

The content of this fact sheet summarizes the main concerns of three deaf or hard of hearing non-heterosexual people<sup>1</sup> who were invited to participate in a reflective workshop. It was organized by Yoann Jeanselme, a student in educational sciences at the Université Paris-Descartes and intern at the *Chaire de recherche sur l'homophobie* (Université du Québec à Montréal) for the UNIE-LGBTQ research project, in May 2018. This workshop aimed to document experiential knowledge on the realities of people of both sexual and gender diversity who are deaf or hard of hearing. The main themes under study in the UNIE-LGBTQ project (family, professional and social life) were addressed by the participants from an intersectional perspective<sup>2</sup>. The comments collected were used to develop research materials, in addition to literature reviews.

## HOMOSEXUALITY AND DEAFNESS

Annie Vaillancourt, Research Development Advisor at the *Centre de recherche universitaire sur les jeunes et les familles (CRUJeF)* of *CIUSSS de la Capitale-Nationale* and co-researcher for the UNIE-LGBTQ project led by Line Chamberland

According to the participants in this reflective workshop on the experiences of deaf or hard of hearing non-heterosexual people, deafness often overshadows sexual orientation on a daily basis, both in the eyes of others as well as in how deaf or hard of hearing people see themselves. "*What people see first when they meet me is my deafness, because it is more apparent,*" explains one participant, who compares this situation to onion peels or Russian dolls. People usually only see the first "*layer of skin*" or the largest doll if they don't look at what's underneath. This image was later echoed by another participant who also believed that LG (lesbian or gay) deaf people are "*LG on the inside, but first seen as deaf*", including in their workplaces.

Some participants also pointed out that many deaf people are reluctant to identify themselves as gay or lesbian because they are already in a minority group and do not want to add another one in the eyes of others. To which one participant replied: "*I have had to fight so hard to gain access to services for the deaf that I don't tend to show my sexual orientation in addition*". Yet, paradoxically, some participants believe that it is easier for people who are deaf or hard of hearing to "*come out*" because they are already experiencing being a minority.

1 The experiences of bisexual, trans or queer people were not discussed in this reflective workshop because the bisexual, trans or queer people who were invited to participate were not available.

2 This term was popularized by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1991 and proposed to explore how identity [of black women], social positioning and experiences of inequality and violence are structured by multiple systems of domination including race, class, ethnicity, etc. Intersectionality highlights the links between discrimination based on racism, sexism, homophobia, classism, ageism, and ableism, among others (Harper and Kurtzman, 2014).

It should also be noted that deafness can lead to situations of exclusion or self-exclusion due to problems of mutual misunderstanding. For example, one participant attended an oral school for the deaf during their<sup>3</sup> first years of school life and was then integrated into a regular school without an interpreter. This person often ate alone at lunchtime because they did not understand what other students were saying to each other. Another participant illustrated this idea by pointing out that if in a group of hearing employees, one hearing person is quieter than the others, staff generally wonder why, which is rather rare in the case of a deaf or hard of hearing person's silence. In other words, it is often assumed that a deaf person stays away or does not express themselves simply because they are deaf. This is sometimes true (one participant said they do not want to be part of the discussions at work at lunchtime because communication is difficult), but not always, of course.

*"What people see first when they meet me is my deafness, because it is more apparent," explains one participant, who compares this situation to onion peels or Russian dolls. People usually only see the first "layer of skin" or the largest doll if they don't look at what's underneath.*

The language or sound barrier is therefore constantly imposed on deaf or hard of hearing people in their relationships with people who hear. It must be said that the latter do not generally learn sign language and sometimes do not bother to repeat or facilitate lip-reading (by standing in front of their interlocutor, for example). Important comment from a participant: *"no need to speak louder to be understood, or you will risk looking ridiculous! A deaf person will not hear any more if you raise your voice..."* In this regard, one participant mentioned a video on Facebook in which a deaf woman meets a hearing woman and sensitizes her to her reality by putting a headset on her head recreating

*"I have had to fight so hard to gain access to services for the deaf that I don't tend to show my sexual orientation in addition".*

the experience of hearing degradation, until complete silence. An experiment compared to pouring concrete in the ears. This person would like to recreate this experience with hearing individuals so that they can fully understand the experiences of deaf people.

In short, for all these reasons and probably more, it would seem that the participants in this meeting experienced more exclusion problems related to their deafness than to their sexual orientation.

Let us now look at what the participants said about their experiences as deaf or hard of hearing homosexuals in their families, at work and in their social lives.

*"It is often assumed that a deaf person stays away or does not express themselves simply because they are deaf".*

## In the Family

A participant shared their mother's reaction to the announcement of their homosexuality. The mother had a homophobic reaction and would not apologize, claiming the participant didn't understand properly because of their deafness. This mother-child relationship was described as difficult and the father-child relationship as very good because he quite simply loves his child and the person who shares their life *"as they are"*.

Homosexual people are used to "hearing" this erroneous statement about their sex life: *"it's your choice"*<sup>4</sup>. One participant "heard" it from their mother and brother and, despite still considering them as their family, the participant kept them away from their intimate life for more than 16 years. The participant described the relationship as being free.

<sup>3</sup> In order to maintain confidentiality of the participants and in an effort to make the text lighter, the terms "they" and "their" are used to refer to one or more people, instead of gendered pronouns.

<sup>4</sup> It is important to remember, for the sake of the matter, that homosexuality is no more a question of choice than homosexuality is no more of a choice than is heterosexuality

Finally, another participant referred to the fact that their mother became aware of their homosexuality during their teenage years. An employee of this person's group home reportedly found a homosexual pornographic magazine under their bed and told their mother. She kept that reality secret until years later when this participant came out to her. She then reacted well, unlike their grandparents and some of their cousins. In any case, what is important in the eyes of this participant is the bond that has been preserved with their mother.

## At Work

One participant, during the workshop, reported that they had not come out of the closet at their current job, not seeing the purpose or need to do so. Another participant asked them what the discussions with their colleagues were about at lunchtime and their answer was *"the hearing people talk to each other; they don't know my life"*.

Another participant came out at their old job in the mid-1980s. Rejection and negative comments from other employees have marked their story at this job. After a change of job in the 2000s, their decision was to talk about their homosexuality only to employees who are interested in their love life. In their opinion, the 2000s, with the advent of social networks, among others, were synonymous of more openness.

## Social Life

The exclusion experienced by deaf or hard of hearing LGBTQ+ people in their social life, as well as at work, is often due to accessibility problems. *"Deaf people are so accustomed to social activities not being accessible to them that they do not go,"* even in LGBTQ+ environments. However, one participant thought that the situation was beginning to change in Montreal, referring to a *drag queen* show that was made accessible in LSQ (Quebec Sign Language) last year by communication and deafness students at the Cégep du Vieux-Montréal.

One participant said that they are often asked what it is like to have sex with a hearing person and how intimate communication takes place. This question is perceived as "funny" because it is not the occasion where people communicate most verbally, in their opinion. It also seems difficult to change the preconceived idea that deaf people do not have a sex life. A bias that could go hand in hand with a tendency to infantilize them, according to some participants.

A participant took advantage of this open door on conjugal and sexual life to talk about their online dating experiences. They said that they do not specify right away that they are deaf on dating sites and that it often happens that the conversation breaks down when they do, after a certain time, even if *"deafness has no influence on the intelligence and beauty of the exchanges"*.

They added that they had been in a relationship with a hearing person in the past and that it was not easy because their partner did not understand the deaf community and culture (for example, the habit of taking the time to talk at length when you meet someone by accident, perceived as rude by their partner). It is important to remember that deaf and hearing people have different cultures that can create mutual misunderstandings on occasion. It should also be noted that in the deaf and hard of hearing community as well as in the general hearing population, the presumption of heterosexuality is omnipresent. Comments such as: *"I look forward to meeting your boyfriend or girlfriend (a person of another sex)"* are legion between deaf or hard of hearing people.

*"Deaf people are so accustomed to social activities not being accessible to them that they do not go".*

Finally, note that there is an important difference to be made between the identity with which a person identifies and the one with which society associates them. For example, deafness and disability are often confounded. However, some deaf people do not consider their deafness as a disability or a flaw to be corrected. Let's look at it as the reality of people who have already had same sex adventures without identifying as being gay or bisexual. Deaf or hard of hearing people should not be given the status of a disabled person if they do not consider themselves to be disabled...

## A few courses of action to promote the inclusion of deaf or hard of hearing LGBTQ people, according to the participants

- **Accessibility, empathy** and a high level of **awareness** on the reality of deaf people at work, at school, in terms of access to health care, social activities and cultural events.
- Write "**interpreters on demand**" on promotional materials for events where it is possible to offer this service and distribute it through networks for people who are deaf or hard of hearing to let them know that these activities exist and are accessible to them.
- To facilitate communication, some participants thought it would be better **to teach both languages** (sign and oral) to deaf or hard of hearing children.

## Acknowledgements

The Understanding Inclusion and Exclusion of LGBTQ People Research Partnership (UNIE-LGBTQ) would like to thank all those who shared their experiential knowledge during this reflective workshop and all those who referred participants to it, including Véronique Leduc, professor in the Department of Public and Social Communication at UQAM as well as staff from the following organizations:



Diversité  
Sourds Québec

For more information on the Understanding Inclusion and Exclusion of LGBTQ People (UNIE-LGBTQ) Project of the Chaire de recherche sur l'homophobie at the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM):

[savie-lgbtq.uqam.ca](http://savie-lgbtq.uqam.ca)

UNIE-LGBTQ research was made possible thanks to financing from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) and contributions from partners and organizations associated with the UNIE-LGBTQ project.