For the past few decades, Deaf people have proudly proclaimed that they have an authentic culture to call their own. This proclamation was one of the outcomes of the legitimization of American Sign Language (ASL) as a distinct language with its own syntax, semantics, and discourse structure. Based on this finding by linguistic scholars in the 1960s, academics began to question whether ASL served as a prelude to the acknowledgment of a Deaf culture. Prior to this discovery, Deaf people had lived their lives for centuries and practiced what is now known as Deaf culture. Since then, scores of academic studies, scholarly articles, prominent books, and educational DVDs have been produced, highlighting and documenting the cultural markers of the Deaf community. In addition, colleges and universities all over the world began to offer undergraduate and graduate degrees in Deaf Studies with thousands of students studying the language and other cultural markers of the Deaf community every year. Deaf culture is now a common phrase used to describe the unique experiences of Deaf people.

There are many different ways to examine a culture, including its system of shared beliefs, values, customs, and behaviors that the members of a community use and practice. On the surface, the visible elements of a culture are easily identified, such as food, clothes, and other obvious artifacts. However, the heart of any culture goes beyond these observable markers and delves into deeper elements, such as membership, values, and taboos. In the case of Deaf culture, there is little to demarcate it from other cultures on the surface, because Deaf people dress, eat, and worship just like their fellow citizens who hear. Yet, when the experiences of Deaf people are examined on a deeper level, many unique cultural aspects of the Deaf community are revealed.

Traditionally, any definition associated with Deaf culture had the prerequisite descriptors—the residential school experience, the prominence of Deaf clubs, and the importance of signed languages. However, most deaf people today do not grow up with this kind of background, as they are more likely to attend a public school. If signing is used at the school, some kind of sign system based on the spoken language is often employed instead of ASL, which is typically used in the Deaf community. In addition, Deaf clubs have ceased to exist in many places, making them irrelevant in the lives of most Deaf people today.

However, this is not to say that Deaf culture has become obsolete for deaf people. Rather, Deaf culture is more critical than ever before, primarily because deaf children no longer have easy access to role models. Without access to the Deaf community, deaf children are devoid of strategies that can be used to survive in a world populated with people who are different from themselves. For example, these children often need to learn from more experienced Deaf people ways to better integrate themselves within their own families, most of which had no exposure to deaf people prior to the birth of their children. In addition to solutions for improved home life, they also need strategies to manage more effectively their participation in the school environment and in the community.

In the past, Deaf clubs and residential schools served as focal points for the cultural transmission between Deaf people. With the decline of these two prominent meeting places, Deaf people today organize events at alternative locations, creating temporary spaces to congregate. With the availability of social media, announcements are made at lightning speed. Deaf people flock to these
predesignated places, such as nightclubs, banquet halls, coffee shops, and subway stops, to socialize with one another. There, they get the benefit of interacting with more experienced members of the community and learning about effective ways to live as Deaf individuals.

The importance of culture cannot be overstated, as its primary role is to provide its members with access to historically created solutions for effective living. For example, the Eskimos have passed down solutions for surviving the harsh climate in which they live while embracing their unique environment. Likewise, living in crowded conditions in places such as Tokyo has resulted in a well-developed culture that offers solutions to allow for a quality lifestyle in spite of the congestion. Deaf people also need solutions for effective living, such as navigating an environment in which most of the people hear.

Accordingly, the solutions vis-à-vis Deaf culture include full access to communication, information sharing, healthy identity formation, and self-determination. These solutions remain as viable for deaf people today as they were 100 years ago. Even with the changing living conditions among deaf people, as evidenced by mainstream educational placements, technological advancements, and disability rights laws, they remain the “People of the Eye and Hands.” These recent developments do not fully address the communicative and linguistic needs of deaf people, including those who are Deaf-blind. As such, deaf people are still terribly misunderstood today, as they were in the past, in terms of what it means to be Deaf. For example, many deaf people do not view themselves as having a disability or being members of the disability community. Rather they perceive themselves as belonging to a linguistic community, full of cultural solutions.

Solutions for effective living can be delineated into three categories: explicit, tacit, and emblematic. Explicit solutions may be found, for example, in a group's constitution, which reveals the group's values and spells out group expectations explicitly. Likewise, rules and laws reflect the values of the community. Policies are another explicit way of how a community expresses its values. In this sense, the group's cultural values are stated explicitly through formal documents, which have gone through rounds of debates and formal votes by its members. Norms associated with sexual behavior are another example of how the values of a community become explicit through legal documents. For example, the legal age of consent for sex varies dramatically from region to region, as evidenced by federal and state laws. Similarly, the legal age for obtaining a driver's license and for seeking employment is outlined explicitly in government documents. On a smaller scale, an organization's by-laws spell out the roles and responsibilities of the membership as agreed and voted upon by its members. These examples show how cultural values can be communicated explicitly, both to community members and to outsiders.

Most cultural norms, however, are not stated explicitly. Rather, members of the culture tacitly understand what the expectations are. How to dress is one example. Although exposing yourself is explicitly outlawed in most places, people generally can dress in any way they want as long as their private parts are covered. Yet members of a society tacitly know what they can and cannot wear in certain environments. Another example is classroom behavior. How students are seated can differ remarkably among classrooms in the United States, Japan, and Tanzania. Although students in these three countries typically sit in rows, American students think nothing of sitting in whatever position is most comfortable, whereas Japanese students are expected to sit upright. Those in Tanzania also are expected to sit upright, but on the floor instead of in chairs. Foreign exchange students to these countries often find it necessary to adjust their seating habits so as not to get into trouble with their
teachers and peers, even if these expectations are not stated explicitly in the school's guidelines.

The final category involves behaviors that are typically associated with a culture, or those considered emblematic of the group. In this case, although such behaviors are strongly connected to the group, the members of that particular community do not universally practice these actions. The Second Amendment to the U.S. Constitution is a good example. Although Americans have the right to bear arms, most citizens do not own a gun. However, people all over the world have come to believe that it is common for Americans to own guns, as portrayed by American movies, television shows, and the mainstream media. In this sense, gun ownership is emblematic of the American culture. Another example is the availability of huge containers that people can fill with soft drinks at convenience stores. Most Americans would never consider consuming that much of a soft drink in one sitting, but it is emblematic of the American culture, where almost everything is supersized, including drinks, foods, and the people themselves.

In the case of Deaf culture, there is little explicit demarcation of cultural values. One clear exception is the value of self-determination, which is also shared by many disenfranchised communities as their members struggle to have their voices heard and respected. Deaf people also have found it necessary to assert their political voice to ensure that their needs and wants are addressed. Otherwise, Deaf people face the consequences of dealing with ill-conceived policies imposed on them by well-meaning people who have limited understanding of the Deaf experience. Unfortunately, this has happened repeatedly over the past two centuries, giving rise to the value of self-determination among Deaf people.

History has shown that Deaf leaders have worked diligently to improve the quality of life of their fellow Deaf citizens. This is evidenced by the formation of many organizations and educational settings known explicitly in the Deaf community as being “of, for, by the deaf.” For example, Deaf people and their allies founded at least 24 deaf schools in the United States, including the very first school in Hartford, Connecticut, and more recently, a charter school in Golden, Colorado, the Rocky Mountain Deaf School. The National Fraternal Society of the Deaf (NFSD) is another example. Unable to purchase life insurance from mainstream insurance companies because of perceived poor risk, Deaf people established their own insurance company (NFSD) in 1901 in order to provide protection for their families. Similarly, in 1975, Deaf people founded Communication Services for the Deaf with the purpose of creating and providing technologies and services that benefit the deaf. Currently, the organization has offices in 18 U.S. cities. Deaf people also found it necessary to start a political organization, the National Association of the Deaf (NAD), in 1880 with the explicit mission to combat disastrous educational policies that were being implemented by hearing people. The patronizing and paternalistic attitude of hearing people throughout history has given rise to the need for self-determination as an enduring cultural value of Deaf people. As Robert McGregor declared during the first NAD convention in 1880, “We have interests peculiar to ourselves which can be taken care of by ourselves” (quoted in Holcomb, 2013, p. 107). In recent years, organizations such as the Deaf Bilingual Coalition and the Deafhood Foundation have complemented NAD in advocating the political agenda of the Deaf community.

Clearly, Deaf people continue to find it necessary to insist that the best solutions for effective living come from themselves. To maintain their voice, many Deaf-run organizations have by-laws that explicitly limit leadership opportunities to Deaf people while welcoming hearing people to the organization's membership. Accordingly, it is not unusual to see policies requiring that an organization's
officers be Deaf. It is also common for Deaf advocates to insist on a 51% Deaf majority for the board that serves the Deaf community. This is not unlike the expectation that organizations such as NOW (National Organization of Women) be led by a woman and the NAACP (National Association for Advancement of Colored People) be led by a person of color.

Another place where expectations are stated explicitly within the Deaf community is in the area of athletics. In most situations other than athletics, a person's degree of hearing is not as relevant as whether the person can sign. In fact, many Deaf people do not identify with the specifics of their own hearing levels (e.g., decibel loss), as they do not consider it pertinent to their daily lives or their identities. However, where athletic competitions are taken seriously, such as the Deaflympics or the annual Deaf Basketball Championships, participants must verify that they are deaf enough by showing their certified audiograms. This explicit requirement was imposed to prevent hearing athletes of outstanding caliber from competing in Deaf events. It also ensures that Deaf athletes are not denied opportunities to compete and enjoy the experiences of being in a barrier-free communication environment.

Whereas few cultural rules are stated explicitly in Deaf culture, most cultural aspects of Deaf people are tacitly understood and embraced. The fact that these expectations are universally accepted among Deaf people serves as a testament that they function as time-tested solutions for effective living for them. More specifically, the core values of full access to communication, information sharing, and healthy identity formation are tacitly embraced and practiced by the members of the Deaf community.

For most Deaf people, full access to communication is made possible only through the use of sign language. Therefore, ASL continues to be an enduring value of the American Deaf community. Not only are the members of the Deaf community expected to develop fluency in sign language they also are expected to embrace ASL over other forms of sign systems. However, ASL has evolved over the years due to the widespread use of sign systems in deaf education, resulting in the infusion of many English-based signs into ASL. Regardless of how people feel about this influence of English, most Deaf people eventually sign in ASL, albeit in a somewhat different form than traditional ASL. For example, no longer do most Deaf people sign with their mouths completely closed, as was done traditionally. This is why Bernard Bragg made this distinction between traditional ASL and modern ASL. This evolution of language use is not unique to signed language. All living languages evolve over the years due to their use, and perhaps abuse, by the linguistic community.

In addition to using and respecting ASL, Deaf people expect full access to communication within the Deaf community and as much access as possible outside the community. This means that people are expected to sign at all times in the presence of other Deaf people, even if they have oral skills. This is done so that no one is excluded from the conversation, and it ensures what Barbara Kannapell described as 100% communication, which is made possible for Deaf people only through a visual language. For situations outside the Deaf community, Deaf people value the service of competent interpreters as a way to access nonsigning situations. So the tacit rule is for community members to develop fluency in ASL and to sign at all times in the presence of Deaf people. Furthermore, if individuals desire a private conversation, it is culturally appropriate and sensitive to remove themselves from the scene by going to a different room, rather than excluding others by speaking without signing or trying to sign discreetly. In contrast, it is more acceptable for hearing people to lower their voices when they have a private conversation in public. In summary, intentionally excluding a Deaf person from a conversation is considered extremely rude, as the tacit rule of Deaf culture is full access to communication.
communication for everyone.

Information sharing is another important element of Deaf culture that is shared tacitly by most Deaf people. Because information is often difficult for deaf people to access due to communication and linguistic barriers between deaf and hearing people, they have largely assumed the responsibilities of filling in the gaps for each other by supplying as much information as possible. This is necessary because more than 90% of deaf people have hearing parents, many of whom do not know how to sign or failed to establish an effective communication system at home. In addition, many attend schools where teachers and/or interpreters are not fluent in sign language. Many of them also do not understand the value of full access to communication and neglect to sign at all times in the presence of Deaf people. Consequently, many deaf people grow up in an environment devoid of effective communication due to the difficulties and limitations associated with speechreading and hearing. As a result, many deaf people miss out on incidental learning, when information is casually shared at dinner tables, in hallways, or in other places outside the formal classroom environment. Furthermore, many deaf people leave school with relatively poor English skills, which is often attributed to the inability of teachers and parents to communicate effectively with them. Consequently, accessing information via printed materials is difficult for many deaf people. So with limited access to communication with their teachers and families, along with their weak English skills, Deaf people have made it a habit to support one another by exchanging information as much as they can. For instance, information about negotiating for the best deal for a new car, performing breast or testicle self-examination, and filing tax returns is often exchanged between Deaf individuals, even if the information is rather personal or potentially embarrassing. Indeed, what may be perceived as gossip is an important cultural trait within the Deaf community, where minute details about life are routinely shared.

Information exchanged between Deaf people is not always of a serious nature. Behaviors that have the potential to cause public embarrassment are often recounted in order to help others avoid being humiliated. As such, bathroom tales are often told and retold in a hilarious manner, reinforcing the need of Deaf people to acquire such minor, yet critical information. For instance, information about the acceptability of passing gas in a public restroom full of people is debated amusedly. Similarly, the amount of noise that can be heard through a motel wall is a stern warning to Deaf people not to lose control in their amorous encounters.

Another core value that is tacitly shared by Deaf people is a healthy identity formation. Most Deaf people do not tolerate self-pity or any expression of sympathy from others for their inability to hear. If anything, Deaf people celebrate their Deaf essence. This serves as a powerful affirmation for many newcomers to the Deaf community—they are embraced for who they are. This comes as a refreshing shift in how deaf people view themselves after years of trying to remedy their hearing loss through therapies, surgeries, and such. Instead, they are being told that they are just fine the way they are, regardless of their hearing level or speech ability. No longer do they need to apologize for their deficiencies, but rather they are now celebrated for who they are and what they are capable of doing. This pride in being Deaf, along with the desirability of Deaf children, can be considered emblematic of the Deaf culture. A deaf child is cause for celebration for many rather than pity. This may result from the fact that most deaf people have hearing parents, which often means a long and difficult journey in reaching a comfortable place for themselves in terms of acceptance, communication, and identity. The longing for a normal or typical family experience is often translated into a desire to have a Deaf child. It is for this reason that some Deaf couples seek to adopt a Deaf child. While the desirability of having a
Deaf child is emblematic of the culture, some deaf people hope for hearing children due to their difficult childhood experiences and do not want their children to “suffer” in the same way. Regardless of their children's hearing status, Deaf people love their children just as any parents would and raise them to the best of their ability.

Also emblematic of the culture is the tendency of Deaf people to be blunt, or what may be better described as participating in straight talk. As discussed earlier, information sharing is an important cultural value. Deaf people often reveal information in a straightforward manner, rather than beating around the bush, as is often done by non-Deaf people. The need for straight talk can be traced to Deaf people's frustrations in trying to obtain information as clearly as possible, especially from nonsigning people. For example, lipreading is a difficult task. Reading materials in English is also difficult for many. With these challenges, hedging, in order to be polite, as hearing people often do, makes it even more frustrating for Deaf people. Indeed, the tendency to practice straight talk in the Deaf community is a source of comfort and is welcomed among Deaf people. However, straight talk should not be equated with being rude; intentionally hurting people's feelings is not a cultural value of Deaf people. However blunt the comments might be, they must be made in a tactful and caring manner. As an example, commenting on an unfavorable appearance because you care is different from making fun of or insulting a person for how he or she looks. The challenge then, as is true for most cultural behaviors, is to find the right formula. Sharing information that is direct, clear, and supportive without appearing to be rude comes with experience and practice with Deaf people themselves.

As is true for all cultures, Deaf culture is rich with historically created solutions for effective living. The solutions such as the residential school experience, the existence of Deaf clubs, and the importance of ASL serve as a testament to the more fundamental and enduring values of Deaf culture. For years, Deaf clubs and residential schools made it possible for Deaf people to meet with others like themselves and learn from them how to live effectively. Through these interactions, Deaf people are able to develop a healthy identity, much of which is accomplished through information sharing. Today, alternative locations, albeit temporary, serve the same purpose for most of the newer generations of Deaf people. Regardless of location, self-determination remains an important function of Deaf culture as Deaf people continue to be terribly misunderstood by the public. Consequently, Deaf people continue to advocate for historically created solutions to be made available to a newer generation of Deaf people in order to provide them with a healthy identity, a sense of belonging, and strategies to function effectively in a world populated mostly by people who hear.

See also Deaf Gain; Deaf Centrism and Deaf Centricity, Deaf Theory; Deafhood

Further Readings


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