

BLACK ETHNIC MINORITY END-USER EXPERIENCE CONSIDERATIONS

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Abstract: The complex needs of Black Minority Ethnic (BME) Deaf people are often misunderstood and inappropriately catered for. A lack of understanding around cultural differences and language needs, can leave the individual very isolated and marginalised in society. It is important to understand the backgrounds of BME Deaf people, their identity issues, their communication, family and social surroundings, in order to encourage more appropriate and well designed communication and cultural sensitivity when working with this niche community, with the overall aim of improving the end-user experience. This will assist in building self-esteem, belonging and confidence, with a general more positive involvement within society, be it Deaf or hearing.

Keywords: Accessibility, BME Deaf, guidelines, Deaf friendly

1. Introduction

BME (Black Minority Ethnic) Deaf people experience different barriers than mainstream Deaf and BME communities. As a combination of barriers is experienced the difficulties of isolation and poor communication tactics come forth. The main reason that issues around isolation can be experienced is due to language and cultural isolation from the home, Deafness usually has a very negative perception within BME communities. This rejection can cause many BME Deaf people to be more strongly linked to their Deaf identity than their BME identity. Which produces another backlash; parents and families become very uncomfortable with the notion of Deaf identity. As commented "Perceptions of new freedoms as threatening to the continuation of traditional cultural values, such as parental authority and obligations, possible changes in marriage choices, and concerns about sexual permissiveness are held strongly by the older generation of South Asian people" (Anwar 1979 & Modood et al. 1994 in Atkin et al. 2002:22). This panel paper will provide a brief overview of the issues that have been identified as problems and areas of concern for BME Deaf people. I will explain partly my experience as a BME Deaf person, and will conclude with some of the main areas of concern for BME end-users.

2. Background

2.1 Deaf

As a result of negative perceptions by the hearing world, Deaf people have struggled to create a positive identity for themselves. This has led Deaf people to develop their own Deaf culture. Within this culture Deaf people identify themselves as Deaf and mix within groups of similar Deaf people.

Sign language, the natural language of Deaf people, is central to the lives of Deaf people and the transference of Deaf culture. 'British Sign Language (BSL), has become a symbol for Deaf identity, facilitating communication and supporting a positive sense of identity, which enables Deaf people to distinguish their experience from hearing people.' (Atkin et al, 2002:23)

The movement to recognise Deaf people as a separate cultural group began when Deaf people distanced themselves from the disability movement, refusing to view Deafness as a medical condition. The Deaf community view themselves as a linguistic minority and as having a unique culture which is to be celebrated. As a member of the Deaf community Jennifer Dodds writes, "We are Deaf, we have the same abilities as hearing people, but while we continue to be different because we have our own language and culture, we are happily different, rather than begrudging our deafness and striving to become second class hearing people" (2003:28)

2.2 BME

Black and Ethnic Minority deaf adults have a complex experience when being introduced to the Deafness, the language and culture. The cultural aspects of BME communities when mixed with Deafness can prove to have a great deal of stigma and struggle for BME deaf individuals, from issues around identity to a lack of bonding with the family due to the lack of communication in the home. "Deaf adults have less exposure to their own ethnic culture than that of their hearing counter-parts" (Atkins, K., Rollings, 1998). Although most deaf children possess normal intelligence, their average reading age remains consistently and substantially below that of their hearing peers (Kyle et al, 1997). There is also evidence to show that young deaf people mature at a much slower rate than their hearing counterparts (Deafax, 2007). This means that identity and socialisation depend largely on the schools they attend, since Deaf identity is rarely developed through family-based socialisation. Communication problems are then often compounded by the use of additional languages within the home. Although ethnic and religious diversity is more evident, services still cannot fully accommodate the needs of minority ethnic populations within the Deaf community, this has shown through research not only in the United Kingdom but also in the United States of America. Language choices such as BSL, English and a variety of home languages are complex and affected by a range of factors. Usually such decisions of language are affected by personal knowledge and preferences on the part of the parents (Ahmad et al, 1998). Interpreters are not always familiar with Asian culture and working with the Asian community, therefore often unable to understand the full cultural implication of the BME deaf person and are unaware of minority ethnic customs, culture, rituals, foods, festivals (Ahmad et al, 1998). In addition, the education system within deaf schools or hearing impaired units can often give little attention to minority religions, languages and cultures, something pointed out by many young people (Ahmad et al, 1998). The lack of education within the Deaf community regarding cultural sensitivity means that many individuals have to turn to home and learn from family and friends. "Ethnic and religious identity was important for minority ethnic especially young, deaf people and many felt that the immersion in a "Deaf identity" had not afforded them access to these other, vital aspects of their heritage" (Ahmad et al, 1998).

3. My Experience

From an early age I learnt to speak a particular dialect of Punjabi called Mirpuri which is because of my mothers influence in my upbringing. When mixing in a mainstream school with a deaf unit I found that I did not know BSL or speak fluent English, therefore I had to have additional classes and support from the school. Therefore slowing my language and speech development, I was able improve fairly quickly but this was down to a great deal of hard work. I started to use spoken English and British Sign Language. The basis of these languages provided me with the ability to communicate well academically and professionally, and knowing Mirpuri at home gave me the capability to have a good relationship with my parents. However, I always felt there was a large part of my culture that I was expected to follow but did not always understand, such as attending a mosque on Fridays, Islamic culture and dress. These things were not accessible to me through BSL and my family was unable to fully explain everything. I started to realize that my communication was very good, but still not fully conversational with my mother. Hence I did not always get full information regarding our cultural practices within my family. I started to focus on further education, my parents became very concerned and would often refuse to allow me to move away for university. I stubbornly pursued this but realized

that they felt very threatened about my new Deaf identity that was merging with my ethnic identity, and were concerned that I would hold onto my Asian values.

Coming from a protective Asian family they were very caring, but I was often isolated from conversation in the home, as I could not fully understand all the “muttering” of conversation and jokes associated with Asian culture. When I got access to university I got access to the Deaf community. Once I arrived at university I found others who could sign and were from the same cultural background as me, and I started to identify similarities, with communication styles, access to information and shared confusion over some practices within our family homes. I started to learn about what my Asian identity is, then it started to make more sense, I developed a great sense of pride knowing of my Asian heritage and my new found Deaf identity. I was fortunate enough to be able to have such access, but I found that many BME Deaf people are not always so lucky and those questions about their identity were and are not always answered, resulting in loneliness, the development of mental health problems, isolation and feelings of being an outcast. There are still things that I struggle with that my hearing and BME hearing counter parts do not have problems with, but these are issues that I have to now overcome with time.

4. Conclusions

When working with BME Deaf people it is always important to remember that not all have full access to information, and often have low reading levels like the mainstream Deaf community. The additional barriers come in place through the use of other languages which can affect literacy development, communicating with peers who sign, or communicating with peers who speak. Therefore when approaching BME Deaf users these issues need to be thought out, and there needs to be a level of sensitivity in place. Within the Deaf community there are several language divides, from those that strongly use British Sign Language and those that use Sign Supported English, and there are those who use the Oral approach which imitates speech. BME Deaf people have their own communities, using their own signs, and hybrids of words combining both Asian and BSL words, creating a new identity of their own. However, there are still a majority of BME Deaf people who are unable to combine the two cultures together and become more isolated. When designing systems for the Deaf these facts need to be thought out and whichever community you work with needs to be thoroughly investigated in terms of their language choices and use. This will help with more appropriate design for BME Deaf people. Also Deaf friendly design visuals need to be used, but using something more culturally relevant to the user will provide a greater rapport with the system being developed.

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