, “Transmigrants do not only live on the borders of a state, but do also experience many symbolic and mental borders, whereby migrants feel that the border is both a barrier between two worlds, as well as an opening to another world.” Within his work, Gelies uses Bourdieu’s concept of ‘habitus’ and links this to transnational migrants. He argues: “Transmigrants have a transnational habitus, which means that they have a dual frame of reference through which they constantly compare their situation in the current country of residence with the situations in their former country of residence” (Gelies, 2009: 603). They will embrace the ways of life in the current country of residence, but still also feel the need to create national difference in their everyday life. They create new borders, which are mostly reinforced on a personal level and therefore carry a sociological meaning. This transnational ‘habitus’ or embodied ‘border experience’ can be applied to the Deaf as well: they also constantly move across the borders of communities, and negotiate their Deafness in order to claim difference and sameness when needed.

2.4.2 Negotiating identity and citizenship in the Deaf world

As I have emphasized above, the spatial boundaries of a community are important, but the social articulation of these boundaries can shift drastically and needs to be interpreted in combination with other characteristics of a community, such as a shared sense of belief, belonging or common feeling of identity. The Deaf also use their identity fluidly to claim rights and recognition within the hearing world. Therefore, the understanding of citizenship

and identity is important when focusing on the social use of the cell phone, as it helps to understand how the Deaf behave and perceive their position in the world. As a marginalised group, the Deaf are confronted with socio-economic limitations that they try to negotiate within their everyday life by using their 'fluid' identity to survive in a larger hearing world. This, in line with Spivak (1990), is known as 'strategic essentialism'.

Strategic essentialism is a term that was developed by Spivak and can be understood as the celebration of irreversible otherness. Defined as a critique of 'otherness' and victimisation, strategic essentialism lets minority groups strategically negotiate their identity according to circumstance to strengthen their position in a larger society. The theory is embraced within anthropological work around migrancy and (racial) minority groups, as it reduces the notion of 'otherness' and allows people to celebrate their difference. When focusing on the Deaf as a sensory minority, other theories also remain important, such as the understanding of citizenship in combination with identity. Within feminist theories particularly, citizenship is deliberately described beyond its traditional sense (of participation in a nation-state) by focusing on the processes of culture in order to deal with social difference. By understanding citizenship in this way, one can create equality and diminish exclusion from society and citizenship (Yuval-Davis, 1999: 1). Because Yuval-Davis focuses mainly on the exclusion of women in post-colonial nations, her argument on citizenship contains important insights for people who do not belong to one dominant community but behave as 'frontier people' as they move between different communities within the larger (hearing, for the Deaf) world.

In line with Yuval-Davis and with minority groups such as the Deaf, Assiter (1999: 49) distinguishes two forms of citizenship, the liberal and the communitarian views. When analyzing both views for being too individual (liberal) or too fascistic (communitarian), she argues that citizenship is influenced both by individual values and morals as well as by communal beliefs. She therefore proposes the term 'epistemic communities', which are based on relativism and emancipatory values that ensure life. The epistemic communities go beyond the communitarian by acknowledging hierarchical structures within them. They therefore listen closely to marginal voices and accept people's individual identity. Furthermore, Assiter acknowledges the fact that people will change during their lives and therefore move in and out of communities when the circumstances require, which is the case with many marginalised groups, such as women and the Deaf.

Using the Kantian understanding of transcendence, Assiter (1999: 46) argues that our choices are embodied and that we are open to opportunities for choice. These opportunities might be based on education, socialisation or other factors, but they influence the way we encounter change and how we choose communities. Therefore, people's ideas and identities are embodied and embedded both individually and communally. This needs to be recognised in order for minorities to participate fully as citizens within a nation-state. Among the Deaf, many socio-economic barriers need to be overcome, as many deaf people do not have equal opportunities by comparison with the hearing population. In order for the Deaf to embrace the epistemic community structure, they adopt a 'fluid' identity, which lets them move strategically in the hearing world as 'frontier people' and negotiate their marginalised position.

Englund (2004: 9) uses the same critique as Assiter on the liberal and communitarian in order to highlight difficulties in acknowledging and accommodating difference in post-colonial Africa. In his work, the politics of identity, rights and claiming difference play an important role in the history and future of African societies. When grappling with the effects of the politics of recognition, Englund (2004:14) mainly focuses on the 'hybridity' of culture, which allows social scholars to incorporate the diverse cultural identities of personal and collective lives. One can observe that the Deaf deliberately use their politics of identity to claim equal rights and use their diverse cultural identities when moving between communities. Therefore, in line with Englund, their identity becomes 'hybrid' or 'fluid', allowing them to claim their (sensory) difference when needed. As a marginalised group, they move beyond the communitarian notion of citizenship and therefore claim citizenship of the epistemic communities of Assiter's conception. The Deaf travel in and out of communities when circumstances require and they are confronted with the different hierarchy structures of these communities, such as gender, race, age, or sensory impairment. Englund's and Assiter's observations are in line with Nyamnjoh's (2011: 710), as he argues that Cameroonian migrants also need to negotiate their identity 'fluidly' when trying to fit into their host communities. Even when they do so, as Nyamnjoh argues, many of them are still not considered citizens but will always be perceived as outsiders. The cell phone, as will be shown within this work, is an essential tool for the Deaf to move socially through these communities and negotiate their mobility via strategic essentialism, because, as Soogaard-Anderson (2004: 138) argues, the Deaf are highly aware of their minority position in a larger hearing society, a position that strongly influences their identity.

In the sections above, I have attempted to elucidate the movement of the Deaf through different communities. I have situated their movement within Kopytoff's framework of 'frontier people'. I have also revisited Heap's (2003) and Clifford's (1994) notion of 'diasporic communities'. I have argued that the Deaf move between different communities strategically in order to adapt to the hearing world even as they contest its assumptions and stereotypes about the Deaf. They also navigate and negotiate communities to compensate for their sensory impairment. This means they cannot be depicted as 'dwelling-in-displacement', but should rather be understood as being part of a 'strategic diasporic community'. When moving in and between both hearing and Deaf communities, the Deaf therefore challenge the 'traditional' understanding of a community as spatially bounded. They bend the (invisible) social and political boundaries of social groups in order to meet their own needs. In this way the Deaf constantly negotiate their identity and feelings of belonging, which become 'fluid' or 'hybrid', to bolster their agency as 'frontier people'.

In the next sections, I will give an outline of the different groups through which the Deaf move, such as political, sensory and linguistic communities. This will let us understand this movement more fully and support my claim that the Deaf can be seen as a 'strategic diasporic community'. I will also provide a background of the different deaf-persons' organisations in South Africa, which are mostly organised politically. These organisations strive for equal opportunities for the Deaf and play a significant role in the creation of the Deaf identity in South Africa and beyond. The description of these communities provides a context for the rest of this thesis, as this description depicts the socio-economic disadvantages of the Deaf, such as poorer access to education, which are the most important barriers the Deaf face when trying to adapt the cell phone meaningfully.

2.5 Understanding Deaf communities

"We need to organise ourselves and show that we are proud members of the deaf community, and have the same rights as all the other linguistic minorities. We are not disabled and never want to be labelled as such, but we need to show that we are strong and all unify behind our deafness." (Steven, one the leaders of the DCCT, 16th of June 2011, Youth Day).

The Deaf, in South Africa and elsewhere in the world, have organised themselves in Deaf communities. The Deaf community distinguishes itself from other (hearing) communities

firstly in its sharing of a hearing impairment, which creates a linguistic boundary with hearing communities. The seemingly clear distinction between being Deaf as part of the socio-cultural community and being deaf when having a hearing impairment is not only socially and individually constructed, its construction is complex and multilayered (Reagan, 2008: 167) as well as ever-changing. According to Reagan, the deaf community can be divided into ‘pathological’, ‘medical’ and ‘socio-cultural’ groups, which combine to form a linguistic minority. These different meanings of deaf communities are contextual and situational, as the Deaf are constantly negotiating their identity, language and rights when seeking equality and access to information and education. Throughout history, deaf people have been classified as disabled, as living with a hearing impairment that largely excluded them from the majority hearing world. According to Oliver (1989), able-bodied people, through their attitudes, beliefs and practices, prevent disabled people from fully participating in society. Nevertheless, when one looks beyond this partial explanation for the marginalisation of Deaf people, one can define the Deaf rather as a minority group than as a category of the ‘disabled’. More importantly, most Deaf people do not define themselves as ‘marginalised’ or ‘disabled’ (Keating, 2007: 3), but are labelled as such in ‘medical’ or ‘pathological’ environments. Therefore, within the deaf community as well as in academic circles, two different definitions are used to describe deaf people. When deaf is written with a lower-case d, it implies the medical explanation of the hearing impairment, while Deaf with a capital D defines Deaf people as a cultural categorization which is also used within the Deaf community as a form of self-identification and distinction (Soogaard-Andersen, 2004: 134)⁴.

2.5.1 Background of the Deaf in South Africa

”We are unique people, with our own culture, own language – which is recognised as a language in itself – and sets us apart from hearing people.”

(Sacks, Seeing Voices, 1989: 158)

According to the SANCD (South African National Council for the Deaf) and Deaf Association in South Africa (Deafsa), approximately 1.6 million people in South Africa use Sign Language (SASL) as their first language⁵. One percent of the total population in South

⁴ Throughout this chapter and the rest of this thesis, I will use deaf with lower-case d and Deaf with capital D in the same way as is suggested by Soogaard-Andersen.

⁵ Statistics from Ph.D thesis Heap: 2003, 12. Official statistics found did not date later than 1995.

Africa can be understood as profoundly deaf, six percent as hard of hearing and three percent as extremely hard of hearing⁶. Approximately 1.6-million people in South Africa are diagnosed with some form of hearing loss. According to SANCD, from 1995 statistics, the number of people with a hearing disability in the Western Cape totals 363,308 (approximately one percent of the population). SASL can be considered as the twelfth national language, as there are more Sign speakers than Tsonga, Swazi, Ndebele and Venda in South Africa (Heap, 2003: 12)⁷. At present, according to the website of the Deaf Federation of South Africa (Deafsa)⁸, 600,000 South Africans use South African Sign Language (SASL) as their primary language and one in ten babies on average in South Africa is born with some degree of hearing-loss. Sometimes this diagnosis of hearing-loss or deafness is only made at four years of age, so many of deaf children enter Grade R with little or no form of language. Even though there are many Deaf schools in South Africa, only twelve offer tuition up to Grade 12. The average Deaf school-leaver has achieved Grade 8. According to Deafsa, the illiteracy rate among the Deaf is 75 percent. Seventy percent of the Deaf are unemployed and therefore are often materially disadvantaged. Deafsa is one of the South African organisations which works closely with the World Deaf Foundation (WDF) to provide communication and information platforms to its members and partners to exchange information. It also plays an important role in raising awareness of the inequalities limiting Deaf people's access to education and information. Deafsa lobbies for better schooling and economic possibilities so that Deaf students can follow a tertiary education. It also conducts research to diagnose hearing loss among small children and creates early educational and Sign-language programs. Deafsa has representatives from every province in the country and is supported by many smaller organisations, such as the Deaf Community Cape Town (DCCT) and youth organisations.

DCCT is by far the biggest Deaf organisation in the Western Cape, based at the Bastion for the Deaf in Newlands, Cape Town. DCCT was established in 1987 in the then Cape Province, as a non-governmental organisation to promote the needs of the African and Coloured Deaf. Within the Bastion, DCCT runs ironing and sewing services as well as educational programs for adults and youth to improve their computer literacy. DCCT is also involved in educational

⁶ The terms deaf, extremely hard of hearing and hard of hearing are used by Deafsa to define the level of people's hearing impairment.

⁷ After thorough research, I was unable to find any official statistics dated later than these.

⁸ According to www.deafsa.co.za. [2012, February 2].

plays, which raise awareness on issues such as HIV/AIDS, domestic abuse and women's empowerment. One of DCCT's longest-standing activities, the mass prayer in Sign, held every third Sunday of the month, has been around for the past 60 years. The 'third Sunday' is not only a day for religious and spiritual reflection but also a much-anticipated social event, where the Deaf catch up on the latest news and share their opinions about current affairs in the community. The community of the Deaf in Cape Town (DCCT) is both locally and nationally organised (Heap, 2003: 125). In addition to the third Sundays, the Bastion runs programs on public holidays such as Youth Day⁹ (16th of June), Women's Day (9th of August) and Freedom Day (27th of April) to celebrate (racial) equality in South Africa and to inform the Deaf about their rights and possibilities for access to information, education, legal assistance and health care.

In the origination of Deaf organisations in South Africa and the work they are doing within Deaf communities, one witnesses the Deaf trying daily to negotiate their marginalised position. Not only do these organisations claim equal educational rights and access to health care, they also operate as a soundboard to communicate actively with the Deaf. They are indispensable within the Deaf community, as they actively lobby to negotiate their position in the larger hearing world.

2.5.2 Where words become signs: Deaf as a linguistic minority

As with any other language, Sign serves not only to let the Deaf communicate but also to identify its users as part of the Deaf community, differentiating them socially and culturally from the hearing world. Sign serves not only as a vernacular language but also as an indicator of cultural group-membership, as language is an identifying facet of the cultural identity of the Deaf community (Reagan, 2008: 169). It is barely possible to be part of the Deaf community when one cannot sign. Therefore, members of the Deaf community identify themselves as socially and culturally Deaf, which might be referred to as 'attitudinal deafness'. In contrast to Heap, Nakamura (n.d.), does not state that the Deaf as a linguistic minority are spatially unbounded: Deaf schools constitute spatial communities. Nakamura, who researched Deaf communities in the United States and Japan, argues that Deaf schools

⁹ Youth Day is celebrated in South Africa to remember the 1976 Soweto student protests against the apartheid government. These 'non-violent' protests, which occurred after the government had forced schools to teach primarily in Afrikaans, ended in a mass slaughter of more than 170 people.

became Deaf students' primary communities. Within the school, the Deaf were offered a place to develop language, identity and a feeling of belonging. Deaf schools served as replacements of traditional 'kin' or family structures, as many of the students lived at the schools because 'home' was many kilometres away. Reagan (2006a, 2006b, 2008) contests the educational policies of Deaf education, because SASL as a language is embedded in apartheid structure and unequal education possibilities for Deaf students. Nevertheless, SASL and the use of language by Deaf people in an educational environment are important, as educational institutions have also been central in producing Sign-language development (Hadder & Keating, 2010: 123).

SASL originated in residential schools for the Deaf and was first documented in the Dominican Convent for the Deaf that was established in Cape Town in 1816¹⁰. Sign language was not used in the classrooms (which still used of written and spoken English and Afrikaans), but evolved in the student's residential areas and playgrounds. There was no official Sign language, but different signs were developed by Deaf students to understand each other outside the classroom, where signing was permitted.

This changed in 1948¹¹, when the apartheid system became official, enforcing racial segregation in all aspects of life, and new rules were established for education. Apartheid and the implementation of the Bantu Education Act¹² drastically changed the education system for Deaf drastically. Many white Deaf children were given hearing aids and other hearing supplies. Non-white Deaf needs were neglected; they relied on the Sign language. The signs which were used in the classrooms mostly differed from the Sign language that was used for social purposes. Classroom Sign language was mostly a direct and manual translation of the English language and was completely alien to the Sign used in Deaf communities (Heap,

¹⁰ The Dominican school for the deaf in Cape Town was found by five sisters from the Dominican Convent Cabr, in Ireland. The school was later known as the Grimley Institute for the Deaf. There was no Sign language documented before this time, even though it is likely that some form of Sign language existed in Deaf groups before the establishment of the school.

¹¹ In 1948, the Apartheid system was instituted after the National Party won the general election. This system was based on racial segregation and divided South Africans into four groups: white, coloured, native and indian.

¹² The Bantu Education Act was established in 1953 and enforced the separation of races in all educational institutions. Non-whites were placed in separate schools from whites and worked with a different educational curriculum, which aimed to place non-whites into the unskilled labor market and resulted into the alienation and division of racial communities.

2003). Sign language only changed toward the end of the apartheid, when the educational system had become a form of ‘total communication’¹³, a combination of Sign and spoken language that is still used by most of the Deaf. One of the reasons for the use of both speech and sign is the fact that, according to oralists, if Deaf people are able to speak they can survive better in the hearing world.

Although this theory sounds adequate, the practice of Deaf education in South Africa is more complicated. Due to a lack of funds and teachers fluent in Sign, many Deaf are neither able to speak adequately nor to use Sign to its full potential, therefore remaining partly or even totally lacking formal education (Heap, 2003: 9). Most of the schools for the Deaf educate their students in Sign and the local language spoken in that area. For example, the Noluthando School for the Deaf in Khayelitsha¹⁴ educates in Xhosa and Sign while the Dominican School for the Deaf in Wittebome¹⁵ educates in Afrikaans and Sign. Therefore, even within SASL there are many different accents and forms spoken in South Africa, influenced by the languages spoken in the schools, as well as by the historical backgrounds of the students and their parents.

2.5.3 Deaf as a sensory minority

In her work, Heap does not thoroughly explore the meaning of sensory communities or the use of sensory anthropology, as she focuses mainly on the different social spaces the Deaf move through and how the Deaf negotiate social space within both the deaf and hearing worlds. In my opinion, however, sensory impairment and the use of the senses in anthropological research needs to be explored in greater detail as the loss of the hearing sense is both a biological condition and a cultural disablement. The definition of the Deaf as a sensory-disabled group is widely criticised, but it serves as a useful description of a range of sensory impairments, and can contribute to a more complete understanding of perception and embodied experience. Interpretations of the five senses (taste, smell, sight, touch, hearing) vary and can highlight crucial differences and similarities in the human experience of the sensorium (Hadder & Keating, 2010: 226).

¹³ Total communication originated in the United States and developed on the philosophy that children develop better when Sign and spoken language are used within schools.

¹⁴ Khayelitsha is one of the biggest townships in Cape Town and has a predominately Xhosa population.

¹⁵ Wittebome is a residential area in the southern suburbs of Cape Town and has a predominately Afrikaans-speaking population.

The sensory system is embedded in language, social practice and the socio-cultural body (Csordas, 1993) which can refine the anthropological understanding of interactions and somatic modes of attention. Warnier (2006: 186) explores how embodiment relates to material culture. He argues that the limits of the physical body are extended with material culture and influences bodily emotions. The use of materials (such as the cell phone) can therefore be seen as an extension of the physical body. He imbues the subjective human body with the seven senses by which it operates, namely the five conventional senses plus proprioception and the vestibular sense of gravitation and spatial orientation. In this way, he attempts to bridge the gaps between psychology, anthropology and neuroscience (Douny & Naji, 2009: 413). When focusing on the social effects of sensory impairment, the meaning of 'the senses' and of 'disability' change over time and between different cultures (Hadder & Keating, 2010: 122). Within their research, Hadder and Keating focus merely on the sensory aspects of cross-linguistics and argue that communication is the most fundamental and unique aspect of the Deaf community in practice. It lets Deaf people share traditions, identity, language and cognitive development. These are, among others, the characteristics which are used to define a community such as the Deaf in Cape Town.

2.5.4 Deaf as a political community

As with many sensory-impaired and 'disabled' communities, the Deaf not only unite as a cultural or linguistic community but share their common impairment to fight for equal rights in sectors such education and health care. The Deaf are thus also a political organisation.

Within Cape Town, DCCT manifests as a prominent political organisation, representing the rights of the Deaf irrespective of gender, race or age. During the apartheid era, the organisation played a significant role in fighting for equal educational rights and the demolishing of social segregation. Many of the Deaf marched alongside other minority groups to proclaim their identity with posters such as "Deaf and Proud" and "Deaf but not Stupid", as they demanded equal rights (Heap, 2003: 146). Through these political activities, the Deaf tried to influence educational, legal and medical policies and garner support for the acknowledgement of SASL as a twelfth official language.

Most of the Deaf, who unify within a political community, are connected through the historical categorisation of deafness as a pathological impairment. This categorisation resulted in marginalisation and racism, especially within the colonial and apartheid eras (Heap, 2003: 25). The urge to create a group identity among the Deaf to fight for equality was not limited to South Africa, but was a worldwide occurrence during the latter half of the 20th century. It brought the Deaf to the street to protest against the marginalisation which resulted in the Deaf being a political organisation, rather than just a linguistic minority or a 'disabled' community. Within the United States, Deaf movements claimed their existence as part of the 'multicultural society' and shared the protest platform with other minority organisations, such as African Americans, feminists, gay activists and other marginalised, poor or powerless groups. The political movement of the Deaf in South Africa was publicly expressed during the early 1990s and is comparable with the political arising of Deaf communities elsewhere in the world. The Deaf in the United States complained about the oppression of their unique language, which became a powerful tool to create group solidarity and the most significant component of the 'Deaf Cultural Identity'. Nowadays, this cultural identity is used to express social and political messages to the 'hearing' public and to claim recognition as a minority group of people who are connected through a common language and shared identity rather than through a physical disability (Heap, 2003: 27).

2.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have focused on the communities through which the Deaf connect visibly. However, there are many other communities which need to be considered when trying to define the movement of the Deaf as 'frontier people' negotiating social relationships, for example educational communities, sporting communities and the community of the hearing world. Within and between these groups, the Deaf need to negotiate their identity strategically to adapt to other deaf and hearing societies. Therefore the Deaf can be seen to travel through the boundaries of other communities, such as sensory, linguistic and political ones. They move between social spaces and place themselves strategically within the Deaf and hearing worlds. They challenge the hierarchical structure of existing communities and negotiate their (former) marginalised position on a communal level as well as on a personal level.

When focusing on the local (DCCT), national (Deafsa) and international (WDF) Deaf organisations, one can observe that the Deaf strategically behave as a ‘frontier community’: they organise themselves politically in order to survive and claim existence in the larger hearing society by both celebrating their (sensory and linguistic) difference and by claiming equality as a minority group. Even though Kopytoff’s understanding of ‘frontier communities’ was as a political organisation of African societies, this theory can be applied on a more regional or even local scale when researching Deaf communities, as well as other (linguistic) minority groups. Therefore, the term ‘strategic diasporic community’ feeds better into Heap’s understanding of the Deaf than does ‘sensory diasporic group’: as the deaf are not dwelling-in-displacement but deliberately moving between different social groups to celebrate their Deafness.

Within this chapter, I have revisited the existing literature around communities and their fluidity. I have interpreted them in a new framework which emphasises the need to see the Deaf as a ‘strategically diasporic community’ who constantly renegotiate their identity, citizenship and sense of belonging in order to survive in the predominant hearing world. Using this framework helps me to engage more fully with the access-barriers the Deaf experience when trying to adopt and adapt the cell phone to their own needs. These barriers are rooted in socio-economic circumstances as well as in education and literacy. Not even the cell phone fully overcomes these barriers; they prevent the cell phone from meaningfully substituting for other forms of communication. Understanding the social movements of the Deaf is crucial when examining the impact of the cell phone, as these movements reveal social relationships and create new social connections between the Deaf and the hearing. Therefore, the Deaf shift the boundaries of communities when needed.

CHAPTER THREE

DEAF TO THE NEEDS OF THE DEAF: APPLYING MULTI-SITED FIELDWORK IN AN 'UNBOUNDED' WORLD

3.1 Introduction

It is problematic to think of communities as bounded entities, frozen in time and space. Understanding communities as constantly changing is a more accurate reflection of their empirical realities. As 'frontier people', the Deaf move in to, out of and within a variety of communities. They constantly renegotiate their identities and feelings of belonging, which are spread across physical and social spaces, rendering them 'strategically diasporic communities'. The fluidity of the Deaf as 'frontier people' and the diverse communities they traverse have a fundamental impact on the way fieldwork with them is conducted. The anthropologist is obliged to re-examine the notion of the field site in a research space where the borders and boundaries of the community fluctuate. Conventional methodologies for conducting anthropological 'fieldwork' are questioned and enriched. In this chapter, I explore the methodological challenges as well as the ethical implications of conducting fieldwork among the Deaf in South Africa. I retrace my journey to find my way among the Deaf as a 'frontier people' who move around different spaces and construct 'unbounded' forms of belonging.

3.2 Where inaudible boundaries appear, disappear and interfere: the practical implications of an 'unbounded' community of Deaf as a field site

"Space is never ontologically given. It is discursively mapped and corporeally practiced. A space is not a space until it is practiced by people's active occupation, their movements through and around it. In this perspective, there is nothing given about a 'field'."

(Micheal de Certeau, 1984, quoted in Clifford, 1997: 186)

Rereading this quote and reflecting on my fieldwork, I realise that Micheal de Certeau and his understanding of 'the practice of everyday life' (1984) addresses my insecurities around the validation of my 'field site'. Travelling across Cape Town daily to speak to my informants and interpreters and renegotiating the borders of space both personally and professionally, constantly challenged my notions of a field site and the methods I decided to use. Therefore,

defining a spatial environment, which I could call my field site, seemed to be extremely difficult, if not impossible.

Conducting fieldwork and finding a space which can be called 'a field' have been two of the defining practices of the discipline of anthropology. Nevertheless, the questions of what a 'field' is, or what fieldwork consists of, are rather unclear and imprecise. The field is a mysterious place that has been left to common sense, beyond and below the threshold of reflexivity (Gupta and Ferguson, 1997: 2). As Clifford (1997: 197) argues: "Within the classical anthropological discourse, fieldwork locations are supposed to be small and clarifying, ideally distinct places, with an inside and outside, reached by practices of physical movement." Clifford (1997), Gupta & Ferguson (1992, 1997), and Marcus (1995) have criticized and contested the meaning of fieldwork within ethnographic discourse and have argued for a broader interpretation of the field site and stress the importance of using multiple sites when conducting anthropological fieldwork. Therefore, according to Gupta and Ferguson (1997), the field site should not be interpreted within the context of a 'place' and 'space', but as a social science, which needs to interrogate the connections between different places as well as the perspective and the position of the researcher. Mark Anthony Falzon argues (2009:5): "Contemporary societies are invariably, inevitably, and self-evidently located within larger wholes. Within these wholes, people, information, goods and ideas are in a constant state of displacement, which makes the whole possible".

Building on this argument, Falzon furthermore stresses that a field site can never be a bounded space as it is always under construction: "Fieldwork therefore is not the investigation of a place where people live, but the relation between people and these places" (2009:5). These relations are not only of a geographic nature, but are strongly linked to social context, history and systems of power in the society (Falzon, 2009:15). When focusing on the Deaf and their social use of the cell phone, I came to understand that these relationships are the basis for communities and that spaces can be negotiated but are not necessarily spatially bounded. Therefore, in line with Falzon, I decided to follow people, who move across space continuously, and their connections, which are linked to visible and invisible systems of power. When following the movement of the Deaf, I created a dispersed field which, in contrast with the 'traditional field site', is not spatially bounded but can be understood as a multi-sited field.

Even though the concept of multi-sited fieldwork sounds tenable and has been embraced by a multitude of anthropological scholars over the past two decades, this approach still begs the question: what constitutes a multi-sited field? How many field sites can be accommodated with one's fieldwork and do those field sites need to be spatially divided, or can they intertwine and overlap each other? These questions cannot easily be answered, but they need to be addressed in order to justify a chosen research framework and a definition and understanding of the research population. Even within the notion of the multi-sited or even 'unbounded' field site, physical and imagined boundaries between places and people need to be negotiated, as borders appear within and between field sites and therefore challenge the ethnographic fieldwork and the ethnographer's position in the field. Therefore, the field can be understood as a direct object of the ethnographer's experience (Cook, Laidlaw & Mair, 2009: 60). When considering the ethnographer's experience, the field site can be part of one's every-day life or can differ completely from the 'home' environment. My research as a field science led me across the whole of Cape Town, into familiar and unfamiliar territory. Travelling from north to south, and east to west, I was exposed to new places and slowly learnt to know the lives of Deaf people in Cape Town.

Cook, Laidlaw and Mair (2009) also focus on the consequences of multi-sited fieldwork and argue that, when trying to understand global flows such as world religion, negotiating a field site becomes a difficult process, as the places one observes can spread across state borders or even be global. They focused on the implications of Buddhism within Asia, a multi-national flow of religion. Being unable to create a spatially bounded field site, they therefore distinguish place, space and field, where a place is the experienced, embodied and cultural understanding of a space.

In connection to this space and place, Cook, Laidlaw and Mair (2009:63) argue: "The field is the understanding of the place by ethnographers, and is therefore experienced and imagined individually and can never be completely distinguished theoretically. Spaces and places are or may be imagined as an area in two or more dimensions. The field is not an area, but a connection of zero-dimensional points, or perhaps better, of one-dimensional lines of comparison that connect such points." Even though Cook, Laidlaw and Mair are arguing for an un-sited field which is composed by the travels of the ethnographer, there are visible and invisible boundaries that appear when researching the global religion, such as nation-state boundaries. These (invisible) boundaries challenge the methodological freedom of

anthropologists constructing an appropriate field site, as the field site does not simply exist but must be laboriously constructed and negotiated (Candea, 2007: 171).

Within my travels as an ethnographer, the boundaries I stumbled upon were not originally visible but appeared over time. As I was, among other places, working in the townships of Cape Town, I was not able to conduct any fieldwork at night for safety reasons. Furthermore, due to the difficult relationship of many informants with their families or the people they lived with, I was not always welcome in their homes and had to resort to other, more neutral spaces to conduct interviews. I am aware that my fieldwork experience may therefore lack in some areas, but these created boundaries have also enriched my experiences as a fieldworker. Boundaries were not only created spatially but also imposed on me physically. As I had a limited knowledge of SASL I always had to rely on interpreters, This greatly limited my freedom of expression, but these boundaries also created other opportunities for me, encouraging me to use my other senses more intensely – my sight in particular. Therefore, I came to understand more clearly anthropologists who have argued that “fieldwork and the field is not only a spatial interpretation of a ‘distinct’ field, but merely an embodied experience, as space has physical, emotional and cognitive components” (Ross, 2010: 10). Therefore, as Falzon states, “fieldwork emerges as a process rather than an event, a spiraling cumulative progression which borrows on a number of empirical stands and collaboration of the researcher, research assistants and new methodological methods” (Falzon, 2009: 18).

3.3 The Deaf as a spatially unbounded community

Before I describe the people who took me to different places in Cape Town and thereby created an unbounded field site, I want to engage in more theory about the Deaf, who are defined as an ‘unbounded community. By exploring this theory critically, I came to understand more deeply my scattered field site and the people among whom I conducted research. The way in which the Deaf construct their community through their social relationships (with both other Deaf and hearing) became one of the key results of my data, and let me engage critically with the social effects of the cell phone. The cell phone also became a very important tool for me, as I was able to use it to construct a field site and remain in contact with my informants.

Within her work conducted in the Deaf community in Cape Town, Marion Heap (2003) engaged with the theories which defined the deaf as a 'sensory diasporic community' (see Chapter Two). Embracing the term 'diasporic' creatively, Heap argues that the Deaf are not connected through space but by other elements such as identity, belonging or shared history. Heap's term 'sensory diasporic community', used to describe the Deaf can, in my fieldwork, be used to describe other imagined communities such as internet and mobile communities. As shown by Focus the trans-spatiality of the Deaf, communities can exist beyond Clifford's notion of diaspora: communities cover different spaces and are therefore translocal. In addition, individuals may belong simultaneously to different communities which may be imagined or spatially real, and therefore threaten the defining heterogeneity of the community (Wilson and Peterson, 2002: 455). Within my research, I experienced that the Deaf can be part of a spatial and a non-spatial community at the same time, depending on the context of the interaction. The Deaf live throughout the city of Cape Town but come together in the Bastion for meetings and events such as the Third Sunday. Furthermore, many of the Deaf created social networks that were constructed in the Deaf schools, where they had lived and interacted with each other daily in a closed and spatially bounded setting. Therefore, even though the Deaf can be seen as a 'diasporic community', some of these communities occur within a spatial setting. Therefore, the community cannot be seen as completely unbounded.

When focusing on the non-spatiality of the Deaf as a community and breaking away from narrow meanings of diaspora, new bodies of literature can be explored, such as the new research on cell phone and online communities as well as social networks such as Facebook and Twitter. These 'unbounded' spaces are significant when trying to define a field site, as they confirm the fluidity of communities and challenge the 'traditional' understanding of field work as informants move to different forms of online and offline communities.

Increased cell-phone use has resulted in rapidly shifting forms of social behaviour and communication (see Chapters Four and Five in this thesis) and has transformed communities and social relationships on both a communal and individual level, creating new relationships while reintegrating or terminating existing ones. In the past two decades, various studies have argued that cell phones function as cultural rather than technological objects. Furthermore, as explained more thoroughly in Chapters Four and Five the cell phone renegotiates power hierarchies, can expand social networks and negotiate identity politics (Bell, 2006: 44). The cell phone can also be seen as a tool of power, as it has the ability to include or exclude

people in a community by their ownership or lack of a cell phone, due to socio-economic circumstances and education, or the lack of cellular reception. This power has a great deal of impact on the way in which Deaf people live and behave as ‘frontier people’ within communities, as they have the ability to gain personal freedom and increase their social mobility (Katz, 2006: 126). Bell (2006:52), who did extensive research on the impact of cell-phone use in Asian communities, describes how teenagers used their phones to express their social identities and to re-inscribe their relationships with their parents or family, as they did not always have to rely on face-to-face communication.

Cell phones therefore operate as forms of intimate computing: they are carried close to our bodies, embedded in our daily lives, becoming an extension of ourselves and our personalities, our social relationships and larger cultural contexts. My cell phone became the most important device that I used during my fieldwork. It let me establish contact with my informants and define my field site. As I was following the movement of the Deaf, they were the people who created the ‘travel itinerary’ for my fieldwork in Cape Town. My informants would tell me about the events happening in DCCT, ask me to come over for an interview or a focus group, or give my directions to their house, all using their cell phones. With my cell phone I was able to travel through the city and engage in the ‘silent world’.

3.4 Field-work as a ‘travel practice’: negotiating anthropological methodology when constructing the ‘unbounded’ field site¹⁶

As mentioned above, the Deaf behave as a ‘strategic diasporic community’ moving between social spaces as ‘frontier people’ and renegotiating social relationships with the use of cell phone technology, which increases their mobility. This made it very difficult for me to define my group of informants and construct a (bounded) field site. My notions of spatiality and boundedness were challenged as I became privy to the movements within Deaf communities, which obliged me to re-examine my methodological approach. Due to these challenges, my fieldwork became a ‘practice of travel’ – a personal and professional journey crisscrossing Cape Town during which I grappled with the impact of the cell phone on the social relationships of the Deaf and the negotiation of their identity. In this section, I take the reader along on my journey through the Deaf world and explain the methodological, ethical, and

¹⁶ Clifford (1992), cited in Falzon, 2009: 9.

linguistic challenges I experienced during my anthropological journey, in which my creation of the Deaf field site proved an elusive mission.

My journey in the Deaf world did not occur in a ‘far-away place’. My first attempt to establish contact with my informants happened at home, where I was armed with my laptop, an internet connection and a cell phone, plus the contact details of people who could potentially become informants.

3.4.1 Establishing contact through the ‘snowball’ method

As Heap (2003: 131) states, fieldwork in spatially unbounded Deaf community can only be effective when using the ‘snowball’ method (which is considered to be an effective method when communities are not spatially divided). During her extensive fieldwork in the Deaf community, Heap used this ‘snowball’ and other sampling methods to expand her research population and contact friends of informants to learn more about their lives, social relationships and movements across Deaf-hearing spaces. In the ‘snowball’ method, the anthropologist starts with a small study population which is used as the base of the informant network. As the snowball starts to roll, one is able to include new informants into the study population who otherwise would not be found due to their scattered positions of the Deaf. As Noy (2006:328) argues: “sampling methods may lead to a dynamic moment where unique social knowledge of an interactional quality can be fruitfully generated”. Not only does the ‘snowball’ method feed into the methodological conversation, embracing this sampling method also reveals much information about the unbounded and fluid field site and unravels the different social relationships of the informants, within both Deaf and hearing communities.

For me, the ‘snowball’ method was only partially useful. Entering the Deaf community as a hearing person was more difficult than I anticipated. My first contact with the Deaf came through attending events held by DCCT, hosted in the Bastion. Within the DCCT there are long-standing traditions and get-togethers, such as the Third Sunday. Every third Sunday of the month, many of the Deaf come together to attend a church service and to receive news and information about the Deaf community (and, most importantly, to meet with friends and catch up on the latest gossip). The third Sunday in May was my first encounter with the Deaf community and a way to experience sign language, as well as to meet my first informants.

3.5 Where the Deaf take you: travelling through Cape Town as a field-worker

The movement of the Deaf eventually led me to three different parts of Cape Town, the spaces in which my informants lived and worked. I also returned to the Bastion for the Deaf (DCCT headquarters) on a regular basis to attend events and conduct a sign-language course together with hearing parents.

At my first sign-language class, I was fortunate to meet Elsa, a mother with a twenty-year-old deaf son. Standing outside during the coffee break, trying to recover from the information overload, I overheard a conversation between two parents who had joined the course to communicate with their young deaf son. The parents were chatting about the lack of opportunities for Deaf people, the communication struggle between hearing parents and their Deaf children, and their fear of being unable to give their children a good future due to a lack of funds and poor educational opportunities. Overhearing this discussion, I became intrigued by Elsa's fierce mentality and her passion to be heard, both by other parents and by officials of the government and the DCCT. Hesitantly, I asked her if I could interview her about her son about their relationship and she became a very willing interviewee. After my first semi-formal interview, I travelled to Elsa and her family in Lavender Hill at least once a week to chat with the other children and practice my sign language with her Deaf son Noell. Even though my SASL remained very limited, I could engage in family life, hear the different stories about Noell's childhood and engage with Elsa's struggles to care for four other children and six grandchildren.

Lavender Hill is considered a 'coloured'¹⁷ residential area. It is based in the Southern Suburbs of Cape Town. Even though the high crime-rate has decreased in the past few years, the area is notorious for gang wars, Tik¹⁸ abuse and high levels of alcoholism. My

¹⁷ During Apartheid, racial segregation divided the city into different neighborhoods which were inhabited by 'racially homogenous' groups according to legislative classifications. Lavender Hill was considered to be a 'coloured' residential area during Apartheid and, in 2012, is still regarded as such.

¹⁸ Tik is a local word for methamphetamine, a highly addictive drug first developed in Japan in the beginning of the 20th century. Tik is easy accessible in Cape Town and relatively cheap to buy. Nevertheless, the effects are highly dangerous, as users become aggressive and create an unlimited sex-drive. In the Western Cape, 91% of the users is male and Coloured and sixty percent under the age of twenty statistics from <http://www.scienceinAfrica.co.za>. [2012, February 4].

relationship with hearing informants such as Elsa became a valuable source of information during my fieldwork – I was able to establish a close relationship with her and with my interpreter, Sheila. My field site therefore did not only include travelling to the Deaf, but also involved many visits to my hearing informants, who proved to be the connection between the ‘silent’ and the ‘hearing’ worlds.

It was much more difficult than I initially thought to find an interpreter who was reliable, spoke different sign dialects and was regularly available for interviews and focus groups. After a few disappointing experiences with interpreters during the first weeks of my fieldwork, I met Sheila. She practiced sign language in her free time, as she frequently came into contact with Deaf in Khayelitsha through her work as a social educator. During these encounters, Sheila became passionate about Sign language and wanted to learn SASL to communicate effectively with the Deaf.

I met Sheila at a special event for the youth in the Bastion. I wanted to gather information from some Deaf participants, but I was muddling my signs and struggling to express myself adequately. When Sheila realised that I was hearing, she helped me with some translation, where after we spoke extensively about her work, her connection with the Deaf and her wish to help them in any way possible. Sheila and I became friendly after she helped me out with some focus groups. Not only did she introduce me to some of her Deaf friends, she also organised meetings for me and would contact my informants if they were unable to reply to me via SMS.

Sheila became my personal gatekeeper between the hearing and the Deaf worlds and took me around Khayelitsha and Philippi to meet the Deaf and arrange meetings with them. As many of my informants had difficult family situations, I was unable to participate in their domestic life in the same way as I did with Elsa’s family in Lavender Hill. Therefore, Sheila and I made sure that we would have available a space in the neighbourhood where we could meet the informants and conduct focus groups. After some hours of talking, laughing and making fun, we would stroll around the area and visit the places my informants frequented, such as the sports field, the Noluthando School for the Deaf or different shops. During those walks, the Deaf would express opinions more openly and share with me the stories of their lives, which are strongly attached to these places.

Khayelitsha (isiXhosa for “new home”) is the biggest township in Cape Town, located on the Cape Flats, next to the N2 highway. This partly informal settlement shelters more than 400,000 people, 75 percent of whom live in shacks without running water or sanitation facilities. As I was following the movement of the Deaf throughout Cape Town, these walks let me engage in their lives and the daily experiences of being Deaf. They filled a large part of my ‘travel itinerary’, as well as my fieldwork data.

Even though my ‘travel itinerary’ seemed to be fluid (being constructed by the Deaf people I would meet through the ‘snowball’ method and the connections in the Bastion) I chose deliberately to focus only on the Deaf who were not directly affiliated with DCCT. Marion Heap, who proposed this project to me, suggested that I look outside the realm of the Bastion, as many of the Deaf who are involved with DCCT are used to participating in research and do not represent the whole Deaf community in Cape Town. As is clear from my findings, the Deaf working in the Bastion of at UCT had very different experiences of the cell phone from other Deaf people. My ‘travel -itinerary’ was guided by these observations, which brought me to places outside of the Bastion, such as Khayelitsha, Philippi and Lavender Hill.

3.6 When thoughts unbind: the reflexive researcher

My experiences within the field, spanning from The Bastion to other residential areas such as Khayelitsha, Philippi and Lavender Hill, were socio-somatic. They engaged all my senses, as I had to adapt to new situations and locations constantly. I created a fluid identity which let me switch quickly between my position as a student and my position as a researcher to create meaningful relations with my informants. Through my research I experienced how knowledge is heavily dependent on the presence and experience of the fieldworker (Gupta and Ferguson, 1997: 15). As Clifford (1997: 209) states, “ethnography is constructed from ‘partial truths’, as it is the relational negotiation of ‘subjects of difference’”. Therefore, research is always based on personal experiences and subjectivity.

As anthropology is not an exact science and is open to interpretation, I try to be reflexive throughout this work and take into account that I, as a researcher, bring to the field the subjectivities borne from my personal background, skin colour, education and beliefs, and these influence the way in which I interpret and present data. I will use the term ‘reflexivity’, in accordance with Ross (2010:14), as a response to the ways in which the present and the

past form part of the anthropological research. I am also aware of the power relations within a community, which shapes one's ideas and action. This form of reflexivity does not only consider informants' subjectivities but includes the personal background of the researcher, which, intentionally and unintentionally, drastically influences the data gathered. Reflexivity, according to Moore (1999) and Gupta & Ferguson (1992), also entails the ability to be surprised and to reengage with theories, in order to show how things really are instead of how they are supposed to be. I am highly aware of the fact that my dissertation might not contain a universal truth, which, according to Ross (2010: 9), is nearly impossible, but I will give an accurate overview of my experiences in the field, combined with the data collected.

I chose to use a variety of data-collecting techniques while conducting my research. I used interviews and participant observation among the Deaf, as I was also interacting regularly with my hearing informants who were participating in the Deaf community professionally or personally. During the course of my fieldwork, I interacted regularly with a group of thirty informants, who were both Deaf and hearing. Due to language barriers, I was not always able to conduct active participant observation, but I was in many cases only an observer, remaining silent and observing the body language and Sign of my informants. I attended events of the DCCT at the Bastion such as the Third Sunday, Women's Day and Youth Day, and I liaised with one of many research projects which were conducted in the Bastion. Prang, a young researcher from the University of Leiden, invited me to shadow her Master's project, (designing a cell phone especially for Deaf people which uses video devices on which sign language could be projected to give health information and explain prescriptions of medication). Attending her focus groups and interviewing Prang about her project shed light on some important aspects of my own research.

Shadowing is not a widely used method in anthropology but has proven useful in both large corporate and small-scale research settings (Gilliat-Ray, 2011: 469). According to Sophie Gilliat-Ray (2011: 482), shadowing a single individual proved to be an effective method within her anthropological research, as she could observe the structure of network relations and communities. Furthermore, she states, "shadowing takes both researcher and researched out of the normal chronological stream of events and routines, and provides the opportunities to experience the world of one another". When shadowing Prang during role-play sessions in which she tested her software programs with her Deaf participants, I could observe the interaction between the researcher and the researched, as well as the reaction of the Deaf to

this new piece of technology. Prang acted as a useful soundboard with which to share my observations during the shadowing – and also to discuss the practical concerns of this new video communication device.

3.7 Deaf to the language of the Deaf: being a hearing anthropologist in a silent world

When I first arrived at the Bastion, all the new things I needed to absorb overwhelmed me. I felt I was entering a strange new world, a bubble of Deaf people in the middle of the city, hidden in a old school building behind one of the city's biggest hotels, as they seemed afraid to mix with the 'real' world, due to their Deafness. On entering the building, I needed to fill out registration forms requesting my name, age, place of residence, and then a box with the letter R. Not understanding what the letter R meant, I looked at the Deaf receptionist, who signed by touching his cheek. I looked from him to the form, which was filled with letter C, and back to him. What did the letter C mean? After another five minutes of attempts to show me the meaning of the column in Sign, I realised what was the correct answer, which could only be the letter W. The Deaf were still using the Apartheid racial categorisations on their registration forms, whereby the attendants are asked to fill in their race. C stands for coloured, W for white¹⁹. Not only was I the only hearing person attending the Third Sunday, I was the only white person.

During the course of the event, however, I realised that my race wasn't the biggest obstacle I would have to overcome: that was the language, brought about by my limited knowledge of Sign. Sitting next to an interpreter, I could follow the service well, but when she left me to meet up with other Deaf, I immediately felt lonely, unable to connect with other people and aware of the staring faces of other attendants who also did not know how to deal with this non-signing person.

Language remained a problem for me throughout my fieldwork. Not only could I not conduct interviews or focus groups without an interpreter, but meeting Deaf people as a non-signer was nearly impossible. Another approach was needed. I contacted most of my first interviewees and informants via SMS and e-mail. Introducing myself in this mode of written

¹⁹ Many forms in South Africa still require one to declare one's race or colour, a remnant from the Apartheid era. In the post-Apartheid era this is not obligatory but many people continue to do so, mostly out of habit.

communication was more difficult than I anticipated. Firstly, I was not aware of the language structure of Sign, which translates differently in the written form, so my my emails and SMSes were difficult to understand. Secondly, electronic communication is a non-synchronous form of communication: it does not oblige an immediate response (the consequences of electronic communication are further explored in Chapters Four and Five). Sometimes, especially during my first weeks of fieldwork, it took me a few days or a week to get a response from an interviewee, which was frustrating as it slowed down the process of my fieldwork and left me unable to spend the maximum amount of time with my informants. I decided to use the 'snowball' method differently, and make contact with hearing people such as interpreters, researchers and parents of Deaf children to get in touch with my Deaf informants.

Speaking to hearing people who had personal or professional relations with the Deaf brought me closer to Deaf informants, but had the added effect of closely involving my hearing contacts in my fieldwork. They shared with me the miscommunications and frictions between the Deaf and hearing that I experienced in my fieldwork. This despite the fact that, as Heap (2003: 92) states, "the Deaf are not set apart on the basis of their deafness, the use of a 'common' sign language is the base of the creation of social relationships and the defining of Sign-spaces". These spaces may overlap with hearing spaces, but their frontiers are not as fluid as between hearing spaces.

The overlap between the hearing and Deaf spaces allowed me to conduct fieldwork within the Deaf community even though I was not able to sign fluently. Within my research, I was able to substitute the use of my ears with other senses, mainly sight, which gave my project an extra challenge and made it a largely embodied experience.

3.7.1 Compensating for the lack of hearing; conducting sensory fieldwork and the practical implications of Deafness and the cell phone in everyday life

As has been emphasized in Chapter One, the Deaf move strategically as 'frontier people', using the cell phone to extend social relationships and to compensate for the lack of hearing. As a sensory minority, the Deaf use the cell phone as an extension of the body – it is strongly embodied and interlinked with other senses, especially sight. The cell phone becomes an extension of the Deaf body. When conducting fieldwork, I needed to understand this bodily

extension within a wider framework of sensory anthropology and, furthermore, to link it to material culture as understood by Warnier (2006).

Jean-Pierre Warnier (2006) extensively describes the interaction of the body with material culture. He tries to combine the notion of the 'Total Man', which is explained by Mauss (1973) as the psychological, biological and sociological body, with the effects and existence of material culture. Warnier (2006) argues that techniques of the body are cultured, so one cannot write about the body without considering material culture. He explains material culture as the way in which the body interacts with materials, which can be used to extend the limitations of the body and influence both the body and bodily emotions.

For the Deaf, the body's limited sense of hearing is extended by the cell phone, which they creatively adapt to bridge the gap between the Deaf and hearing worlds. As I worked with the Deaf as a spatially unbounded community, the cell phone also became an extension of my own body: I used the technology to communicate effectively with the Deaf, bridging the gap between myself as a hearing researcher and my Deaf informants. Even though the cell phone has become a frequent subject of anthropological research, its impact on the researcher's process of developing a field site and its methodological implications do not yet seem to be acknowledged. For me personally, the cell phone became my diary, my city map (as my informants gave directions via SMS) and my data base, in which I could store the SMSs which are used in this thesis. Lotte Pelckmans (2009: 24), who used her cell phone actively when conducting multi-sited fieldwork on the cell phone and social mobility among the transnational society of the Fulbe people in Mali, acknowledges that the mobile phone both shapes and is shaped by the researcher's methodologies and practices. Within her work, Pelckmans used her cell phone for multiple practicalities during her research: to record interviews, to make appointments, to store data, and to investigate the social networks of her informants via their contact lists. Even though the cell phone can be an effective embodied tool for research, several ethical questions need to be considered, especially around informants' privacy and their social contacts. Furthermore, issues surrounding the field site arise: the cell phone challenges the construction of the unbounded field site, which is no longer spatial but built on connections (Pelckmans, 2009: 42). During my research, I was able to adapt the cell phone successfully both to construct a field site and to overcome language barriers between me and my Deaf informants. I was also able to make appointments and remain in contact with both the hearing and the Deaf.

3.7.2 Where words get lost in translation

The role of translation in anthropology has not been addressed very regularly, but it is central to data-gathering processes and to the search for meanings and understandings, which is the goal of anthropology (Rubel and Rosman, 2003: 1). Within my fieldwork especially, I was constantly confronted by language barriers, which were (unintentionally) co-created by me, my informants, and the interpreters I worked with. Even though I took some lessons in Sign language before and during my fieldwork, the time I spent among my Deaf informants was too short to become fluent in Sign language myself. The translation and second-hand information I gathered greatly influenced the quality of my data. In the majority of scenarios I was unable to record my interviews and I found it difficult to translate quotes directly. Translation from Sign language into English was problematic as none of the interpreters were first-language English speakers, so most of the information was simplified and transformed during the translation process.

Although I am concerned about the degree to which translation may have changed the intended message, this can never be completely avoided, due to the personal interpretations and meanings given to language, as well as the hierarchy and cultural dominance which are reflected in translations (Venuti, 2000: 5). Language, miscommunication, the contextualisation of words and translation were not only a significant obstacle during my fieldwork, they also became a large part of my data collection. Therefore, in order to provide an ethnographic description of my fieldwork, I will try to convey as much as possible from the original source and use the content meaningfully within the context of various translations to give a fruitful explanation of the data collected.

3.8 Ethical implications of fieldwork

During the course of my fieldwork, I used the Association of Social Anthropology in the UK and Commonwealth (ASA) ethical guidelines (2007) as there are no particular ethical guidelines available for conducting anthropological research with Deaf people. Lane (2005: 291) argues that using a different ethics guideline for working with the Deaf is not particularly necessary, because Deaf people do not consider themselves as being disabled and, therefore, the disability ethics code would function on a misconception. The Deaf are more appropriately considered an ethnic minority or linguistic minority. With Lane's

argument in mind, I did not use any different ethical guidelines if these were not necessary and their omission respected the choice of my informants. When appropriate, I asked oral consent from my informants and the interpreters and made them aware that they could resign from the research at any time. During my fieldwork, I was always clear and honest about the intention of the visit and repeatedly asked whether the information could be used in my research. Even though many of my informants did not request the use of pseudonyms, I have chosen to keep some of their identities secret by using different names. I have, however, opted to use the names of academics and interpreters interviewed for the research as within my work, as they were speaking in a professional capacity and were aware that the interviews were being recorded for academic purposes.

Despite a miscommunication with one of my interpreters, I did not experience any ethical crises during my fieldwork. The social worker of DCCT trained me in 'Deaf etiquette' and, as a result, I found myself quite readily accepted into the community, despite the occasional misunderstanding due to the language barrier. Luckily, these barriers were overcome by the use of interpreters, who were able to contextualise the problems and explain to the Deaf the reason for my visit.

3.8.1 Giving back to the Deaf community

When I was first approached by Marion Heap to conduct research in the Deaf community and focus on the social use of cell-phone technology, I did not realise how my study could be used to help the Deaf by providing accurate information to the health-care system. Now, when writing this thesis and revisiting my data, I am aware of the practical implications my study will have for future research in the Deaf community and for the development and implementation of a communication system for Deaf people. I hope this thesis will give academic information back to the Deaf community as well as to the University, which can be expanded upon or revisited in future.

I am aware that the Deaf community will not immediately benefit from my work. This data can only be considered preliminary and will not have immediate practical implications. Therefore, I tried to make a (short-term) difference within the Deaf community and for my informants' benefit in various ways. Firstly, I tried never to arrive empty-handed when conducting interviews and focus groups. For most of my informants, I baked muffins and

brought cool drinks, to show my respect and gratitude to those involved. I tried to give back to my informants in various other ways. Sheila, who became my regular interpreter, and is the caretaker of her two little brothers, had financial struggles when I met her. I was able to give her a small income and transfer money in return for her interpretation services and to give her access to the interpreter service from UCT, which is now paying for her education to become a professional interpreter and get her diploma from the University of Free State. For Elsie and her family, I tried to be an advisor on several issues such as the legal implications of setting up a business. I also formed a good relationship with her youngest daughter, who wished to enrol at UCT. As a UCT student, I helped her to get the correct forms, explored the possibilities of scholarships and filled in the paperwork with her. Even though she was not accepted for an education at the University of Cape Town, she is the first of her family to get matric exemption and have a chance to obtain a tertiary education. In my conclusion to this thesis, I have included a section on recommendations partly meant to inspire and inform policy makers and suggest areas of future research.

3.9 Conclusion

The Deaf, who move strategically as a diasporic community between hearing and Deaf spaces, cannot be considered a bounded community, as they behave as 'frontier people'. Within this movement, they embrace the cell phone creatively bend the borders and boundaries of (in)visible communities. Therefore, as has been emphasized within this chapter, traditional theories on anthropological fieldwork need to be revisited with reference to the Deaf, as they do not constitute a bounded community.

In this chapter, I described the implications of community-unboundedness for my fieldwork experience. I argued that, when doing research among the Deaf, theories of the unbounded field site need to be considered and alternative methodologies negotiated. The fact that the Deaf lack the hearing sense and use a different, visual language also had far-reaching consequences for my own position in the field and for my relationship with my informants. The cell phone proved to be an irreplaceable device for practising an alternative methodology, letting me follow the movement of the Deaf, with my informants as facilitators to fill my 'travel itinerary' which took me all over Cape Town.

CHAPTER FOUR:

THE CELL PHONE AND THE DEAF AS INTIMATE STRANGERS: SOCIAL IMPLEMENTATION OF THE CELL PHONE FOR DEAF USERS

4.1 Introduction:

In Chapters Two and Three I explored the extent to which the Deaf can be described as a ‘strategic diasporic community’ and ‘frontier people’, navigating and negotiating the boundaries of existing communities and creating new communities. In this chapter I draw on my fieldwork data to argue that the Deaf are able to adopt and adapt cell-phone technology to fit their own needs, thereby increasing their mobility and flexibility as ‘frontier people’. I also address issues arising from the acceptability and accessibility of the cell phone, which are influenced by language, education and economic constraints. Even though the cell phone was originally developed for hearing users, the Deaf embrace it creatively via the use of SMS, a device they use to extend social relationships within Deaf communities and to negotiate language barriers with the hearing. I engage with current discourses on the impact of cell-phone use in predominantly hearing communities and use these theories to inform my own interpretation of my fieldwork data.

4.2 Embracing technology: The use of the cell phone in Deaf communities

“Mobile phones have become one of the most equitably distributed information and communication technologies”

(Akasaka, reported in United Nations News Centre, 12 November 2009)

Even though the cell phone is as a relatively recent communication technology, it has drastically and irreversibly changed the lives of people. Introduced to the public during the late 1980’s (Bell, 2006), the cell phone is now used all over the world in large numbers and far exceeds its original purpose. The technology was developed to enable users to contact each other regardless of location but it has seen an explosion of applications such as SMS,

MXit²⁰ and other chat devices in recent years (Pierterra, 2005; Steenson & Donner, 2009). With the use of ‘smart phones’²¹, one can maintain constant contact through unlimited access to internet and social networks such as Facebook and MySpace.

In 2011, the cell phone and other forms of communication technology proved pivotal in the creation and mobilisation of social movements. The ‘Arab spring’²² is probably the most recent example, but not the first that was sparked by the use of the technology. In 2005, the power of the cell phone was already noted in the Philippines, where the Estrada government was overthrown after protests that were organised via cell-phone communication (Lamoureaux, 2011; Pertierra, 2005). Besides the political power that the cell phone holds, the technology can also be understood as a cultural artefact, a metaphor for the distinctively technological modern way of life (Goggin, 2006: 7). The cell phone is both socially and culturally shaped by the users’ innovations and their imaginings of the technology (Goggin, 2006: 98).

As cell phones have the capacity to make the absent present (Lamoureaux, 2011: 1), the technology is strongly connected with feelings of belonging, identity and the negotiation of communities. It is a form of communication which influences one’s social networks, such as friends and family, as it allows people to expand or extend relationships. Therefore, communities, which cannot always be understood as bounded, become even more ‘fluid’ as the cell phone changes the ideas about distance and reshapes social and economic hierarchies in societies (Brinkman, de Bruijn & Bilal, 2009; Goggin, 2006; Katz & Sugiyami, 2005;

²⁰ MXit (pronounced "mix it") is a free instant messaging application developed by in South Africa that can be installed on smart phones which have access to the internet. Besides running chat platforms, it also allows access to social networks such as Twitter and Facebook. According to a 2011 study, MXit currently has about 10 million active subscribers, making it the largest mobile social network in Africa (World Wide Works, 2011).

²¹ The smart phone is built on a mobile computing platform, which increases the connectivity of the user by comparison with the ordinary cell phone. The new models combine functions such as PDA (personal digital assistance), compact digital cameras and pocket video cameras. They also have the ability to establish high-speed internet connections via WiFi or mobile operation systems.

²² The Arab Spring (or Arab Awakening) consisted of a wave of protests in Middle Eastern and Northern African countries against corrupt political leadership. The protests were facilitated by social networks such as Facebook and Twitter and led to the forced resignation of, among others, Muammar Kadafi (Libya) and Zine El Abadine Ben Ali (Tunisia).

Lamoureaux, 2011). The cell phone can be seen as a liberating device, because it gives people the opportunity to create a more individual identity, free from collective constraints (Pertierra, 2005). Brinkman, de Bruijn and Bilal (2009: 87) describe the power of the cell phone to negotiate social networks and break down existing hierarchical structures. Their research in Khartoum showed that the cell phone let women break existing gender dynamics, as they were able to contact male companions via SMS and speech communication. The cell phone allowed Muslim women to increase previously limited social exchange between the sexes.

The Deaf also embrace the cell phone creatively and thereby negotiate their feelings of belonging and identity in the dominant hearing world, but without completely breaking hierarchical boundaries. With the support of my preliminary data, I will show how the Deaf shape the cell phone culturally when adapting it to support their own needs (Goggin, 2006: 96). They adapt or appropriate the cell phone, which was initially developed as a device for the hearing, to increase their mobility and use it as a tool to move strategically between Deaf and hearing communities.

4.3 Using SASL as a written language: SMS communication between the Deaf (and the hearing)

Trying to connect with the Deaf world via the ‘snowball method’ (see Chapter Three), I was happy to receive the cell-phone number of Ndiphiwe, a soccer coach in Philippi, via Chris, one of the interpreters in Cape Town. He told me I could reach Ndiphiwe via SMS and arrange a personal interview assisted by an interpreter. Sitting in the comfortable space of my own house, I tried to introduce myself via SMS, which seemed odd to me, as I would not easily SMS²³ a stranger to ask him for an interview if I had not first exchanged details with them verbally. In this case, I had no other option but to introduce myself and my project via SMS. Here follows an excerpt from our conversation:

N²⁴: Hi. Thank received sms me. Sorry I no airtime nw buy airtime. I need met 2 u ad chat abt football couching student what course or subject (*Thanks for the sms. Sorry I did not have*

²³ SMS is the abbreviations for Short Message Service. An SMS contains a text message of maximum 152 characters (letters, numbers and spaces) and can be directly sent to one or more cell phones.

²⁴ N: Ndiphiwe, M: Myrna

airtime and needed to buy new airtime. I need to meet with you to chat about football coaching. As you are a student, which subject or course are you in?)

M: I am a master student from UCT and do research within the Deaf community about communication via cell phones and sms. Are you still active in the Deaf community?

N: I am deaf. Chair ad founder philipi Deaf starts FC and intrim chairperson WDCfootball. I am know Deaf community and pls do u do discuss when meet me (*I am deaf. I am the chairperson and founder of the FC Philippi Deaf Stars and interim chairperson of WDC football. I am well known within the Deaf community. Please discuss this with me when we can meet.*)

M: I will let you know on Monday okay? I need to find and interpreter who can assist me, as my Sign is not so good yet. Thanks for making time for me, Myrna.

N: I give interpreter Tshepiso this cell

M: okay, will do. I let you know when we can meet. Myrna

N: Best meet Wednesday me. Wht tme meet me? (*For me, it is best to meet on Wednesday. What time shall we meet?*)

M: Uhm, I am free all day. Maybe around ten? Where do you wanna meet?

N: thank. I meet at place philippi (*Thanks, we can meet in a place in Philippi.*)

M: Okay, lets sms on Tuesday to confirm place and time. Myrna.

N: sharp (*okay*)

While preparing for the interview the following day, I realised we had not finalised a precise meeting place. Therefore, our conversation continued:

M: Hi, are you still free for the interview tomorrow morning? Where do you want to meet? Myrna

N: Hi. Thanks sms me. Nw I work at noluthando school 4 def its aid teacher. I wait wil sms u. *(Hi, thanks for the SMS. I am working now at Nothulando school for the Deaf as a teacher. I will sms you a bit later.)*

N: my mother house at Philippi, street soloman mahalangu. U cn contact my mother member street at place. U dnt forget interpreter. *(I am at my mother's house in Philippi, Soloman Mahalanga. You can contact my mother if you cannot find the place and street. Don't forget your interpreter.)*

M: Okay, thanks, can you maybe give me some directions. Me and my interpreter are using public transport. What is the easiest place to get off?

N: Ok. 2mrrw I stay at Philippi u wait cme with interview. *(Okay. Tomorrow, I will stay in Philippi and you can come over to do the interview.)*

M: huh? I am sorry. Don't get what you say.

N: please call me SMS

'Please call me' SMS? Why would Ndiphiwe send me a 'please call me'²⁵ if he is not able to hear when I speak to him? Confused, I decided to answer the 'please call me' and phoned Ndiphiwe. Hearing the sound of the phone ringing and knowing that nobody would answer my call, I became very aware of my own stupidity. How could I call someone who is Deaf? Did I really expect him to pick up and start talking to me? When I was ready to hang up, a voice at the other side of the line started speaking. "Is that you, Myrna?" "Yes," I answered, still suspicious and flabbergasted at what had just happened, "Who am I speaking to?" It turned out to be Ndiphwe's sister, who lived a few houses away from him. She told me that Ndiphwe was trying to give me directions to his mother's house, but realized that I was not

²⁵ Please call me are free messages provided by the cell phone network, which mostly contain advertisement and can be sent to other mobile numbers.

familiar with the area, so suggested it would be better to find another venue for the interview. After she and I discussed the details and venue, I hung up, satisfied with the arrangement and surprised about Ndiphiwe's inventive recourse to a 'please call me', without which we might never have worked out our miscommunication²⁶.

This example with Ndiphiwe reveals much important information about the use of language, grammar structure and the power of the cell phone as a bridging technology between Deaf and hearing communities. Firstly, I will address the communication challenges we encountered and then examine the way in which Ndiphiwe used SMS and 'please call me's to communicate effectively with me, a hearing researcher.

4.4 Writing the language of the Deaf

Among all the new technologies that were introduced in the Deaf community, the cell phone may be one of the most empowering (Goggin, 2006). SMS and instant messages (IM) are the most-used forms of communication between the Deaf and the hearing to circumvent the Deaf's lack of hearing. The text messages exchanged between Ndiphiwe and me became important data. They highlighted that sign language is not directly translatable into written text, because there is no official written equivalent to Sign. Text messages sent by the Deaf need to be interpreted within a framework of SASL, whose grammar structure differs significantly from that of other languages, as is evident from the SMSs above. To interpret Ndiphiwe's messages accurately required knowledge of SASL and its grammar structure. For example, when one of my Deaf informants would Sign to me: "I went home yesterday," the literal translation of Sign to English would be "Yesterday, I go home." SASL doesn't recognise tenses so the meaning of the message can change significantly when interpreted in an English grammar structure.

Ndiphiwe's messages illustrate the extent to which SMS abbreviations, such as pls (please), nw (npw), and abt (about) can differ from SASL and English, as Sign does not use abbreviations. Many Deaf in South Africa do not receive secondary or tertiary educations, which further influences the quality of language they use when SMSing. The example also shows that the interpretation of language is social, informed by levels of literacy, education and cultural background. The new language used in SMS constitutes a new emergent genre of

²⁶ Message and phone call received on the 20th and 21st of June 2011.

English writing, one with a limited lexicon of phrases and syntax. These new characteristics of SMS language correspond to the sometimes small knowledge of English possessed by users of the SMS (Power & Power, 2004: 335).

The same difficulty of translation from visual Sign to written language was experienced by Okoyama and Iwai (2011: 388) when doing research among Deaf youth. They examined whether Deaf and hearing students used text messages differently. The outcome of the research revealed that both Deaf and hearing adolescents use SMS regularly, but due to the barrier in language, deaf informants use SMS to a lesser extent than hearing high-school learners.

“SMS is a written communication, mostly used in the written Japanese language, feasible and linguistic barriers still exists regardless of the Deaf community’s adaptation of cell phone technology. In this regard, the mastery of the language of communication must be as important as the right of equal access to the new technology.”

(Okoyama and Iwai, 2011: 400)

Even though the Deaf in Cape Town experience these language barriers in the same way, they still use SMS as a form of communication because it is the only way they can communicate besides face-to-face communication.

It was not only I who was at a loss when trying to interpret Ndiphiwe’s messages. Miscommunications, the different interpretation of words and other difficulties I have discussed above meant that he was quite often unable to interpret my own messages. Tshepiso, one of the interpreters, told me that Ndiphiwe came to her and showed her my messages.

“Luckily, I was there to assist him, so everything worked out well. He was very ashamed to tell you that he could not read your messages, as they are so different from the ones he gets from his Deaf friends. Even for me as an interpreter it is sometimes difficult to SMS with the Deaf as they are using so many different words and are not always able to spell correctly, which can change the meaning of the message and cause confusion. Even though I use my

*phone a lot to get in contact with the Deaf, there is much misconception and miscommunication between me and my Deaf clients.*²⁷

Furthermore, Tshepiso told me that many of the Deaf people are uncomfortable to have SMS contact with hearing people due to the language difficulties encountered.

“A Deaf person will more easily contact another Deaf person via SMS than a hearing person will. Deaf people know that most of their friends cannot write English perfectly so will never correct each other on their language or spelling. Therefore, getting in contact with the hearing via cell phone or in face-to-face communication is still a challenge, especially without an interpreter. Besides the language and practical barriers which need to be overcome, the emotional and psychological constraints to initiating contact with the hearing world are even more important.”

Growing up in Gauteng, Tshepiso has first-hand knowledge of the ways the Deaf are marginalised. Learning SASL as her first language, she experienced the same problems as many of my Deaf informants. *“I was not exposed to English from an early age, so I still consider myself as a second-language English speaker, with Sign as my first language. It took me many years to speak English fluently, as I was never exposed to the language at home.”*

As Tshepiso was sharing with me her story about her family and the adaptation to English as a second language, I began to think about my own obstacles which I had needed to overcome when arriving in South Africa and attending an English University. Born and bred in Holland, I also needed, and still need, to negotiate English carefully, as I was used to communicating in Dutch. In learning to communicate professionally in a different language, I also experienced many personal struggles, especially when trying to adapt to the high standard of English at UCT. While attending the Post-Graduate School of Humanities in 2010 after the completion of my Journalism degree, I felt like an outcast, someone who did not belong in the academic setting UCT provided. Thinking back on my first months in Cape Town, there is only one word that summarizes my feelings: survival. On a daily basis, I was trying to catch up with the level of English which was required of me, as well as keep pace with the new academic system. Night after night, I sat at my desk, armed with the English-Dutch

²⁷ Semi-structured interview with Tshepiso, 11th of July, 2011.

dictionary, trying to decipher the ideas of Foucault, Bourdieu, Levi-Strauss and Malinowski and familiarize myself with the anthropological lexicon. It was through the social networks I established that I was able to pass my exams in the first semester with reasonable marks. My second-language English also proved to be my disability; I needed to rely on my friends and professors, who would patiently explain to me the content of the articles and would teach me to write an adequate literature review or research proposal. To a certain extent I behaved as a 'frontier person' myself, trying strategically to negotiate my position in the dominant English-speaking world. I also had to be able to use available technology to assist me when needed, such as the online dictionary.

Tshepiso and many of my informants expressed feelings of shame and discomfort when trying to adapt to a second language. Even though I was able to negotiate my own position in the academic world and adapt adequately to the learning system at UCT, there are still many barriers I will never overcome, since Dutch will always remain my mother tongue.

Being reflexive about my own understanding of English as a second language, and by listening to Tshepiso's story, I came to understand that the Deaf are not the only group that experience difficulties with SMSing. Many second-language English speakers who are trying to navigate communication systems based predominantly on English (Deumert and Masiyana, 2008: 123) share the same challenges. According to Deumert and Masiyana (2008: 140), there is a social-cultural development of language constructed via SMS technology. This development of language is influenced by context, space, time and literacy.

Sirti Lamoureaux (2011) explored the connection between SMS language and identity among students in Khartoum. As the students come from different outskirts of the Arabic world, the use of Arabic language in SMS (sometimes in combination with English) revealed much about their identity, feelings of belonging and understanding of social relationships. Lamoureaux argues that:

"Language data can provide crucial insight into the social and affective functions of mobile communication, and in turn, language must be understood as a consequence of social interactions, the combined effects of linguistic structures with the need to communicate and express aspects of one's identity."

(Lamoureaux, 2011: 4)

Lamoureaux (2011:48) focuses mainly on the choice of language in SMS, especially the way in which spoken language (speech) and written language (text) are creatively combined in messages. Arabic is a symbolic language with many different dialects and forms of expression. SMS data can reveal insights into the sender's identity and feelings of belonging and the social relationships of the sender with the receiver. Lamoureaux's (2011: 52) socio-linguistic research does not only emphasise the different dialects used but also reveals the meaning of poems sent by her informants. The language becomes an indicator of a common Arabic identity as well as a distinguisher and contextualiser of the (subtle) differences among students in Khartoum.

An interview with another informant proved that language is an existing barrier for the Deaf to access cell-phone technology effectively. Roy, who works at UCT as one of Marion Heap's assistants for the interpreter service²⁸, is exposed to SMS and MXit on a daily basis. For the interpreter service, Roy sends out free bulk SMSs to Deaf clients to inform them about openings of hospitals or clinics. Furthermore, he makes appointments for the Deaf when needed and confirms these by SMS. The use of SMS and his access to cell phones has changed his life drastically.

*"I do not have a computer or internet at home, so my phone enables me to connect with the world. I use it to send SMSs to friends and family, as well as to contact colleagues for work-related matters. The cell phone became such a big part of my life, and I cannot live without it. I can communicate much more easily with other hearing people who work at UCT, and feel more comfortable doing so by SMS than by email."*²⁹

It became clear during this interview that even though Roy's cell phone was indispensable and he used it efficiently to contact a few people regularly, he did not have the urge to extend his social networks via the cell phone. He could count his regular contacts on two hands.

²⁸ The UCT interpretation service is a special unit set up by the School for Public Health and Family Medicine, to provide interpreters for Deaf people who need medical care. SASL interpreter services addresses language barriers and work towards ensuring the rights of equal access to non-discriminatory health care as is promised in South Africa's Constitution (No 108, 1996). They also work with collaborating hospitals and clinics to implement consultation hours especially for the Deaf, such as the monthly Eye Clinic in Groote Schuur Hospital.

²⁹ Interview conducted on the 21st of June 2011.

“I do use MXit, but not to make new friends, only to get in contact with the ones I already have, as well as to contact my wife. I do not add people to my phone list that I do not know and I keep my life private. I have no intention of meeting new people via chat or SMS, I would much rather stay in contact with the people I interact with in my daily life.”

Even though the cell phone can be seen as a tool to expand social relationships, Roy and some of my other informants did not aspire to this. Their cell phones were actively used to establish or maintain both hearing and Deaf relations for social and practical reasons. Nevertheless, the cell phone is also embraced individually and adapted to one’s personal needs. Roy, who works daily with both his Deaf and hearing colleagues, is exposed to modern technology extensively and has therefore adapted more easily to the possibilities of the cell phone than have many of my other informants. Not only was he able to embrace the cell phone, he also actively used email and other online media such the internet via UCT.

The biggest difference between my Deaf UCT informants and the others was their greater access to technology. In addition my Deaf UCT informants were able to use the cell phone more effectively due to their higher levels of literacy and education. Jenny, who works for the UCT interpreters service and runs the computer lab in the Bastion, learnt how to use modern technology such as email and internet via training provided by the University of the Western Cape (UWC). This training seems to have been fruitful, as she is able to communicate via email regularly with her family in South Africa and abroad. For her, email is the best invention for the Deaf, if one is able to write English effectively.

“The internet is the best thing that ever happened to me, and I am very happy I received the training to use it properly. Due to the lessons UWC gave me, I can now send emails to my sons and their families, as two of them are living in the United States. In the past, we only had the TTY³⁰, which was too expensive for most people. If I wanted to contact my sons, I need to write them a letter, which took weeks to arrive. Email is a very fast homing pigeon who delivers my letters immediately. I also have a cell phone, but just a very simple one,

³⁰ The TTY is the teletype writer, which was developed in the 1960’s to establish contact between the Deaf and the hearing via the telephone line. It translated text into voice and voice into text. Within South Africa, the implementation of the device was never successful due to the high costs involved.

because I cannot afford those fancy smart phones. I use it mostly to contact colleagues and friends, but rather use email.”

4.5 ‘Please call ME’: the social currency of free messaging

As been demonstrated above, many of the Deaf use the cell phone to communicate with both the hearing and the Deaf, thereby renegotiating established relationships and establishing new ones. Ndiphiwe and I created a new relationship, but he was also reinforcing his (kin) relationship with his hearing sister to communicate with me. In doing so, he crossed over between the Deaf and hearing communities strategically and adapted the cell phone to fit his own needs. Many of my Deaf informants used this application on a regular basis to maintain contact with both their Deaf and hearing contacts, whether in professional or personal use.

‘Please call me’ SMSs are free text messages provided by the cell-phone network. They function as a marketing tool by delivering an advertisement with the sender’s details to the contact, requesting them to phone the sender. The cell-phone user is allotted five to seven of these messages daily. The ‘please call me’ SMSs are not only used in the obvious sense, to request a phone call, but have a variety of other meanings depending on the context in which the message is sent. Happy, a 25 year-old Deaf man from Philippi, shared some of these meanings with me.

“I use ‘please call me’s very often. Sometimes, I will ask one of my friends to send me some air time via a ‘please call me’, other times I will just use it to tell my girlfriend that I am thinking about her. It really depends on the person and the urgency of the phone call. If I will send one to my friends in the middle of the night, it means that the matter is serious. They will probably reply and ask me what is wrong.”³¹

Happy’s use of ‘please call me’s is an excellent way for him to communicate with his Deaf friends.

“But I will not send one to a person who I do not know very well. They might panic and not know what to do, as I cannot hear them when they would call me. That would cause problems for both sides.”

³¹ Focus groups, conducting on the 3rd of July 2011.

The different meanings of a 'please call me' have also been raised by Deumert and Masiyina (2008: 122) who argue that the sending of 'please call me's does not merely fulfil a practical function but is also modified for social reasons, such as generating and maintaining friendship networks. They argue that in rural areas, where it might be difficult to obtain airtime and money is in short supply, 'please call me's become an easy way to maintain social relationships. The importance of keeping in touch via SMS and 'please call me's is also underlined by Lamoureaux (2011: 39), who argues that keeping in touch with friends and relatives has become much easier due to the cell phone. As she understands the Sudanese culture, largely as a collective, and social relationships are maintained easily via the occasional SMS. The content of the SMS therefore seemed less important, but the context in which it is sent contains the meaning of the message. The practice of keeping in touch via SMS and 'please call me's can therefore be understood differently across cultures and contexts.

In my research, I found that the use of 'please call me's' was largely economically motivated. In South Africa, cell-phone services are relatively expensive: sending an SMS costs between R0.70 and R1,00 per message. Despite the high cell-phone usage rate in the country, 80% of cell phones use prepaid SIM cards, or "pay as you go".³² This system allows users to buy airtime when they are able to afford it, but if there is no money to buy airtime, the users are unable to call or respond to SMSs. The costs of cell-phone use therefore have far-reaching consequences for Deaf users, as they are driven to use their creativity to address their needs despite financial constraints. The high cost of cell-phone use was expressed by many of my informants, as they were not always able to afford a cell phone or to buy airtime regularly, which occasionally resulted in conflict with family and friends.

Kweba (25) was born in the Eastern Cape but came to Cape Town at the age of 21, looking for work. In the past, he had owned a cell phone, but he was robbed many times of his belongings, including his cell phone, in his neighbourhood of Philippi. He did not have the financial means to replace it, and as a result he had spent the past four months before the interview without one.

³² Deumert and Mayisana, 2008: 118.

“I would love to have a cell phone again, but cannot afford it at this stage. I bought a few new ones, which were stolen almost immediately. Now, I just need to give my friends a few bucks and use their cell phone when needed. It still costs money, but I only send an SMS to my family for urgent matters. But it is difficult for my girlfriend and child, who are still living in the Eastern Cape, as they cannot always reach me.”³³

Sharing a cell phone with friends or family seemed to be quite common among my Deaf informants and had many positive consequences, especially with hearing family or friends. Some of my informants relied on their social hearing networks. Elsa, for instance, lives in Lavender Hill with her five children and shares a cell phone with Noell, her Deaf son. They use the phone mostly to renew contact with Noell’s former high-school friends, with whom he wanted to remain in contact after graduating from the school for the Deaf in Wittebome.

“I bought a cell phone for Noell and me, even though we could not really afford it, so we can stay in contact with Noell’s friends from his school. After he graduated last year, he stayed at home with his hearing brothers and sisters, as he is not able to find a suitable job. I am very afraid that he gets lonely and want him to keep in touch with his friends from school, as he otherwise becomes isolated from both the Deaf and the hearing world. I am the only one in the family who can sign and have the feeling that he gets very dependent on me. I try to get in contact with his former friends and classmates, so they can meet up and share their stories.”³⁴

With the cell phone, Elsa would arrange meetings with Noell’s friends by calling their (mostly) hearing parents. She would also act as his interpreter over the phone when trying to secure a job or arrange business opportunities that would afford him a small income and a measure of independence. The cell phone also negotiated the existing relationships between Noell and his hearing family, as they were able bridge the gap between the hearing and Deaf communities, as well as strengthen his Deaf identity with renewed contact between him and his Deaf friends.

³³ Focus group, conducted on the 3rd of July, 2011.

³⁴ Informal conversation, conducted on the 11th of July 2011

Many of my Deaf informants had no qualms about contacting a hearing person (who also has knowledge of sign language), to act as an interpreter during business calls. They would use their relationship with a hearing friend, family member or interpreter, as they could always consult them for legal matters, business affairs or assistance when visiting a hospital or seeking other forms of health care.

Sheila, who is an interpreter in Khayelitsha, received many SMSs from Deaf friends who ask her for assistance in filling out grant forms, apply for driving licences or solving work-related problems.

“A few days ago, Luvuyo, one of my Deaf friends, send me an urgent message, asking me if I could come over to his house as soon as possible. Arriving there, he showed me a letter and looked very puzzled, not able to read the content. After translating the letter, I informed him that, according to the text, he was fired from his job, after not showing up for more than three days. “What do you mean? I was at work today!” Luvuyo told me angrily. “How can I be fired?”. The next day we went to his work together so I could listen to the story and interpret for Luvuyo. We were able to solve the problem and Luvuyo could go back to work, making an income for him and his family.”³⁵

For Happy, one of my informants in Philippi, the cell phone turned into a life-saving tool as it indirectly facilitated the safe delivery of his baby. When his pregnant wife was nearing her due date, Happy bought a cell phone to SMS his brother in case of emergency.

“It was in the middle of the night when my wife’s water broke. We could not call an interpreter at that hour, so I sent an SMS to my brother and he brought us to the hospital. He stayed with us so he could interpret the instruction of the doctors, as there were many complications. I have no idea how we would have managed the situation if he had not been there.”³⁶

Stenson and Donner (2009: 232) focus on the effects of sharing cell phones. In India, cell phones are often shared between friends and family, which reveals the importance of kinship

³⁵ Semi-formal interview conducted on the 1st of July 2011.

³⁶ Focus group, 30th of June 2011.

ties and family dynamics. Steenson and Donner argue that the use of mobile communication challenges and reconstruct social spheres and also social relationships. Cell phones, therefore, do are not always individual communication devices but reflect socio-economic mobility and domestic dynamism (Steenson & Donner, 2009: 245). As is the case with the Deaf, socio-economic mobility increases with access to the cell phone: many of the informants were able to move strategically between the Deaf and hearing communities using tools such as SMS. Alzouma (2005: 342) while acknowledging the empowering possibilities of cell-phone technology, is quick to point out that it can further entrench the division of power between the 'haves' and 'have-nots' and hasten the rise of inequality between social groups due to illiteracy. As I have previously shown, literacy proved a problem when Ndiphiwe tried to understand my messages. Even though the level of illiteracy was fairly high among my informants (see also Chapter Two), many of them tried to overcome this barrier when using SMS by translating SASL into written language. Furthermore, they used their social relationships with hearing people to help them use the cell phone and were thus still able to use them meaningfully.

4.6 Conclusion

In this chapter I have emphasized the difficulties experienced by the Deaf when trying to adapt the cell phone as a 'hearing baby' into the silent world. Even though the Deaf have to negotiate linguistic, socio-economic and sensory problems when using a cell phone, they are able to access cell phones and use them successfully to extend social relationships and create new relationships within both the Deaf and the hearing worlds. The ways in which they creatively embrace the cell phone increase their mobility and flexibility as 'frontier people'. Furthermore, when extending their social networks with the cell phone, the Deaf also strategically negotiate their marginalised position and challenge the socio-economic and linguistic barriers they experience in their everyday life. Lastly, I have shown that the meanings of SMSs and 'please call me's differ within and between societies, demonstrating that the cell phone, among the Deaf and beyond, needs to be understood within a larger cultural framework.

CHAPTER FIVE:

ADOPTING AND ADAPTING THE ‘HEARING BABY’: THE NEGOTIATION AND NAVIGATION OF THE CELL PHONE BY THE DEAF

5.1 Introduction:

So far, I have focused on the social implications of cell phone use for the Deaf people and emphasized the ways in which they adopt and adapt this technology despite access barriers such as language, education, financial struggles and the lack of hearing. I have also demonstrated the extent to which the Deaf use the cell phone to negotiate their relationships with other Deaf and hearing people and therefore strategically move between communities when the need arises.

In this chapter, I further explore the possibilities and difficulties of cell phone use, by examining the challenges faced in developing a Deaf-friendly cell phone. Observing the research projects conducted among the DCCT members and critically engaging with the researchers and scientists let me explore in depth the social implications of the cell phone. My observations revealed that the Deaf use the cell phone creatively to maintain and expand their social networks. These social networks are used in turn to increase their mobility and flexibility as ‘frontier people’ and negotiate their marginalised position. The creative use of the cell phone has inspired researchers from several universities in Africa and beyond to research into developing a cell phone which combines video technology with Sign language that may be used within the health-care system.

Many Deaf experience daily access and communication problems which have far-reaching consequences for both the Deaf and medical staff. Despite the potential of a user-friendly cell phone for the Deaf, the development of such a tool needs to take into account factors such as level of education, literacy and economic situation (see also Chapter 4). In this chapter, I draw on my fieldwork data to demonstrate how and which conflicts arise between hearing researchers and Deaf participants when the researcher’s assumptions about their participants are not in line with participants’ experiences. I argue that, although the cell phone can assist the Deaf in the health-care sector and beyond, it cannot replace (at least not in the near future)

the interpreter or other forms of face-to-face communication that are provided by the interpreter. In my experience, the cell phone is used as a communication tool that may assist the Deaf and increase their mobility, but which will not (yet) fully substitute for the interpreter. Nevertheless, when placing the cell phone within the larger framework of the ‘communicative ecology’ (Halloran, 1964; Horst & Miller, 2006, Miller, 2010) which understands the device in combination with other forms of communication, the technology can still be seen as a useful tool.

5.2 Shadowing the professionals: the implementation of a pharmaceutical helpdesk on the cell phone

Prang, a Masters student from the University of Leiden – in collaboration with the University of the Western Cape (UWC) – invited me to shadow her during her research project, which was developing cell phone software based on SASL to assist the Deaf within the health-care system. The research was mainly focused on the communication between the pharmaceutical industry and its Deaf clients.

The Deaf experience many problems regarding the prescription and correct use of medicine, which can lead to unforeseen consequences. The software under development would translate a medical prescription from English into Sign and incorporate a device that would let the user share information about their medical condition. In addition, the phone would be equipped with a rotating camera which would support video communication technology such as Skype.

The focus groups I attended were conducted during Prang’s project’s final stage, in which she examined the problems experienced by the Deaf in the pharmaceutical context using role-play. During role play, the Deaf actively engaged with the software (which was displayed on a computer, as the prototype of the actual cell phone is not yet developed) and used it to communicate with the doctor and the pharmacist, preferably without the use of an interpreter. The role-play imitated real-life situations and allowed the Deaf participants to experience Deaf-friendly software first-hand while highlighting possible difficulties or errors in the programme. This feedback was to be used by Prang to develop software with video-communication technology, which would, when implemented in a prototype cell phone, allow the Deaf to communicate with the pharmacist and doctor without the use of an interpreter. The role-play was divided in five different steps, namely:

- 1) Using an interpreter to explain the rationale behind the technology and how to use it.
- 2) A hospital visit to consult with the doctor and collect a prescription, which is saved to the phone.
- 3) Going to the pharmacy with the prescription to receive the correct medication.
- 4) Replaying the prescription at home and take the medication according to the video.
- 5) The participant provides the researcher with feedback on the experience of using the software and makes recommendations for future or possible alterations to the existing programme.

Prang had based her software programme on the data she had collected during previous focus groups with the Deaf participants. Despite this in-depth data collection, the actual implementation of the software still presented many unforeseen problems and could not effectively be implemented in its current format. While I observed the Deaf interacting with the new programme, I found myself contemplating the various possibilities and social implications of software geared toward the Deaf. In the following paragraphs I will convey my observations of the role-plays and describe the problems experienced by the Deaf when trying to adapt to the cell-phone software. The problems are mostly connected with language, education and socio-economic circumstances.

5.3 ‘Some obstacles can never be overcome’: Adapting to the Deaf-friendly cell phone

Members of the DCCT who work as ironers or tailors at the Bastion for the Deaf attended the role-play session in the examination room of The Bastion, which functions as the headquarters for DCCT. The first attendee was a young girl, Anna, who works in the ironing service. She is visually impaired, even while wearing glasses, as well as Deaf.

Anna appeared to have trouble understanding Prang’s lecture on the software, which was interpreted by Tshepiso. She seemed anxious and ashamed and her eyes kept searching the room, but she was unable to focus on the actual introduction.

“I do not understand the meaning of the symbols in the software [such as a picture of an envelope, which explains the button for text messages], they are all completely new to me. I

do not have a cell phone, and I have never really used the computer, as my writing in English is really bad. I am not sure if I can do this."³⁷

Dismayed and disillusioned by Anna's reaction, Prang was not yet willing to give up. She asked Anna if she wanted to continue with the role-play. "Yes," she told Prang and Tshepiso, and they decided to continue.

Anna's participation in the role-play exercise was based on a consultation with the doctor (played by one of Prang's friends) and the pharmacist (an official pharmacist), but she required constant assistance from Prang, asking for assistance at every step despite the earlier explanation that this was to be avoided. At the end of the process, which took more than 90 minutes, Anna seemed confused and could not completely understand that the software would allow her to visit a doctor, order medicine and read the prescription independently. Therefore, many questions and comments were raised during the evaluation.

"I am really not sure if I will ever be able to understand such a complicated device, as I do not have a cell phone and barely use a computer. The activity my friends use their phones for is to SMS each other to organise a meeting, so they can catch up. I am working in the Bastion and see my friends every day, so I do not need to see them via my phone too."

Absorbing this critique, Prang asked whether Anna would use the software with the accompanying cell phone if she was trained to use it properly.

"Maybe, I would. But there are so many things that can go wrong if you are at the doctor's or in the pharmacy. What if you insert the wrong words, the doctor still does not know what your complaint is, because he cannot understand you. Or what if the pharmacist gives you the wrong medication or you did not take it properly because you do not understand the prescription in Sign? Then you still need someone to assist you. I am always taking my mom with me when going to the doctor, so she can interpret for me. I think that works much better."

³⁷ Role-play, conducted on the 30th of June 2011.

The role-play pharmacist addressed the miscommunication between the pharmacist and the patient as well.

“As a trained pharmacist, I am not allowed to give people medicine without orally confirming if the patient understands. Even though the software allows the Deaf patients to understand the prescription of the medicine with the help of a cell phone which is equipped with video-communication, I would still not give it to them. I always need to ask my patients orally if they are allergic to one of the substances in the medicine. In cause of death due to maltreatment of the medicine, I will be held responsible and will lose my licence as a pharmacist.”

Tshepiso also shared with us the story of one Deaf person who died after taking the medicine which was incorrectly prescribed by the doctor. I had also heard this story during one of my focus groups and understood that this was not an isolated incident. Tshepiso, who sometimes interprets for the Deaf during hospital visits, remarked:

“I think it is crucial that there is someone to assist the Deaf with medical issues as they will sometimes have difficulties explaining their pain, as they might be ashamed or can just not find the right words. Moreover, with the high level of illiteracy among the patients, how are they ever able to explain themselves in ‘written English’?”

Anna was unable to use the software independently, needing constant assistance from the interpreter before she was able to understand the role-play and the intention of the technology. Therefore, Anna and many other Deaf will always need to rely on their hearing network, which, in Anna’s case, is her mother. The Deaf cannot afford to move only in the Deaf communities, but need to cross over strategically to their hearing social networks in order to survive in the hearing world. In order to increase her social mobility, Anna needs to negotiate flexibly her feelings of belonging and identity, which define her as being part of the ‘frontier people’ in the larger (hearing) society.

This example shows that, in order to embrace cell-phone technology, the Deaf need to construct a partnership with the hearing. As the encounter with the pharmacist illustrates, the health-care system in South Africa is not constructed to support the Deaf independently, as the law requires that oral consent must be given before medicine can be provided. Even

though cell-phone technology can help the Deaf to overcome language issues when seeking health care, it can never completely overcome all the barriers Deaf people face. Consequently, the software which was developed by Prang has not (yet) been able to substitute for the interpreter. However, the software can be useful when the Deaf draw on their larger social network, which is not only limited to other Deaf, but also extends into the hearing world.

The possibilities of the cell phone and the fact that it is used individually are strongly connected with the user's adaptability and level of education. This became apparent when the next participant was asked to take part in the role-play. James³⁸ revealed that he owned a cell phone which he used regularly to SMS friends and family. He seemed to recognise the possibilities of video communication and the development of software which could be used in a hospital setting. James could understand written English relatively well, which proved to be an advantage. During the tutorial that explained the software and its possibilities, he fired questions about the device at Prang.

“Do we all get a phone like that? And who is going to pay for it and for the airtime? Can I use it to go to the police station as well if I want to report a crime? And does it really work if I go alone to the hospital?”

During the actual role-play, James did not need much help from the interpreter and worked through the stages of role-play unassisted. Afterwards, he did raise several points, which seemed of importance for Prang and the finalisation of the software.

“I think for many people, the software and the symbols used are too difficult. I understand the program, as I have a cell phone myself, but not all the Deaf use one daily. Besides that, I was sometimes confused with the translation of the prescription into Sign. The interpreter uses signs which I would never use, which makes it difficult to understand the meaning of the message.”

Lastly, James raised a point about the training needed to teach the Deaf to use the device. This, according to him, was essential for the implementation of the software and the cell phone in the daily lives of the Deaf. According to James, the effective use of the device

³⁸ To protect the anonymity of the participant, a pseudonym is used here.

would require several practice sessions to familiarise the Deaf with the cell phone before it would be possible to implement the software.

After the role-play I asked Tshepiso why she thought James found it easier to connect with the software than Anna, who required more assistance and did not seem to understand the possibilities of the device.

“James and many other people who work in the Bastion are very used to academic research, as they participate in this kind of project quite regularly. James is quite well educated and interacts daily with hearing people, as many of his family are hearing. The way in which James connects with new software is amazing, but this is exceptional. You can say that he is part of the ‘Deaf elite’, but he is definitely not a representation of the whole Deaf community.”

Tshepiso’s comment about James’ position within the Deaf community demonstrates that the Deaf cannot be understood as an homogenous group but one that is divided along hierarchies of various kinds. These hierarchies are not only defined by their impairment but also by factors such as race, gender, culture, education and place of residence. James, like Jenny and Roy (see examples in Chapter Four), has a more advantaged position than many of my other informants, as he was fortunate enough to work and live in a supportive environment such as UCT and DCCT, which exposed him frequently to new technologies. Some of the Deaf can use this exposure to their advantage and so can embrace the cell phone more effectively than others. This proves that the Deaf give meaning to technology individually rather than as a group. This individual meaning, which is shaped by the social hierarchies described above, cannot be overlooked when trying to develop software for the Deaf.

5.4: ‘Feeling invisible’: The Deaf and their experience of ‘symbolic violence’

During role-play I observed that, despite the nature of the software, the language barriers I have described in previous chapters remained. A telling example came from Anna’s role-play in the pharmacist’s waiting room. Although the pharmacist was not allowed to talk, he had to call her to the desk using of a hand signal and his voice, as the software did not allow the pharmacist to use the cell phone to call the patient. The necessity of this simple action despite

the presence of a special cell phone and software exemplified the ways in which my participants felt ignored because they are Deaf. From my interviews with my participants I deduced that the feeling of invisibility did not only affect the Deaf on a practical level but also emotionally. Jenny shared one of the many stories about the struggles of the Deaf in the South African health-care system with me:

“It is so frustrating to go to the clinic without an interpreter, even if you can read and write to explain your problems to the nurse. When you are sitting in the waiting room, they call your name time after time, but you cannot hear them. You see all the other people who came in later as you to the waiting room being helped, but they just leave you there, waiting. When you finally get up after hours and start losing your patience, you are asked to come back the next day, as the nurse does not have time to see you today anymore. It is so frustrating, even though the files in the hospital have information about your deafness and are supposed to just write your name on a piece of paper or lead you to the nurse’s office. You feel powerless and rejected that you do will reconsider going to the clinic again, unless it is really necessary.”

As Jenny and many others told me, the institutionalised marginalising power of the health system (as well as other legal institutions such as the police or local government offices) as experienced by the Deaf can never completely be overcome. Even though cell-phone technology is developing rapidly and is, to a certain extent, successfully adopted and adapted by the Deaf, some access barriers remain.

The institutionalised power that Deaf people need to negotiate daily is strongly congruent with Foucault’s theory on bio-power. Foucault (1979) explains bio-power as the way in which violence and institutional power, such as the ignorance Jenny experienced, is inscribed within the individual body and affects one’s psycho-social and emotional life. As the example above shows, the deaf are sometimes ignored in hospitals, leaving them with unequal access to health care and socially and emotionally bruised. Many of Foucault’s ideas around bio-power are developed by looking at modern society as a panopticon prison, where a single guard can watch over many prisoners and control them even though the guard remains unseen. Foucault compares the panopticon prison with the way in which people experience institutionalised power. The power may not necessarily be visible, but is inscribed culturally and socially. According to Foucault (1979, cited in Fox, 1992: 31), citizens of a bureaucratic society can be seen as the prisoners, with the state as their unseen guard of the panopticon

prison who observes and influences their individual life drastically and in many ways violently even without knowing it. Interpreting this theory freely, one can argue that the cell phone allows control over forms of power, such as access to knowledge production, which influences social relationships.

Foucault's theories, which are explored in his book "Discipline and Punish" (1979) are useful for reflecting on the degree to which inherent power relations underlie flows of information and affect that information and social knowledge. For the Deaf, the most significant form of violence is exerted by language. As Foucault (1979, cited in Ross, 2010: 164) states, language is saturated with power. "It shapes our notions of truths, gives form to social institutions, and creates illocutionary and prelocutionary forces. It undermines, humiliates and wounds, cruelly undercutting one's own and others' achievements."

Therefore, as with my Deaf informants, language remains a barrier which cannot be overcome by the individual; neither is assisted by the state with the provision of accurate interpreter services, which results in the violation of individuals on a psycho-socio and emotional level. The ways in which the Deaf struggle to embody the cell phone can be negotiated and reduced with the development of a special cell phone for the Deaf, but the 'symbolic power' inscribed by the health-care system of South Africa can never be completely eliminated. At present many problems obstruct researchers' and scientists' attempts to create a cell phone for the Deaf. These obstructions may be visible or invisible, but they must be taken into account when developing Deaf-friendly software. Within this chapter, as well as Chapter Four, my ethnographic findings show that socio-economic circumstances, as well as educational, linguistic and sensory barriers, can be negotiated with the use of the cell phone but cannot be completely overcome.

Edwin Blake, who works at the University of Cape Town ICTS (internet communication technology system) Department for Development is deeply involved with the development of cell-phone communication for marginalised groups such as the Deaf. Even though he acknowledges that there are many possibilities for a Deaf-friendly cell phone, he maintains that the practical implication remains difficult.

"Right now, smart phones such as the iPhone from Apple are able to run the kinds of programs we want to implement, but there are many hurdles to overcome. For instance, if we

want to use the internet to run video communication such as Skype, a very fast internet connection is required, which is not widely available in South Africa yet. Besides that, we need to have the financial resources to give the Deaf an iPhone, and give them education so they are able to use it. Within the rural areas of South Africa especially, access to cell-phone and internet communication remains problematic. The South African system does not provide the right climate, which makes it difficult to implement the cell phone in the daily lives of the people, even though scientists have the knowledge to do so.”³⁹

According to Blake, the cell phone cannot yet substitute for a Deaf user’s interpreter, as there are many socio-economic, educational and linguistic barriers, which prevent the Deaf from effectively adapting to Deaf-friendly software or technology. Until it is able to do so, social relationships between Deaf and their hearing family and friends, across worlds, remain crucial.

The daily barriers and institutionalised power that the Deaf experience when moving as ‘frontier people’ in the larger hearing society forces them to adapt their identity and feelings of belonging flexibly, and obliges them to create extended social networks in both Deaf and hearing communities. The Deaf need to negotiate their frontier position through the use of other networks, and thereby create an agency of interdependence, as they are not completely dependent upon or independent of the hearing. Negotiating their identity and culture around the barriers they experience, obliges them to adapt a ‘domesticated agency’.

Nyamnjoh (2002: 111) uses the term ‘domesticated agency’ in his work around identity and belonging in the Cameroonian grassfields. Agency, according to Nyamnjoh, can only be observed through relationships with others and must go beyond the empowerment of the individual alone. When describing parts of his own autobiography, Nyamnjoh shows that even in the remote grassfields of Cameroon, identity is not created individually, but through the interconnectedness of peoples and cultures. This makes individuals creative manipulators or jugglers of multiple identities. Additionally, Nyamnjoh (2002: 115) argues that “A child is one person’s only in the womb,” a statement which illustrates that as soon as a person is born, (s)he already belongs to more than one community (those of both the parents), and will belong to many more during his or her life. Through ‘domesticated agency’, which is

³⁹ Interview conducted on the 14th of June.

influenced by the internal and external forces within different communities, one adapts to different networks of interdependence that allow the individual to be successful. Therefore, the ways in which the agency of the Deaf becomes domesticated through institutionalised power and other external forces, plus the way they negotiate this power through networks of interdependence, can be placed within a larger framework of identity and mobility, which is not only experienced within the Deaf community but in many other societies, such as the grassfields of Cameroon.

5.5 Embracing the ‘hearing baby’ as a complementing technology

Within the development projects such as the one which Prang initiated, the obstacles to using the cell phone as a tool within health-care and other official settings seem impossible to overcome, but the role-play also demonstrates the potential to create a Deaf-friendly cell phone. To negotiate problems such as the ones described above, technology can be reinvented and reapplied to understand the needs of the Deaf. The possibilities to improve the cell phone could be ground-breaking. Researchers need to consistently bear in mind the ways in which the cell phone is used socially and embraced by the Deaf, despite its shortcomings. In this chapter, and throughout this thesis, I have demonstrated that the social use of the cell phone always needs to be considered when trying to improve existing technology. The situational context in which the cell phone is used, the user’s socio-economic background and level of education are also important.

Understanding the social relationship that the Deaf have with their cell phones lets anthropologists as well researchers on relevant and appropriate technological innovations think critically about the capacity and the meaning of technology, which differs across cultures and between individuals. Miller (2010: 112), in his book ‘Stuff’, investigates the meaning of the cell phone and the internet, and calls this meaning the ‘inherent capacity’ of the cell phone, as the cultural genres it gave birth to were never anticipated by its designers. According to Miller, new media and communication technology can achieve different things. Firstly, they can realise desires which already exist and thus create new opportunities. Secondly, it can allow individuals to explore new forms of freedoms. These freedoms challenge traditional hierarchy structures and call for innovative ways to control the new media to maintain these hierarchies. Thirdly, it can mediate existing relationships.

Miller (2010: 121) uses the term ‘inherent capacity’ to observe how technology and communication devices such as the internet and the cell phone are embraced by their users. He focuses mostly on the effects of technology on social relationships, as he argues that media and communication are largely instruments of relationship. New media or new information and communication technologies allow new relationships to be developed and existing ones to be strengthened. Focusing on these relationships, Miller uses the example of migrant families who use the cell phone to remain in contact with their children whilst in diaspora. Even though the connection between the parents and the children may remain strong via the use of the cell phone, feelings of abandonment and lack of materiality can never be completely diminished. For the Deaf, the cell phone is embraced in the same way, as they negotiate positively their social relationships with other Deaf and hearing, but some of the socio-economic obstacles they experience due to their lack of hearing can never be completely overcome. This is due, among other factors, to the symbolic power exerted on them by the South African health-care system.

Miller, together with Horst, conducted a year of fieldwork in Jamaica, focusing on the impact on the cell phone among low-income households in Kingston. When reading their observations in the books ‘The cell phone: an anthropology of communication’ (2006) and ‘Stuff’ (Miller, 2010), I noticed many similarities between their work and my observations of the social use of the cell phone among the Deaf.

Miller and Horst observed that, among the lowest-income groups in Jamaica, the cell phone was used to maintain a large network of friends, family and acquaintances, upon which they could rely in times of financial crisis. According to their findings, many low-income households rely completely on the gifts and hand-outs of their families and friends. The cell phone therefore functions as a device to maintain these relationships. Even though these relationships might be called social, they are also partly maintained for economic reasons. According to Miller and Horst, this does not mean that they use the cell phone to generate an income but, partly in line with my fieldwork findings, they use it strategically to negotiate their social networks to solve short-term (economic) crises. These findings are in line with Brinkman, de Bruijn & Bilal (2009) and Lamoureaux (2011), who argue that: “the mobile phone is often used as an extension of existing social networks. These networks offer individuals more choice in communication, but the choice in contact continues to be based in face-to-face networks (Lamoureaux: 2011: 6).”

Horst and Miller (2006: 136) argue that technology needs to be placed into a larger framework of 'communicative ecology' in which each 'species' of technology becomes part of a larger environment that has a specific place within communication as a whole. Horst and Miller use this 'communicative ecology' when looking at the impact of the cell phone on the health-care system of Jamaica. Even though the cell phone was not used as a direct device to make appointments for doctor's consultations or medical examinations, it was used to call taxis and ambulances or to contact friends or family who had medical knowledge. In Jamaica, there was no evidence that the cell phone had a direct medical input, but within a wider communicative ecology it played an important role in managing health and welfare (Horst & Miller, 2006: 142).

When placing the impact of the cell phone within the communicative ecology and focusing on the specific place of the technology in the larger communication systems of the Deaf, one can observe its positive effects, as the Deaf embrace the device to negotiate their social relationships and widen their networks. This widening of networks lets the Deaf move more strategically as 'frontier people' and to negotiate their marginalized place in society. Even though the cell phone might not completely take over the role of the interpreter, as was intended by researchers who developed the Deaf-friendly software, it can be successfully used as a instrument within the larger communicative ecology and proves to be effectively embraced by the Deaf. Therefore, as Lamoureaux (2011:7) argues, quoting Castells et al. (2007): "Technology does not determine society; it is society and can only be understood in social terms as a social practice."

This statement about the role of communication in society ties in with Halloran's (1964: 38) observation of television as a form of mass communication. Within his work, he argues that people have an interdependent relationship with communication, as the receiver and sender create an interdependence that is highly influenced by the larger structure of society and other forms of communication. This argument is also relevant and ties in with the ways in which the Deaf embrace the cell phone. Firstly, the Deaf do use the cell phone in combination with other forms of communication, and create an interdependent relationship with the hearing when adopting it. Halloran (1964) also emphasizes that the way in which any communication technology is used is influenced by the larger structure of society that is articulated in systems of institutionalized power (Foucault, 1979) and hierarchy structures.

5.6 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have critically engaged with the work of Horst and Miller (2006, 2010) placing the technology into a larger framework of communicative ecology to show its impact among the Deaf in Cape Town. The Deaf experience many barriers when seeking health care in South Africa, due to their hearing impairment and the lack of interpreters available. Researchers and scientists are trying to diminish these barriers by developing Deaf-friendly software to act as an interpreter by using video communication which translates medical prescriptions into sign language. Nevertheless, the practical implications of implementation of this software have proved to be more difficult than expected, as some access barriers cannot be overcome.

The barriers are in line with Alzouma's (2005: 352) argument about the possibilities of cell phone technology. She states that: "modern communication devices such as cell phones can be used within development strategies, but they do not automatically change the problems of illiteracy, health-related problems or poverty. These solutions reside outside of the realm of technology and need to focus on the causes behind the divisions in societies." Although this means that replacing the interpreter with special software is not (yet) possible, the effect of the cell phone among Deaf people can still be understood as positive because it allows the Deaf to widen their social networks, increase their mobility and move more strategically between different communities when needed. Given their emphasis on interdependence as 'frontier people', the Deaf are more interested in a technology that enhances their sociality, and not one that seeks to replace that sociality and relationship with the hearing world.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

6.1 Summary of Findings

In this thesis, I have provided a case study which was conducted among a group of Deaf people and their social networks (both Deaf and hearing) in Cape Town. The aim of the case study was to understand the ways in which the cell phone is socially adapted by the Deaf, based on the following research questions:

- Do Deaf people use cell phones and, if so, to what extent?
- How do the Deaf adopt and adapt the cell phone (“hearing baby”) to serve their own communication needs?
- Does the use of cell phones shape a sense of identity for Deaf people?

In Chapter One I provided a theoretical framework in which I define the Deaf as ‘frontier people’ and a ‘strategic diasporic community’ based on their mobility between different Deaf and hearing communities. This mobility enables the Deaf to negotiate their marginalized position within the larger hearing society and is strongly interlinked with their understanding of identity, citizenship and feelings of belonging. After describing this social mobility of the Deaf in Chapter Two, I have shown the main socio-economic barriers that the Deaf experience, which define their marginalized position.

In Chapter Three, I have described how the Deaf as ‘frontier people’ challenge traditional anthropological understandings of the field site and influence traditional methodology such as participant-observation and interviews. Negotiating the borders and boundaries of communities, I was able to follow the movement of the Deaf and create an un-bounded field site, which was supported by the use of the cell phone.

In Chapter Four, I illustrated how the Deaf use the cell phone effectively through SMS technology and other tools such as ‘please call me’s. I have showed how these devices let the

Deaf meaningfully negotiate social relationships and, to a certain extent, cross the borders of the hearing community.

Chapter Five, which can be seen as an extension of Chapter Four, let me focus more deeply on the consequences of the social use of the cell phone and the daily barriers which are experienced by the Deaf when trying to adopt and adapt it to assist them when moving in the hearing world. The observations made when monitoring parts of an academic research project and shadowing researchers who are trying to develop a Deaf-friendly cell phone helped me to understand that the cell phone can only be partly embraced by the Deaf, as there are many socio-economic obstacles which cannot be overcome. This understanding inspired me to place the technology within a larger 'communicative ecology', whereby the cell phone can be understood in combination with other forms of communication such as the internet and face-to-face interaction. With the use of the work of Halloran (1964) and Horst & Miller (2006, 2010), I came to the conclusion that the cell phone is used as a tool by the Deaf to extend their social relationships meaningfully. Those relationships are used in turn to behave strategically in the hearing society as 'frontier people'. Nevertheless, due to socio-economic circumstances and institutionalized power, the Deaf, even with the use of the cell phone, still rely on the interdependence of their hearing network.

Aiming to answer my research questions above, I was able to understand to which extent the Deaf are using cell phone technology in their daily lives and show how they negotiate their lack of hearing when adapting the cell phone to their own needs. I have indicated that the Deaf, due to the cell phone, are able to negotiate their social networks and mobility, which challenges ideas around identity, feelings of belonging and sense of (domesticated) agency. Using the cell phone as an assisting tool, the Deaf are able to expand and extend their social networks strategically when moving through the hearing world as 'frontier people'.

6.2 Recommendations

The intention of this research project was to gather preliminary data about the social use of the cell phone among the Deaf and to seek the barriers the Deaf face when trying to use the cell phone within the health-care system of South Africa. As has been shown, a closer look at the social impact of the cell phone proved to be essential, as there are many socio-economic barriers which the Deaf face and which cannot (yet) be overcome by technology. As is shown

in Chapter Five, the adaptation of the cell phone by the Deaf is only partly successful because they are interdependent on their social networks both within the Deaf and the hearing worlds. Therefore, the cell phone needs to be placed within a larger framework of (mass) communication and media, as these are interrelated and cannot be understood separately.

Within this research, as I sought answers to questions around social mobility and the use of the cell phone among the Deaf, many other questions remained unanswered. This research was initiated to understand the possibilities of establishing an SMS system for the Deaf to assist them when seeking health care. Is this possible? My answer to this question is twofold. On the one hand, yes: as my findings show, the Deaf are able to use SMS in their daily lives and can create and extend their social relationships effectively using the cell phone. Nevertheless, much more research needs to be conducted in order for this SMS system to work properly. The barriers that are experienced in the health-care system need to be more extensively addressed, both within the hospital setting as well as in emergency situations. The technological research, which is currently conducted among DCCT members, is extremely useful when trying to understand the possibilities of an SMS system for the Deaf as well as for the development of a Deaf-friendly cell phone. However, more social research will be required to understand completely the use of the cell phone, within the larger communicative ecology and within South African society as a whole. Socio-economic barriers and the technological needs of the Deaf need to be understood before a cell phone can be created which is able to address these needs.

Furthermore, the Deaf are not the only linguistic minority in South Africa, as eleven national languages are recognized in the country. This work could prove inspirational for social scientists seeking to understand the access barriers of technology which are experienced by other linguistic minorities.

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