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'Sorry, I'm Dead, it's Too Late Now': Barriers Faced by D/deaf Citizens When Accessing Police Services

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Abstract

Police organisations have been slow with regards to the integration of services which are accessible and responsive to the needs of D/deaf citizens. This qualitative study explored the barriers which D/deaf citizens face when accessing police. It considered the impact of police initiatives designed to widen the avenues through which D/deaf people can contact them including information and communication technologies (i.e. Emergency SMS Text Services and Video Relay Services) and interpreters. The study involved focus groups with D/deaf citizens, interviews with police officers, and a review of police practices in England. The findings focus on cultural, technological and interactional barriers, and demonstrate that despite indications that members of this community are likely to be vulnerable in terms of victimisation, current policies, procedures and training do not address access requirements.

Points of interest

- This article looks at the barriers faced by D/deaf citizens when accessing police services.

- Age, ethnicity and disability impacted on D/deaf citizens' access to services and their use of technologies to contact the police.

- D/deaf citizens felt that more work needed to be done to raise greater deaf awareness amongst police officers and to avoid misunderstandings.

- Some improvements in police service provision have been made, but a better engagement strategy is needed to build D/deaf citizens' confidence in the police.

- The research recommends that when designing police services and technologies, the focus must include the needs of D/deaf citizens.

Introduction

This article focuses on the experiences of D/deaf citizens in England with regards to accessing police services and the cultural, technological and interactional barriers they encounter. D/deaf people face many difficulties when trying to access services or information, either through lack of awareness or language barriers (British Deaf Association 2017). Criminal justice services must be suited to the specific cultural and linguistic needs of D/deaf citizens (O'rourke and Grewer 2005, 671; Napier 2002). The 'deaf world' has distinct cultures and deafness is constructed differently in this culture than it is in national cultures of hearing people (Lane 1995). For D/deaf citizens, information and its provision can influence social inclusion and exclusion at local and national levels. It has been argued that D/deaf people as a linguistic minority share more in common with other ethnic minorities than they do with people with disabilities (Harris and Bamford 2001).

Despite a growing body of work on access to services, research on D/deaf citizens' experiences of the police is in its infancy (see Napier 2016; Ohene-Djan et al. 2010; Race and Hogue 2017). The introduction of the Equality Act 2010 aimed to address issues of equality and access to services in the UK, however many services for the D/deaf community remain 'sparse and inconsistent' (Race and Hogue 2017, 65). Studies have highlighted the barriers

that people with different impairments face in accessing justice and reporting a crime (Edwards 2013) and many agencies have failed 'to make "spaces of justice" physically accessible' for a diversity of needs (Edwards 2014, 686; Equality and Human Rights Commission 2020). The socio-spatial barriers that institutions like the criminal justice system create through their policies and practices can be incapacitating for an individual with a sensory impairment and lead to 'a series of "disabling" spaces and geographies' (Edwards 2013, 308). Limited D/deaf awareness in the police can lead to an increased chance of mistreating individuals due to misunderstandings, result in a lack of appropriate processing of possible crimes, and a lack of trust in the police (Race and Hogue 2017; Child et al. 2011).

This article presents findings from a qualitative study which explored the barriers D/deaf people face when accessing police services in England. It considered the impact of police initiatives designed to widen the avenues through which D/deaf people can contact police including information and communication technologies (i.e. Emergency SMS Text Services and Video Relay Services) and interpreters. We follow the convention of using 'Deaf' with a capital 'D' to refer to BSL sign language users who belong to the Deaf community and 'deaf' with a small 'd' to denote the audiological condition of being unable to hear (Willoughby 2014). Findings focus on three themes identified in focus groups with D/deaf citizens: 1) cultural barriers; 2) technological barriers; and 3) interactional barriers faced when accessing police services. The discussion highlights intersections of age, ethnicity and disability in terms of access to services, and in particular in relation to the technological barriers encountered. It then offers stakeholder recommendations for policy and practice.

D/deafness and deaf culture

Approximately 10 percent of the population in Western countries suffer from a hearing loss of such a degree that it affects ordinary daily life (Arlinger 2003). An estimated 11 million people in the UK have some form of hearing loss (Action on Hearing Loss 2015) and deafness is the third most common disability in the world (British Deaf Association 2015). British Sign Language (BSL) is formally recognised as an indigenous language by the UK government and is the first or preferred language of over 50,000 D/deaf people (Young and Hunt 2011). A hearing loss can give rise to various kinds of disabilities including for example 'loss of ability to detect sounds, to recognize speech, especially in adverse conditions, and to localize sound sources' (Arlinger 2003, S17). Deafness can be defined by various criteria including: audiometry, age at onset of deafness, identity and communication style (Baines 2007).

There are two models of deafness: the disability model and the cultural model. The disability model views deafness from a 'medical construction' perspective 'in audiological terms as a physical deficiency in the ability to hear' (O'rourke and Grewer 2005, 672). Those referred to in the disability model are described as 'deaf' or 'hard of hearing' (O'rourke and Grewer 2005, 672). The 'cultural model' views deafness from a social constructivist perspective whereby deaf people are viewed as different rather than disabled. Those referred to via the cultural model use the convention of 'Deaf' with an upper case 'D' (Harris 1995a) and will likely be part of the Deaf community which is a group with variations in culture, norms and language (Harris 1995b), but which also shares common features with the surrounding world and cultures. The participants in our study were all British Sign Language (BSL) users and most were profoundly audiologically deaf. Most of our sample identified with the Deaf community. However, as we did not specifically ask all of them to self-define, the fact that they all spoke BSL is used as the identifying criteria, and we use the convention 'D/deaf'

throughout the article to include both those inside and outside of the Deaf community (Action on Hearing Loss 2015). By using the convention 'D/deaf' we acknowledge those participants who would not consider themselves to be part of the 'deaf community' (acknowledged via the use of lower case, 'd'). When referring to other studies, we follow the convention utilised by the author(s).

Accessing services as a member of the D/deaf community

A growing body of work has addressed D/deaf people's access to services. Jones et al. (2001) focus on the ways in which Asian young deaf people and their families engage with welfare provision. They found that professional help can disempower Asian deaf people by privileging oralism over sign language and Western norms over other cultural values. The difficulties which deaf people face when accessing services are argued to 'embody specific assumptions about deafness, which challenge the way in which deaf people can exercise control over their lives' (2001, 51). Thus practical support from public services such as social work and health care can serve an ideological function 'offering a form of social control in which deafness is equated with "deficit"' (ibid).

Harris and Bamford (2001) address issues of participation, equality and access for Deaf and hard of hearing people in British society. In their study of the desired outcomes of social care, they found that the organisation and delivery of services can undermine, rather than facilitate, the performance of roles including 'citizen', 'employee', 'parent' and 'patient'. Current services and legislation do not provide an adequate basis for the participation of Deaf and hard of hearing people in British society. Deaf participants identified access to information as a concern while technology was often used as a 'naïve solution' to the problems that deafness

is seen to raise. Often the technology is 'missing, unaffordable or unusable owing to lack of training' (Harris and Bamford 2001, 971-972).

Baines et al. (2010) focus on deaf people's access to mental health services. Legal obligations to provide equality of access to services which meet the needs of people with disabilities have been differently interpreted and implemented across regions and services depending on their understanding of the needs of people with disabilities and the financial constraints they imply (Baines 2007). Whilst having access to a BSL interpreter may constitute a reasonable adjustment, the lack of availability coupled with financial implications often makes this unlikely. Deaf people are also seen to harbour negative perceptions towards services such as mental health due to historical misunderstanding and treatment within these types of facilities (Steinberg et al. 1998). O'rourke and Grewer (2005) also demonstrate that the evidence-base on which mental health service delivery is provided relies on models and techniques validated within the hearing population.

McKay and Miller (2005) focus on the risks of injustice encountered by deaf people on their journey through the criminal justice system. The challenge of court room interpreting means a large percentage of deaf people who are charged and convicted in criminal courts do not fully understand the legal processes that led to their conviction. In her study of the needs of d/Deaf prisoners in England and Wales, Kelly (2017) found that there was no official knowledge of how many Deaf or hard of hearing people were serving custodial sentences. This translated into a lack of provision for d/Deaf prisoners including the inability to obtain access to BSL interpreters, a lack of d/Deaf awareness amongst staff, and a lack of understanding around the needs of d/Deaf people such as communicating via writing things

down or treating the prisoners as if they were hearing with the 'hope' that they might understand (p.10).

There are significant issues concerning interpreters for BSL speakers within criminal justice settings (McKay and Miller 2005). Harris and Bamford (2001) point to a national shortage of sign language interpreters in the UK. This shortage continues to pose problems with the National Registers of Communication Professionals Working with Deaf and Deafblind People (NRCPD) documenting only 883 registered sign language interpreters in 2013-14 available to a community of 800,000 severely/profoundly D/deaf individuals in the UK (Race and Hogue 2017). However, the National Union of British Sign Language Interpreters (NUBSLI) highlights a complex situation in which the shortage is less about the availability of interpreters, and more about the way in which interpreters are booked and provided. They point to the use of framework agreements by the government to provide interpreters through a service contract unsuited to the needs of both interpreters and Deaf communities (NUBSLI 2019). Thus the shortage may be a structural product of service access rather than actual availability. In addition to this, BSL varies in language and in dialect which means that there can be limitations on the understanding of interpreters and the specific signs that are used (Race and Hogue 2017).

The challenges faced by access to interpreters in the UK means that when interpreters are not provided, family members (sometimes children) are often asked to act as interpreters (see Baines 2007). Technology has been viewed as a way of addressing the issue of a lack of interpreters. Video Relay Services (VRS) have replaced text-based telephone relay services for D/deaf people and allow interpreters to work from a remote call centre location. However, Napier and Leneham (2011) highlight how remote video interpreting for all languages can be

challenging for participants and alienating for interpreters. They can hinder interpreting performance and also remove the ability to empathise with their clients. To be successful, these services must work in conjunction with people who also have D/deaf awareness as very often the use of such services is dependent on the response of individual service providers rather than a universal insistence (Baines 2007).

Deafness intersects with age to determine experiences of accessing services, particularly where technology is concerned. Baines (2007) notes that whilst young Deaf people's methods of socialisation may be changing due to the increased use of communication technology, this may be having a detrimental effect on the number of people attending Deaf clubs, which are one of the 'cornerstones' of the Deaf community. This has implications, particularly for older members of the Deaf community who may find the shift to technological solutions more exclusionary.

Police services for D/deaf citizens

A lack of D/deaf awareness and barriers to communication have been highlighted in studies investigating crime reporting by victims. Child et al. (2011) investigated these barriers in the USA. They found that not only are victims with disabilities and deaf victims reluctant to report to the police because of communication barriers, they may also fear being judged as vulnerable and in need of protection. Child et al. (2011) note misconceptions and stereotypes in law enforcement responses to disabled or deaf victims of interpersonal violence. Officers often did not understand their disabilities and were unresponsive to victim needs. Participants stressed the need for accommodations to be made which were specific to the individual and for deaf individuals – to acknowledge that some might rely heavily on lip reading, while others may not be able to read lips.

In England and Wales, the first report to investigate the communication needs of D/deaf citizens was *Police and Deaf People: A Lack of Communication* (Verity 1997). Although the report made several recommendations about the need for the police to communicate effectively with D/deaf people 'on matters of personal safety, road traffic issues and road safety in general' it was left to Chief Constables to decide whether to implement these (Ohene-Djan et al. 2010, 316). A Strategic Command Course publication for Sign Health in 2011 noted that services for D/deaf people in the criminal justice system needed to be improved and that the number of Police Link Officer for the Deaf (PLOD) schemes in police constabularies should be increased (Walton et al. cited in Race and Hogue 2017, 64).

Hampshire Constabulary were the first English police constabulary to launch a Police Link Officers for Deaf People (PLOD) initiative in 1999. It has since been introduced by other police constabularies in England and Wales. PLOD officers are trained in deaf awareness and BSL, positioning them as a point of contact or response officer for incidents involving D/deaf victims, witnesses or suspects. This is not intended to replace interpreter services in the evidentiary process, but to relieve some of the issues around a lack of immediate interpreter provision. PLOD officers are also responsible for initiatives such as the Emergency SMS Text Service, signed video interviewing systems, emergency facilities for lip-reading, and providing basic training to officers on D/deaf issues (Ohene-Djan et al. 2010). However, research by Race and Hogue (2017) found a lack of awareness with regards to PLOD schemes amongst not only the D/deaf community but also police officers and Police Crime Commissioners. Their study also highlighted the differences between the communication methods used by police, and those preferred by the D/deaf community (i.e. sign language). A further point to consider is that not all police constabularies offer the same provisions. Not all

constabularies have VRS and those who do tend to utilise different VRS providers, depending on those which are available at different times of day, and thus require different modes of access. As a result, D/deaf people will receive a different service depending on where they live and the time of day they contact their police constabulary. They may also not be aware of the different services on offer in their area. Older D/deaf citizens may struggle to use technology (Race and Hogue 2017).

Napier (2016) draws attention to the communication problems faced when dealing with the police. She argues that constabularies in the UK and elsewhere in Europe often struggle to provide sign language interpreters at short notice or even to understand the needs of D/deaf people. This hampers their access to justice. Police officers were often unaware that D/deaf people might need an interpreter to communicate, as not all can lipread or write notes. However, often not enough interpreters were available at short notice. Interpreters could be reluctant to work in police interviews in case they were called to court as a witness at a later date (Napier 2016).

The study

We report on a qualitative study with D/deaf citizens and five police constabularies conducted from 2016-2017 in England in order to explore the support provided and the barriers faced by D/deaf citizens when contacting the police. Five constabularies were involved in the study as it was part of a larger funded package of work which involved a collaboration of academics and police constabularies in a particular region of England. In England and Wales there are 43 police constabularies and British Transport Police. The five police constabularies involved in this study each covered a combination of rural, town, and city populations. The study explored: 1) the perceptions that D/deaf citizens have of the

police constabulary in their area; 2) the services available to them when making contact with the police; 3) issues of accessibility and barriers to services; 4) recommendations for improvements in police services and support; and 5) the potential benefit of recent service improvements for D/deaf citizens.

Data collection consisted of five semi-structured interviews with police officers who held the designated specialist roles of Police Link Officers for Deaf People (PLOD) and had responsibility for Video Relay Services (VRS) in their organisations. We conducted a review of current practices and documents provided by the five police constabularies involved in the study. Three focus groups were conducted with D/deaf citizens who were accessed via D/deaf community groups in three of the police constabularies. Only three focus groups out of the five constabularies were able to be arranged within the time constraints of the study. In this article we concentrate on findings from focus groups.

Access to D/deaf citizens was provided via PLOD officers from three constabularies involved in the study. PLOD officers utilised their key community contacts who made direct contact with the researcher and acted as a gatekeeper to arrange the focus groups. The gatekeeper recruited participants who were BSL speakers and interested in discussing their perceptions of the police and their knowledge of police services. It was not a prerequisite for selection that the participant had prior contact with the police. The research team did not have access to personal information on the identities of participants prior to the focus group, nor did the police have any knowledge of or contact with participants. The research team sought guidance and feedback on research instruments (information sheet, consent form, focus group schedule) from a BSL speaking gatekeeper to ensure they were appropriate. Particular

attention was paid to phrases or concepts that needed to be linguistically and culturally relevant for BSL speakers (Ackroyd and Wright 2018).

The focus groups were facilitated by the Research Assistant (author 2) and each had two BSL interpreters present. Focus group 1 had 6 participants, focus group 2 had 7 participants, and focus group 3 had 6 participants. The total number of participants across all focus groups was 19 with a spread of both male and female participants in each group. Focus groups typically have between 6 and 12 participants per group (Morgan 1997); however focus groups with individuals with cognitive or sensory disabilities should be smaller (Seymour et al. 2003). This leaves more time to present questions, for participants to process questions, and for interpretation between researcher and participants via interpreters. The extra time was balanced with the overall length of the discussion so as to not fatigue participants (Kroll et al. 2007). The average duration of each focus group was 70 minutes. In order to preserve confidentiality the Research Assistant informed interpreters of the importance of not discussing the information shared by participants during the focus group with any persons other than the Principal Investigator and Research Assistant. The interpreters also read the Participant Information Form and Consent Form and were aware of the principles of confidentiality and anonymity. The focus group schedule focused on: 1) their perception of the police in their local area and police community engagement, 2) their views and experiences of contacting the police, and 3) their knowledge and views of the services available to D/deaf citizens.

As a method, focus groups can be defined as a 'nondirective technique that results in the controlled production of a discussion within a group of people' (Flores and Alonso 1995, 84). In social research, focus groups have the 'potential to elicit individuals' views, experiences

and preferences with regards to a wide range of topics in various settings' (Kroll, Barbour and Harris 2007, 690). The group process and interaction of people within the group also becomes important. The BSL interpreters relayed the moderator's questions to the group and translated their responses. It is important to acknowledge the role of the interpreter within the research process. As prior research has demonstrated, working with interpreters raises the same issues of ethics, value-judgements and power as all social research does (Edwards 1998). Translating a visual language into English, which is then transcribed in to a fixed written text for analysis throws up not only methodological but also political questions. As Temple and Young (2004) argue, methodologically there could be semantic errors or loss of cultural meaning and inherent power dynamics of the translator and the participants. On a socio-political level, the use of a translator, particularly if not acknowledged, can further reinforce the denial of BSL as a language, adding to the 'political invisibility' of it and its users (Edwards 1998, 166). Following the example of Edwards (1998), we sought to acknowledge and reflect upon the use of interpreters, and the potential impacts this may have had on the data. Interpreters were free to directly translate or use the third person speech to make them visible within the research. Where excerpts from the transcripts have been used, we have provided context of the discussion that was being had to provide greater transparency for the reader. It is further hoped that the focus group setting, with the participants in the majority, would shift the power balance away from the research or the interpreter (Smithson 2000).

It is also important to consider the issue of D/deaf-hearing research dynamics (Napier and Leeson 2016) and to identify the position of researchers as D/deaf or hearing, as the presence of the researcher(s) can influence the outcome of the data collection (Young and Temple 2014). As hearing researchers we do not have a shared life experience with deaf people and

instead we are 'guests in their community' (Napier and Leeson 2016). We acknowledge that we have 'hearing privilege' which is when 'hearing people view their social, cultural, and economic experiences as a norm that all deaf people should experience… hearing people possess an undeniable advantage over deaf persons' (Napier and Leeson 2016, 11).

Focus groups were recorded and transcribed by a transcription service. Transcripts were analysed thematically, initially by the Research Assistant, and then analysis was collaboratively reviewed by both investigators. Thematic analysis is a beneficial form of qualitative data analysis since it is flexible and accessible (Braun and Clarke 2012). It facilitated both an inductive and deductive approach to the data in which codes and themes derived from the content of the data, in a ground-up approach, but also whereby we could explore a set of top-down topics and ideas. The analysis of data followed the six steps of thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2012): familiarizing yourself with the data; generating initial codes; searching for themes; reviewing themes; defining and naming themes; producing the report.

The study received ethical clearance from the university. Pseudonyms are used to disguise the identities of participants in the focus groups. The police constabularies and geographical areas have also been anonymised and any identifying factors omitted so that they do not result in the identification of the organisations, employees, or members of the community.

Findings: barriers faced by D/deaf citizens when accessing police services

Cultural barriers: police misunderstandings of 'deafness'

In relation to contacting the police, participants conveyed a fear of being misunderstood or of having methods of communication taken out of context. Many were concerned that their signing would be viewed as a signal of anger or frustration which could cause suspicion:

> When we're signing, we're signing links, you know, people being patient as well. The police don't really understand, they just arrest you and then the signs linked to your behaviour, if you're stressed, if you're angry, they might arrest you by mistake when they see you using sign language. (Focus group 2)

Others relayed stories they were aware of in which police officers had arrested BSL speakers without access to interpreters thus removing their ability to communicate:

> In the end they arrested him for 36 hours and the police sort of said, 'oh, you're deaf, okay, we're going to wait in the cell' – so held him in the cell, for 36 hours. Again, there was no interpreter. And they kept saying, 'oh yeah, we're going to get one for you, we will, we will'. And the time just passed and the interpreter didn't arrive and the deaf person said, 'I want an interpreter', and they said, 'There's no one local, you can't use local interpreters, you have to use someone … outside.' (Focus group 3)

Participants felt that police often misunderstood D/deaf people and culture. Stories detailing these misunderstandings were shared amongst the community and contributed to their collective fear and decreased their confidence in the police. There was also a lack of understanding regarding the linguistic differences in D/deaf cultures; for example how they might use different languages in signing and in communicating with family and friends. BSL was often their first language and some did not speak or write English.

When discussing the effectiveness of police engagement, concern was raised about the communication of emergency information in public settings, for example on trains with regards to delays and in relation to public safety, as announcements are made verbally:

> British Transport Police I had a problem with on a train. I was stuck for two and a half hours, got off at the platform to find out what was going on. There'd been an incident and obviously with me being deaf, I didn't realise, I hadn't heard any announcements. So we thought, well, if something had happened, there was a security incident, anything like that … how are deaf people going to be informed? (Focus group 1)

The communication barriers that D/deaf citizens face with regards to public safety, and the inability for the police to provide interpreters often left participants feeling that they were 'low priority', as can be seen in the below discussion of participants previous police interaction:

> Tom's referring to some car crime with cars being broken into and car radios taken. He contacted the police and explained, he had to leave his car where it was and go off to work. And … quite a few other cars had … been broken into in the same street. And then they asked him about what things had gone from the car, but he had to wait quite a long time for … the police officers to come and sort out his particular incident … all the other people on the street had had theirs sorted out quite quickly, whereas Tom obviously is left to the end … it's about deaf people … being last in the line. (Focus group 1)

The fear of missing important safety information due to language barriers also extends to changes in legislation. When discussing police communication, participants raised the issue of changes to road traffic laws which are most heavily communicated through spoken or written English. This can lead to concern about accidentally breaking the law:

> Jake is saying … the law that's put out there in news, deaf people see glimpses but won't understand information. When they come somewhere like the deaf club and start talking about it, they all realise that they got mixed messages and they all have a different understanding of things. And then they become nervous and think that they're going to get arrested for whatever reason. I think some consideration maybe in the future is about when new laws come into play or different penalties, to police come into the Deaf Society and talk to us. (Focus group 1)

These shared narratives feed into people's lack of faith that they have received the correct information and the consequential fear of being mistreated by the authorities. This absence of information echoes Harris and Bamford's (2001) argument that access to information is a basic form of social inclusion without which, the role of citizen cannot be performed. This extends to understanding the legal requirements that govern citizens' lives. This exclusion relates to broader concerns which Deaf people have concerning societal views of BSL as a 'low priority' language which is not treated with the same significance as others.

Technological barriers: Emergency SMS Text Services and VRS

When asked about prior contact with the police, participants expressed uncertainty over how they should contact them. They highlighted a lack of communication from the police to D/deaf citizens with regards to the contact options available. Not all participants were aware

of the Emergency SMS Text Service and many were not registered. This service enables D/deaf people to contact fire and police services independently via text message, without the need for an interpreter or help from a hearing person, in emergency situations (Ohene-Djan, Hersh and Naqvi 2010):

> Late in the evening, if anything really bad happens, how do we contact them? How would I get through to them? It would be impossible. That's a really big barrier … for deaf people. (Focus group 2)

There was confusion over the local initiatives that police constabularies used. Not all participants had awareness of these, and those who did have awareness and were registered to use them were unclear as to their purpose or benefit. They also expressed a lack of confidence in using them:

> Steve: … that's his [local scheme] number, mine's different. So what happens is if we contact 999 then the police contact centre will have information about us on their system.
>
> Paul: … that's only if you call from home, isn't it?
>
> Steve: No, I got new information here, and I can show you about this, it's new linking in with that.
>
> Paul: So what'll happen is straight away, if I ring say 999, information will come up on the computer database, this is Paul, his address is x, y, z, he's deaf.
>
> Steve: Yeah, you know, they will have a new service now where if you're out in the pub or wherever you will be able to contact them.

Paul: I'm not 100% confident about all of this. I think, 'oh, what if I give them the wrong information, what if I'm wasting police time?' … (Focus group 1)

The use of Emergency SMS Text Services generated mixed reactions. Some participants were confident using text messaging. Others experienced difficulties using English language, while others stated that they did not speak English. In one example, SMS messages sent by the police to inform them of a case could not be understood by the participant who did not speak English:

I had problems with my car being blocked in. But I … didn't get a response, … I do keep reminding her of what's happened. I eventually got a text message but it's in English, so that's not my first language and I don't understand. (Focus group 1)

Text message services are a technological solution brought in by the police to enable better communication with D/deaf citizens. However, whilst police officers preferred written communication methods when engaging with D/deaf people, D/deaf people preferred sign language (Race and Hogue 2017). This mismatch privileges the preferences of the hearing population and is reminiscent of O'rourke and Grewer's (2005) argument that services provided to D/deaf people often rely on models and techniques validated within the hearing population. Participants in this study found Emergency SMS text messaging slow. It resulted in a fragmented conversation that failed to communicate a serious emergency situation:

With 999, they ask what do you want, fire, police, ambulance, and you just reply, police. And they say, what do you need? You put your name, and a few details down, just a brief description of what's going on. It's not a massive conversation. And

there's a bit of a delay, it's like to you, to me, to you, you know, replying. So the whole thing's quite slow. So it's a bit of a waste of time then. Texting back and forth. *Sorry, I'm dead, it's too late now.* (Focus group 2)

Police constabularies in England have rolled out the use of VRS. This involves BSL users connecting with a live interpreter who can contact the police on their behalf. Only two of the constabularies involved in this study at the time had VRS which was provided by different organisations. Participants had experience of VRS but not always in a police setting. Users often conflated VRS with VRI when discussing accessing interpreters via the internet.

Generally participants were positive about VRS as a contact option. Some lacked confidence in how to use VRS and suggested they would need training in order to feel more confident. VRS was viewed as a potential barrier for some people, including older generations, highlighting intersections of age and disability with regards to the use of technology to access services. Hawthorn (2000) has highlighted the issue of bias in usability testing of technology towards younger subjects. This is especially pertinent given that it takes longer and is harder for older people to learn new computer interfaces and applications. Stressful conditions can also have an impact on older people's ability to draw meaning from communication (Hawthorn 2000). Taken together with language barriers, these factors heighten the challenges of using VRS in emergency situations and the likelihood of technical isolation:

Steve: It might be an age thing, you've got to think about young people absolutely love technology, some older people are going to struggle. So yeah, in the deaf community we have the 50 plus deaf community. But we do have a VRS system here

and I've sort of shown that to some of the deaf people, shown them how to use it and how they can access. (Focus group 1)

One participant's experience of VRS also highlighted the difficulty of police-specific services and incidents which crossed geographical jurisdictions of constabularies:

I got into it, started signing, there was an interpreter on the screen, they were going to call [name of local police] police. That was the contract for [local police]. So I got through and then I had a problem in [other force] when my Freedom Pass got stolen, my bus pass got stolen. And [local police] said, 'Oh, in that case you'll need to contact [X] Police.' I said, 'How do I do that because I'm using this service? So how do I contact another Force?' 'Oh, we'll put you through.' So they put us through, and me and the interpreter sat there looking at each other waiting, having a quick chat. Are they picking up? No, they're not picking up yet. So 15 minutes we waited, and I said, 'Do you know what, I can't be bothered anymore.' So I never got through and I hung up, told the interpreter to hang up. (Focus group 2)

These geographical barriers were highlighted by HMIC (2013) who noted how police in England and Wales are missing opportunities to share software services across borders and enhance the efficiency of the services they offer to communities. Also of concern is the lack of personal engagement, for example when reporting a crime or attending a doctor's surgery. In these settings VRS was described as 'too impersonal'. This reflects the views of interpreters using VRS who draw attention to the difficulty in being able to empathise with users (Napier and Leneham 2011).

Interactional barriers: visiting the police station and the role of interpreters

Participants stated that they preferred face-to-face contact and attending front desks at police stations. However, they had encountered several issues when attempting to do so. The closure of local police stations was one barrier, with some people unaware that their local station had closed until they attempted to visit it in person. Others explained that stations would often have a telephone or intercom service instead of a front desk:

> People that can hear can make a phone call, we generally would have to attend an actual police station, but often when you walk into the police stations there's nobody on reception, there's just a phone on the wall. (Focus group 1)

Some participants had communicated with officers at front desks via written notes. This highlights the interactional barriers which these spaces create and often magnify, coupled with the aforementioned lack of D/deaf awareness by police officers and staff:

> I had to use pen and paper. Because it's glass as well so you can't really hear or see each other properly, they couldn't hear me properly, so I had to get pen and paper and write down what I wanted to say. It's like at the Post Office, they can't hear very well from the other side because of my deaf voice… (Focus group 2)

Similar findings were reported by Deaf and hard of hearing people when trying to access hospital services, where the importance of interpreters was not recognised, and staff relied on written communication (Harris and Bamford 2001). The safety glass was a physical barrier that made hearing and lip reading difficult. For the above participant, the experience highlighted a lack of D/deaf awareness, and a reliance on the English language. They felt that

their presence as a BSL user alienated officers stating: '*as soon as they see a deaf person they run [away], we all know that*'.

One of the biggest issues identified by PLOD officers and D/deaf citizens was the problem of accessing or using interpreters. The police constabularies involved in this study sourced their interpreters through a joint contract with one provider. This contract provided interpreters for all languages, including BSL. However, officers and D/deaf participants described problems in accessing interpreters when needed. One suggestion was that this was a result of inadequate numbers available. Though as previously noted, there is a tension between whether the issue is a shortage of qualified interpreters (Harris and Bamford 2001) or the way in which they are provided through service contracts (NUBSLI 2019). Participants had mixed experiences of interpreters in police settings. There was some recognition that interpreters could take time to arrive. There were also reports of interpreters not being available when needed:

> I've been to two police stations. One knew I needed an interpreter. But when I arrived at the police station there wasn't an interpreter there. They'd told me there would be, so that was a waste of my time. Another time they did have an interpreter there and the police person could sign as well. The other one was a really poor experience, there was no interpreter, they expected us to write back and forth and that's the problem for people having to write things. (Focus group 3)

Another participant described her experience of police officers asking to use her children as interpreters. Whilst all constabularies have made it policy not to ask family members to interpret, this experience may overshadow that stance:

Shona: They asked me to use my children, which I said no to. At that time they were four, six and I don't know, whatever age, but I thought, I'm not using my children, that's way too emotional … they might be upset by what's going on. So I told them to go away and come back with an interpreter. (Focus group 2)

Concerns were raised about the quality of interpreters. There is a lack of consistency across Europe in training and certifying legal sign language interpreters (Napier 2016). The broad range of BSL dialects enhances this difficulty and adds to the reluctance of BSL interpreters to work in criminal justice settings in case they are called to court as a witness (Napier 2016). As this participant explained, the interpreter shapes the police response:

Jo made a report of somebody threatening her. The first interpreter who went to the police station with her explained everything and that was fine. Then she had to go and make another report to another police station and it was a different interpreter … Jo has very grass roots, very strong British sign language, and she felt this interpreter didn't reflect her account of the story. Apparently the interpreter's rendition was very flat. And so the officers didn't take it as seriously. So … the quality of the interpreter sometimes affect[s] the information that's given... (Focus group 1)

These experiences are supported by studies which detail how BSL speakers have given witness statements without the aid of an interpreter, have had their communications misinterpreted, and have had lengthy waits for interpreters (Harris and Bamford 2001).

Discussion and conclusion

This article highlighted the challenges that D/deaf citizens face when accessing spaces of justice. Members of this community had a general lack of confidence in the police and felt that they did not have the requisite knowledge and information to be able to access police services effectively. Cultural barriers shaped participants' expectations of police interactions, which were formed either by direct experience or through shared stories that then informed a collective set of community expectations. These expectations were influenced by historical memories of the mistreatment of D/deaf people within institutions and facilities (Baines 2007). Participants expected the police to misinterpret their methods of communication or expressions as signs of anger and frustration. There was also concern that D/deaf people may not have access to relevant public safety information or changes in legislation. These barriers add to the social exclusion D/deaf people may face in attempts to participate as full citizens (Harris and Bamford 2001).

Access to police services was complicated by technological barriers. Whilst some participants were confident using these services, including Emergency SMS Text Services and VRS, others lacked confidence and others still were unaware of their existence or confused by the variety of options. The different provisions offered by police constabularies also create 'disabling geographies' (Edwards 2013) in relation to cross-border incidents in which these technologies do not facilitate communication across police jurisdictions. There is a need for greater technological collaboration across police constabularies (HMIC 2013) and greater clarity on how people can use them. Age also influenced how D/deaf people used these technologies. The majority of participants were working age or retired, and many expressed concern as users of these technologies. Older people in general find it harder to learn new interfaces and applications (Hawthorn 2000). For D/deaf people who do not speak or write English, the use of these technologies further highlights the dominance of solutions

for the D/deaf which are validated within hearing communities (O'rourke and Grewer 2005). These technologies are also seen to detract from the severity of the emergency situation at hand, elongating the time taken for the interaction and depersonalising the situation. The study highlights that deafness also intersects with ethnicity and minority culture; therefore any minority-group specific linguistic barriers must also be taken into account (as indicated in the above comment by a participant without first language English).

Participants conveyed a preference for face-to-face communication. However this presented additional barriers, most significantly, the inability of police to consistently provide BSL interpreters. The closure of local police stations and the introduction of intercom services were problematic. A lack of D/deaf awareness amongst police is reflected in incidences in which officers tried to communicate in written form or requested that people's children act as interpreters.

However participants did highlight some improvements in the police response to D/deaf communities. The introduction of the PLOD scheme was viewed as a positive step in addressing the issue of D/deaf awareness. Although VRS presented challenges, it was also seen as a service that offered choice for some BSL users and one which they hoped would develop in the future.

This article identified a range of cultural, technological and interactional barriers that D/deaf people face when accessing police services. It is however, important to consider that these barriers will also affect other people who are excluded through communication differences and thus the findings have wider relevance for communication and disability studies more generally. A recent inquiry by the Equality and Human Rights Commission (2020)

highlighted the exclusionary processes within the criminal justice system for those with cognitive impairments, mental health conditions and neuro-diverse conditions. Amongst the barriers identified; such as a lack of accessible information and complicated language, digital technology such as video hearings were found not to be suitable for those who require communication support. It recommended that the criminal justice system needs to design and deliver its services around the needs of disabled people, following the social model of disability. Other recent debates highlight the introduction of digital accessibility laws across the UK and Europe which will require public sector bodies to make digital platforms accessible to all citizens. Lewthwaite and James (2020, 4) signal this as a 'crucial moment in digital accessibility regulation' which may offer the oversight needed for digital and social inclusion for all. It will also have important implications for police and criminal justice services.

Recommendations for policy and practice

In order to address some of the contact and communication issues raised above, police services must ensure that their police stations allow D/deaf users to make contact when a telephone or intercom is provided. It should be clearly communicated to BSL speakers online which station provides these services and which stations are still open to the public. With regards to interpreter services, each force needs to ensure that their interpreter provider has locally accessible BSL interpreters registered to their service. Forces should establish relationships with their local BSL interpreters to see if and how they can link in with the central provider to address the shortage/service contract issue. Best practice should be reiterated to officers so that they are not asking family members to interpret for an individual and are aware how and when to access registered interpreters.

The PLOD scheme was seen by the participants as a positive development. However, PLOD managers must ensure clear and consistent communication to members of the public over what it means and what members of the D/deaf community can expect it to deliver. Similarly, VRS offered new options for communication with the police. Participant's responses highlighted the need for consistency across service provision and geographical location, the need for proper user testing and local training.

Overall, this article demonstrates that there are still significant cultural, technological and interactional barriers for D/deaf citizens accessing police services. These barriers hinder the confidence of D/deaf citizens and act as a form of social exclusion. Officers require further training on best practice. There needs to be clear guidelines on how VRS (and VRI) will be used within police settings. There also needs to be ongoing dialogue between D/deaf citizens and police constabularies. Police schemes must acknowledge the intersections of age, ethnicity and disability, and be able to cater to the differing requirements of a diverse D/deaf community. Finally, attention needs to be paid to the preferences of D/deaf citizens, rather than privileging the hearing community.

Declaration of interest

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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