

My special body and sign language under the aspect of communicative competence

1. Why is my language so special?

First of all I want to say that I am capable of all common and usual forms of communicating, whether in spoken or nonverbal ways. I can use words, eye contact, gesturing or all at the same time as most people can do to understand people or to be understood by someone else. There is no lack of any ability to communicate with others. Although German is my native language, you can see that I am writing in English; I can even read some easy Russian texts. During my social work studies here at the Gesamthochschule in Kassel I began to learn sign language for people with hearing impairments.

But moreover, and that is what I think is very unusual, I do a lot of various gesturing and face-miming all the time except when asleep. That kind of gesturing contains some different movements of hands and arms and sometimes even with my legs. Often I move my head in many different ways as well. All these gestures are mostly very quick and very sudden so that I always need some room around myself. If you could watch it, you may say, I am flipping and flinging my head and arms around. Almost all the time these movements are very strong and are often repeated for a short time. Nonetheless, sometimes they are done very cautiously.

The periods of gesturing are very different from one another. They can last from a short to a long period, they can be soft or wild, there may be just one kind of sign or there are a lot all mixed together repeated for a couple of times or just once. In addition to these signs there is almost always an uttering of sounds or words (most of them are aggressive and sexualized) or both. They can be nearly silent, but most of the time they are very loud up to a screaming level.

I did not know about the meaning of my vulgar expressions for a long time, until I recognized that I had found words for something I must have experienced before. Using them as well as screaming more and more loudly has increased a lot since I am an adult. Both forms of signs, the

noisy ones as well as the whirling ones, occur each for themselves or parallel.

I experience my signs as coming in patterns. A block of sign combinations is frequently repeated. It can be followed by more blocks of sign combinations. I can only have a feeling of emotional balance again once I have expressed these signs as a pattern. These short terms of activity can differ in length, strength and kind of signs, too. From time to time some signs disappear, whereas new ones are developed. The loudness and the power of the signs depend very much on how I feel, where I am and what happens around me. Usually the signs are less powerful and do not happen very often when I feel well. The better I feel and the more I am relaxed, the less and the less strongly signs come up. The more pressure I feel, the more often I show lots of uncontrolled signs. That is usually the rule.

Before I go on talking about this I must say that there is a possibility to get some control over the movements and noises. I always sense a kind of impulse that is building up and leading to a sign or a chain of different signs a split second beforehand. If I want to and if I have enough strength, I am able to suppress a chain reaction of signs or parts thereof, or I can lower the strength of my acting either for some time or just for the moment. So I am able to gain at least some control, but this costs a lot of energy and focuses much of my attention to myself all day long. Whether I use my brain and my strength to control signs depends on how people behave, when they become aware of my strangeness on the one hand, and how calm and unconcerned I am to their reactions on the other hand. When I do not mind people staring or discriminating against me I feel free enough to follow my impulses and live them instead of keeping them back unnaturally. But that does not happen frequently. It is much more likely that as I walk somewhere watching others I, myself, feel quite frightened and try to behave as appropriately as possible. As I do this I become more and more nervous and tense.

As I mentioned before, my acting with signs is quite often related to my emotional stress. Nevertheless it is possible that I act the other way around. When I am together with close friends and feel relaxed I do not fear any bad reactions so that I can lower control and give signs as they come. I do enjoy that kind of low stress situation, too, when I am alone,

when I am with my girlfriend, or with my family. The other way around is, of course, possible as well. Though I am under pressure or concentrate on something special, hardly any signs are presented because my attention is directed towards an item so closely that there is no energy left for wild acting and screaming. In summary I can say that sending signs during my whole life is not an easy task for two reasons:

Being constantly active uses a lot of energy, concentration and attention. Very often I feel tired afterwards and it is hard to calm down or just stay silent and relaxed anyway. It is difficult to perform any form of work for a longer period of time without any breaks, especially during physical activities. Most of the time I do not like being in the public. Visiting theatres, cinemas, restaurants or just going downtown is trying. Sitting in a car, a tram or anything else with a crowd around where any movements are impossible is a torture for me. People cannot understand my behaviour. They feel confused, anxious, embarrassed, shocked or amused. Their reactions are staring, chatting, or other forms of discriminating against me, laughing, stammering, attacking me verbally.

2. The meaning of the signs

In order to explain what the signs mean I need to convey why I do all this. For this I have to go back far into my early childhood. I think all this started when my father began to sexually abuse me as a little baby. Nowadays I assume it was many years before he stopped. As I experienced it, fondling and tickling must be counted to possible sexually abusive offences, too. Those acts went on until I was about 14. Having been raped by my father as an infant was not only mind-destroying, but resulted in a severe emotional disorder. I loved this man and I hated what he was doing to me at the same time. In a word: I felt split and ambivalent and I was trying desperately to survive as well as I could. My emotions were mixed, unclear and confused; they still are so.

Besides the sexual abuse, my family hardly gave me any support in expressing feelings, regardless of whether they were comfortable or uncomfortable ones. Showing feelings seemed to be difficult and somehow dangerous as well. My parents never have learned to feel free

enough to show their emotions directly, neither the good ones nor the bad ones. Neither have I learned thus. While emotions like sadness, anger, hate and so on were 'not allowed', those of pleasure, happiness and joy were rather welcome. Nobody was able to show me the usual and healthy ways of living ones emotional life fully. Moreover showing feelings of anger and hate would have been too threatening for my father, because it would have meant being resistant. But this would have been too dangerous for me, also. I would have lost him then.

At this point my mind together with my body decided to develop a new kind of outlet, a language that would be as visible as well as audible (and allowed!), one that would enable me to get rid of all my aggressions, fears, ambiguities, uncertainties: my signs. They helped me to survive. I may have died otherwise. Today I am proud of having been able to find a way to get through. Although it is hard to live with them, difficult to be with people again and again, to go shopping carefreely, etc., I am glad to have them, glad to be alive.

I had to use my signs for a long, long time; they were the only way of staying emotionally stable, of expressing what I was feeling. Once learned, I used this scheme steadily because I knew it would work and I would live. I am still sending signs at age 24, though my sexual abuse and my non-emotional living form are gone. But acting out with signs got stuck so deeply within me that almost all feelings are still shown coded at first. I am working hard on becoming aware of my emotions before they are presented by my signs automatically. If I sense what I feel, I get the chance to let them out naturally so my feelings do not make me ill any longer.

The signs I show are some relects of a very old structure of dealing with emotions that I am not able to change easily. If I feel angry today I still (usually) use this method to express this, although, of course, this is not an appropriate way of doing so. That does not mean that I suppress my emotions, but they show up in a modified version. Sometimes I feel very sad when I notice that my speaking in signs with friends is confusing although they know about them. Then I wish to be able to show more directly what I am feeling in a situation.

People have the problem that they just cannot understand me, they do not know what happens inside (and outside) of me. My problem is that people

are not able to handle their confusion or fears most of the time. They discriminate against me instead of asking openly what the matter is. Then I fantasize shouting: Do not stare at me, ask me!

3. How I dealt and now deal my body and sign language

Right from the beginning my signs were noticed by my parents. I had made the signs for them. But they were not able to interpret them as I wanted them to be interpreted. I felt helpless and my parents felt the same, too. They asked doctors for an explanation what their son was doing and why. For a period of about 13 or 14 years I had to go to a lot of physicians and therapists. But all specialists could not give any satisfying answer. They always told my parents that I would be ill, psychologically or psychosomatically ill.

So I was labeled as ill since my early childhood. My parents believed I was ill and so did I. They called my signs symptoms, while I was degraded to a strange, unexplicable medical case. The two main consequences of that development were:

- Always feeling strange and ill impaired me in obtaining a strong self-confidence, self-awareness and a sense of self-determination. It was very hard for me to come to a point, where I could say: I am not ill, I am healthy, but others discriminate against me because I am how I am.
- When I was only seen as ill it was me who was also responsible for it. So what did anybody else have to do with that? It was me who was behaving strange and unusual. Nobody ever got the idea of questioning my parents about their son's acting crazy, let alone my parents asking themselves. All that did not help me but helped hide perfectly what my father had done to me for a very long time.

I discovered what had happened to me as a baby when I was 22 years old. It took me about two decades to find out what my signs mean, why I needed and still need them and what mechanisms supported my father directly as well as indirectly in disguising his destroying attacks for years. Since the age of 15 I have been partaking in therapies more or less continuously. These have helped me step by step depuzzle the chaos inside

of me, reorganize myself emotionally, and thus attain an understandable picture of myself now. I began to become aware of what I was feeling in different situations, recognizing that there often is a lot of anger that is not expressed directly to the person opposite me. After some time I sensed the relationship to my father was not as good as he always pretended it to be. I learned to stay distant from him, following my own instincts. This turned out to be right for me.

Some therapists and friends helped me to develop a point of view that did not agree with the common opinion of regarding myself as ill any longer but to say: I am discriminated against by others. Today I call my symptoms signs because they are meaningful and I am self-confident and strong enough to manage my life as I want to. My gesturing tends to become more and more integrated into my personality. It is a significant part of my communicative competence. Sometimes I can use it as a means of communicating or in order to cause a wanted reaction from a person. I even used it to fight against my father to become independent and strong. It does not feel like to be at the mercy of my emotions anymore but to have gained some control over my signs.

Nonetheless there are problems. One is my ongoing repetition of sexual and/or aggressive words, which are more or less audible according to my will-power to suppress them. People or even friends are sometimes shocked or feel awfully touched, of course, if they hear such words by chance. Another big problem are my cries, which are partially so loud and sharp that they hurt not only myself, but those as well who are with me. Because I hardly do express them in public, it is I, myself, my family, and my girlfriend in the first place who suffer from them.

4. My signs and my profession as a social worker

Of course, I have thought about that very often. It is a problem. I just do not know what will happen, where I am going to work and what the people in a staff and the clients are like. Sometimes it is helpful to fantasize about what might happen, but my opinion is that I have to wait and see how I can deal with problems when I am confronted with them. I have always experienced that the most decisive point is to get together

with people and talk about the problem openly in a relaxed atmosphere. People really do not want to discriminate against me. I can always feel a big relief when they know something about my signs.

My interests in social work concentrate very much on two issues: to work on the topic of disability (being discriminated against) or on sexual abuse and men. The first practicum that I absolved was very interesting. I worked at fab e.V., an association whose aims are to give disabled people support in independent living. In the second practicum I have decided to work in the mannagerie, a center run by men for men who are interested in topics dealing with men. I will try to focus some activities on the issue of sexually abused men. My hope is that the sexually abused men I am going to work with as clients (and as peers as well) will understand and accept my signs. I hope that I will always feel strong enough to explain what I am doing and why I am doing that. I surely will have to make a lot of compromises as a social worker, whether with the staff or the team I am in, or with the clients, or both, but my advantage is:

I am already used to this and what is more important since I discovered those hidden aspects of my early childhood, I feel better and better. I feel and realize to what extent I have improved my life up to now, to what extent I have learned to deal with my problem, to what extent I have been able to understand my acting as one possible and important form of my communicating spectrum. This development encourages me a lot and I am rather convinced that I am going to find my way, even as a social worker.

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