

Summary of Doctoral (PhD) Thesis

**IDENTITY AND EDUCATIONAL
INCLUSION IN A MULTIPLE MINORITY
SITUATION: THE CASE OF A
HUNGARIAN DEAF COMMUNITY IN
ROMANIA**

Emese-Hajnalka Belényi

Supervisor: Dr. Ildikó Pető



UNIVERSITY OF DEBRECEN

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The objective of the dissertation, determining the scope of the subject

The education and further education, vocational and social mobility processes and chances of disadvantaged, marginalized, vulnerable individuals, families and communities form a uniquely complex phenomenon, which requires a permanent, systematic and strategic planning, based on interaction and constant attention. In my dissertation I discuss the situation of *Deaf people born to the Hungarian minority ethnic-national community living in Bihor County (Romania)*. Their situation has complex characteristics, as the exclusion generated by their social status and the social perceptions of their impairment is combined with the exclusionary effects of specific cultural and identity traits. They are subjected to social marginality and exclusion not only as members of the Deaf community, but also due to their ethnolinguistic belonging, as members of the Hungarian minority ethnic-national community.

From sociological and anthropological perspective, deafness, unlike other disability types, works as a *linguistic and cultural communities forming factor*. According to Tajfel (1978) cultural communities acknowledge that certain socially constructed group characteristics with specific cognitive content distinguish them from their social surroundings. In this regard, Deaf community is not just one group of people with disabilities among others, but also a *linguistic and cultural minority*, whose members use sign language as a primary means of communication, behave in a similar manner and share similar beliefs. Deafness, as a state of

being, requires on the one hand the adaptation of the society to the specific (social, educational, psychological, communication) needs of the Deaf people, while on the other hand it is a phenomenon which provides the core identity of a certain group of people. According to Padden (1989) Deaf community can be defined as the totality of languages, experiences, values and forms of contact which are characteristic for the Deaf.

National minority is another type of minority cultural community, „a group of citizens of a State, constituting a numerical minority and in a non-dominant position in that State, endowed with ethnic, religious or linguistic characteristics which differ from those of the majority of the population, having a sense of solidarity with one another, motivated, if only implicitly, by a collective will to survive and whose aim is to achieve equality with the majority in fact and in law" (Deschénes 1985:24).

In the case of Deaf belonging to ethnic-national minorities, there is a coincidence, a combination of the two mentioned types of culturally rooted disadvantage, which is generating *multiple exclusions*. First, within the society based on the hearing culture, they form a Deaf cultural minority using the sign language as the most important mean of intra-community communication. Second, as ethnic-national minority members, they differ culturally and linguistically from the members of the Deaf community belonging to the dominant ethnic-national community. Third, as Deaf, they represent a marginal group also within the ethnic-national minority to which they belong.

Within the interpretations framework outlined above, my research is discussing the identity socialisation and inclusion of ethnic Hungarian Deaf people living in Bihor County (Romania) viewed in their micro- and macro-social dynamics, focusing on the following main research questions: what are in their case the main factors generating social exclusion and inequality of chances? In what ways these factors are related to the social status and perception of Deaf people, their belonging to the Deaf culture and the ethnic-national identity of the Deaf community members? What kind of strategies aimed at identity preservation and attenuating social exclusion are employed by the members of the group? How to integrate the values related to ethnic-national identity preservation in the public policy programs aimed at the inclusion of the members of the group in question and at promoting equal opportunities?

The theoretical part of my dissertation provides a historical overview of the main interpretations of disability in the specialist literature, starting from the pathological-medical model, through the outlooks centred on “integration” and “normalisation”, and concluding with the presentation of the contemporary visions aimed at full social inclusion. Once this general framework set, I proceed to outline the interpretation models of deafness and the specific problems faced by Deaf persons living in minority ethnic-national communities, in relation to their family socialisation, formal education, family set up, parenting and community inclusion. Today, disability centred outlooks oriented towards the compensation of hearing loss are step by step replaced by interpretations based on

bilingual or even multilingual approaches, which are viewing the Deaf child as a member of a distinct cultural and linguistic minority (Higgins and Liberman 2016). In my overview, I emphasised therefore those theoretical, research and action oriented interpretations, which aim to promote social inclusion while preserving cultural and linguistic identity and diversity.

The applied methods

Previous research results (Belényi-Flóra 2013; Belényi 2014) confirmed that due to their social marginality the life trajectory and social conditions of Deaf in Romania are to a large extent predetermined, and their possible career paths and options are extremely limited. On the other hand, however, in case of Deaf ethnic minority members, their identity is influenced by a series of differentiating factors, which require a typological analysis. In order to achieve this, I considered that the method of *life-path research* (Kohli 2007) would be the most adequate option, as it would *facilitate* the focus on those crucial life events and turning points which have had a major influence on the identity of ethnic minority Deaf individuals.

In planning my research strategy, I started from the assumption that the processes of social exclusion and inclusion, as well as the process of identity formation and identity changes accompany the whole life-paths of individuals. That is why any analysis should include all important stages and social settings of a person's life-path. Based on a preliminary investigation (testing the questionnaire, preliminary interviews and initial

participant observation) and the study of major relevant bibliographical sources, for the purposes of the current research I proposed to take into account the following main life-path stages:

A. *Early childhood socialization*, language and identity in the early stages of life: factors influencing the handing down of identity within the family of origin; communication within the family; family socialization and early development;

B. *School socialization*, language and identity: determinants of school choice; school culture, language and communication; school language and ethnic-national identity;

C. *Family formation*, language and identity within the founded family: choice of profession, home-making and the Deaf community; linguistic and cultural identity of the selected spouse; experiencing and transmittance of identity within the family;

D. *Community inclusion*, use of language and identity: communication modes; social networks, informal community space and linguistic-cultural identity; experiencing the modalities of belonging to the nation.

The research study group is made up of adult Deaf persons who cumulate the following characteristics:

1. Are residents of Bihor County;
2. Are of adults age (18 years or older);

3. At least one parent is tied to the Hungarian national-ethnic community;

4. In their case, at least one of the following conditions of belonging to Deaf culture / Deaf community is met: membership of the Association of the Deaf; graduation from special school for Deaf; Deaf parent(s); membership of religious congregations for Deaf.

In order to expand the possibilities of interpretation, the research study group also included Deaf persons of Romanian ethnic belonging (Romanian spouses of ethnic Hungarian Deaf persons living in ethnically mix marriages or other ethnic Romanian members of the local Deaf community).

Over the life course research, the following methods and techniques have been applied:

a) *Statistical data collection* was carried out from the records for the Deaf in Bihor (members of the Association of the Deaf), based on personal files, which provide information concerning major aspects of the Deaf community members life. The register includes files of around 600 people. Out of these members, an estimated one quarter supposedly has at least one parent of ethnic Hungarian descent.

b) *Questionnaire based survey* among members of the ethnic Hungarian Deaf community in Oradea and their ethnic Romanian spouses. The research sample included 111 subjects, of which 89 are ethnic Hungarians and 22 Romanian spouses. As they form a relatively

homogeneous group and community relations tie them together, the surveyed subjects have been selected involving relevant organizations (Bihar County Association of the Deaf, schools, religious communities). I tried to contact every Deaf person with Hungarian ethnic background, so the survey included all recorded and active ethnic Hungarian members of the Deaf community who could be reached. The survey results were processed using the SPSS software.

c) *Life path interviews* with ethnic Hungarian Deaf individuals and their ethnic Romanian spouses (30 persons) selected on the basis of relevant typological criteria, in order to reveal their deeper motives and personal ways of reaching life-shaping decisions, the subjective means of experiencing key events occurred in one's life, and their influence on identity.

d. *Family case studies* of two or three generation families, in order to allow the tracing of identity transfer within the family in a greater time horizon and its analysis in connection to the external factors and internal changes influencing family life.

The selection of interviewees and the survey data processing / interpretation were performed using the comparative method and the typological criteria established after the pre-research phase. My aim was to identify the role of relevant differentiating factors in shaping the crucial decisions, options and life breaking turning points which had a major influence on the subjects' identity development. In accordance to the initial hypotheses, the role of the differentiating factors

was examined with the help of distinct typologies in the case of each of the four major life-stages:

A) Studying *socialization within the family of origin*, I hypothetically considered that the main differentiating factor relates to the fact whether *the parents of the subjects are Deaf or hearing*. Thus two types can be distinguished:

A1 persons with hearing family background

A2 persons with Deaf family background

B. Concerning *formal educational socialisation*, I presumed that in addition to the (hearing or Deaf) family background, the teaching language of the special school of graduation (the fact whether the subjects were enrolled in a school having as a teaching language their *native Hungarian* or *the state language Romanian*) also acted as an important influencing factor of identity development. From the combination of the two mentioned factors the following four types resulted:

B1 hearing family background – language of special school: Hungarian

B2 hearing family background – language of special school: Romanian

B3 deaf family background – language of special school: Hungarian

B4 deaf family background – language of special school: Romanian

C. In researching *family formation and identity transmittance to the next generation within families set up by Deaf partners*, the typological criteria used is concerning the differentiation between the *ethnically homogenous* and *ethnically heterogeneous* marriages. This dimension of the analysis also includes the ethnic Romanian partners within heterogeneous marriages, so there are three categories of subjects:

C1 ethnic Hungarians in homogenous marriages (with Hungarian partners) or with no partner

C2 ethnic Hungarians in heterogeneous marriages (with Romanian partners)

C3 ethnic Romanian spouses

Within the framework of the *two generations* life-cycle family case studies I used the already mentioned typological criteria. In the selection of the families for the *three generations* family case studies I considered important to select at least one family from the following categories:

CS1 three-generational Deaf families

CS2 families where the grandparents and the children are Deaf, while the parents are hearing

CS3 families where the grandparents and the children are hearing, while the parents are Deaf

d. During my participant *observation* in Deaf communities of Oradea (Deaf Association, Baptist Deaf

Community, Deaf Bowling Club), I aimed to obtain a clearer image concerning Deaf community life, use of language(s) and identity development. In doing so, first of all I was interested in how the occasional Deaf community get-togethers allow / do not allow the use of Hungarian Sign Language, and to what extent and in what contexts the graduates from the Hungarian language special school are able to practice their acquired Hungarian sign language within the ethnically mix Deaf community.

e. As a complementary method, in order to facilitate a broader pedagogical and sociological interpretation of the research information, I conducted *structured interviews with highly experienced educators* from the only one existing Hungarian language special school for Deaf in Romania, located in Cluj (Kolozsvár/Klausenburg). The problems addressed during the interviews concerned: past and current educational practices; parent educational options and motivations; relations between teachers, pupils, and parents; the Deaf community within the special school; further study and vocational mobility opportunities of the graduates; and factors influencing their identity development.

Research results

As Deaf communities are typically one-generational communities, most of the subjects of my research are from families of hearing parents. According to hypothesis HA, *the process of linguistic and cultural socialisation of Deaf children occurred in their early*

years of life was essentially influenced by their being born and raised in the families of hearing parents versus families of Deaf parents. Hearing parents tend to see their children's' deafness as a functional deficiency and as an obstacle on the way of intra-familial learning and cultural reproduction. (Atkin et al. 2002). In those ethnic minority families where both parents are hearing and the marriage is ethnically homogenous, hearing parents are striving to transmit to their children their own oral communication culture and linguistic national identity. In contrast, the main preoccupation of Deaf parents is to transmit to their Deaf children the knowledge of sign language and the cultural identity based on this visual language (Denmark 1999:30).

My research results basically confirmed and in the same time also nuanced the validity of this hypothesis, particularly as far as the conditions and opportunities of national identity development are concerned. It can be stated that in the case of children born Deaf or who became Deaf before acquiring of speech, their hearing parents were not able to use either oral or other alternative ways of communication with them. Very few parents manifested openness towards learning the sign language. In spite of the fact that - particularly in the case of pre-lingual Deaf child - the early acquiring of sign language is essential for the development of good first language abilities absolutely necessary for learning to think and thus for ensuring normal intellectual development (Loots et al. 2005), in the families of hearing parents the Deaf children are surrounded by a communicational environment dominated by the strive

for the acquisition of oral communication and the total neglect of sign language.

Most of the Deaf children born to hearing parents had their first encounter with sign language only after they reached the schooling age and became enrolled in special school. This encounter proved essential for their socialisation into the Deaf culture. During special school years the oral communication of Deaf children with their hearing parents improved to some extent due to their new oral skills acquired in school, but typically remained at modest level. In contrast, sign language became of primary importance in their life, as an essential resource both as the main mean of communication within the Deaf community and as their most effective tool of gaining knowledge about the world in general.

The dominant educational policies unilaterally oriented towards the acquisition of oral communication skills, which in Romania lasted for many decades and to a large extent are still in place even today, although in most cases could not prevent Deaf children and young people from learning sign language and entering the Deaf culture, nevertheless had negative effects on their intellectual, psychological and identity development, and increased their feelings of alienation and inferiority in a “world of hearers”. As national cultures developed historically as oral language cultures, national identities are intimately linked to the oral and written expressions of the language, rather than to sign language. In spite of this fact, the efforts of hearing parents to transmit national identity and culture to their children could not be successful in preschool years, mainly due to the

linguistic incompatibility and persisting communication gap between the parents and their children (Kontra 2009).

In contrast, Deaf children born from Deaf parents experienced from an early age the rich communicational, intellectual and emotional development opportunities offered by the chance to acquire sign language from their parents as a native language. After entering the special school, under the impulse of the educational requirements encountered there, they were of course making efforts to learn oral language as their second language. Although they undoubtedly experienced their newly acquired oral skills as a communicational enrichment, the core of their identity and community life was the community of Deaf learner peers and the sign language spontaneously acquired within that community.

Unlike the relationships between hearing parents and Deaf children, the communication between Deaf parents and Deaf children was smooth and non-problematic, characteristically even more so in the families where deafness was inherited through generations. Deaf parents typically consider as their main priority the transmission to their children of the identity based on sign language and Deaf culture. In the same time, to an extent differing case by case, they might also give a certain importance to endowing their children with the oral culture components linked to ethno-national identity. However, their preoccupations and insistence in this regard tended to be comparatively weaker.

To the Deaf children of hearing parents, the informal educational environment of learning peers community encountered in the special school typically meant the initial moment of their socialisation into the Deaf culture, while to the Deaf children educated in Deaf families it had the significance of continuity and reinforcement of the Deaf culture which was already familiar to them. However, Deaf culture, as already mentioned, is not void of other cultural elements, including ethno-national identity. Based on the claims made in the specialist literature concerning the education of ethnic minority *hearing* children (Gúti and Szépe 2006, Göncz 2004) I supposed (in hypothesis HB) that the teaching language of the special school is an important factor in shaping the national identity of Deaf pupils belonging to the Hungarian minority in Romania. What primarily matters is whether *they are enrolled in a special school where they are taught in their native Hungarian, or in a special school where the teaching language is Romanian* (the state language of Romania, which is not the native language of ethnic Hungarian Deaf pupils). As far as the opportunities of preserving minority ethno-linguistic identity are concerned, the graduates of special schools with Romanian teaching language are at a serious disadvantage compared to their peers who studied in special school in their native Hungarian language and also acquired Hungarian sign language in the informal learning context of their special school.

The results of my research confirmed this hypothesis. The language of special school is an important matter in Romania also as the result of the fact that the right of ethnic Hungarian Deaf children to study in the special

school in their native language is only partially secured, being available exclusively in the first eight classes of the special school and in only one educational institution within the country. This situation forces the families living far away from Cluj who insist that their children should be enrolled in a native language special school to accept residential form of learning, which contradicts one of the basic principles of inclusive education, stating that the school should be in the physical proximity to the pupils' family home. On the other hand, to those parents who refuse residential separation from their children, the only other available option is to choose one of the Romanian special schools. Such institutions are usually functioning in all the larger cities; however they offer education exclusively in Romanian oral language and opportunities for the informal acquisition of Romanian sign language only.

Even so, since in Romania there are no vocational school level special classes reserved for the linguistic needs of Hungarian Deaf students, to the Hungarian-language school for Deaf graduates - unless they continue their studies in Hungary - the road will eventually lead to a Romanian special vocational institution. The fact that to ethnic Hungarian Deaf special school graduates further educational opportunities in native language are not accessible within the Romanian special education system might weaken the chances for preserving their national identity and might strengthen their inclination to assimilate into the Romanian Deaf community. The language of instruction in vocational schools and the official language of communication is the Romanian oral and written language. Depending on the ethnic

composition of the student population, the Romanian sign language accompanied or not by Romanian oral language also prevails during the informal language use inside the Deaf learner community.

Within the educational environment of the Romanian special school, Deaf young people coming there after graduating from Hungarian special school are for the first time confronted with the fact that mastering the Romanian sign language as an adopted common mode of communication is an essential prerequisite for their successful integration into the ethnically mixed Deaf community. As belonging to the Deaf culture is essential to them, this fact strengthens their desire for linguistic adaptation. On the other hand, however, the results of my research show that the language of primary school remains an important factor in preserving the Hungarian identity of Deaf community members. Compared to their Hungarian peers studying exclusively in Romanian language, pupils graduating from the Hungarian language special primary school are more likely to choose ethnic Hungarian spouses (often already known from the Hungarian special school) and to transmit Hungarian identity to their children.

Among the Deaf culture the endogamous marriage rate is very high, and the most likely social environment for spouse selection is the Deaf community (Schein 1989). According to hypothesis HC, *within the marriages where both partners are Deaf, while the mode of sharing Deaf culture within the family life has a crucial importance in all families, the opportunities to preserve the use of Hungarian sign language/oral language in intra-familiar*

communication depends to a large extent on the fact whether the marriage is ethnically homogenous or heterogeneous. Within the ethnically homogeneous marriages (i.e. concluded between Hungarian partners), compared with mixed (Romanian-Hungarian) marriages, there are larger opportunities for the use of Hungarian sign language, and in some cases also for the use of Hungarian oral language. Similarly to the ethnically mixed families between hearing partners (Sallay 2010), the preservation and transmittance of Hungarian minority ethnic-national identity is much more insecure compared to the ethnically homogenous Hungarian families.

The results of my research are confirming and in the same are significantly enriching the value of scientific information implied by this hypothesis. It was confirmed that in the case of families where both partners are Hungarian, their family upbringing and the education received within the Hungarian special school all might play a role in prompting them not to give up their ethnic-national identity and continue cherishing it within their own micro- communities, and through their family and kinship ties. Within ethnically homogenous Hungarian families, the handing down to children of Hungarian ethnic-national identity and of Hungarian sign language / oral language knowledge – combined with the elements of Deaf culture - usually develops as a non-problematic, smooth process.

However, if one spouse is Romanian, the language of communication within the family is likely to be the Romanian sign language/oral language, which is also the dominant language of communication within the

ethnically mix Deaf community. A typical situation is when the Hungarian spouse is usually familiar with the Romanian sign language/oral language, but the Romanian spouse is not aware of its Hungarian equivalent. In these families, the handing down of Hungarian-language national identity is in a precarious situation compared to ethnically homogenous families and it is much less likely to be realized.

In the same time, my research findings also highlight that the communication situation and the passing of identity to the next generation might become an especially complicated process within family interactions involving three generations (children, parents and grandparents), where Deaf and hearing, national minority and national majority family members are present. In these situations, special, multifaceted communication models might prevail, and particular characteristics and modalities of identity transmission might occur. A distinct attention in this regard deserves the ethnically heterogeneous multi-generational Deaf families where signs of a special linguistic and cultural enrichment and efforts for the balancing of cultural and linguistic aspirations can be observed. These might likely be explained by the natural elasticity and openness characteristic for the special communicational and cultural situation of multi-ethnic families with Deaf members.

This linguistically, culturally open, inclusive and flexible attitude is also characteristic to the community life of Deaf Hungarians in Oradea. Within the ethnically heterogeneous local Deaf community, the dominant cohesive strength of the Deaf culture and sign language

(Padden 1989) tends to overcome the potential divisive effect of ethno-cultural differentiation. Hypothesis HD states that *although ethnic Hungarians are accepted as equal members of the local Deaf community due to their belonging to Deaf culture, however their national oral language/sign language have restricted opportunities for use within the community. As a consequence, in the efforts of Hungarian Deaf to preserve their ethnic-national identity, their relationships and social networks with their Deaf co-ethnics outside the local Deaf community are given a more important role.*

This hypothesis was confirmed too. Indeed, the language of inter-ethnic communication within the Deaf community functioning in the framework of the Deaf Association in Oradea is the Romanian sign language/oral language. The use of Hungarian sign language/oral language appears only in small groups, circle of friends or other communicational situations where all participants are Hungarians. The official events and cultural services operating within the Deaf do not provide space for experiencing Hungarian national identity, and therefore networks outside the community (such as relations with former schoolmates) are highly valued and important within the individual identity protecting strategies of Hungarian Deaf.

At the same time, as the result of the participant observation I conducted within the local Deaf community of Oradea, my initial image concerning the community life of Deaf Hungarians became more complex and nuanced. Similarly to Romanian Deaf, Hungarian members arrive in the local Deaf community

mostly from "outside", from hearing family environments. However, the frequent contacts and communications between ethnic minority and majority members which exist within the hearing society are not characteristic for Deaf. Their primary habitat and space of experiencing their belonging to Deaf culture is the local Deaf community.

Since during their formal education period Hungarian Deaf practiced both the Romanian and Hungarian methods of communication within the Deaf culture, they experience a seamless integration in the local Deaf community from communicational and cultural point of view. However, their Hungarian sign language/oral language communication opportunities within the ethnically mix community are severely limited. This fact has negative impact for retaining and cultivating their sense of belonging to the Hungarian nation, the more so, as their access to the spiritual values of Hungarian culture is also limited by their characteristic lifestyles and the encountered communicational barriers.

For all this shortfalls they seek compensation through the contact networks and joint activities of the Deaf culture permeating their community life. A great importance has their belonging to those micro-communities within the Deaf community which they join according to their special affinities, interests, or religious affiliations. Due to the mixed ethnicity of participants the possible use of the Hungarian sign language is limited or completely absent even in this micro-communities. Nevertheless, participation in such special interest groups might have important self-development and quality of life-enriching

effects. For example, within the Baptist religious group I had the opportunity to observe very interesting and valuable self-organized sign language development community activities. However, at present the ethnic-national identity of Hungarian Deaf is not generating micro-community ties comparable in intensity and significances with those produced by the mentioned religious affiliation.

The search for solutions in the case of the multiple minority situation characteristic for the Hungarian Deaf in Romania is especially difficult, as there is not just *one* type of cause generating social disadvantage (deafness or ethnic-national belonging) and various combinations needs to be considered. The real possibility of enhancing opportunities resides in inclusive solutions based on linguistic and cultural pluralism, which would presuppose the transformation of the whole education and social integration system. There is a need to establish a new legal and institutional framework which could provide a favourable social environment for the recognition and enhancement of the complex and multiple identities so much characteristic for ethnic minority Deaf.

For the success of the inclusion it would be essential that hearing parents, especially mothers, learn as quickly as possible about Deaf culture, the communication needs of their Deaf children and the effective ways of adaptation. In the case of Deaf parents' family, however, where sign language knowledge is self-evident, the linguistic and cultural components of ethnic identity should be

vigorously strengthened by early intervention, family support and intervention during the preschool education.

The right to education in the mother tongue concerns also the Deaf as members of distinct cultural communities having their own languages, and therefore includes the right of Deaf to be educated in sign language. In the light of the fact that pupils from minority ethnic communities must have the same rights as their counterparts with mainstream national affinity, it is important to stress, that they have the right to be educated in *their minority sign language(s)* as well. For Romania, this presupposes the development of a school network (from kindergarten to high school), where beyond learning Romanian pupils of minority ethnic belonging have the opportunity to become familiar with all communicational means specific to their ethnic-national identity and to make full use of them both within formal an informal educational contexts.

Social workers can also have an important role in strengthening ethnic-national identity of Hungarian Deaf in all aspects of their social life: in family, school and out of school social environments, and the local Deaf community. As a primary condition, these professionals must be familiar both with Deaf culture and with Hungarian sign and oral language. To carry out activities within the family of origin, there is a strong need for social professionals with adequate Hungarian signing and oral abilities who could be a link between parents and Deaf children in helping to overcome communicational gaps and attenuate their alienating effects.

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