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The Deaf Community and the Culture of Deaf People

Carol Padden

The Dictionary of American Sign Language, published in 1965 by William Stokoe, Carl Croneberg, and Dorothy Casterline, was unique for at least two reasons. First, it offered a new description of Sign Language based on linguistic principles. Second, it devoted a section to the description of the “social” and “cultural” characteristics of Deaf people who use American Sign Language.¹

It was indeed unique to describe Deaf people as constituting a “cultural group.” Professionals in the physical sciences and education of deaf people typically describe deaf people in terms of their pathological condition: hearing loss. There are numerous studies which list statistics about the types, ranges, and etiologies of hearing loss and how these physical deficiencies may subsequently affect the behavior of deaf people. But rarely had these professionals seriously attended to other equally important aspects of Deaf people: the fact that Deaf people form groups in which the members do not experience “deficiencies” and in which the basic needs of the individual members are met, as in any other culture of human beings.

Deaf people have long recognized that their groups are different from those of hearing people; in the “Deaf world”, certain behaviors are accepted while others are discouraged. The discussion of the “linguistic community” of Deaf people in the Dictionary of ASL represented a break from a long tradition of “pathologising” Deaf people. In a sense, the book brought official and public recognition of a deeper aspect of Deaf people’s lives: their culture.

When I re-read the book, as I do from time to time, I am always appreciative of the many insights that I find about the structure of American Sign Language and the culture of Deaf people.

The Deaf Community

We commonly hear references to the deaf community.² The term has demographic, linguistic, political and social implications. There is a national “community” of deaf people

1. I will use here a convention adopted by a number of researchers where the capitalized “Deaf” is used when referring to cultural aspects, as in the culture of Deaf people. The lower-case “deaf,” on the other hand, refers to noncultural aspects such as the audiological condition of deafness.

2. As will be explained in a later section, the “deaf community” as described here is not a cultural entity; thus, the capitalized Deaf adjective will not be used to describe it. This differs from earlier treatments of the deaf community such as those found in Markowicz and Woodward (1975), Padden and Markowicz (1976), and Baker and Padden (1978).
who share certain characteristics and react to events around them as a group. In addition to a national community of deaf people, in almost every city or town in the U.S. there are smaller deaf communities. But what is a "deaf community?" More precisely, who are the members of a deaf community and what are the identifying characteristics of such a community?

To answer these questions, we need first to look at a definition of community. Unfortunately, there is much disagreement among anthropologists and sociologists about what constitutes a "community."

George Hillery (1974), a sociologist, evaluated ninety-four different definitions of "community" proposed by various researchers who have studied communities of people. In search of a definition, he singled out common features from the majority of the ninety-four definitions of local communities. Other sociologists such as Allan Edwards (1976) and Dennis Poplin (1972) have come to the same definition that Hillery proposes. Hillery's definition of "community" is as follows:

1. A community is a group of people who share common goals and cooperate in achieving these goals. Each community has its own goals. A goal may be equal employment opportunities, greater political participation, or better community services.

2. A community occupies a particular geographic location. The geography of a community determines the ways in which the community functions.

3. A community has some degree of freedom to organize the social life and responsibilities of its members. Institutions such as prisons and mental hospitals bring together groups of people in one locality, but the people have no power to make decisions about their daily lives and routines. Thus, we cannot call these types of groups "communities."

Communities may be small and closed, such as those we find in villages and tribes; but in large, industrialized societies, communities tend to be more mixed and are composed of several smaller groups of people. Consequently, while members of a community may cooperate with each other to carry out the goals of the community, there may also be conflicts and antagonism between various groups of people within the community. The conflicts are greater when any group within a community has low status or lacks power because it is a minority group. A good case is a borough of New York City that has Black, Puerto Rican, Jewish, and Protestant residents. The members of this community may unite over common concerns such as housing, but at the same time, they may conflict over other concerns that may benefit one group, but not another.

But how do we distinguish between community and culture?

A culture is a set of learned behaviors of a group of people who have their own language, values, rules for behavior, and traditions. A person may be born into a culture; he is brought up according to the values of the culture and his personality and behavior are shaped by his cultural values. Or, a person may grow up in one culture and later learn the language, values, and practices of a different culture and become "enculturated" into that culture.

A community, on the other hand, is a general social system in which a group of people live together, share common goals, and carry out certain responsibilities to each other. For example, the culture of a community of people living in a small New England town is the same as that of the larger society in which they participate. And my example of a New York borough is one where a community may be composed of a number of different cultural groups. A Puerto Rican person has the beliefs and the behaviors of his cultural group, but he lives in a larger community of people where he works and, to some degree, socializes with other people who are not Puerto Rican. Thus, a person's beliefs and actions are mainly influenced within his own community.

With this back ground laid, we can return to the question of whether people who share the goals of Deaf community are similarly defined. Earlier definitions of deaf community goals of Deaf community may include the community of the Deaf, the Deaf culture, and the beliefs of Deaf community. I will now discuss describing certain characteristics of these communities.

**Location**

Each deaf community, like the political and economic communities, is shaped by the geographical boundaries within which it exists. A geographic community is made up of a very large group of people who share many of the same characteristics. Other deaf communities may consist of smaller groups of people who share the same beliefs and values.

**Language**

Since a deaf community uses a particular language within each cultural group, As culture of Deaf people...
are mainly influenced by his *culture*, but his work and many social activities are carried out within his *community*.

With this background, we cannot begin to define "deaf community." The term has been used in two restricted ways—either meaning only those persons who are audiologically deaf, or those persons who are a part of the culture of Deaf people. But it is clear that Deaf people work with and interact with other people who are not Deaf, and who share the goals of Deaf people and work with them in various social and political activities. Earlier definitions of "deaf community," such as Schein's study of the Washington, D.C. deaf community in 1968, included only those persons who are audiologically hearing impaired. I propose a definition that differs from earlier ones:

A deaf community is a group of people who live in a particular location, share the common goals of its members, and in various ways, work toward achieving these goals. A deaf community may include persons who are not themselves Deaf, but who actively support the goals of the community and work with Deaf people to achieve them.

The definition I have proposed here fits well with the way Hillery (1974) defined "community." A community in New York City may be composed of different cultural groups; likewise, a deaf community has not only Deaf members, but also hearing and deaf people who are not culturally Deaf, and who interact on a daily basis with Deaf people and see themselves as working with Deaf people in various common concerns.

The culture of Deaf people, however, is more closed than the deaf community. Members of the Deaf culture behave as Deaf people do, use the language of Deaf people, and share the beliefs of Deaf people toward themselves and other people who are not Deaf.

I will now discuss some characteristics of the deaf community and then turn to describing certain aspects of the American Deaf culture.

### Characteristics of Deaf Communities

#### Location

Each deaf community in the United States is uniquely affected by its location. For example, the identity of the Washington, D.C. community is undeniably influenced by the political and educational institutions in Washington, D.C. The Los Angeles deaf community is shaped by the fact that it is located in one of the largest urban areas in the United States. A great number of deaf people are employed in this area, and thus they make up a very large and powerful community.

Other deaf communities, smaller in size than the Washington, D.C., or Los Angeles communities, may be more closed, and some have less participation of non-Deaf people in their affairs.

Deaf people can move from one geographical location to another and enter into a new community with relative ease. They carry with them the knowledge of their culture to help them establish new community ties and learn the specific issues and operations of the new community. Thus, there are many different deaf communities across the United States, but there is a single American Deaf culture with members who live in different communities.

#### Language Use

Since a deaf community is composed of people from different cultural groups, language use within the community is different from language use within the particular cultural group. As will be discussed in more detail in a later section, the language of the *culture* of Deaf people is American Sign Language (ASL). The use of ASL by Deaf people
in community affairs is tolerated to some degree by community members. For example, some Deaf people prefer to use ASL in public speaking situations, and sign-to-voice interpreting is provided for them. At the same time, when Deaf people are involved in community activities which include hearing people who use English, they may choose to use a variety of Sign English. Language use at the community level is rather flexible, but within the cultural group, language is more restricted.

The distinction between community and culture allows us to explain how some Deaf people may accept, respect, and in community activities, even use the language of the majority group—English—but at the same time, they can prefer the language of their cultural group. Deaf people feel a strong identification with ASL since it is a part of their cultural background, but when they are involved in community activities, the use of another language allows them to interact with other persons who are not Deaf.

**Goals**

A community is a group of people in a certain geographical location who share common goals. What are the goals of deaf communities?

A primary goal of the national deaf community is to achieve public acceptance of deaf people as equals—equals in employment, in political representation, and in the control of institutions that involve deaf people, such as schools and service organizations. An equally important goal is the acceptance and recognition of their history and their use of sign as a means of communication. As an example, the National Association of the Deaf prints on its envelopes the message, Hire the Deaf—They’re Good Workers! The message is a public exhortation of an important goal of the community: to convince the public that deaf workers are not a liability, and should be given equal employment opportunities.

Many deaf communities have been pushing for media exposure of Sign Language in television programs and newspaper articles as a means of accomplishing another important goal: public recognition and acceptance of the use of signs to communicate.

The goals of deaf communities are derived primarily from the values of Deaf and hearing people in America. The values of a cultural group are represented in those attitudes and behaviors that the group considers most respected and important. Values can be positive: they can show what a group admires and respects. But values can also be negative: members of a cultural group may reject or be suspicious of certain attitudes and behaviors which they consider to be in conflict with their beliefs.

**The Culture of American Deaf People**

I will turn now to a discussion of some identifying characteristics of the American Deaf culture. My descriptions here are based first on intuition—my own understanding of how I grew up as a child of Deaf parents and how I interact with other Deaf people. I also consulted a number of books and articles written by Deaf people and have found several ideas and concerns repeated throughout these writings. I have picked out some of the more frequently occurring comments Deaf people make about themselves or their lives and have placed them in a framework of culture and cultural values. Some of the books I found helpful in explaining concerns of Deaf people are: Leo Jacobs's *A Deaf Adult Speaks Out* (1969) and W. H. Woods' *The Forgotten People* (1973). The *Deaf American* magazine is another good source of information about issues that concern Deaf people.

**Deaf People**

What does it mean to be Deaf? Who are Deaf people?

Deaf people can be born into the culture, as in the case of children of Deaf parents. They begin learning the language of their parents from birth and thus acquire native competence in that cultural group. When the larger number of people who use ASL as the primary type of ASL in their daily life, whether they are deaf people are often unsure, may be surprised, or telephone.

But the most striking is the value these people strive for.
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competence in that language. They also learn the beliefs and behaviors of their parents' cultural group. When they enter schools, they serve as cultural and linguistic models for the larger number of deaf children who do not have Deaf parents and who become a part of the culture later in life.

Being Deaf usually means the person has some degree of hearing loss. However, the type of degree of hearing loss is not a criterion for being Deaf. Rather, the criterion is whether a person identifies with other Deaf people, and behaves as a Deaf person. Deaf people are often unaware of the details of their Deaf friends' hearing loss, and for example, may be surprised to learn that some of their friends can hear well enough to use the telephone.

But the most striking characteristic of the culture of Deaf people is their cultural values—these values shape how Deaf people behave and what they believe in.

Cultural Values

What are some examples of values held by Deaf people?

Language

Certainly an all-important value of the culture is respect for one of its major identifying features: American Sign Language. Not all Deaf individuals have native competence in ASL; that is, not all Deaf individuals have learned ASL from their parents as a first language. There are many individuals who become enculturated as Deaf persons and who bring with them a knowledge of some other language, usually English. While not all Deaf people are equally competent in ASL, many of them respect and accept ASL, and more now than before, Deaf people are beginning to promote its use. For Deaf people who prefer to use ASL, the language serves as a visible means of displaying one of their unique characteristics. While use of ASL sets the Deaf person apart from the majority English-speaking culture, it also belongs to Deaf people and allows them to take advantage of their capabilities as normal language-using human beings.

Because Sign Language uses the hands, there is a “sacredness” attached to how the hands can be used to communicate. Hands are used for daily manual activities, gestures, and Sign Language, but not for other forms of communication that are not Sign Language. Deaf people believe firmly that hand gestures must convey some kind of visual meaning and have strongly resisted what appears to be “nonsense” use of hands—one such example is “cued speech.”

Deaf people frequently explain signs in terms of the “pictures” they depict. While some signs visually represent the object in some way—for example, the sign for house outlines the shape of a typical house—other signs have a less clear pantomimic origin. The sign for white supposedly refers to the white ruffles on shirts that men used to wear. Whether the sign actually had that origin is not the point, but that the signifier believes strongly that there must be “reason and rhyme” behind a sign.

Speaking

There is a general disassociation from speech in the Deaf culture. Some Deaf people may choose to use speech in community activities that involve non-Deaf people, such as mixed parties, parent education programs, or while representing the community in some larger public function. But on the cultural level, speaking is not considered appropriate behavior. Children who are brought up in Deaf culture are often trained to limit their mouth movement to only those movements that are part of their language. Exaggerated speaking behavior is thought of as “undignified” and sometimes can be interpreted as making fun of other Deaf people.

Before the 1960s and the advent of “total communication” and “simultaneous
communication," many Deaf people preferred to sign with the mouth completely closed. This type of signing was considered "proper" and aesthetically pleasing. Now, usually only older Deaf people continue to sign this way. Although more mouth movement is permitted now, exaggerated mouth movement while signing is still not acceptable to Deaf people.

Mouthing and the use of speech represent things to Deaf people. Since speech has traditionally been forced on Deaf people as a substitute for their language, it has come to represent confinement and denial of the most fundamental need of Deaf people: to communicate deeply and comfortably in their own language. Deaf people often distrust speech communication for this reason. In speaking, the Deaf person feels he will always be at a disadvantage and can never become fully equal to hearing people who, from the viewpoint of the Deaf person, are always the more accurate models of speaking.

Social Relations

As with any minority group, there is strong emphasis on social and family ties when family members are of the same culture or community. Carl Cronenberg commented on this fact in the Dictionary of American Sign Language. Deaf people consider social activities an important way of maintaining contact with other Deaf people. It has frequently been observed that Deaf people often remain in groups talking late, long after the party has ended, or after the restaurant has emptied of people. One reason is certainly that Deaf people enjoy the company of other like-minded Deaf people. They feel they gain support and trusting companionship from other Deaf people who share the same cultural beliefs and attitudes.

Additionally, in some cases, access to other culture members may be limited to parties, club meetings, or other social activities. This is often the case with Deaf people who work in a place that has no other Deaf employees. Thus, because the time that Deaf people spend together in a comfortable social atmosphere may be limited, they like to take advantage of social occasions where they are likely to meet their friends.

Stories and Literature of the Culture

The cultural values described in this paper are never explicitly stated; there are no books that Deaf children read to learn these values. Deaf children learn them through the process of training in which other Deaf people either reinforce or discourage their comments and actions. And these values are found among the symbols used in the literature of the culture. The play Sign Me Alice by Gil Eastman (1974) is a good example, or the poetry of Dot Miles in Gestures: Poetry in Sign Language (1976), and many other unrecorded stories or games. Among the stories that Deaf people tell are the famous "success stories." A typical story may go like this: a deaf person grows up in an oral environment, never having met or talked with Deaf people. Later in life, the deaf person meets a Deaf person who brings him to parties, teaches him Sign Language and instructs him in the way of Deaf people's lives. This person becomes more and more involved, and leaves behind his past as he joins other Deaf people.

In much the same way that Americans support and propagate the “American Dream,” these success stories reinforce the strong belief and pride Deaf people have in their way of life: that it is good and right to be Deaf.

Entering into the Culture of Deaf People

An interesting perspective on being Deaf comes from deaf people who are going through a process of becoming Deaf and are beginning to assimilate the values of Deaf people. In a study that Harry Markowicz and I (1976) did several years ago, we described the con-

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negatively and usually carries the implication that the person is difficult to communicate with, or may not speak at all. Thus, a deaf person is more likely to be avoided if he calls himself "deaf." But, among Deaf people, the distinctions between hearing loss are not considered important for group relations. "Deaf" is not a label of deafness as much as a label of identity with other Deaf people. A person learning to interact with other Deaf people will quickly learn that there is one name for all members of the cultural group, regardless of the degree of hearing loss: Deaf. In fact, the sign DEAF can be used in an ASL sentence to mean "my friends," which conveys the cultural meaning of "Deaf." Although Deaf people recognize and accept members that are audiologically hard-of-hearing, calling oneself "hard-of-hearing" rather than by the group name is interpreted by some Deaf people as "putting on airs," because it appears to draw undue attention to hearing loss.

The existence of conflict brings out those aspects of the culture of Deaf people that are unique and separate from other cultural groups. It also shows that the group of Deaf people is not merely a group of like-minded people, as with a bridge club, but a group of people who share a code of behaviors and values that are learned and passed on from one generation of Deaf people to the next. Entering into Deaf culture and becoming Deaf means learning all the appropriate ways to behave like a Deaf person.

Hearing Children of Deaf Parents

As mentioned earlier, being Deaf usually means the person has a hearing loss. But there are hearing children of Deaf parents who have grown up with their parents' culture and feel a strong personal affiliation with other Deaf people. They are like other Deaf people in that they actively participate in various cultural affairs and consider themselves a part of the cultural group. However, the fact that they have an "extra sense," like the "sighted man in a country of the blind," is often a source of conflict for these hearing children of Deaf parents.

They may find themselves cast in the demanding role of being "links" between their families and the majority culture. At a very young age, they may learn to interpret for their families and make contact with other hearing people on behalf of the family. Even after they have left the family, they may still maintain the role of a "go-between," perhaps as professional interpreters, or as part of a Deaf organization that makes contact with hearing people.

Hearing children of Deaf parents are usually given greater access to the culture of Deaf people than other hearing children who do not have Deaf parents. Since they often have been brought up to share the cherished values of Deaf people, Deaf people perceive them as less likely to threaten or try to change the structure of the cultural group, and thus, will allow them to interact more fully with Deaf people. An equally important factor in their being able to become members of the cultural group is their knowledge of the group's language. Hearing children of Deaf parents may acquire native competence in ASL to the point where Deaf people will say, "He signs like Deaf people."

Some hearing children of Deaf parents are acutely aware that the behaviors they must use when they interact with a group of Deaf people are different from the behaviors they must use with a group of hearing people. When they are with Deaf people, they find that they must change many aspects of their behavior; the language they use, the kind of jokes they tell, or how they use their eyes. On the other hand, there are other hearing children of Deaf parents who do not seem to be as aware of conflicts between hearing and Deaf cultures. These children say that when interacting with Deaf people, they behave a certain way, but when with hearing people, they find that they switch behaviors unconsciously.

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summary

The term deaf community has had difficulty that has been found in Hillery (1974), has been used be goals of the deaf are joined together. While there is conflicts over values of each culture. The culture until recently, it been remarked. Descriptions of the normal aspects communities are Values of Deaf social environments and need to be encd by deaf p. William Stok's attempt to others who have which facts abc reach a new sn people can ach

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We need to study more deeply and carefully the experiences of hearing children of Deaf parents. Their varied experiences raise many questions about the characteristics of the culture of Deaf people. For one thing, their experiences will help us understand the role hearing loss plays in shaping the culture of Deaf people.

**Summary**

The term *deaf community* is used in many different ways. The fact that the word *community* has had different definitions has probably contributed to the variety of definitions that have been used for *deaf community*. I follow the definition of *community* proposed by Hillery (1974), and the term *deaf community* is used here in a more general sense than has been used before: to describe the group of people who interact and contribute to the goals of the community. These people can be members of different cultural groups, and are joined together to the extent that they share in the goals of the community as a whole.

While there is general consensus on the goals of the community, there may also be conflicts over various issues that arise in the community, resulting from the different values of each cultural group.

The culture of Deaf people has not yet been studied in much depth. One reason is that, until recently, it was rare to describe Deaf people as having a *culture*, although it has often been remarked that deaf people tend to seek out other deaf people for companionship.

Descriptions of Deaf people have often focused on details of their deficiency, and not on the normal aspects of their lives; that they, like other human beings, are members of communities and cultural groups.

Values of Deaf people reflect the beliefs and ways in which Deaf people react to their social environment. These values are often different from those of the majority culture and need to be learned by incoming deaf people; this is reflected in the problems experienced by deaf people who first grow up as hearing people.

William Stokoe's perspective (1971) on the language and culture of Deaf people shows his attempt to describe Deaf people not as abnormal, pathological cases, but as individuals who have a cultural and linguistic identity. His work hopefully has begun an age in which facts about Deaf people are not hidden or ignored, but are brought out to help us reach a new stage of awareness and acceptance of Deaf people. It is only then that Deaf people can achieve the kind of equality they have long sought.

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