THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN COCHLEAR IMPLANTS AND DEAF IDENTITY

The degree to which individuals with cochlear implants (CIs) experience communication difficulties has implications for social participation and identity development. However, few studies have examined the relationship between cochlear implantation, identity, and social participation. Using data from a Danish national survey of deaf adults, the authors examined the significance of having (or not having) a CI in regard to identity (categorized as deaf, hearing, bicultural, and marginal) and various related factors concerning social participation and experiences of being deaf. Cochlear implantation was found to be associated with type of identity, type and quality of friendships and social activities, and feelings of limitation attributed to hearing loss. Age was a significant factor: These associations were mainly found among participants older than age 25 years. The authors discuss the results in dialogue with the concept of social identity and the history of the bilingual/bicultural tradition in Denmark.

Keywords: cochlear implant, deaf identity, hearing loss, social identity

Cochlear implant (CI) surgery has been available to profoundly deaf children and adults for about 40 years (Christiansen & Leigh, 2002). In the United States, the National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders (2016) reported that by the end of 2012 about 324,200 CI devices had been implanted worldwide. Congenitally deaf children are increasingly being implanted at a young age. In the United Kingdom, for example, between 2006 and 2011, 74% of eligible children ages 0–3 years received a CI (Raine, 2013).

The successful outcomes of cochlear implantation in regard to audition and spoken-language development, particularly for those who have CI surgery at a young age, have been widely reported (see, e.g., Niparko & Marlowe, 2010), but research has also drawn attention to the difficulties of communication and social participation that continue to be experienced by children and young people with CIs (e.g., Bat-Chava & Deignan, 2001; Punch & Hyde, 2011). At the same time, policies promoting integrated schooling have resulted in the decline of specialized deaf schools and bilingual/bicultural approaches to deaf education (Swanwick,