

Authenticity in Cultural Studies

Black Deaf Studies Symposium Proceedings

Tom Humphries 

University of California San Diego, www.ucsd.edu
thumphries@ucsd.edu

Abstract

Dr. Tom Humphries explores the inherent biases rooted in cultural and academic studies. He posits that individuals perceive and interpret cultural studies through their unique lenses, influenced by their personal and cultural backgrounds. This presents a challenge to achieving authenticity in research and narratives. The issue extends into academia, where established traditions and ways of thinking can exclude diverse perspectives and approaches. Humphries emphasizes the need for self-examination and the recognition that every piece of research is filtered through the researcher's personal and cultural experiences. He also underscores the significance of creating dynamic, new narratives that reflect a more diverse and authentic representation of cultures, particularly in Black and Deaf communities, to counter existing misconceptions and biases.

Keywords

Authenticity, Cultural Studies, Biases, Narratives, Academia, Diversity

Presentation Transcript

(Slide 1 – 00:00)

Good morning. It's so fascinating to see you all here. What a tremendous day that we have been anticipating for so long. I can see the collective energy and spirit and passion in the room. And it's awesome.

I know I have limited time, so I will try to condense my talk to 20 minutes. And if I can do it in 20 minutes, we'll see. I will try my best.

The title of my presentation is "Authenticity and Cultural Studies." I will explain a little bit more about that. It takes a different approach than Glenn (Anderson). Glenn was sharing some of his experiences. And my presentation will be a little bit more theory based. Please bear with me.

Next slide.

(Slide 2 – 00:57)

Many people in cultural studies, specifically in the field of cultural studies, think about culture as a predicament. And I agree with that. Culture does present us with a predicament to unpack. Culture itself is something that you have probably realized is your own understanding. So we have a personal culture that we have had and acquired from our upbringing. So we see things through our cultural lenses. Our perspectives, my perspective. And it's filtered through that cultural experience that I have had. Which means that I can't necessarily see and understand other people's cultures through their eyes. That does present us with quite a predicament for studying and for writing and reporting and documenting and narrating.

So everything we produce as researchers, we have to know that we're looking at this through our own lenses and our own cultural experiences, our own filters, biases, and prejudices. And we all have to do that. We all have to engage in self-examination. And of course, we know that in conducting this work, we have to know that it will be filtered through our own personal experience and expression of how I understand culture, how I see the world. And so we all have a responsibility to understand that concept further and know that when we're conducting cultural studies, we certainly do have to keep that in the back of our minds. And that is because, honestly, in the same way, science is also an expression of culture, a cultural production. Science is a cultural expression. Whose science: mine, yours, or theirs?

And so science is a construct that's expressed by us through our own cultural eyes.

And with that being said, what that means is that when we're producing a particular work or study, either if we're writing a report or we're conducting research, we have a problem of authenticity in our work. Are the results true? Are they not true? Are they real? Are they not real? So that's a question that we have to ask ourselves. I think there are many who know about the problem of authenticity and what that presents in our work as researchers. Whether you are Deaf and you're looking at Deaf cultural studies or Black Deaf cultural studies, it is there in our work.

This is especially true in the academy, in the world of the university, research, teaching, and learning. Investigations, histories, this is the world of the academy.

And the problem with the academy is that we also see the academy through our own eyes, keeping in mind our own biases. The academy itself has certain ways of doing things. It has certain ways of thinking. It has certain rules that are to be followed. There are certain ways of conducting research and how to define research. Is this research? Is

that research? The academy has certain demands that we as scholars have to follow, or... not. I'll talk more about that.

(Slide 3 – 05:01)

In the academy, as I did for over 40 years, there are certain challenges that we face. The academy already has certain traditions of research, of cultural studies, and of analyzing work. There are traditions of narrating, reporting and writing research, and when we, in general, express our ideas, we are following the academy's already established conventions and traditions around how to do that.

What that means is as we look at scholarship and the science of scholarship, it often excludes certain ways of doing. And there is a word here that I use, on the slide heuristics, a fancy word, I apologize.. There are ways of doing and thinking and mental ways of being in the academy that have already been established. Deviation from this established way is difficult, people will judge my work with skepticism. I admit that in my early writings, people in cultural studies looked at it and laughed, thinking it was immature and amateurish. And it was true. I would reflect on my writing and have to admit, it was, but I was learning.

And I would also say that in early times in my career, we had to challenge the narratives that were out there, we didn't like existing narratives. As a Deaf scholar, my early narratives my challenged older narratives in ways that others didn't like. People would disagree with the conclusions that I came to. And they would say what I wrote was not true, and if I used the word culture, they would say it's not true. It was a problem.

Back to the point, as we become more authentic, our most authentic selves, we resist existing narratives and push back against them.

(Slide 4 – 07:26)

I would like to make a bold statement. And that is prior to the 1960s, people who were researching the Deaf community and writing about them were producing fictions. They were constructions through their own eyes written about us, but not by us. That was their perspective as white Deaf people, not ours. And I know as Black Deaf people they were not yours either.

And so the history of science about Deaf people is a history of misconceptions and harms.

In my limited few minutes remaining, I will try my best to share with you my perspectives.

But remember, this is my perspective. And I would like to give you some ideas in terms of what I see as the challenges for the disciplines of Black studies and Black Deaf studies. Of course, this is through my own eyes, my own lens.

(Slide 5 – 08:43)

So when we think about studying culture, for me, cultural studies is, quote, unquote, the study of us.

And so not their study of us, but our own studies of us. And simultaneously, we have to think about the study of not us. Because that is also important.

We have to study them and their view of us. Why do they have that view of us? What is behind that view of us? Their biases, their prejudices, why do they see us that way? As Black Deaf, why do they see you that way? Explain to me, what's their meaning system that produces that view? We have to study them as well. Right now, you are doing what I did when I started studying culture, I focused on us. That is important.

You're doing that now. You have to establish that clearly right now. You are studying us. But you have to keep in mind and pay attention to not us so that you know what narratives they are producing about your community.

Someone told me, we need to know what the deal is with others. That's true.

(Slide 6 – 10:33)

I think there are a few things that I should say about that process. And maybe I'm overreaching here, but I know that when I started, and I see you here have started. I do want to say that this is a very important time. We have to create. We have to borrow. We have to revise and retain new narratives. And throughout my career, it has been about creating, writing, and disseminating new narratives. Because if we want others to change their narratives, we have to offer something to replace those narratives. I want to replace their narratives with mine. We have to offer new narratives to replace theirs. And there are parallels to many other groups such as women, for example. Women have had to challenge the others' narratives and replace those narratives with new ones.

And I would also add that it's important to create new narratives that are very dynamic. The nature of narratives is that they are constantly changing and revised. They can't be frozen. No one owns a particular narrative. Once you have a narrative and you share it

with the public, it's out there. And that means it's not yours anymore. The community, the people, now own this narrative.

Be careful about becoming too possessive. If it's the work that you're doing, yes, it is your work, yes, you thought of it, it's your idea, but don't own it. And don't let other people own it. We don't want appropriation.

Next slide, please.

(Slide 7 – 12:43)

So as I mentioned previously, we need to create new areas of study, new disciplines, such as the field of Black Deaf studies. Doing so is an act of resistance. It is activism.

When you study culture it is almost always an act of resistance. And it requires activists, and you will be challenging what's been done, said, and written before. That leads to certain tensions. There will be stress and emotion.

When I began in this field, it was very emotional work. It was very frustrating. There were some people here who are old enough to remember me during those days, and I was furious. I was hot tempered. I would yell at people. I admit that. But it comes with how frustrated we are, how aggrieved we are, and we have to get it out there.

If you are a better person than me, you will do it in a nicer way, I often felt very alone. Doing that activism while also doing scholarship is a real balancing act that becomes quite the challenge. We can't stop doing activism. That's what most of us are about. We protest for Deaf people, or we protest for Black Deaf people, and we cannot take away the activism from ourselves while we do scholarship. We have to manage it and ask yourselves how we will manage it. I manage it my way, sometimes not very well, and you have to manage it your way, specifically how you struggle with -isms, and take a deep dive in your research work while keeping your cool and stay that way.

I have no regrets, but I admit to being embarrassed at that time. But now I can say I don't care, it was important to me to do it and be myself. I hope that you feel the same way, not like me but aware that activism is part of you and scholarship is also part of you.

(Slide 8 – 15:49)

One way to engage in this work is to lead with scholarship and still do activism. Lead with scholarship and be someone who can engage deeply in research and know more

than anyone else in your field. You may think you know but I can challenge what you know with what I know.

Focus on developing more authentic narratives about Deaf and Black Deaf. You can tell people you need to look at this and show my work. I do my work, I can publish, I can disseminate, and I can give presentations and do it very carefully with scholarship that is backed up by evidence with a clear theoretical foundation in cultural studies.

What cultural studies requires is for the work to be accepted as legitimate in cultural studies. I must know my foundations, I must know my literature, and not just know my own area of focus, but I must also know other cultures as well in order to learn from them. You do that without letting them affect your final product, which is yours.

It is absolutely thrilling to open a new field, as Glenn said earlier, and see the results. There are possibly 1,000 different findings. There's a famous quote that humans have the possibilities of living 1,000 lives, but we only need one. We do have the possibilities of discovering the thousands of lives that are in each of you that collectively make up our cultures and study them. We have to study what is there. But Glenn is right, we have to look at all the different schools, it cannot be based on just one school. That's not good scholarship. You are going to be doing your work, and that's great. I can build on it. I will learn from it. I can add to other works and cite all these works in writing something that I consider good scholarship.

You are creating a new discipline of Black Deaf studies. And I tell you, wow, what an amazing opportunity. I can't describe how exciting that opportunity is. I went through the 70s, and that inspired my whole life. I hope it inspires you in the same way. And I look forward to your growth that you share with me and what I will learn from it. Thank you.

PUBLICATION TEAM

Patrick Boudreault, Executive Editor
Rezenet Moges-Riedel, Co-Editor
Lissa Ramirez-Stapleton, Co-Editor
Megan Konstandtinidis, Assistant Editor
Brenna Smith, Assistant Editor

Carolyn McCaskill, CBDS Director
Lindsay Dunn, CBDS Scholar Fellow
Evon Black, CBDS Associate Director
Kristina McKinnie, CBDS Assistant

Theodore Doresette III, Lead Videographer
Cem Barutcu, Videographer
Amelia Palmer, Videographer
JC Smith, Videographer
Blue20 LLC, Editing and Transcript

PUBLICATION FUNDING

This symposium proceeding was made possible with generous financial support from Sorenson Communications and Gallaudet University; The Office of the Provost, and Gesture Literacy Knowledge Studio.