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### Deafness among the Negev Bedouin: an interdisciplinary dialogue on deafness, marginality and context

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**Publication date**  
2012

[Link to publication](#)

#### **Citation for published version (APA):**

Kisch, S. (2012). *Deafness among the Negev Bedouin: an interdisciplinary dialogue on deafness, marginality and context*.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

### **An Interdisciplinary Dialogue on Deafness, Marginality and Context**

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"By focusing closely on particular individuals and their changing relationships, one would necessarily subvert the most problematic connotations of culture: homogeneity, coherence, and timelessness" (Abu-Lughod 1991:154).

"[i]t seems most useful to us to redefine the fieldwork "trademark" not with a time honored commitment to the *local* but with an attentiveness to the social, cultural, and political *location* and willingness to work self-consciously at shifting or realigning our own location..." (Gupta & Ferguson 1997:5)

The articles assembled in this doctoral dissertation are based on intermittent ethnographic fieldwork spanning over 16 years among the Negev Bedouin (the native Arab inhabitants of the southern arid region of present-day Israel), and address different research questions that arise from their experience with deafness and with the various interventions related to deafness. Deafness among the Negev Bedouin is of anthropological interest in several respects: (a) due to high rates of deafness, unique shared signing communities emerged; (b) despite general neglect and discrimination of the Negev Bedouin, deafness became the target of diverse state interventions; and (c) a myth of isolation is often invoked in recent publications on a locally emerged Bedouin sign language presumed to provide a "natural laboratory" for the emergence of human language.

(a) Shared signing communities: The extent to which deaf people are disabled varies considerably between different groups within the Negev-Bedouin society (see chapter 2, 3). Exceptionally high rates of deafness occur within several Negev Bedouin groups. These high incidences account for significant differences in the experience of deafness by both deaf and hearing. Among the Al-Sayyid Bedouin the incidence is 2.5-3% constituting one of the highest worldwide incidences of congenital deafness documented so far. Most significantly, both deaf and hearing people are exposed to signed communication from a young age, using an indigenous sign language that emerged over 80 years ago (see chapter 4). I introduce the term shared signing communities to refer to such conditions where hearing and deaf signers jointly participate in visual language from an early age. The majority of deaf people among the Negev Bedouin are – like the majority of deaf people worldwide – born into families with no previous experience with deafness or signed communication. This renders the Al-Sayyid experience an opportunity to study an indigenous sign language and explore the unique social arrangements that have developed to cope with deafness, as well as the impact of the introduction of state interventions targeting deaf people.

(b) State services and interventions: The Negev Bedouin constitute one of Israel's most marginalized minority groups, many still residing in settlements formally unrecognized by the state, therefore lacking basic infrastructure, including water or electricity. Nonetheless, various state services and intervention programs target deafness, which includes deaf education and the introduction of genetic counselling and Cochlear Implants. These interventions have various unintended consequences, including the stigmatization of deafness and the amplification of gender disparities. The politics of such specialized interventions are often overlooked, for they are perceived to be based on the judgment of experts. In the case of the Negev Bedouin, these professional discourses should be examined in the light of the experiential knowledge gained by deaf people and their hearing relatives in shared signing communities. At stake are (for all Negev Bedouin) the complex relations between a disadvantaged minority and the dominant society, its institutions and ideologies (see chapters 3, 5 & 6).

(c) The myth of Isolation: The Al-Sayyid and several comparable cases have drawn the attention of scholars from various disciplines, most notably in Deaf Studies and sign language linguistics. This literature often employs romanticized notions of isolated village communities, overlooking their

complexity, stripping them from context and fixing them in a-historical time. The quest to study the conditions that engender language have made the study of relatively young sign languages a cutting edge theme in modern linguistics and cognitive sciences. Al-Sayyid Bedouin Sign Language (ABSL) is currently one of the most celebrated cases of a so-called emerging (sign) language isolate. This literature in particular, upholds the impression that the language and its users are isolated (see chapters 2 & 4). While there is little doubt that ABSL is indeed a language-isolate in the strict sense of the word (a language with no demonstrable ancestral language), it certainly did not emerge – as claimed – in the absence of any linguistic models or external influences. I consider what is masked by assumptions of social isolation, and argue that it is not merely the result of an uncritical application of social and anthropological terms. The slippage from “language isolate” to “isolated community” conveniently corresponds to scientists’ longing for a natural laboratory of a linguistic vacuum.

My analysis of the Al-Sayyid signing community shows that, while the sign language developed locally, it is also the product of a complex historical and political context.

My research illustrates how particular aspects such as local accounts of deafness or the disparities between deaf and hearing men and women, can be better understood in terms of marginalization, rather than romanticized notions of isolation. Additionally, my analysis attests to how social structures and practices in shared signing communities should be examined for how they may both facilitate and restrict deaf people.

The growing interest in the Al-Sayyid, by medical practitioners, scholars from various disciplines and the general public has had impact on both the course of my fieldwork and research focuses. These interventions and research projects became part of my subject matter as well as brought me into dialogue with diverse fields such as genetics and linguistics, pleading for better incorporation of the social and political contexts in which both state interventions and academic studies operate.

The articles bundled here address diverse aspects of deafness among the Negev Bedouin; each represent a dialogue with different fields of knowledge production and interests. Whereas this research project utilizes different analytical perspectives and interdisciplinary academic sources, my core

methodology is anthropological. In what follows, I will attempt to outline what such an anthropological perspective contributes to these debates.

First, this introductory chapter opens with a short introduction to of the Negev Bedouin and a sociolinguistic sketch of the Al-Sayyid. The second part then concerns my fieldwork and outlines my activities over a decade and a half of engagement with the Negev Bedouin. The third and main part of the chapter reflects upon my interdisciplinary engagement, followed by a fourth part in which I outline my anthropological perspective. Finally the chapter concludes with an outline of the subsequent chapters.

### 'ARAB AL-NAQAB, THE NEGEV BEDOUIN

The Arab populations of the southern arid Negev region of present-day Israel, make up part of the Arab inhabitants of historical Palestine remaining in the territory which in after 1948 came under the control of the newly founded State of Israel.

These Arab/Palestinian citizens of the State of Israel are often referred to as an ethnic or national minority. In the Arab world, they are commonly referred to as '*Arab 48*' or '*Arab al-dakhil*' (the Arabs of the interior), terms avoiding the explicit mention of the State of Israel. Conversely, within Israel they are commonly referred to as 'Israeli Arabs' or '*Arviyey Israel*' ('Arabs of Israel'); to avoid any mentioning of a Palestinian nation. Different terms have been employed to address the nature of their structural subordination and exclusion within the Jewish State of Israel, including, internal colonialism (Zureik 1979), strangers in their own land (Rouhana 1990) 'subtenants' (Benziman & Mansour 1992), and 'trapped minority' (Yiftachel 1999; Rabinowitz 2001), terms which refer to their marginalization twice over by both Israelis and Palestinians.

The native Arab inhabitants of the Negev are also commonly referred to as Bedouin, alluding to their nomadic past. I primarily use the term "Negev Bedouin" as a relatively accessible English translation of the term used locally in Arabic: '*Arab Al-Naqab*'. Throughout the Middle East, the term *Arab* is often used to designate various Bedouin groups inhabiting a certain region.

Prior to 1948, Negev Bedouin largely relied on semi-nomadism living off combined agriculture and pastoralism. After 1948, only a minority of the Bedouin remained within the boundaries of the Negev, where they were confined to an enclosed area and kept under military administration until

1966.<sup>1</sup> Through the establishment of urban settlements, the Israeli government made a concerted effort to concentrate the Bedouin into state-established townships and to minimize their use of land resources. The current Negev Bedouin population amounts to 210,000 and they make up roughly a fourth of the otherwise predominantly Jewish-Israeli Negev inhabitants. Approximately half of the Negev Bedouin reside in townships established by the state while the remaining half inhabits settlements lacking basic infrastructures. The latter are mostly unrecognized by the state, and some are in the process of gaining formal recognition.

Poverty and unemployment rates are among the highest in Israel; Bedouin (men) are mostly confined to the lower strata of the labour market. Child mortality rates among Negev Bedouin are alarmingly high, the highest among Israeli citizens. Other demographic characteristics include common consanguinity and polygyny and the highest fertility rates in the country. Consequently, the Negev Bedouin have a very high proportion of young people; more than half of the population is under the age of 14.<sup>2</sup> Having said this, however, it should be noted that within contemporary Negev Bedouin society there are also considerable differences in livelihood, lifestyle, political identities, education and gender segregation.

Whereas the Negev Bedouin constitute one of Israel's most marginalized minority groups, they are – and were historically – embedded in wider networks in present-day Jordan, Egypt, the Palestinian West Bank and Gaza, and elsewhere in Israel (Parizot 2004). Thus, employing the term *Bedouin* is neither self-evident nor without problems. It requires examining any demographic, and otherwise perceived distinctiveness of the Negev Bedouin, as possibly related to their actual shared historical background, as well as to the state's segmentation practices and discourses. The reinforcement and construction of ethnic and religious divides among the Arab inhabitants of historical Palestine is one element of an elaborate system of control (Lustick 1980) aimed to obstruct political mobilization.

At the same time, not unlike the so-called “noble savage”, the imagery of *the Bedouin* is entangled in symbolically contradictory and ambivalent

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<sup>1</sup> Whereas prior to 1948, the estimated number of Negev Arabs was between 65,000-90,000 (Falah 1989), by the beginning of the 1950s it dropped to 11,000 (Marx 1967; Falah 1989; Meir 1997).

<sup>2</sup> The Negev Bedouin Statistical Data Book, No. 3. 2010; The Galilee Society 2010.

concepts; it ascribes backwardness in a romantic disguise appealing to the archetype of a legendary Arab past. Such imagery is found throughout the Middle-East, and is common among both Jews and Palestinians in Israel. The Negev Bedouin are subject to the paternalism of modernization policies, and their direct self-governance is restricted by assigning administrative units such as the "Administration for the Promotion of the Bedouin"<sup>3</sup> (see Swirski 2008 for more examples of such sectoral institutions). The Negev Bedouin are simultaneously constructed as a demographic and geographical threat, and as the "good Arabs" within the state (Cohen 2010), suggesting they are less of a security threat than their fellow Arab/Palestinian citizens of Israel. In practice the latter category was reinforced by enabling the Bedouin to join the army on a voluntary basis, thereby establishing a distinct 'privileged' category. Thus, one aspect of Negev Bedouin distinctiveness concerns their predefined relationships with the State of Israel.

The next section provides a detailed sketch of the until recently unrecognized village of the Al-Sayyid Bedouin, with whom I resided throughout my fieldwork years.

#### AL-SAYYID: A SOCIOLINGUISTIC SKETCH <sup>4</sup>

The village of Al-Sayyid is located in the northern Negev, its inhabitants are all related through kinship and named after their common ancestor who settled here in the mid-19th century. Al-Sayyid is home to a shared signing community where deaf and hearing signers use Al-Sayyid Bedouin Sign Language (ABSL), an indigenous sign language that has emerged over the past 90 years.

Following the practice of cousin marriage, Al-Sayyid's grandchildren intermarried: four of these unions bore deaf offspring. The first deaf siblings

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<sup>3</sup> This administrative body is the transformed version of a previously existing body whose initial goal was to complete the resettlement of Bedouin and to resolve the land disputes.

<sup>4</sup> A slightly modified version of this sketch is forthcoming in Zeshan, U. and C. de Vos (eds.) [in press]. *Sign Languages in Village Communities: Anthropological and Linguistic Insights*. Sign Language Typology Series 4. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter & Ishara Press.

were born between 1924 and 1940. The Al-Sayyid are now estimated<sup>5</sup> to number 4,500 men, women and children, of whom nearly 130 are deaf. These deaf individuals are distributed throughout Al-Sayyid's major lineages representing five apical ancestors, each a son of Al-Sayyid the founder.

To this day kin-endogamy (between and within these lineages) accounts for over 60% of marriages (see chapter 4). Genetic research,<sup>6</sup> conducted among the Al-Sayyid in the early 1990s, identified autosomal, recessive non-syndromic deafness, associated with intermarriage. Demographic and genealogical data I have been recording since 1995 show a stable incidence of congenital deafness of 2.5–3%. (see chapters 2, 3 & 4) <sup>7</sup> The recessiveness of the genetic mutation, the fact that the majority (80%)<sup>8</sup> of deaf individuals were born to hearing parents, and the fact that deaf adults were until recently always married to hearing partners, further contribute to the blending of deaf and hearing.

Not only did kin-endogamy induce high incidences of deafness, it also accounts for a dense social network in which both hearing and deaf people are embedded. Many members of the community have at least one deaf individual among their household members, in-laws, peers, or neighbours. Consequently, all deaf and many hearing Al-Sayyid infants are exposed to signing from birth, within the family environment, with additional (deaf or hearing) adult models in the community.

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<sup>5</sup> Obtaining accurate and reliable demographic data is obstructed by the fact that unrecognised (or newly-recognised) settlements are only very partly included in data published by the Israel Central Bureau of Statistics (ICBS). Additionally, The Al-Sayyid now reside under different municipal jurisdictions, and some still reside outside the jurisdiction of any local or regional council.

<sup>6</sup> Scott et. al. (1995, 1998). These publications are also often quoted to state that all deaf individuals are “descendants of two of the five adult sons of the founder” (Scott 1995:965). However, this conclusion was based on partial data collected at the initial phase of the genetic study. Also the use of the term *tribe* to refer to the Al-Sayyid, used by Scott et. al. and in several other publication, is inaccurate.

<sup>7</sup> Last updated survey conducted in the summer of 2011 listing 130 congenitally deaf individuals (see chapter 5). Higher rates noted for the Al-Sayyid case are mostly based on (over)estimations of the number of deaf individuals or outdated figures for the total population.

<sup>8</sup> Based on my last survey of the total deaf population (rather than a sample) in summer 2011.

Sited on one of the highways connecting the northern Negev and the Dead Sea, the village of Al-Sayyid lies less than 20 kilometres from the Negev's district capital of Beersheba. In fact, this highway divides the original village into two parts and beside the road are situated several garages, grocery stores, and one of the village's four mosques. In the village there are several smaller grocery stores. The larger part of the village, south-west of the highway,<sup>9</sup> is spread at the foot of a moderate hill, on top of which the village's first school and clinic are located. The village now has three elementary schools and two (Health Maintenance Organization) clinics. Until 2005, Al-Sayyid was one of the many Bedouin villages officially unrecognized by Israeli authorities due to the state's refusal to recognise or negotiate land claims. Despite the current process towards recognition,<sup>10</sup> most parts of the village still lack basic infrastructure, including paved roads, running water, connection to the national electricity network, sewage and waste disposal.

Most homes are modest cement-brick constructions of two to four rooms with flat tin or concrete roofs. There are also several new two story red tiled houses belonging to the few more affluent residents.<sup>11</sup> Generally, village homes are arranged in compounds of several households of extended families. The village is made up of several dense clusters of multiple compounds, as well as slightly more dispersed compounds. The geographical distribution of the residential clusters partially corresponds to the five main lineages. Many dirt roads crisscross the village leading to its residential clusters, neighbouring villages and the adjacent highway. Most households have a television<sup>12</sup> and, increasingly, more men and women have mobile phones, but

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<sup>9</sup> The smaller north-eastern part of the village is contiguous to one of the seven Bedouin state established townships, and has access to limited municipal utilities. It is no longer part of the Al-Sayyid village as defined in the state recognition plan.

<sup>10</sup> It has been in the process for several years now, but a master plan for the village is still in preparation and negotiation. An approved master plan is required for the provision of many services and building permits. Connection to running water supply and the paving of several asphalt roads are underway.

<sup>11</sup> With the prospect of full recognition and lowered risk of demolition, these houses were built by several businesses owners (such as a garage or construction company) and a few young dentists and lawyers.

<sup>12</sup> Several Israeli and Jordanian channels offer limited but regular on-screen sign language interpreting, to ISL and LIU respectively.

only a few have an internet connection. In most (multiple-household) compounds there is at least one car owner.

Most deaf and hearing Al-Sayyid signers are embedded in several diverse language communities. Hearing signers communicate in both sign language and the local spoken Arabic dialect. Literacy in Hebrew and/or Arabic is increasingly common. Additionally, most men and increasing numbers of women regularly communicate in Hebrew for work, administrative or medical matters. The majority of deaf signers are, or have been, members of student signing communities at school and boarding school outside the village, where communication between students was mostly based on Israeli Sign Language (ISL). Since people regularly move between languages, code switching and mixing are common. Deaf signers may code switch or blend ISL and ABSL, while many hearing signers often switch between speech and sign, use signed Arabic, or voice over their own or other people's signing in mixed-group interactions.

Neighbouring Al-Sayyid are two villages inhabited by two groups of the Qderat Bedouin (see chapters 4 & 5) that exhibit comparable rates of deafness and hearing signers. Here too, shared signing communities have emerged. The first Qderat deaf descendants are coevals of the first deaf Al-Sayyid siblings and their deaf descendants started attending the same schools around the same time<sup>13</sup>. Despite the fact that they can easily demonstrate several obvious lexical variations, the signing of the Al-Sayyid and Qderat is mutually intelligible and they do not consider their signing to constitute separate languages. Moreover, comparable lexical variation exists within the Al-Sayyid community. Both hearing and deaf people often refer to it as 'our language'.

Many lexicalized signs bear evidence for the historical depth of ABSL. For instance, the sign for 'adult woman' or 'mother' is based on the iconic representation of a form of veiling no longer practised. Similarly, the sign for 'butter' derives from the iconic representation of the churning of milk, rarely seen nowadays, for in most households butter is no longer domestically produced. The compound place name COW-THERE (pointing to the actual north), referring to the region where some families took their cattle to graze

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<sup>13</sup> For over 30 years deaf Qderat and Al-Sayyid students have had regular contact; together they made up a third of the deaf students at the relevant elementary schools.

in spring, is still used by some to sign 'Tel-Aviv' (or more generally to indicate the country's central urban agglomeration).

ABSL is used in diverse settings and communication contexts, from casual conversation to resolving disputes and storytelling, and from transactions in local garages or grocery stores to the simultaneous home translation of broadcasted news and other TV programmes. More formal medical, bureaucratic and legal interactions (in Hebrew or Arabic) are often interpreted into ABSL by accompanying relatives. State funded interpreting services (ISL/Hebrew) are also increasingly employed in such formal settings. Even within the village, ABSL is no longer used exclusively. Like schools outside the village, Al-Sayyid schools take a Total Communication approach<sup>14</sup> to deaf education, based on ISL. Al-Sayyid deaf staff members (along with the non-Al-Sayyid teachers of the deaf) insist that the language of instruction should be exclusively ISL. However, hearing Al-Sayyid staff and peers (lacking command of ISL) regularly use ABSL to communicate with their relatives on school grounds.

Signing is not restricted to deaf signers; in fact hearing signers outnumber deaf signers. Roughly a third of the hearing population is observed to sign regularly. Whereas there are 130 deaf signers, there are more than 700 hearing signers, even when only the most immediate signing relatives are included. This minimum estimate is based on a sample survey comprised of only those hearing signers, such as siblings (and half-siblings), partners and children of deaf individuals, that were regarded by other household members, including at least one deaf relative, as competent signers. Yet (unquantified) ethnographic data indicates that there are many more hearing signers than this partial survey suggests, because there is a significant number of hearing signers who have no immediate deaf relatives.

However, the relative ease of communication between deaf and hearing, as well as the status of signed communication, does not solely depend on the number of fluent hearing signers. Indeed, hearing Al-Sayyid use the local sign language with varying degrees of proficiency. Some use local signs only to

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<sup>14</sup> This educational approach advocates using all potential sources of linguistic input (signed, spoken, written and amplification), in practice it often consist mostly of a manual code for the expression of spoken language (Marschark & Spencer 2009). Most special education schools for the deaf in Israel take the Total Communication approach (Weisel & Zandberg 2002).

accompany spoken Arabic. But, even those least proficient often demonstrate awareness of the pragmatics of signed communication and can discuss practical matters fairly easily, preferring translation for more intensive interaction; skilled signers can readily be found to mediate, translate or tutor others in improving their signing skills. Largely due to this widespread awareness and experience of the viability of signed communication, deafness in Al-Sayyid does not make for social marginalization or isolation; deaf people are not categorically shunned or stigmatised. Rather than being considered a defect or disability, deafness is commonly perceived as a condition requiring the use of signed communication.

As manifested in both common attitudes and practices, this relatively inclusive social reality is grounded in daily experiences that contest the disablement of deafness. There is no evidence that additional characteristics are perceived as inherently attached to deafness, nor are certain social roles or activities reserved for deaf people. The absence of local myths to account for deafness discloses the common perception of deafness as a form of human variation that does not require explaining or fixing.

As a consequence, attempts to reduce the rates of deafness by means of genetic testing and counselling were not received without controversy; compliance to the program was low. Likewise, most (hearing) parents were initially reluctant to respond to the active promotion of cochlear implants (CIs). However, over the last five years, after parents were convinced it would increase their children's opportunities, as many as 14 Al-Sayyid children have been implanted.

The status of deaf people is gradually being eroded by the differential and restricted structure of their opportunities. The education available for hearing Negev Bedouin is rather dismal, but deaf education has fared worse. While hearing children have been able to attend school since the late 1960s, deaf Al-Sayyid children started attending a Hebrew school for the deaf in Beersheba only in the early 1980s. Later, some of the male deaf students could also continue on to receive vocational training at a more distant boarding school. Only in the 1990s were the first classes for deaf students opened in Arabic schools, and in 2004, the first kindergarten (followed by elementary school classes) opened in Al-Sayyid. Out of the total of 134 deaf descendants among all generations of Al-Sayyid, only 14 have never had any form of schooling, and deaf people attend school for longer on average compared to their hearing peers. Nonetheless, literacy among most deaf students remains poor.

The separate and mostly inferior schooling available for deaf students presents the most obvious structural disparity between deaf and hearing Al-Sayyid. This schooling has not been designed to prepare students for matriculation certificates, and so higher education has not been available to deaf students. Their options are limited to a few vocational training programmes.

During the adult lives of the first deaf descendants, farming and animal husbandry – the previously dominant sources of livelihood – became severely restricted and income increasingly depended on wage labour. Bedouin men generally inhabit the unskilled, lower strata of the Israeli labour market, with unemployment rates among the highest in the country. Among the Al-Sayyid, sources of income are diverse, including jobs as watchmen, mechanics, tractor or truck drivers, or seasonal agricultural or construction workers. Many commute daily or weekly to work all over the country. There are small business owners and over a dozen hearing young men who have studied abroad in medicine, dentistry, pharmacology and law. Though there is a growing number of both male and female teachers, Bedouin women are otherwise rarely involved in paid labour. Among young deaf Al-Sayyid women however, the rate of employment as trained and untrained educational staff at the local schools is slightly higher than that of their hearing counterparts. With poor literacy but relative ease of access to a limited number of vocational courses, most deaf men and women occupy the middle to lower range of occupations. The recent recession has left many hearing and most deaf men unemployed and dependent on welfare benefits with occasional informal day work.

Over 30 years of separate deaf education (and consequent differential work opportunities) have reduced the social space shared by deaf and hearing Al-Sayyid and transformed deaf people's social networks. This has contributed to the emergence of deaf sociality associated with the use of ISL, as well as a preference for deaf-deaf marriages. In 2004, the marriage of a deaf Al-Sayyid woman to her (non Al-Sayyid Bedouin) classmate constituted the first deaf-deaf marriage among the Al-Sayyid. Since then, half (7 out of 14) of the marriages of deaf Al-Sayyid women have been with deaf partners almost exclusively from outside the community. Deaf-deaf marriages were initially received with some apprehension, as many deaf and hearing considered the familiar arrangement (the marriage of a deaf and hearing signer) advantageous. Besides, family members and deaf candidates often lacked the

social networks to arrange deaf-deaf marriages. This illustrates that whereas the sociolinguistic space shared by deaf and hearing Al-Sayyid is generally accommodating for deaf people, established structures and practices may – as any social configuration elsewhere – both facilitate and restrict (deaf) people (see chapters 2 & 3).

Since 2005, a team of four linguists<sup>15</sup> has published extensively on the linguistic structure of ABSL. They argue that ABSL lacks phonological organisation but recognise grammatical regularity at the syntactic, morphological, and prosodic levels. Much of their work is based on the premise that ABSL is an isolated language and Al-Sayyid an isolated community, often overlooking the widespread bilingualism of both deaf and hearing signers. From the late 1990s the Al-Sayyid have received occasional media attention from regional, national and international media. The linguistic publications have further expanded publicity for ABSL, turning it into one of the most celebrated cases of what is perceived to be an emerging (sign) language, now at the centre of several academic debates. Publicity among the general public has also increased with two documentaries and the publication of a popular science book (see Appendix for published essay book review). All told, this publicity has left various marks on local attitudes towards ABSL.

## A DECADE AND A HALF OF RESEARCH AMONG THE AL-SAYYID

The sociolinguistic sketch presented above and the remaining articles assembled here, are all based on ethnographic fieldwork, mostly carried out among the Negev Bedouin, over a period of over 16 years. I was first introduced to the family which later became my host family, in 1995 and my first in-residence fieldwork was carried out in the spring of 1996.

Throughout these years I have witnessed many developments unfold, some anticipated and others entirely unpredictable. I have seen little children grow into adulthood and held their own children in my arms and I have attended the second and third weddings of those who had earlier decisively condemned polygyny as a “primitive” and “old fashion” practice in which they would never engage. Houses were demolished and rebuilt; the first Bedouin

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<sup>15</sup> Sandler et. al. 2005 and other publications by these authors.

young women graduated from university; a new class of Bedouin young professionals emerged; and numerous new NGO's were established-some evolved to make significant contributions, some survived and many withered. I also witnessed the introduction of several –some more and others less - successful state intervention programs directly related to deafness, including the introduction of genetic counselling and cochlear implants. The first school for the deaf in Beersheba was closed down, the education for deaf Bedouin students shifted to classes for the deaf in schools of the general Bedouin education system and thus shifted from Hebrew to Arabic; a new generation of bilingual signers emerged who chat online and SMS regularly. These developments all impacted both the course of my fieldwork and my research focus over these years.

Representing and analysing the temporal aspects of the social phenomena we study poses several challenges. The early tendency in anthropological writing to erase time has made it guilty of “othering” its subjects and of reifying notions such as culture (Fabian 1983; Abu-Lughod 1991). In the early phases of my anthropological training and fieldwork, I felt challenged by the evidence of a rapidly changing social reality and the common reference by my interlocutors to the past. Professor Emmanuel Marx had alerted me to the pitfalls of such “now versus then” narrative frames; so that, rather than take references to the past at face value, I learned to appreciate what these narratives were revealing about the now, and then. Eventually I gained an additional (admittedly less original) way of allowing me to address this temporal challenge: with the perspective of over 16 years of research I can anchor the analysis of change in my own observations of various national and local developments, and among the Negev Bedouin and the Al-Sayyid in particular. While I can now speak of a concrete past, my own perspective has also changed over these years, as is evident among others from the different literature I consulted and some terms and analytical concept not used uniformly over the chapters.

As advantageous as an enduring acquaintance might be for the purpose of social analysis, this situation has its own drawbacks; it produces overwhelming amounts of data and makes one relentlessly aware of the ever-changing, volatile nature of social life and the multiple versions of any social reality. Additionally, the Negev has not been a new terrain. I partially grew up in the Negev and completed my high school education in Beersheba: my family migrated to Israel and settled in the Negev when my father was invited

to join the establishment of a new geology department in the Ben-Gurion University of the Negev. Although I had left the Negev after completing high school, throughout most of the years of my fieldwork my parents remained in the Negev. This background was also creatively summoned by my hosts and interlocutors to adjust my identity as they presented it to different contexts. Sometimes I was presented and labelled as foreign, removed from the laden Jewish-Arab relations; at others, I would be rooted in local contexts as the daughter of an esteemed professor at the university where small but increasing numbers of young Bedouin women and men studied.

My ethnographic project can roughly be divided into three periods (1) 1995-1999 (total of 8 months of in-residence fieldwork), (2) three long fieldwork stints in 2003-2005 (a total of 18 months<sup>16</sup>) and (3) several shorter fieldwork stints and bi-annual visits between 2007-2012 (a total of 6 months). During the last of these visits (two weeks in June 2011 and several days in January 2012), fieldwork included a comprehensive survey.

The first period of my fieldwork (1995-1999), carried out within the framework of my MA thesis, was most significant for the establishment of my contacts among the Al-Sayyid. My MA research project investigated the social construction of deafness among the Al-Sayyid. I conducted community-based fieldwork residing with a host family among the Al-Sayyid for a period of five months and several months more over the years that followed<sup>17</sup>. Although it soon became clear that multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork was necessary to capture the multiple lifeworlds, language communities and power relations in which deaf and hearing Al-Sayyid were embedded, Al-Sayyid remained my residential base. And the same family has remained my host family throughout these years.

It was during these years, since 1995, when first introduced to my host Al-Sayyid family, that I established strong contacts with several families, and an expanding network of both deaf and hearing relatives and friends. From 1995 to 2003 when I was otherwise residing, studying and teaching in Tel Aviv, I regularly visited the Negev (in addition to several month of in-residence fieldwork). These included casual and festive visits, such as

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<sup>16</sup> January-March 2003, November 2003-April 2004, September 2004-March 2005, July-Aug 2005, July-Aug 2006, amounting to a total period of 18 months.

<sup>17</sup> April to August 1996, Aug 1997, June 1998, June-July 1999

weddings, but also other events or tasks that I was summoned to participate in, such as *sulha* (conflict resolution), and escorting people to clinics, courts and women to birth.

By the end of 2003, after a year of working on another research project, I decided to continue my main research focus on deafness and signing among the Negev Bedouin for the purpose of my Ph.D. research project at the University of Amsterdam. During the first two years (the second and most intense fieldwork period) I spend more time in the Negev than in Amsterdam. In the years that followed (the third period) I resided in Amsterdam, I visited bi-annually and maintained several long distance contacts. The possibilities to maintain long-distance communication were expanded during this time. Initially contact was maintained by occasional phone calls and letter correspondence with several deaf and hearing individuals. But gradually more people had mobile phones and in recent years internet connections and video calls are also becoming increasingly available.

During these years I have also engaged in several other projects and developed several other research interests. One such research project examined the encounters between Bedouin and Jewish women in the regional hospital, addressing question of gender, nation and citizenship (it resulted in the article that makes for chapter 6 of this dissertation). Another project was an ethnographic study of an experimental grassroots educational project at an elementary school in one of the Bedouin townships. This study examined how different participants including both students and staff, engaged with the project drawing on resources in the community and its physical environments. This school was also one of the first Bedouin schools to have inclusive classes for deaf students. The resulting report was later integrated into a report submitted by the Ben-Gurion University of the Negev to the Israeli ministry of education. Other opportunities to collaborate with several grassroots organizations related to my research interests, further enhancing my inquiry and contributed to my deeper involvement and understanding of the situation in the Negev. These include serving as advisor to grassroots organizations that are addressing the problems met by various sectors and interest groups, including health issues in unrecognized Bedouin villages, the rights of Bedouin women, and educational advocacy by parents of deaf students.

However, I turned down several invitations by medical and linguistic teams to serve as advisor on projects related to deafness. While I was happy

to reflect on their interventions in light of my own experience and to share with them the insights from my own study, I declined these invitations when I realized how our respective disciplines understand collaboration with those studied (or interdisciplinary collaboration<sup>18</sup>). I could best encourage them to establish their own local relationships, advising them to be aware of how, in the face of neglect and discrimination, people's cooperation is often accompanied by implicit -but high -expectations and hopes. However, the growing interest in Al-Sayyid, in particular, eventually had a major impact on the unfolding of my own research trajectory. As more was published on the Al-Sayyid I became increasingly implicated in interdisciplinary exchange.

## INTERDISCIPLINARY DIALOGUE

Al-Sayyid has been the target of several research projects and interventions. While I considered these activities an integral part of my field of inquiry, these projects also brought me into dialogue with different fields of knowledge production. This dialogue enabled me to advocate closer examination of daily practices and interactional patterns, on the one hand and plead for better incorporation of the social, sociolinguistic and political context on the other. It is the joining of these two enterprises, best captured in two epigraphs to this chapter, the "ethnographies of the particular" and the creating of new connections as we redefine our subject matter, that I consider to be the essence of my anthropological approach.

While I was studying the Al-Sayyid several studies were published, mostly by linguists and few linguistic anthropologists, documenting comparable cases where high incidences of deafness facilitated the emergence of sign languages shared by deaf and hearing. These cases attracted the attention not only of geneticists, but also increasingly that of scholars in Deaf Studies, disability studies and sign language linguistics.

While my anthropological inquiry is informed by the relevant work produced by scholars in these fields, it is also produced in the tension between engaging in dialogue with them and my conviction that the study of deafness can make a contribution to the social sciences, broadly, appealing to scholars not necessarily interested in deafness as such.

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<sup>18</sup> I was not convinced that they considered anthropology could offer them particular analytical insights, rather they were interested in what they consider raw data.

Additionally, while neighbouring (and partially overlapping) fields of inquiry might benefit from a more cautious and critical use of concepts developed in anthropology and in the social sciences, I submit that anthropology should engage with the afterlife of the concepts it developed, including -and maybe particularly- those that were reconsidered (or even discarded) within anthropology but then went on to gain stronghold in other disciplines. Within anthropology concepts too often fall from popularity or disappear without their drawbacks or the good reasons to abandon them being spelled out (I here think of notions such as kinship and community). One concept that has been thoroughly and sharply reviewed is the notion of culture itself (e.g. Abu-Lughod 1991; Kuper 1999).

While anthropologists have relentlessly documented the contradictory nature of social life, in many other fields of enquiry notions as culture are still assumed to denote a coherent property. Moreover, other disciplines often expect anthropology to provide them with the “stuff” of culture: such fixed cultural notions run the risk of becoming so rigid that they might as well be considered innate (Abu-Lughod 1991). Thus, engaging in interdisciplinary dialogue sometimes entails stating that which might seem redundant and obvious within one’s own discipline: such as pointing out that kinship diagrams do not reflect actual social relations, that despite cultural idioms, kinship is seldom the only source of networks of affiliation and collaboration, or that common accounts and discourses are not mere reflections of some cultural logic or belief, but should be understood as a practice within the specific context in which they arise. I believe it remains the work of anthropologists to challenge the grip of such notions in other disciplines (as well as in popular public discourse).

In this sense, each of the articles assembled here, though they are connected by their core theme, makes a new start. Each article takes a different angle to engage with debates in fields of inquiry working with quite different sets of assumptions than mine. This is manifest not only in the content of these essays but also in their place of publication and the literature with which they engage.

The article that makes for chapter 2 (Kisch 2008a) was published in *Medical Anthropology*; chapter 3 (Kisch 2004) was written for an edited volume entitled *Genetics, Disability, and Deafness* published by *Gallaudet University Press* (the primary publisher of academic book series and journals in Deaf Studies); chapter 4 (as well as the Sociolinguistic Sketch integrated

into this introduction) are forthcoming in a volume entitled *Endangered Sign Languages in Village Communities* with a mostly linguistic audience to be published by Ishara Press, specializing in publications on sign language and Mouton de Gruyter; chapter 5 (Kisch 2007a) was published in *Disability Studies Quarterly*; chapter 6 (Kisch 2008a) was published in *Anthropological Quarterly*. The appended essay book review was published in *Sign Language Linguistics*. Below I briefly describe the growing academic interest in shared signing communities and outline how my engagement with the different disciplines evolved.

When I first visited the Al-Sayyid the most prominent academic interest in the high incidence of deafness among the Al-Sayyid was on the part of geneticists; high prevalence of particular genetic conditions facilitates identifying the loci of genetic mutations. This knowledge was produced in the context of the possible intervention to reduce the incidence of deafness. A genetic study identifying the genetic locus of deafness among the Al-Sayyid was completed shortly before my arrival (Scott et. al. 1995). It was followed by an attempt with limited success to create a genetic database, and a pre-marital genetic compatibility testing and counselling project. Despite the intent of the genetic programs, carrier screening did not become a standard premarital procedure. Even so, genetic testing introduced the notion of carriers as well as of genetic incompatibility. These notions have been creatively used, for instance, when in the absence of genetic testing, families alleged genetic incompatibility to disqualify potential marriage unions as well as already settled engagements, that have fallen out of favour for other reasons. Actual testing is mostly restricted to individuals and some couples, typically the initiative of high-schooled potential brides. I argue these cases illustrate the status and confidence of educated young women in finding a marriage partner; while most brides with a lower education, and their families, consider genetic testing itself to hamper marriageability, a significant risk in comparison to the avoidance of the specific so-called genetic risk of having deaf children.

My first English language publication (chapter 3, this volume) resulted from an invitation to participate in a conference at Gallaudet University (the only university worldwide that offers a bimodal-bilingual, American Sign Language and English, education program), which was intended to generate a long-avoided dialogue between Deaf people, Deaf Studies and geneticists reflecting on the interventions and knowledge they produced. My

presentation there was the only one concerning a case of exceptionally high incidences of deafness.

I initially framed my work mostly in the context of the literature on deafness and deaf sociality. However, as the literature and references to the newly documented comparable cases, in general, and to the Al-Sayyid in particular grew, I increasingly engaged with the assumptions underlying their comparative sociolinguistic and linguistic analysis.

The best-known case of a shared sign language was reported in the ethnographic-historical study with the revealing title, “Everyone here spoke sign language” (Groce 1985), exploring the shared lives of deaf and hearing signers on Martha’s Vineyard during the second half of the 19th century (Groce 1985; Lane et al. 2000). Other cases since documented are: Desa Kolok on Bali, Indonesia (Branson et al. 1996; Hinnant 2000; Marsaja 2008); Adamorobe in Ghana (Nyst 2007; Kusters 2012); and a group of villages in Ban Khor, Thailand (Woodward 2003; Nonaka 2004, 2009).

Spread as they are over the globe, each of these cases is embedded in a distinct social, economic and political context. However, they all involve locally-emerged sign languages used by deaf and hearing members of relatively small groups with high incidences of congenital deafness i.e. 1 to 2 per cent (as compared with the expected rate of 0.1 per cent of congenital deafness in the general population). In other aspects, including those related to the position of deaf people, these cases vary considerably.

To refer to these comparable cases I have introduced the term *shared signing community* (Kisch 2008a, chapter 2 this volume). Though I recognize the limitations of the term “community”, too often vaguely used to imply very diverse social features (Creed 2006; Joseph 2002) I use the term in the restricted sense of a linguistic speech community following (Hymes 1974). I introduced the term to capture the unique sociolinguistic circumstances where sign languages are developed and used by deaf and hearing alike, a fact often downplayed by both linguists and Deaf Studies scholars. My term has been adopted by some linguists to denote shared signing communities (e.g. Zeshan & de Vos, in press), and to correspondingly denote shared sign languages (e.g. Nyst 2012), yet problematic terms such as “village sign languages”, “isolated deaf communities”, and “deaf villages” are still commonly used in the literature.

My conclusions were reached in view of two dominant lines of inquiry taken by different disciplinary approaches to shared signing communities. Both suffered from rather romanticized notions of bounded, traditional, village communities and isolation. Deaf Studies focus on the circumstances for the emergence of so-called Deaf communities and Deaf identity (e.g. Schein 1992; Bahan & Pool-Nash 1995; Woll & Ladd 2003; Monaghan 2003), and mostly consider shared signing communities as their contrast or as embryonic Deaf communities. Also in disability studies attention to these cases is often related to the absence of stigma and disablement (e.g., Scheer & Groce 1988; Oliver 1990; Ingstad & Whyte 1995). In Deaf studies this perspective produced a range of conclusions, from the romantic extreme myth of a “Deaf Utopia” (Kusters 2010) to sceptical allegations of deaf people’s “false consciousness” in such circumstances. When presenting my work on Al-Sayyid in Gallaudet University in 2003, for instance, several Deaf commentators suggested that the absence of a distinct Deaf identity within conditions of perceived integration represented a form of “false consciousness”. Strongly inspired by an ethnic minority politics frame (Nakamura 2006; Davis 2008), this perspective is grounded in a form of identity politics dominant in the American Deaf Community, and much of Deaf Studies.

While I have benefited from the scholarship of both deaf studies and disability studies, it has also been challenging to engage with it. Both are transdisciplinary enterprises that emerged from social movements: analogous to what Strathern (1987: 268) writes about feminist studies, Deaf studies and disability studies “...know themselves as an interest group. There is certainty about the context”. To complicate matters further, despite overlaps and alliances between Deaf and Disability Studies, they exist in an uneasy tension, largely as a result of common ambivalence among deaf people towards disability as a category of affiliation (Burch and Kafer 2010). Besides, anthropologists are under-represented among both disability studies (Kasnitz & Shuttleworth 2001) and Deaf studies (Senghas & Monaghan 2002) both of which largely rely on studies conducted in the global north. In the case of Deaf studies, this has resulted in a rather uniform notion of culturally Deaf, conveyed in terms such as Deaf community or Deaf identity. These terms are marked by an uppercase Deaf to distinguish the socio-cultural from the physiological condition of deafness.

Over the years I have experimented with various terms in an attempt to do justice to the social reality I was studying, and at the same time

accommodate cross disciplinary dialogue. Initially I had used the deaf/Deaf distinction mostly to note the absence of these reified uppercase objects of study. I also tried to accomplish the same thing without using these terms, still to convey that deafness did not serve as a postulate for social alignment as a distinct social group (chapters 2 and 3), elsewhere I wrote of various manifestations of deaf alliance (chapters 2 and 5). But as my study extended, I witnessed increasingly more variation, including the emergence of new forms of deaf sociality, still I felt uncomfortable and limited by any terms requiring binary classification. I sought a way to avoid having to draw the line between those who embrace a familiar Deaf identity, those who don't, and those cultivating a less pronounced or simply different sense of being deaf. Several times (chapter 5) following Senghas and Monaghan (2002), I employed a combined d/Deaf to surmount the binary.

I was intrigued by Ladd's (2003) notion of Deafhood as an analytical category of subjectivity instead of an effort to label identities, for I found it particularly useful for imagining a range of shapes such a sense of being might take. Even so, rather than evoking further discussion within Deaf studies, the term— still marked by the use of the uppercase Deafhood—is subject to the same binary thinking. More recently, I see new possibilities in the more general and open notion of deaf sociality to which I was introduced through the excellent work of Michele Friedner (2010, 2011), who was also grappling with the conventional terms in her study with young deaf people in urban India. This term seems to accommodate a nuanced analysis of the myriad manifestations of a collective deaf experience, as well as to facilitate the spread of insights from deaf studies more broadly to the social sciences.

My work has brought me into dialogue with another discipline interested in sign languages and shared signing communities, namely linguistics. Many of the linguists directly involved in the study of shared sign languages are concerned with their endangerment as revealed by the title of the edited volume (Zeshan & de Vos, in press) *Endangered Sign Languages in Village Communities* (see also Nyst 2007, 2012; Nonaka 2004). However, the more dominant line of inquiry is informed by the growing interest of modern linguistics and cognitive sciences in sign language linguistics. The quest to study the conditions that engender language and the origins of human language and its structures (e.g. Senghas 2005; Arbib 2009; Meir et. al. 2010a), has made the study of relatively young sign languages a cutting edge theme. ABSL is considered to be a (sign) language isolate. Based on my own research

there is little doubt that the sign language of Al-Sayyid is indeed a language-isolate in the strict sense of the word: a natural language with no demonstrable ancestral language. However, it certainly did not emerge in a “linguistic vacuum” (Fox 2007:280) or in the absence of linguistic models or external influences (Aronoff et. al. 2005; Meir & Sandler 2008). Moreover, in this literature there is a slippage from “language isolate” to “isolated community”, and a general failure to mention prominent features of the dynamic sociolinguistic landscape in which the signers of this “language isolate” operate; most pointedly this setting includes widespread schooling and bilingualism, increasing literacy rates and the socially, economically and politically marginal, rather than isolated, position of the Negev Bedouin. Since 2005, more than a dozen linguistic articles have been published on the Al-Sayyid Bedouin Sign Language. These are often cited in many other publications, and a popular science book was written about the ABSL research project (see book review in Appendix). In *all* these texts the Al-Sayyid are repeatedly portrayed as reputedly remote, isolated, and insular.

## MARGINALITY AND CONTEXT

Studying people in context has been one of anthropology’s distinctive features, one with both theoretical and methodological importance (Strathern 1987; Dilley 1999; Hazan 1995; Fabian 1995). Malinowski insisted that practices and ideas were to be analysed as intrinsic to a specific social context, playing an important role in the emergence of the discipline. Defining such context is anything but a straightforward task, however. Anthropology is not the only discipline concerned with context. Different disciplines, most notably philosophy and linguistics (and schools within these disciplines) offer diverse definitions of context in general, and would thus arrive at different conclusions as to what should be considered as relevant to a particular phenomenon. In linguistics, context can range from implying the mere semantic environment of a word, to a range of social and cultural features considered relevant to linguistic analysis, as suggested by the works of Dell Hymes (Duranti and Goodwin 1992).

Engagement in the interdisciplinary debates discussed in the previous section, encouraged me from early on to consider the possible contribution of my anthropological training and approach to such a dialogue, consequently it made me recognize two inseparable ingredients of an anthropological

approach to context. In this a sections I outline my anthropological perspective .

Anthropology is equally committed to examining the context in which social phenomena are embedded and perceived locally, as to exploring the ways people and social phenomena are embedded in broader social contexts. The two epigraphs of this chapter encapsulate these two inseparable ingredients of context in an anthropological approach. The first quote from Abu-Lughod (1991) emphasizes the need for “ethnographies of the particular”, the lives of particular individuals and their daily practices. The second quote from Gupta and Ferguson (1997) emphasizes the need to define our subject matter with attentiveness to all relevant connections (Abu-Lughod 1991) including the particular social, cultural, and political location (Gupta & Ferguson 1997). This tension has made me increasingly aware of processes of marginalization and contextualization, leading me to several conclusions not restricted to the study of deafness.

Marginality can be seen structurally as a disadvantaged position, as distant from the centres of power, influence and control. Yet, when considering context more closely a more complex structure emerges. Examining the particular social cultural and political location most often reveals that people are entangled in more than one and often incompatible structures of power, and when these structural constraints are examined from within the context of their own experience and the desires that inform their subjectivities and strategies- we can learn how people employ their local resources to manoeuvre within the structural limitations of their locations. This dialectics can only be understood if we heed anthropology’s pleas to understand the people and social phenomena we study both from within the context of their own lived experience and as embedded in broader social cultural and political structures.

Over the years, I have employed different analytical tools to deal with this dialectics and explore the implications and dynamics of social marginality. In particular, I examine marginality in the context, and as a consequence, of multiple and incompatible power relations. Only retrospectively I recognized that marginality and context gradually emerged as reoccurring themes underlying many of my issues with the literature I engaged with on deafness and on the Negev Bedouin.

I here briefly mention some of the analytical concept I had employed over the years. In chapters 2 and 3 (Kisch 2008a, 2004) I considers the

permeability of languages in relation to dominant forms of discourse, drawing on Talal Asad's (1986) notion of the inequalities of languages, which enables me to better understand encounters between marginal minorities and dominant establishments. In analysing the dialectical communication web in chapter 2 (Kisch 2008a), I use Dumont's (1980) notion of dialectical hierarchy to illustrate how social asymmetries are seldom reducible to one-dimensional hierarchies. Gender well illustrates that seemingly fixed hierarchies are reversed when men have restricted access to women's discourse. Yet men's consequent reliance on mediation does not result in social subordination - just as in the case of sign/speech translations among the Al-Sayyid that despite the asymmetry does not result in subordination. In chapter 3 (2004) the earliest of these articles, I respond to attempts to understand local accounts of deafness as reflecting cultural beliefs. Analysing the context summoned by those providing the accounts, reveals that they should be understood as responses to the genetic study and counselling project.

In chapters 5 and 6 (Kisch 2007a, 2009a), I draw on Abu-Lughod's (1990) notion that women juggle between various incompatible power relations. Chapter 6, concerning encounters between Bedouin and Jewish women in an Israeli hospital, shows how Negev Bedouin women enmeshed in patriarchal gender relations, political discrimination, changing regimes of production, and medical regimes of reproduction carve out a space to negotiate the dilemmas (as well as new technologies) introduced by these changing power relations.

To question the usefulness of thinking of deaf Bedouin women, (or of disability, gender and ethnicity more generally) in terms of triple marginality I also draws on the notion of intersectionality (Chapter 5). This notion allowed me to analyse how the structural location transforms the experience of being Bedouin, woman and deaf. However, I also consider state agencies as representing one of multiple and incompatible power relations in which Bedouin women are entangled.

From within this dialectical analytical approach I try to understand the tendency to depict the Al-Sayyid as an isolated (insular, remote, self-containing, closed) community. I also attempt to respond to this tendency by underscoring the significant difference between isolation and marginalization.

## OUTLINE OF CHAPTERS

**Chapter 2**, entitled “*The Social Construction of Deafness in a Bedouin Community in the Negev*”<sup>19</sup>, provides an in-depth analysis of the Al-Sayyid shared-signing community and advocates closer investigation of both facilitating and disabling social practices, in the study of comparable cases. Based on the analysis of two extended ethnographic events this article analyses the shared use of sign language, the asymmetry it entails, and the manifold forms of translation and mediation that take place among the Al-Sayyid. The chapter argues that, despite the asymmetry constituted by deaf people’s reliance on signed communication, in contrast to hearing people’s access to both spoken and signed modality, deafness cannot be reduced to the disabling absence of speech or dependency on translation. It shows that among the Al-Sayyid reliance on translation and mediation is not restricted to deaf people; for, local communication patterns involve many different forms of translation, including signed, spoken and written language modes in Hebrew, Arabic and more than one sign language. The chapter demonstrates that ABSL should be examined within a multiplex of languages, language modes and domains. Using the example of gendered discourse it demonstrates how asymmetries are irreducible to one-dimensional hierarchies. I argue that so long as deaf people will be located in positions that allow them-like their hearing relatives- to also provide translation, their reliance on translation of spoken communication need not result in disablement or cause social isolation. This chapter also responds to several problems within the literature on comparable cases, especially the terms used to describe and classify them. I introduce the notion of a *shared signing community*, as a type of speech community where deaf and hearing share unique experiential knowledge, grounded in daily experiences with deafness, and signed communication.

Although this chapter was originally published in “*Medical Anthropology*”, it does not focus on medical aspects of deafness, but rather demonstrates that, in the context of a shared-signing community, deafness is not easily subjugated to its medical model. The next chapter explores the responses to one of the interventions contributing to the medicalization of deafness among the Negev Bedouin.

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<sup>19</sup> Originally published in *Medical Anthropology*. 27(3):283-313. 2008.

**Chapter 3** entitled *Negotiating (Genetic) Deafness in a Bedouin Community* was originally published in an edited volume<sup>20</sup> resulting from the earlier mentioned conference *Genetics, Disability, and Deafness* held at Gallaudet University in 2003. Genetic research among the Al-Sayyid, completed shortly before I started research, confirmed that deafness among the Al-Sayyid was a recessive inherited condition ascribed to intermarriage. With the onset of genetic research medical perspectives of deafness were introduced among the Negev Bedouin, followed by efforts to create a genetic database for purpose of genetic counselling. Compliance was low, however. Having examined the local accounts of deafness among the Al-Sayyid Bedouin, I argue that rather than reflecting ignorance of the genetic explanation of deafness, they should be understood as responses to the genetic study and counselling project and as attempts to negotiate it. This chapter concerns the impact of the introduction of such medical models; it explores the local accounts of deafness in response to the medical establishment's presumption that the high rate of deafness necessitates intervention into one of the most sensitive social arenas: marriage arrangement. Local accounts of deafness, my research suggests, are mainly offered out of concern with the implications of the genetic explanation. For deafness is generally perceived as manageable. Finding suitable marriage partners (for deaf or for hearing individuals) is a source of growing concern, however. Considering discourse not merely as a key to cultural representations and local theories of procreation, but as a practice, reveals that the local explanations of deafness can be understood as attempts to negotiate the prescription of genetic counselling. The genetic explanation is partly employed when convenient, but in seeking a marriage partner, people consider many factors over the avoidance of one specific genetic risk.

**Chapter 4** is entitled *Demarcating generations of signers in the dynamic sociolinguistic landscape of a shared sign-language: the case of the Al-Sayyid Bedouin*<sup>21</sup>. This chapter examines the challenges involved in identifying

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<sup>20</sup> This chapter is a slightly modified version of the chapter published in Van Cleve, John Vickrey (ed). 2004. *Genetics, Disability, and Deafness*. Washington DC: Gallaudet University press. pp 195-227.

<sup>21</sup> To appear in Zeshan, U. and C. de Vos (eds.) [in press]. *Endangered Sign Languages in Village Communities: Anthropological and Linguistic Insights*. Sign Language Typology Series 4. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter & Ishara Press.

generation of signers in shared signing communities. It is directed to a mostly linguistic audience, particularly those studying shared sign languages. The chapter provides a detailed analysis of my most recently updated survey among the Al-Sayyid, including a concrete proposal classifying deaf Al-Sayyid signers into four generations of signers and sub-cohorts, a detailed profile of each cohort, and guidelines for incorporating hearing signers into this structure. One purpose of this detailed proposal is to inform the further investigation of ABSL by resolving several common misconceptions with regards to ABSL and making my data on the variation and multilingualism among its users available. However, the main purpose of the chapter is to serve the study of comparable shared sign languages by advocating a better incorporation of hearing signers, and recognition of dynamic sociolinguistic networks, too often assumed to be embedded simply in primary kin-networks. It addresses the confusion caused by mistaking structural generations of descent (typically represented in kinship diagrams) for social or cultural generations, of actual contemporaries with shared experiences and language input. I considers the relevance of these categories and kinship diagrams to the task of identifying sociolinguistic generations of signers, emphasizing the importance of complementing kinship diagrams with an analysis of actual (kin and non-kin) social relations.

The case of Al-Sayyid illustrates the processes by which signers are embedded in multiple language communities: in particular, changing work and marriage patterns mediated by schooling, differentially shape the social networks of Bedouin (deaf and hearing) men and women. I argue that recognizing the social factors that transform the sociolinguistic networks of signers, is imperative in order to consider all possible avenues for language exposure, spread, and transmission. Linguists hoping to identify independent developments within these relatively young languages, must consider communicative input broadly as well as the possibility of contact-induced change; both have too often been overlooked.

**Chapter 5** entitled *Disablement Gender and Deafhood among the Negev Arab-Bedouin*<sup>22</sup>, explores the different lived experiences and structures of opportunities of deaf Bedouin men and women. While chapters 2, 3 and 4

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<sup>22</sup> Originally published in *Disability Studies Quarterly* 27(4) .2007.

focus on the Al-Sayyid shared signing community, this chapter analyses several intersecting factors shaping the differential state of deaf men versus women among the Negev Bedouin more generally. I show that the extent to which deaf people among the Negev Bedouin are disabled varies considerably.

Most deaf Bedouin are born into families inexperienced with deafness, which makes for an important distinction between deaf Bedouin. But disablement also considerably varies along gender lines; having different social implications for Bedouin men versus women. Because gender disparities among the Negev Bedouin are too often simply ascribed to so called traditional gender relations, the role of state agencies in reinforcing gender disparities is often overlooked; I therefore demonstrate the combined impact of both new-but limited -schooling opportunities not equally available to men and women and of changing marriage patterns.

I also show how marriage patterns and schooling opportunities shape the emergence of a new sense of Deafhood among young deaf Bedouin, also varying along gender lines. I argue against an approach reducing the condition of deaf Bedouin women to triple marginality resulting merely in intensified oppression. To do justice to the lived experience of Bedouin deaf women, their positions and structural constraints are examined from within the context of their own experience and the desires that inform their subjectivities and strategies. Thus illustrating how they employ their local resources to manoeuvre within their often limited structures of opportunities. The chapter provides an analysis of the intersection of deafness and gender, focusing on the way marriage and schooling inform the lives of deaf Bedouin women and men, shaping their lived experiences and structure of opportunities.

**Chapter 6**, entitled *Reproductive Encounters: Negev Bedouin Women's Experience of Childbirth in an Israeli Hospital*<sup>23</sup>, is the only chapter not directly related to deafness. However, it arose not only from my fieldwork among the Al-Sayyid and the countless times I accompanied women to visits at the maternity wards, it also emerged from similar analytical concerns. Like the previous chapter on deafness and gender, this chapter demonstrates the ways women juggle between different power relations and manoeuvre within their limited structures of opportunities.

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<sup>23</sup> Originally published in *Anthropological Quarterly* 82(30):719-754, 2009.

This paper examines the encounters between women on two sides of a socio-political divide: for several days during and after birth, Israeli Jewish and Arab-Bedouin women, share intimate space and daily routines. It analyses the significance of Bedouin women's encounters with unfamiliar women, both Jewish and Bedouin, for what they reveal of Bedouin women's negotiation of self and other. In the context of the unmediated knowledge Bedouin women establish about the Other, they reflect critically on their own society and engage in complex deliberations among themselves related to childcare and motherhood, generating a broader critical debate. The hospital is, thus, not merely a site where health-related values and practices are enacted, but one where they are formulated, negotiated and challenged, vis-à-vis others. The chapter argues for the significance of studying what I here call "lay encounters" for what they betray of the larger social context in which they are embedded. It shows how hospital maternity wards present an unusual encounter zone embodying various contradictions, especially for those Bedouin women who do not move freely in public space, particularly in spaces that are mixed by gender and ethnicity.

**Chapter 7** is the concluding chapter and reverts to the issues raised in the introduction. It revisits the main arguments and indicates new directions for further research.