Lockwood on Grishkin and Monaghan, 'Deaf Empowerment: Resistance and Decolonization'

Review published on Saturday, October 1, 2022


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Printable Version: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showpdf.php?id=57369

Deaf Empowerment: Resistance and Decolonization is an important book that provides new perspectives on Deaf empowerment. The chapters illustrate Deaf empowerment from a variety of angles. The concepts analyzed in this book parallel other border communities, such as immigrants and Indigenous peoples, and build on Deaf scholarship around Deaf identities, including Deafhood, Deaf Gain, and DEAF-SAME.[1]

Grushkin and Monaghan’s edited book encapsulates different forms of Deaf empowerment. Common themes that weave throughout the narrative include Deaf community activism and leadership centered around Deaf rights and the use of sign language as a tool for autonomy, self-determination, and decolonization. According to Grushkin and Monaghan, “Deaf empowerment takes many forms” and this book illustrates examples throughout of “a deep desire for community autonomy and the use of community-based signed languages” (p. 20).

There are examples of empowerment of both older Deaf persons and Deaf youth, two population groups that typically garner less attention but which have contributed and continue to significantly contribute to the evolution of Deaf empowerment. Additionally, the book provides historical accounts of empowerment among Deaf persons, including a fresh take on residential deaf schools and their role in transmitting Deaf culture, language, and identities and thus fostering Deaf empowerment. This aligns with the concept from Goedele De Clerck that when Deaf people come in contact with Deaf cultural rhetoric it can be the impetus to deconstruct and then reconstruct their lives, creating a more cohesive Deaf identity, and shifting toward activism and thus empowerment.[2]

A history of Deaf collective resistance illuminates the Deaf grassroots movement. One chapter describes the use of information sharing as an advocacy tool, and even more so with the birth of social media. This builds on the notion that increased information access assists Deaf leaders and communities to become empowered and encourages political activism.[3] In fact, information sharing via different forms of media can be used as a tool for empowerment, as shown with the Deaf community in Uruguay. As a result of increased media exposure, Uruguayan society overall gained awareness and sensitivity toward the Deaf community and, consequently, deaf-related discrimination lessened.[4]

The book’s contributions focus on language throughout, especially the importance of sign language as a key factor in the empowerment of Deaf communities, including national sign languages in...
Indigenous communities. An important theme shows that language historically has been used as a tool to colonize Deaf people. Yet language also has been the mechanism of decolonization for Deaf communities, such as engaging in grassroots activism to transform language into an empowering framework. For example, since the early 1800s, Deaf communities have sought to remove audist and ableist labels including “asylum,” “mute,” and “dumb.”[5] Since then, Deaf communities have redefined their identities by dropping the word “mute” and “mudo” (in Spanish) from “deaf-mute” and “sordomudo” and delineating Deaf identity as a linguistic cultural community.[6]

A similar process of empowerment took place with the Deaf community in Uruguay.[7] Deaf community leaders advocated to remove “mudo” (mute) from “sordomudo” (deaf-mute) in the original title of the national deaf association, Asociación de Sordomudos del Uruguay (Uruguyan Association of the Deaf-mute). In 1997, after two years of advocacy efforts led by the Deaf community, the name was officially changed to Asociación de Sordos del Uruguay (Uruguyan Association of the Deaf). This Deaf empowerment journey evoked mixed feelings among older Deaf community members, some of whom preferred to keep the original name for historical reasons while others embraced the new, empowered wording. And, ultimately the community gained a sense of pride with the new title.

This book provides new literature around Deaf identities, self-determination of Deaf people, the power of language as an advocacy tool, Deaf histories, and different paths of Deaf empowerment. This scholarship is an important contribution to Deaf studies, disability studies, and other fields.

Notes


[7]. Elizabeth M. Lockwood, “The Role of Regional, National, and Transnational Influences in the Creation of Strong Deaf Activist Networks in Uruguay,” in It’s a Small World: International Deaf Spaces and Encounters, ed. Michele Friedner and Annelies Kusters, 212-35.


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