

A Brief Introduction to Deaf Culture

There are two popular uses of the word culture. One means to have a sophisticated taste or to be well read, appreciate art, literature, cuisine—to be cultured. The other use of culture relates to the unique attributes of a certain group of people. Various groups of people develop distinctive ways of describing, valuing, and behaving in the world. This is their culture. Anthropologists have been formally studying world cultures for years, and mindful people have been pondering and examining culture as long as human societies have existed. Yet, having a deep understanding of culture still can be elusive.

One way of understanding a culture is to look at how the members identify themselves. Over the years different terms have been used to refer to Deaf people. Some older terms are considered offensive today and should not be used, especially “deaf and dumb” and “deaf mute.” The terms “hearing impaired,” “deaf and hard of hearing,” or “people with hearing loss” have been used by public institutions, political groups, and some individuals, as an attempt to be inclusive, but those terms focus on what is perceived as lacking or lost. The term “Deaf” with a capital “D” is an inclusive term because it focuses on what people *have*—a living culture, an available language, and the infinite, untapped possibilities being Deaf can offer.

People within Deaf culture value being kept informed about the environment, the community, and its members. Since the majority culture’s primary ways of disseminating information are not visually centered, Deaf people are expected to have a sense of social obligation and duty to others within Deaf

culture. This includes sharing information and offering updates on what is going on in the Deaf world as well as the broader world. In fulfilling this duty to the group, one tends to develop long-term relationships and complex networking systems. Similar to more than 70% of cultures in the world (many found in Africa, Asia and Latin America), in Deaf culture the group comes before the individual. Although the Deaf community recognizes individual achievements and talents, contributing to the group’s success is very highly valued. This is different than in American culture where great emphasis is placed on independence, self-reliance, achievement and individual success.

One visible cultural behavior among Deaf signers is how their eyes are used during signed interactions. For example, while watching another person sign, they would focus on the signer’s face, while reading the signs within their peripheral vision. This is to get valuable information about the grammar of the sentence which is shown simultaneously on the face.

Another visible cultural behavior among Deaf signers is how they get other people’s attention. Examples are waving in others’ peripheral vision, tapping on certain parts of the body and/or hitting a surface to create vibrations.

Yet another visible cultural behavior is how Deaf people locate themselves and move among people in signing situations. For example, if a path is blocked by two signers conversing, the Deaf person does not wait until the signers stop talking, bend down to pass, or find another path, but just walks through.