

Interfamilial deaf history. Reconstructing a case of family history from the Nazi era to the present: Deafness, signing, and cochlear implants

Ines Potthast and Bettina Lindmeier

The trends seem to be contradictory: On the one hand, there is a growing legal and social recognition of the language and culture of the deaf community. On the other hand, cochlear implants (CIs) are implanted as a matter of course from infancy. However, we know little about how families with deaf and CI-implanted children negotiate the topics of deafness, CI, and multilingualism. What do these topics mean to these families, their members and their biographies? What is told about deafness and family in these families, and how is it told?

These topics are discussed in this contribution. It uses parts from an interview with a father from the first author's doctoral thesis. The biography of the father and the family's biography are particularly interesting as his narration about family and deafness connects contemporary history and societal trends of hearing and deaf history from the time of National Socialism to the present.

Both of the father's parents are deaf and part of the deaf community. Even though their deafness is supposedly hereditary and probably existed since birth, in the family's narrative of their history it is told that the father's parents are deafened at a later point in childhood. The origin of this story shows several of the functions that this story takes for the father's family. The father himself and his wife are hearing. Their first son is born deaf and fitted with a CI. The grandparents are initially reluctant to the parent's decision to implant the grandchild. Thus, the different generations of this family show different value attributions regarding, for example, to different modes of communication, spoken language, and sign

language. The long version of our contribution shows how the father and his family deal with these areas of tension in their narratives.

In conclusion, one can say that family members construct meaning and sense via their narratives in order to generate cohesion and sense of protection in the family. We see new interpretations of older narratives and a sharing of experiences of inclusion and exclusion in the family, all within a context of historical and societal developments.