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Deaf Culture

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Deafness can be viewed from an audiological standpoint as well as from a sociocultural standpoint. In the latter case, many persons—particularly those who are prelingually deaf sign language users—identify as members of the Deaf community and its culture (where *Deaf* is routinely capitalized in the literature and refers to those affiliated with the Deaf community and its culture). Deaf culture is characterized by a shared set of developmental and social experiences, values, behavioral norms, and communication preferences that often differ from those of persons who are not deaf, persons who are hard of hearing and even persons who are audiologically deaf but who never chose to, or had the opportunity to, become affiliated with the Deaf community and its culture.

Since those in the human communication sciences fields undoubtedly encounter individuals who affiliate with the Deaf community, it is imperative to know and appreciate key features of Deaf culture. Service provision to this subpopulation by persons who are not Deaf is truly a cross-cultural endeavor, with the same attendant knowledge and ethical responsibilities that would apply to any cross-cultural service provision situation. This entry details essential features of Deaf culture, explores important differences between Deaf and nondeaf ("hearing") sociocultural characteristics—some of which can lead to misunderstandings and conflicts—and grounds the description of Deaf culture in its historical antecedents. The entry concludes with a look at diversity in the Deaf community and how the community and culture continue to evolve.

Some Deaf Culture Characteristics

The traditional medical model of deafness, which focuses on one's hearing loss, is anathema to persons who are Deaf. Although Deaf persons may well avail themselves of audiology, speech–language services, or both, these are viewed as ancillary and not at all central to their identity or sense of self. The term *audism* has come into vogue to characterize opinions, attitudes, or behaviors that put hearing loss at the center of how others view Deaf persons. Rather, Deaf persons embrace the Deaf experience, their belongingness to a community that shares that experience, and especially their shared use of a signed language. (Signed languages differ from country to country, although certain linguistic features are common to many.)

Deaf gain is another term in recent parlance that expresses the idea that the Deaf experience has features that enhance life in ways that persons who are not deaf cannot know. The medical versus cultural perspective influences many aspects of Deaf–hearing relations—from differing views on childhood cochlear implantation, deaf education, whether and how early deaf children should be exposed to sign language and the Deaf community, even whether deafness should be considered a disability at all rather than another manifestation of sociocultural diversity.

Several features of Deaf culture stem from a core aspect of the Deaf experience—barriers to acquiring information. Many auditory information sources (e.g., radio, soundtracks, overheard speech) are inaccessible to deaf persons. Furthermore, the approximately 90% to 95% of deaf children born to hearing families are often left out of much family conversation. Accordingly, Deaf culture, even sign language itself, have developed in ways that prioritize clear, direct information sharing. Subtlety is not valued; directness is (which hearing people may experience as bluntness).

Certain categorization terms in English (e.g., tools, jewelry) do not have sign equivalents because the language favors clarity (e.g., the specific type of tool or jewelry). Sign language discourse typically begins and ends with the main point, whereas English discourse typically leads up to the main point. Rigid turn taking is the norm in Deaf conversations, whereas interruptions and cross talk are common in hearing conversations.

Vision necessarily trumps auditory elements of the Deaf experience. To gain someone's attention, hands may wave, shoulders may be tapped, light switches jiggled, or the floor or table struck to cause a vibration. Sign conversations are optimized via adjustments to where people stand or sit and optimal lighting considerations. These and other vision-related behaviors are ingrained, often subconscious aspects of Deaf culture.

Relevant History

Aristotle asserted that thought was internalized speech. Because, in his day, deaf persons typically did not speak, he concluded they therefore were incapable of thought, effectively curtailing deaf education efforts until the 1500s. The first school for the deaf was established in Paris in 1771, and deaf schools proliferated in the Western world quickly thereafter. However, debate raged as to whether educational methods that used sign language versus those that prohibited it (i.e., the "oral" approach) were more effective. The 1880 Conference of Milan was called to settle this debate and proclaimed the oral approach superior, leading many schools for the deaf to change to an oral education approach.

In Deaf culture, the conference is derided because of its long-term influence in debilitating sign language–based deaf education. To this day, especially with the popularity of mainstreaming, least restrictive environment, and inclusion education philosophies (Public Law 94-142, 1975; Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 1990, 2004), enrollment at schools for the deaf continues to decline, and many have closed. Without early exposure to sign language (most likely at a deaf school that promotes sign language), it is less likely that a deaf child will acquire sign fluency, be exposed to deaf peers and adult role models, and become affiliated with the Deaf community. Many in the Deaf community view this as tragic for deaf children and as a threat to Deaf culture itself.

Other historical threats have shaped the Deaf community and culture. The eugenics movement that began in the late 1800s espoused that the human race could be improved by preventing characteristics deemed undesirable from being passed along through procreation. Alexander Graham Bell and colleagues in the American Breeders Association successfully lobbied for marriage laws and sterilization policies aimed at preventing the genetic spread of deafness and other disabilities.

Thirty-four American states adopted such sterilization policies, and eugenics became the central philosophy guiding Nazi-era sterilization and murder of deaf persons and other perceived undesirables. This history remains as relevant to the Deaf community as slavery and genocide are to the communities affected by those atrocities, leaving Deaf culture with heightened awareness of potential threats to its language, culture, and the right to bear children and raise them in a signing household—a right that continues to be challenged in legal cases to this day.

Other historical events have been celebrated in Deaf culture. Primary among these is the scholarship of William Stokoe, an English teacher and linguist at Gallaudet University (then College) in Washington, D.C. Before Stokoe and colleagues began examining the nature of American Sign Language (ASL) according to strict linguistic principles, most people, even Deaf people, presumed ASL was some type of gesture system or a visual representation of English. Stokoe and colleagues documented the sophisticated linguistic rules that underlay ASL production and, in doing so, effectively legitimized ASL as a true language and, by extension, Deaf persons as a true linguistic minority.

The consequences of this work cannot be overstated. It not only launched the still-vibrant field of sign language linguistics; it brought a previously absent degree of respect to Deaf people, their language, and their culture. In psychiatry, for example, Stokoe's work fostered a radical shift from earlier presumptions that all deaf persons were less intelligent, less sophisticated, and more prone to psychiatric disorders than hearing people. Subsequently, psychiatrists and psychologists, an increasing number of whom are Deaf themselves, have demonstrated complex intervening factors that promote psychological health, or illness, among deaf persons.

Stokoe's groundbreaking work has launched similar study of the signed languages and cultures of Deaf communities around the globe, with attendant, positive outcomes. Sign language education is increasingly available around the world since its nadir following the Conference of Milan and is even commonly offered to hearing students in secondary and postsecondary education. Many parents practice signing with their infant children, be they hearing or deaf.

Modern-era legislation has overturned the wrongs associated with the eugenics movement and bolstered the rights of deaf persons in many countries. In the United States, the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 prohibited discrimination of individuals with disabilities by entities that received federal funding (e.g., hospitals, colleges), opening the doors of higher education to deaf persons as never before. Access to many more places of public accommodation (e.g., theaters, private doctor's offices) skyrocketed via the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990. Many other countries have similar laws that serve to enhance the lives and prosperity of deaf people. These events have become cherished milestones in Deaf history and culture.

In 1988, a watershed event took place at Gallaudet University. From the school's founding in 1864, until 1988, all its many presidents were hearing persons. That year, the board of trustees selected another hearing person to fill the latest presidential vacancy, although two of the three finalists were deaf. A weeklong protest ensued, garnering an unprecedented degree of national media attention and widespread support among the general public for what was ostensibly a "Deaf issue." Ultimately, the new hearing president stepped aside, one of the deaf finalists became president, and the composition of Gallaudet's board of trustees was reconfigured to achieve a majority of deaf members.

March 13, when these changes were agreed to, is now recognized worldwide as "Deaf Freedom Day." The significance of this event is paramount in Deaf culture, having sparked repercussions far beyond the confines of Gallaudet or even deaf education generally. It proved to the Deaf community that peaceful solidarity could garner the world's attention and support, that deaf people were more than capable of leadership of the institutions and programs that affect them, and that in the words of Gallaudet's first deaf president, "Deaf people can do anything except hear."

Deaf Sociocultural Diversity

Although the valuation of sign language and many elements of the Deaf experience are shared among virtually all Deaf people, heterogeneity within the Deaf community also must be recognized. Beyond variations in auditory and other sensory capacities, communication abilities and preferences, developmental and family experiences, education, and more, the Deaf community manifests racial, religious, political, economic, sexual orientation, and other aspects of diversity in common with the general population. Auditorily, Deaf persons demonstrate a range of residual hearing abilities whether or not aided by their differing preferences for using cochlear implants or hearing aids. Again, it is not the audiologic framework that defines who is or is not Deaf but much more so the individual's linguistic and sociocultural choices and values.

Vision is obviously an important factor in the lives of deaf people. Variations in visual ability contribute markedly to Deaf community diversity. DeafBlind persons (expressed as a single word to connote that the experience is unique and not just an uncomplicated combination of vision and hearing loss), rarely familiar to most hearing people, make up a notable subset of the Deaf community. A substantial cause of DeafBlindness is Usher syndrome, a group of genetic conditions characterized by hearing loss and retinitis pigmentosa, which progressively diminishes one's field of vision. Deaf and DeafBlind people interact frequently, adjusting their sign communication methods in a number of ways (ProTactile signing, tracking, tactile fingerspelling, signing within a diminished visual field, and more), depending on the individuals' abilities and preferences.

Outside the sensory realm, diversity within the Deaf community and culture reflects influences similar to those found in the general population. There are regional variations in sign vocabulary and other linguistic features even within a given country. Scholars describe unique aspects of the Black Deaf experience and its own linguistic and cultural nuances. American organizations reflecting Deaf cultural diversity include the National Black Deaf Advocates, the National Asian Deaf Congress, the Rainbow Alliance of the Deaf, various Deaf Jewish organizations, and many more.

Whether one was raised by Deaf or hearing parents, whether one's parents (deaf or hearing) used sign lan-

guage, whether one had other deaf or hearing relatives and, of course, one's educational and social experiences with deaf, Deaf, and hearing people, further contributes to sociocultural diversity within the Deaf community. It is common for Deaf persons to cite several influential contributions to their sociocultural identity, drawn from a variety of physical, geographic, and family characteristics, as well as developmental and other life experiences.

The Continuing Evolution of Deaf Culture

Deaf clubs once flourished in communities with a critical mass of Deaf residents. For many years, these clubs were the primary location where Deaf persons gathered to socialize, recreate, host athletic competitions, plan and debate civil activism, and perhaps most important, simply exchange information in a shared, accessible language in an environment where Deaf culture itself was the normative atmosphere. Since video communication technology has become widespread, Deaf persons, especially the younger generations, find less necessity for in-person contact because information can be shared and plans made in sign language via the Internet. The number and vitality of Deaf clubs are therefore on the decline but remain a cherished aspect of many older Deaf persons' lives.

Beyond the local influence of Deaf clubs, the proliferation of national and international Deaf-created, Deaf-run organizations is another growing manifestation of Deaf culture. In the United States, the National Association of the Deaf, founded in 1880 (prior to the Conference of Milan) has tirelessly focused on a host of issues, from the right to drive to employment discrimination to educational policies to access to television and telecommunication systems and much more. Many other countries have similar deaf rights organizations. The World Federation of the Deaf, founded in 1951, advocates for deaf rights around the globe, often focusing on access to education and sign language in countries where these fundamentals are lacking in addition to protection against discrimination in employment and other settings.

Nearly three decades after the passage of the ADA, deaf persons in the United States and elsewhere are reaching educational and occupational heights never before possible for previous generations. Doctoral-level education is no longer unusual. An increasing number of Deaf scientists, doctors, lawyers, actors, psychologists, athletes, college professors, and entrepreneurs are breaking employment barriers and serving as role models for young deaf people. Further progress, especially regarding attitudes that retard such educational and employment achievements must still be made. Yet the picture continues to brighten—in part, due to the general population's increasing exposure to deaf people and Deaf culture, lifting the curtain on what used to be a marginalized and mysterious community and its ways.

Since Stokoe's time, interest in signed languages and Deaf culture within academia and the arts has flourished. Scholars continue to make advances in the understanding of signed languages, neuropsychology and the deaf population, and the diverse global manifestations of Deaf culture. In recent decades, Deaf theater, film, graphic arts, dance, and sign language poetry have blossomed. Deaf characters and themes in mainstream television and movies are not uncommon and, like the proliferation of sign language courses, are opening windows to the Deaf experience for the general public.

See also American Sign Language; Bilingual Education; Captioning; Signed Languages; Sociolinguistics of Sign Language

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