



INTRODUCTION TO AMERICAN DEAF CULTURE

Thomas K. Holcomb

OXFORD

Introduction to American Deaf Culture

PROFESSIONAL PERSPECTIVES ON DEAFNESS: EVIDENCE AND APPLICATIONS

Patricia Elizabeth Spencer and Marc Marschark, Series Editors

Evidence-Based Practice in Educating Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing Students

Patricia Elizabeth Spencer and Marc Marschark

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PREFACE

During my 30 years teaching courses related to Deaf culture, I have been continually frustrated with the lack of appropriate teaching materials that address this subject for college-level, undergraduate classes. Many of my colleagues have also expressed a desire for a single textbook that encompasses all the topics necessary to support a course in Deaf culture. This is the reason I undertook this project. I was fortunate to be provided with not one, but two sabbatical leaves by my college, Ohlone College, in Fremont, California, which made it possible for me to complete the complex task of putting together such a textbook. In all, this project took more than 10 years to complete.

As with any field of study, Deaf studies is continually evolving. Our understanding of Deaf culture is enriched with each new addition to the literature. Currently, both artistic works and published research are being produced at a greater frequency than ever before. As a result, the process of analyzing and documenting Deaf culture is becoming increasingly complicated. This upsurge in energy and output is due to many factors. One area of huge transformation has come from revolutionary changes in technology, which have impacted deaf people's lives in two completely different ways. Certain technological developments, such as videophones, text pagers, and webcams, which have benefitted society as a whole, have had a profound positive impact on the lives of deaf people, allowing them to communicate with both deaf and hearing people more easily and effectively, regardless of their hearing levels. Other technological innovations that focus on the physical ability to hear, such as digitized hearing aids and cochlear implants, have also impacted deaf people's exploration of what it means to be Deaf.

Besides technological advancements, legislation has also created an increasingly level playing field for deaf people in all areas of life, including education, employment, and leisure, thus allowing them to participate more fully in many fundamental life experiences. For example, antidiscrimination laws have made it possible for deaf people to pursue career and educational opportunities that were traditionally inaccessible to them. Equal access in many entertainment and information venues is becoming a reality for deaf people through the provision of interpreting and captioning services. Finally, as the United States is becoming increasingly diverse and accommodating, deaf people are less likely to be marginalized, and instead are more often considered a part of the fabric of American life. All of these changes have resulted in lifestyles for deaf people that are markedly different from those of past generations. Yet, many experiences have remained constant over generations and will continue for years to come.

The challenge, then, is to present Deaf culture in a manner that reflects the realities of deaf people's lives today while, at the same time, appreciates and includes the contributions of past generations. As Padden and Humphries (2005) remarked in their book, *Inside Deaf Culture*, "being Deaf, the specific and particular way of being was shaped powerfully by shared histories" (p. 3). Deaf people need to continue to acknowledge their past in order to truly appreciate what opportunities they enjoy today.

I am not an anthropologist, nor is this book based on a formal ethnographical study. Instead, the

information and perspective presented in the book is a result of my life as a Deaf person in a multigenerational Deaf family and my career as a college professor teaching courses related to Deaf culture. Topics addressed in the book have been derived from scholarly works published over the past few decades, plus discussions I've had with a wide range of deaf and hearing friends and colleagues, with students in courses I've taught, and with participants in the conferences where I've presented.

Deaf culture is not new. The label itself, just like other new terms that have been created, make it possible to better describe the experiences of certain groups of people. For example, racism existed long before the term was created. As Bauman (2008) explained, "Before there was *racism*, there was racism; before the word there was the practice. Yet, after the word was coined, it has become a powerful tool to collect the diverse practices of oppressors and compress them into a single lens through which we can see just how deeply racism structures societal arrangements and identities" (p. 13). Although Deaf culture existed long before the term was coined, the emergence of the field of Deaf studies and the subsequent language associated with describing the culture have become powerful tools in discussing, analyzing, and presenting the Deaf experience.

By no means is this book the last word on the topic, nor should it be seen as the absolute authority on Deaf culture. Rather, I see this book functioning as a starting point and guide for further discussions about the Deaf experience. I welcome those who are interested in this topic to continue exploring the aspects of Deaf culture presented in the book. Any discussions we have will help advance our communal understanding of Deaf culture and the many-faceted realities of the lives of deaf people.

I hope that, for deaf people, reading this book and discussing their own life experiences will help them better articulate their thoughts, feelings, and journeys as deaf individuals. For professors teaching courses related to Deaf culture, my goal is that this book will act as a valuable resource in preparing lectures and discussions on the Deaf experience. Because Deaf culture is simultaneously experienced personally and collectively, professors should feel free to expand on or add to points made in the book. They should even feel comfortable digressing or discussing how they view proposed points in a different manner, or how certain ethnic or geographical segments of the Deaf community may have an alternate perspective. Again, I'd like to remind readers that this book should not be viewed as a "bible" that presents the absolute truth about Deaf people and their culture, but rather as a guide for further discussion, exploration, and enlightenment. For newcomers to the Deaf community, I hope this book will help you gain a better understanding of Deaf people, the Deaf community, and Deaf culture as a whole and inspire you to endeavor to become their allies in their quest for equality, respect, and appreciation.

One of the fascinating aspects of discussing various aspects of Deaf culture with a variety of audiences is occasionally being challenged by Deaf people themselves about some of the points I have presented. One example is the topic of "straight talk," which I believe is a prominent feature of Deaf culture. I remember very clearly the time an older Deaf woman approached me after a presentation and accused me of spreading false information about Deaf culture because she would never engage in such behavior. She scolded me for creating a fabrication and informed me that this behavior was something that only poorly educated deaf people would do and that these individuals needed to be taught manners and learn to do things the right way. When she was done admonishing me, I told her that she was being exceedingly direct with her feedback and asked her whether or not she was exhibiting straight talk or the bad manners that she assigned to "poorly educated deaf people." She retorted that, in this situation, that was fine because we were both deaf and so there was no need

to beat around the bush! Aha! The intricacies and complexities of living, working, and being part of a culture!

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book would not have been possible without the support and encouragement I've received from numerous people along the way. They include my amazing family, my supportive colleagues, my dear friends, and wonderful Deaf people in general. I would be remiss not to mention certain individuals who have made a difference, and I apologize in advance if I missed anyone and, in doing so, offended them.

To begin, I would like to thank Dr. Marc Marschark for his enthusiasm about this book project and for his positive encouragement to get the book published through Oxford University Press' Professional Perspectives on Deafness: Evidence and Applications Series. Marc is the person who made this volume possible!

This book project started many years ago with a seed planted by my dear colleague and friend, Dr. Judith Coryell, who insisted that not only could I undertake such a huge endeavor, but that I was the best person to do so. Deep heartfelt thanks to Judith for prompting me in that direction and for being the best colleague and friend anyone could ask for.

I would like to express my profound sense of appreciation to Anna Mindess for her expert editing assistance, for the various projects we have collaborated on related to this topic, and for her wonderful support all these years.

A big thank-you from the bottom of my heart to Dr. Glenn Anderson, who took the time to carefully review the book to make sure it is culturally sensitive and respectful, and inclusive of various communities that exist under the umbrella of the Deaf community. I am especially grateful to him for this valuable assistance.

I sincerely appreciate my colleagues Rory Osbrink and Sandra Ammons for pilot testing the book and for their subsequent feedback, which allowed me to fine-tune the presentation of information throughout the book. I also wish to thank the individuals listed below for taking the time to review certain parts of the book and provide me with their expert and honest feedback: Dr. Karen Christine, John Lee Clark, Patti Durr, Dr. Genie Gertz, Anna Hein, Jack Lamberton, Marta Ordaz, and Dr. Deborah (Sonnenstrahl) Blumenson. I feel honored to be associated with such a great group of colleagues.

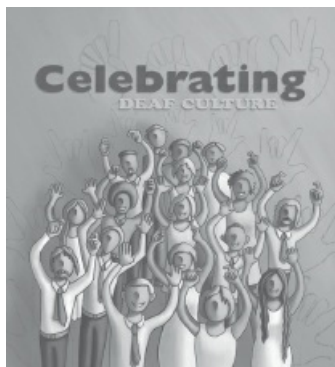
I am grateful for the permission I received from the poets and artists, allowing me to include their work in the book. They have helped to bring the Deaf experience alive through their creative work, which has added distinctive "color" to the book.

I also wish to express my appreciation to the administration of Ohlone College for their ongoing support and commitment to the Deaf studies program in general and for my work in particular. I thank them for making Ohlone a wonderful place for Deaf people and their allies to work and study.

Last, but not least, I am grateful for the ongoing love, support, and encouragement of my family. First of all, I honor my late father, Roy K. Holcomb, who always insisted that being Deaf is a cause for celebration. He was living proof that being Deaf was indeed a blessing, for it provided him a ticket out of poverty and culminated in a long, rich, and rewarding life. I also thank my mother, Marjoriebell Stakley Holcomb for

being such a strong individual, not only as a Deaf person, but as a woman who wouldn't let anything stop her. My parents' strong presence in my life has shaped me in significant ways that I believe are evident in this book. I continue to be in awe of my four children (Tara, Leala, Cary, and Troy), all of whom continue to demonstrate that there is more to life than just being Deaf, and, at the same time, celebrate their essence as Deaf beings. They serve as a reminder of how important it is for deaf children to grow up with a strong sense of self. I thank my brother, Sam, and his wife, Barbara Ray, for being a constant source of reliable support and love even though they live 3,000 miles away. Most important of all, I am so fortunate to have found my soul mate, Michele Berke, who has been a valuable critic and consistent source of inspiration, support, encouragement, and love. I couldn't ask for more!

1 Introduction



"Celebrating Deaf Culture" by Mary Rappazzo. Used with permission.

INTRODUCTION

You are about to enter the realm of Deaf culture, a world that may be completely new to you. Intriguingly, insiders and outsiders to this world may regard it in two completely different fashions. Let us examine this contradiction with the proverbial glass of water that can be viewed as either half-full or half-empty.

Like those who see the glass as half-empty, the traditional view of deaf people focuses only on what is not there—the missing ability to hear. From that starting point, the assumption follows that all the consequences of this condition must be negative, and the picture painted is of deaf people leading lonely, depressing, isolated lives, with minimal educational achievement and low rates of employment. In the traditional view, if parents realize that they have a deaf child, they should be pitied for the struggles they will face with their handicapped child. In the midst of their anguish, however, professionals often materialize to support parents through the “difficult” journey ahead and help them to rehabilitate, medicate, and fix their deaf child, with the obvious goal of overcoming the disability. Professionals’ advice usually involves extreme medical procedures such as surgery, early intervention in the form of intensive auditory verbal therapy, and grief counseling. The ultimate goal is for deaf children to conquer their deafness, so that they can become fully integrated adults who will avoid being ghettoized into the world of those poor unfortunates who are destined to rely on crude gestures to communicate.

Ironically, by contrast, Deaf people themselves view their glass as half-full or even brimming over with the positive feelings and a wide range of opportunities afforded them by a close-knit, intimate society. Rich social lives based on a beloved sign language underpin a network of social, artistic, athletic, and educational opportunities. In fact, most Deaf people are proud to be Deaf, would not change their hearing status if they could, and would happily welcome a Deaf child into their family. Deaf literature provides scores of examples of the satisfying lives Deaf people have created for themselves, including titles such as *Journey into the Deaf-World*, *Black and Deaf in America*, *Deaf Culture Our Way*, *Deaf History Unveiled*, *Deaf Sport: The Impact of*

Sports Within the Deaf Community, *Deaf Women: A Parade Through the Decades*, *Pictures in the Air: History of the National Theatre of the Deaf*, and *Silent Magic: Biographies of Deaf Magicians in the United States*, all of which celebrate the Deaf existence.

The focus of this book is on these joys of being Deaf, which are made possible by the culture of Deaf people. The cultural aspects of Deaf life will be explored throughout the book to provide readers with a glimpse into how Deaf people have managed to create a positive lifestyle for themselves in spite of the challenges often imposed on them by their families, professionals in the field of deafness, and society in general.

THE DEAF COMMUNITY AND THE CULTURE OF DEAF PEOPLE

The Deaf community is not a recent phenomenon, nor is it an outdated concept. The Deaf community is a time-tested solution that provides the support Deaf people need to live a quality life, and it has been in existence since the early 1700s, when educational institutions were first established in Europe to rescue deaf people from an educational and religious vacuum. When deaf people began to congregate at these schools, a new community of people was created among those who found they had a similar orientation toward life—a visual orientation. Similarly in our own country, when Laurent Clerc, a Deaf teacher recruited from France in 1815, co-founded what is now the American School for the Deaf in Hartford, Connecticut with his benefactor, Thomas Gallaudet, American deaf culture was born. With the guidance of Laurent Clerc, and patterned after the vibrant Parisian Deaf community, Deaf Americans began to evolve their own strategies for effective living.

As a result of this type of congregation, an elaborate sociopolitical, linguistic framework for effective living was developed and fine-tuned by Deaf people themselves to maximize the use of their visual orientation to communicate, interact, and learn, all of which are necessary skills for a successful life. After students graduate from deaf schools, they are supported by this societal framework, which allows them to continue to interact among themselves and with the hearing public, in addition to making positive contributions to the larger society.

Today, as in the past, American Deaf people are noted for their strong sense of pride, and their fierce protective stance toward their rights of independence, self-determination, and the right to use a signed language. In addition, American Deaf people have fought passionately to be fully included in society through the elimination of communication barriers. They have insisted that they have a right to full citizenship, and expressed their adamant belief that being deaf is not in itself a disabling condition, but rather a “handicap” imposed by society because of communication and attitudinal barriers.

Even with the shared values and cultural bonding occurring since the 1700s, the term “Deaf culture” did not emerge until the 1980s. Instead, cultural insiders described certain behaviors and values in terms of “the Deaf experience,” “the Deaf way,” or the “Deaf world.” However, because the majority of Americans unconsciously subscribe to the norms of hearing people, any unfamiliar or peculiar habits of Deaf people are automatically compared to these standards. The result is that Deaf people are frequently judged to be immature, deviant, socially irresponsible, or juvenile. This represents an erroneous view of Deaf culture.

Herein lies the paradox. Deaf people have long considered themselves as independent and capable, and not defined by a deficit model. When they look at themselves in the mirror, they do not see disability. When

Deaf people congregate among themselves, they do not feel disabled. Yet, society has consistently viewed deaf people as disabled.

It is for this reason that, until recently, very little has been written about the experiences of Deaf people from a cultural view. Rather, mainstream literature abounds with perspectives on the disabling psychological effects of being deaf. Deaf people have been examined from a pathological perspective, from a deviance model, from a special education frame of reference, and from paternalistic viewpoints. However, in recent years, a growing body of literature has described Deaf people from an alternative perspective: a cultural point of view.

Introduction to American Deaf Culture will add to that body of knowledge and is among the first textbooks to present this subject specifically for a college-level audience. The fact that the author is Deaf and has lived all his life in the Deaf community adds to this book's insights.

THE AUTHOR

This book presents Deaf culture from the perspective of a Deaf man who has been teaching courses related to deaf people for 30 years. The author comes from a long line of Deaf relatives, including his parents and maternal grandparents and brother. He also has four children who are Deaf or hard of hearing and a Deaf grandson, making his lineage a five-generation Deaf family. In addition to the personal experiences of living in the Deaf community, he has taught Deaf culture classes to both deaf and hearing students at several universities and colleges including Ohlone College, San Jose State University, National Technical Institute for the Deaf/Rochester Institute of Technology, and the University of Rochester. He has also delivered numerous presentations throughout the world on issues related to Deaf culture, Deaf education, and identity. Through these speaking and teaching engagements, he has formulated his thoughts on how best to define and discuss Deaf culture, and on ways that Deaf culture can be treated in an academic context. Fortunately, he has associated with diverse segments of the Deaf community throughout his life, including people from a wide range of religious affiliations, ethnicities, sexual orientations, regional backgrounds, generations, and political leanings. Based on these personal and professional connections, he has come to appreciate the unique experiences of Deaf people from a variety of backgrounds. Hopefully, this has translated into a balanced view of Deaf culture. However, this is not to say that the author has the last word on this subject or that the book reflects all deaf people's experiences of being Deaf. Because of his heritage as a multigenerational Deaf, Caucasian, heterosexual, middle-class male, the book may be skewed toward the perspective of this dominant group.

Writing this book was simultaneously a personal and a professional undertaking. In keeping with the general style of a textbook that attempts to portray the reality of a diverse society of Deaf members, it is written in the third person. However, some of the author's personal experiences with various elements of culture discussed in the book will be presented in first-person narratives found throughout the text in highlighted boxes.

OVERVIEW OF THE BOOK

Introduction to American Deaf Culture is designed to provide an academic perspective on the lives of Deaf people, their culture, and the community in which they reside. Readers will learn in [Chapter 2](#) (Culture

Defined) how culture is defined and how Deaf culture fulfills the requirements necessary to be considered a culture. This examination will help us frame our thinking as we scrutinize the fascinating world that Deaf people have created: a vibrant community and its associated culture. Here, we will distinguish between culture and community and discover that the role of culture is to provide its community members with historically created, time-tested solutions for effective living. In the case of Deaf culture, this calls for an examination that goes beyond superficial and visible aspects of culture such as food, clothes, and religion, and instead focuses on deeper elements such values, expectations, and behavior norms. We will see how these solutions have contributed to an effective lifestyle amid a world of people who have little or no experience with the Deaf community. We will also discover what Deaf people refer to as the “hearing” culture and examine what it means to be a hearing American from their point of view.

Because there is no one “typical” deaf person, the question of “Who are the Deaf people?” will be addressed in [Chapter 3](#). Here, the range of demographic details in the deaf populace is presented. This includes the hearing status of their families, type of school settings they attend, several pathways toward membership in the Deaf community, and terms used to identify and distinguish various members of the Deaf community. This reading will help direct our focus to a specific group of deaf people that is being discussed in this book, the culturally Deaf.

To be culturally Deaf, one undertakes a long and often difficult journey in discovering one’s identity. [Chapter 4](#) (Deafhood: A Personal Journey Toward Self-Actualization) presents information on the reasons that many deaf people find it necessary to undertake this journey. The journey often requires people to progress through specific stages in order to achieve a healthy and positive identity for themselves. Our examination of this progression of identities will help us understand certain variations among deaf people.

In [Chapter 5](#) (Early Definitions of Deaf Culture), we travel back in history by reading about the pioneering work of various scholars who took the first steps in identifying and defining Deaf culture. This will allow us to trace the shifting perspectives on deaf people, from one suffused with pathological judgments to a more enlightened view of Deaf people as a cultural entity.

The early works of these scholars identify the traditional hallmarks of Deaf culture and demonstrate the roots of Deaf people’s values. These distinctions have made it possible for the field of Deaf Studies to advance with a clearer definition of Deaf culture. This definition, along with the foundations of Deaf culture, is presented in [Chapter 6](#) (Deaf Culture Redefined).

American Sign Language (ASL) is one of the most distinctive marks of Deaf culture. In [Chapter 7](#), the language will be analyzed from two different perspectives, prescriptively and descriptively. A linguistic analysis of ASL will help us understand how ASL meets all the requirements of a language. This will negate the misconception that ASL is simply a crude form of gestures and therefore not a real language. In addition, a sociolinguistic analysis of ASL will spotlight the variations of ASL that exist within the Deaf community. These variations serve as a reminder that ASL, like all living languages, continues to change and evolve as the linguistic community uses (and perhaps abuses) its language.

Along with the recognition of ASL as a legitimate language and its ties to Deaf culture comes the accompanying interest in the literature of Deaf people. [Chapter 8](#) includes historical accounts of how Deaf literature has emerged and evolved. Early creations of Deaf poets, writers, and performers are highlighted here, along with the more contemporary pieces. Because Deaf people are often bilingual in English and ASL,

Deaf literature consists of two categories, one performed through ASL and one presented in written English, both of which will be discussed in detail in this chapter.

Along with Deaf literature, the Deaf community has a long history of artistic creations by Deaf artists. In [Chapter 9](#) (Deaf Art), we discuss several reasons why a strong artistic presence exists in the Deaf community, and we examine three categories of work by Deaf artists. Outstanding accomplishments of Deaf artists, both in the visual arts and performing arts venues, are spotlighted in this chapter. The Deaf culture art movement, better known as De'VIA, is also examined.

Examples of deep elements of Deaf culture are investigated in [Chapter 10](#) (Rules of Social Interaction). Here, we will learn the rules of social interaction that are expected of members in the Deaf community. These rules will be examined from both historical and pragmatic angles, helping us understand how these rules serve as solutions for effective living among Deaf Americans today.

These solutions, such as cherished opportunities to congregate with other Deaf people, have contributed to the vibrancy of the Deaf community. In [Chapter 11](#) (The Vibrant Deaf Community), we will explore various Deaf communities that exist today, which all contribute to the larger American Deaf community. This chapter will help us see how the American Deaf community is united by Deaf people's experiences, the bond of being deaf, their common language (ASL), and their participation in and support of Deaf culture.

Although many Deaf people see themselves as members of a cultural entity, and therefore reject the notion that they are disabled, most people outside of the Deaf community perceive deaf people to be disabled. In [Chapter 12](#) (The Collision Between Culture and Disability), points of convergence and divergence between the Deaf community and disabled people will be presented with the goal of better understanding Deaf people's rejection of the disability label. At the same time, deaf people routinely benefit from the legal protection of disability-related laws, such as the Americans with Disabilities Act and the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. The applicability of these laws to deaf people is further discussed in this chapter.

As the United States is becoming increasingly diverse in its demographic make-up, the Deaf community is also experiencing a similar shift. Even so, some changes are unique and specific to the Deaf community, and these will be addressed in [Chapter 13](#) (Diversity). One example of the situation unique to the Deaf community is the impact of residential schools in the lives of deaf people. With the prevalence of mainstreamed programs today, the role of deaf schools in the lives of deaf people is becoming relatively insignificant. This has created a huge divide between "old-timers," most of whom attended a residential school, and the newer generation of Deaf community members who did not. This fact, along with the changing racial, ethnic, and religious make-up of American society (both hearing and Deaf) has prompted the Deaf community to adjust to this new reality. We will examine two different perspectives on how diversity is embraced in the Deaf community in this chapter.

Although there are Deaf people all over the world, some experiences are unique to Deaf Americans. In [Chapter 14](#) (The Universality of the Deaf Experience), we will compare and contrast the experiences of Deaf people in the United States with those in other countries. One aspect of the common bonds shared by deaf people all over the world is the challenge of growing up being misunderstood, both literally and figuratively. Many deaf people around the globe suffer an impoverished linguistic home environment because their parents fail to establish an effective communication system, largely due to the fact that family members do not sign. This has resulted in miscommunication on a daily basis, not only at home but out in the community as well.

In addition, in much of the world, deaf people's potential as capable contributing members of society is often overlooked. Although this is also a common phenomenon in the United States, deaf Americans enjoy many privileges that do not exist elsewhere. Those privileges are discussed in detail in this chapter.

The last chapter, *The Future of the Deaf Community*, is a difficult one to approach because the hypothetical question of whether the Deaf community will continue to exist in the future is addressed here. With the rapid advancements made in technological and medical arenas in recent years, it is entirely possible that there will no longer be a "need" for Deaf culture and its solutions in the future. At the same time, the lives of deaf people today have never been better, due to a more widespread and enlightened view of who they are, thus making a "cure" less necessary than ever before. In considering these various possibilities, [Chapter 15](#) presents three scenarios, based on current trends, as to what the future might hold for the Deaf community.

INDIVIDUALS NAMED IN THE BOOK

This textbook does not attempt to provide a comprehensive list of all prominent Deaf individuals throughout history. There are other books that serve this purpose well, including *Deaf Heritage*, *Deaf Persons in Arts and Science*, *Deaf Women: A Parade Through History*, *Deaf People in Sports*, *Deaf Artists in America*, and *Black and Deaf: Are We That Different?*

Rather, the individuals named in this book were selected to provide readers with a broad sense of the contributions that have been made by the Deaf community as a whole. Some individuals are more well known than others, with several enjoying a national or even international reputation for distinguished service within and/or outside the Deaf community. However, most individuals identified in this book were selected to represent countless other Deaf people who have made similar achievements. It is not the author's intention to minimize the contributions made by any individuals not included in this book.

CONVENTIONS USED IN TEXT

For the purposes of this text, the term "Deaf culture" will refer only to American Deaf culture unless otherwise specified. The term "Deaf people" (individuals, children, students, etc.) will refer only to Deaf people residing in the United States, and for much of Canada. The term, "Deaf community" will refer only to the Deaf community of the United States and to a large degree, Canada.

Culturally Deaf people, who are the focus of this book, will be distinguished by the capital "D". Otherwise, deaf (with the lower case d) will be used to refer to the general deaf population or to the audiological condition of being deaf.

Because of the difficulty in translating ASL into printed English, a convention used in this book is that capitalization (or "gloss") refers to an ASL sign. As an example, EYES-WIDE-OPEN refers to the ASL sign indicating a person being in shock.

CONCLUSION

Although this book is not the first to present Deaf people and the Deaf community in a cultural context, it is my hope that *Introduction to American Deaf Culture* will help advance the notion that Deaf people are best understood from that perspective. Another hope is that this book will fill the need for a textbook written specifically for college-level Deaf culture courses. Most importantly, it is my hope that readers of this book will become even more inspired to master ASL, pursue additional opportunities to learn more about Deaf

culture, and contribute to a world that is welcoming of all differences, including Deaf people.

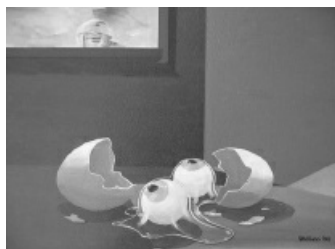
You Have to be Deaf to Understand

by Willard J. Madsen (1981)

What is it like to “hear” a hand?
You have to be deaf to understand.
What is it like to be a small child,
In a school, in a room void of sound –
With a teacher who talks and talks and talks;
And then when she does come around to you,
She expects you to know what she’s said?
You have to be deaf to understand.
Or the teacher thinks that to make you smart,
You must first learn how to talk with your voice;
So mumbo-jumbo with hands on your face
For hours and hours without patience or end,
Until out comes a faint resembling sound?
You have to be deaf to understand.
What is it like to be curious,
To thirst for knowledge you can call your own,
With an inner desire that’s set on fire-
And you ask a brother, sister, or friend
Who looks in answer and says, “Never mind”?
You have to be deaf to understand.
What it is like in a corner to stand,
Though there’s nothing you’ve done really wrong,
Other than try to make use of your hands
To a silent peer to communicate
A thought that comes to your mind all at once?
You have to be deaf to understand.
What is it like to be shouted at
When one thinks that will help you to hear;
Or misunderstand the words of a friend
Who is trying to make a joke clear,
And you don’t get the point because he’s failed?
You have to be deaf to understand.
What is it like to be laughed in the face
When you try to repeat what is said;
Just to make sure that you’ve understood,
And you find that the words were misread-

And you want to cry out, "Please help me, friend"?
You have to be deaf to understand.
What is it like to have to depend
Upon one who can hear to phone a friend;
Or place a call to a business firm
And be forced to share what's personal, and,
Then find that your message wasn't made clear?
You have to be deaf to understand.
What is it like to be deaf and alone
In the company of those who can hear-
And you only guess as you go along,
For no one's there with a helping hand,
As you try to keep up with words and song?
You have to be deaf to understand.
What is it like on the road of life
To meet with a stranger who opens his mouth –
And speaks out a line at a rapid pace;
And you can't understand the look in his face
Because it is new and you're lost in the race?
You have to be deaf to understand.
What is it like to comprehend
Some nimble fingers that paint the scene,
And make you smile and feel serene
With the "spoken word" of the moving hand
that makes you part of the world at large?
You have to be deaf to understand.
What is it like to "hear" a hand?
Yes, you have to be deaf to understand.

2 Culture Defined



“Born to See” by Roy Ricci. Used with permission.

When people think of culture, they often conjure up images of clothes, food, religion, language, government systems, or other visible elements of a country, a region, or a community. We commonly visualize culture in terms of unique characteristics that can be attributed to a particular group of people. For instance, people usually associate sombreros, tacos, Catholicism, and the Spanish language with Mexico and consider these marks as the culture of Mexicans. Likewise, sushi, Buddhism, and the Japanese language are associated with the Japanese culture. Cowboys, hamburgers, and the English language are associated with American culture by people all over the world. Yet, as we will see, there is much more to culture than just these surface manifestations. In this chapter, several different applications and definitions of culture will be presented to help provide a clear understanding of the ways that Deaf culture can be explained, defined, and discussed.

Not everyone conceives of culture in the same way and, because of this, culture has been defined in many different ways. For instance, some people use the term “culture” to describe the unique way employees are treated or are expected to operate within a company. As an example, the Apple culture is known for its laid-back, flexible work environment, which stands in contrast to the IBM culture, where employees are expected to conform to a more rigid and traditional way of doing things.

Yet another application of the term “culture” has been used to characterize the experiences of diverse groups that exist within the United States. For instance, Black culture has been used to describe the common bonds that hold the African American community together (Haight, 1998; Pattilo-McCoy, 1998). Comparably, many gay people identify with Gay culture as a way of substantiating their unique experiences (Duberman, 1997; Herdt, 1992). Similarly, Deaf culture provides evidence of the bonds that hold the Deaf community together and validate the Deaf experience, and serves as the subject that will be explored in the rest of this book.

CULTURE DEFINED

Several different ways to categorize and define cultures are presented and discussed below. These include Historically Created Solutions, Five Hallmarks of a Culture, Culture Versus Community, Surface and Deep

Elements of Culture, Collectivist Versus Individualistic Cultures, the Insider/Outsider Distinction, and American Versus Hearing Culture, all of which will shape the information presented in this book.

Historically Created Solutions

By general definition, culture can be described as “The system of shared beliefs, values, customs, behaviours, and artifacts that the members of society use to cope with their world and with one another, and that are transmitted from generation to generation through learning” (Bates & Plog, 1990, p. 7). In this vein, Diller (2007) explains that, “culture is the conscious and unconscious content that a group learns, shares, and transmits from generation to generation that organizes life and helps interpret existence” (p. 86). Only through language can these contents be shared and communicated by the members of a community. Brooks (cited in Lange & Paige, 2003, p. 55) discusses how “Culture is the distinctive life ... way of a people who are united by a common language.” The interrelationship between culture and language is also presented by Hirsch, Kett, and Trefili (2002) in *The New Dictionary of Cultural Literacy* as “the sum of attitudes, customs, and beliefs that distinguish one group of people from another. Culture is transmitted, through language, material objects, rituals, institutions, and art from one generation to the next” (p. 431). These definitions revolve around Tyler’s original proposition, made in 1871, that culture is “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.”

In this sense, people are not born with culture; rather, they are born into a culture where strategies of survival are introduced to members of the community as they grow up. These strategies allow people not only to survive, but also to thrive in the environment in which they live. Ultimately, culture provides community members with access to historically created, time-tested solutions for effective living that have been transmitted over generations. These solutions consist of five characteristics or hallmarks that shape the culture and address the unique needs of a particular community.

Five Hallmarks of a Culture

These primary cultural hallmarks include language, heritage, customs, arts, and family or “cultural players.” Through these five hallmarks, the salient aspects of a community are identified and reflected. First, language enables people in the community to have an effective communication system—the ultimate bond that holds them together. In addition, language gives community members a way to express specific feelings, thoughts, and ideas, which is crucial to their survival and therefore is essential for effective living. An analysis of a community’s heritage provides a historical perspective as to why people subscribe to certain belief systems and behave in specific ways. Arts reflect the soul of the culture. Customs dictate the rules of behavior and are grounded in historical applications. Families are the ones who transmit those values from one generation to the next, providing the newer members of the community with access to the historically created solutions for effective living. Community members and leaders often function as *cultural players* to supplement or even replace family members in introducing the solutions to the newcomers.

Often, these five hallmarks are so interwoven that they cannot be understood in isolation. Examining languages used by the members of certain cultures raises questions such as “Why do people in Quebec speak French, while Mexicans use Spanish, and Americans in the United States speak English?” Likewise, language

usage among Deaf people has historical implications. The following questions are equally intriguing regarding sign language usage in Australia and United States. “Why do Deaf people in Australia employ sign language that is similar to one used by Deaf people in Great Britain while American Sign Language (ASL) more closely resembles France’s signed language?”

The answers to these questions about why certain languages are used in specific regions by certain groups of people lie in political history and migration patterns. For example, the use of English in the United States can be traced to the imperialistic ambitions of Great Britain during the 1600s, as well as to the battles it won against France and Spain to stake its claim on the territory that is now known as the United States. By contrast, sign language was introduced to the United States by a Deaf teacher who was recruited from France in 1816. As a result, the roots of ASL are in French Sign Language, as opposed to the sign language used in Great Britain. However, in Australia, another English-speaking country, a Deaf Englishman established the educational system there and imported British Sign Language to the deaf school in Melbourne; hence, the difference in the sign languages used in the United States and Australia. In summary, by tracing the history of each country, one can discover the reasons why a particular language is used there.

As will be discussed in this book, all five hallmarks exist within Deaf culture, and these serve to legitimize it as a distinct culture. But language is the most crucial—ASL, the language of Deaf people in America, is the primary reason for the existence and perpetuation of the Deaf community. Having access to a visual language is the main reason why deaf schools were established in the United States in the 1800s, why Deaf organizations came into existence, and why Deaf people continue to congregate despite increased tolerance, acceptance, and respect accorded them in mainstream society.

Historical accounts of the Deaf community provide reasons for the solutions that were created by people from generations long gone-by. Customs that are decidedly unique to Deaf people are numerous and practical. These customs were not created out of thin air but in response to certain needs that may not exist today. For instance, a lengthy and formal ritual of leave-taking (ending a conversation) can be traced to the days when Deaf people did not have an easy way to keep in contact with each other. By contrast, Deaf people today can use text pagers and videophones to have immediate communication with each other. Yet, the formal ritual of leave-taking remains one of the most salient characteristics of Deaf culture.

The fourth category, Arts, is also a strong presence in the Deaf community. As part of Deaf people’s heritage, they struggle to maintain self-control in their own affairs. Dealing with oppression and the ignorance of hearing people are common experiences of deaf people and are therefore often reflected as the focus of Deaf art. Additionally, the beauty of ASL and the pride of being Deaf are other themes that are often portrayed through the arts.

Finally, because the majority of deaf people come from hearing parents who have no previous experience with the Deaf community, the common pattern of the transmission of culture through family members does not apply to them. Instead, Deaf people need to seek cultural players outside the family in order to gain access to those solutions for effective living as Deaf individuals that have been devised by generations of their Deaf predecessors. Furthermore, because of communication obstacles between deaf people and their families, they often turn to the Deaf community for information ranging from facts of life to politics to religion. Consequently, the Deaf community is often considered as “second family” to many Deaf people (Kelly, 2008; Lane, Pillard, & Hedberg, 2011; Lee, 2006; Robinson, 2006). This presents a unique situation for many Deaf

people and is the source of a rallying cry for the continued need of Deaf culture and the importance of the Deaf community among deaf young people today.

Although members of the Deaf community are Americans first, they also are bilinguals (or even multilinguals), just like many Spanish, Chinese, Vietnamese, and other foreign-language speakers in the United States. Deaf people use both ASL and English in their daily lives. American Sign Language has been recognized as a full-fledged language, with its own unique phonology, morphology, syntax, and pragmatics, all distinct from English. This, by itself, legitimizes Deaf culture and makes Deaf people members of a linguistic community.

Culture Versus Community

Because of the importance of ASL and Deaf culture in the lives of many Deaf people, a community of ASL users thrives in the United States. Deaf culture is sometimes used as a synonym for the Deaf community, resulting in confusion regarding the differences between these two terms ([Bechter, 2008](#)). Here, it might be helpful to look at [Padden's \(1989\)](#) discussion of how these two critical concepts—community and culture—can be applied to the Deaf experience. Community is typically perceived as a group of people who happen to reside in a similar geographical location, whether it be an apartment community, a master-planned community, a neighborhood, a city, or a region. Padden explains that a sense of community could also be formed by individuals who share similar goals and/or common interests. This does not necessarily require community members to live in the same geographical location. The bridge-playing community, the artist community, the environmentalist community are all examples of this second definition of a community that is not defined by geography but rather by the special interests or needs that draw a group of people together. Furthermore, the Black community can be united in their goals to protect and advance the interests of African Americans in the United States regardless of geographical location. However, the Black community is often used to refer to locations where a substantial number of African Americans reside, often alongside a large number of businesses that cater to this segment of the population ([Smitherman, 2000](#)).

For Deaf people, the Deaf community is not geographically bound, as its members are scattered all over the country, although concentrations of Deaf people can be found living in major metropolitan areas where services are more readily available to them. A large number of Deaf people also often remain in the same town after graduating from high school or college, even if these schools are situated in more remote locations.

In summary, the American Deaf community consists of people who are bound by their use of ASL and who are drawn to the community by a shared culture—Deaf culture. In addition, the American Deaf community provides its members with access to solutions for effective living in a predominately hearing society. Deaf communities are concentrated in locations where there is support for quality lives for Deaf people. The kind of support many Deaf people find appealing may include schools for the deaf, Deaf clubs, service agencies, and employment options. In addition, the Deaf community offers a host of organizations that devote themselves to promoting religious, social, and athletic opportunities for Deaf people. In essence, the Deaf community is a historically created solution that has naturally emerged and evolved over many generations as a result of Deaf people coming together. It has allowed Deaf people to escape the isolation and loneliness of living in a predominately hearing, English-speaking society. This function of the Deaf community remains as strong today as it did generations ago, and continues to serve as a powerful magnet for

deaf people seeking better lives for themselves.

Surface Versus Deep Elements of a Culture

When discussing culture, people often think of visible, surface elements of a culture such as language, food, and clothes. Yet, a culture consists of much more than what is visible or tangible (Hall, 1994). To gain insights into the values and beliefs of a community, it is necessary to analyze beyond superficial artifacts and delve deeper into areas such as customs, social etiquette, and conversational discourse (Samovar, Porter, & McDaniel, 2010). In the case of Deaf people, there is little to be learned from surface elements, as they dress, eat, and worship just like their hearing counterparts. One of the few outward signs that might identify some members of the Deaf community is a hearing aid, although this would not be considered a cultural marker in Deaf culture. A better example of a surface element of Deaf culture is ASL. However, when you look beyond the surface and explore the deeper elements of the Deaf experience, many unique features of Deaf culture emerge.

Collectivist Versus Individualist Cultures

Cultures throughout the world can be divided into two categories—those with a collectivist orientation and those who are more individualistic in outlook (Corker, 1998; Mindess, Holcomb, Langholtz, & Moyer, 2006; Triandis, 1995). In collectivist cultures, the goals of the community supersede individuals' rights and personal opinions. In this sense, individuals are expected to conform to the expectations of the community so as not to disrupt the harmony among its members. The decision-making process relies heavily on the consensus of the community members. In addition, protecting the reputation of the community is of utmost importance, and each member of the community has the responsibility not to project a negative image of the community to outsiders. For this reason, it is often felt that the community can advance only if its members work in a collectivist manner, making personal sacrifices for the betterment of the community. By contrast, in individualist cultures, the success of the community depends on contributions made by individuals. The individual rights of each member to participate in and belong to the community are of utmost importance, and so people in these cultures often expect the community to be able to respect the needs of each individual.

Unlike 70% of the cultures throughout the world that would be considered collectivist, Americans are known for their individualistic attitudes and behavior (Mindess & Poyner-Moyers, 1999). As would be expected from an individualist culture, Americans demand that their individual rights be protected and that no single individual is discriminated against. For instance, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (see Chapter 12 for a description of the law) requires that each disabled child in the United States receives an appropriate education regardless of the cost. In this sense, the society is expected to provide the child with opportunities for equal access to education, even if the cost to accommodate one child could be criticized as putting a considerable financial burden on the rest of the school system. Likewise, the judicial system requires that each accused party is considered innocent until proven guilty, placing the burden of proof on the accuser. In support of this individual right, Americans feel justified in spending millions of tax dollars on the public defender system to ensure that the accused person's rights are upheld.

Another example involves child-rearing practices. It is customary in the United States for a newborn infant to be separated from its mother immediately after birth, to be weighed and cleaned. Afterward, the

infant is often wrapped in a warm blanket and placed in a bassinet, allowing the mother to rest and recover from the birth. This practice of separating the infant and the mother immediately after birth is considered bizarre in many cultures.

Likewise, many of the world's cultures adopt the practice of a "family bed." These families share the same bed, or at least the same room, to promote warmth and closeness whereas in America, a nursery is routinely provided for the infant, creating a sense of separation between parents and child. This sense of separateness is reinforced repeatedly throughout life, cumulating in the child's graduation from high school and the expected departure from the home in order to establish his or her own and independent place of residence.

In contrast to much of the world, it is not an American custom for aging parents to live with family during their twilight years. Instead, retirement homes and assisted living centers are prevalent, reinforcing the sense of independence among both the aged and their adult children.

A final example of individualism in American life involves different perspectives on discriminatory practices. In America, any form of discrimination is theoretically unacceptable. For this reason, hiring practices by employers are bound by nondiscriminatory policies. Federal policy dictates that, during the search process, prospective employers may not screen out applicants based solely on their appearance, handicapping condition, gender, age, or any other characteristics unrelated to the job duties. By contrast, in Japan, it is acceptable for an employer to specify age range, gender, and any other personal characteristics that are seen to be compatible with the corporate image. For example, it is not unusual for a job announcement in Japan, as a collectivist-oriented country, to include descriptions such as "must be between the ages of 20 and 35," "must be of Asian ancestry," and "must have no physical defect." This overt discrimination would appall Americans if they saw this kind of job announcement in an American newspaper. Likewise, Japanese are shocked that federal law here in United States has the power to dictate the hiring policies of employers, especially since the new hire has the potential of "tarnishing" the image of the company for not being the right age, gender, or race.

The collectivist nature of Deaf people was revealed by [Mindess et al. \(2006\)](#) in the book, *Reading Between the Signs*. Deaf people are expected to be fiercely loyal to the Deaf community, be actively involved in community affairs, and spend most of their social time with Deaf friends and at community events. This expectation continues to be true even among those who learned sign language at a later age or have never attended a deaf school.

Insider/Outsider Distinctions

Also typical of many collectivist cultures is a deeply held insider/outsider distinction that makes it important for people to clearly identify their connections to the community ([Lauderdale, 1993](#)). It is for this reason that Deaf people have a strong need to know who is deaf and who is not, who went to a deaf school and who did not, and who grew up signing in contrast to those who learned how to sign more recently. As part of Deaf culture, this type of information is routinely disclosed as part of introductions when people meet each other for the first time ([Murray, 2008](#)). This allows them, just like people from any other collectivist culture, to protect themselves from potential harm from outsiders ([Pudan-Smith, 2006](#)). Obviously, sharing information is an important hallmark of the Deaf community, just as it is in most collectivist cultures. This behavior affirms the unity of the community and serves as a survival tool. It is for this reason that many Deaf people

find hearing people's need for privacy unsettling (Hall, 1989).

American Culture or Hearing Culture?

Frequently, Deaf people describe the actions, behaviors, and thinking of hearing people as "hearing culture," especially when these attributes differ from the conventional ways of Deaf people. However, many aspects of these "hearing culture" traits can be better described as the mainstream American culture, or even more specifically, the culture of middle-class, white, hearing Americans (Andersen & Collins, 2009). At the same time, it is important to note that these attributes are often not practiced in non-white, non-Deaf communities, as many people in these groups do not enjoy the privileges of a middle- or upper-class lifestyle. Yet, there are specific things that are decidedly "hearing" in the eyes of Deaf people. For this reason, it is important to distinguish the "hearing way" from what is commonly considered to be features of American culture.

In *Reading Between the Signs*, Mindess et al. (2006) identified several dominant characteristics of American culture that are not necessarily in line with the thinking of many people in the Deaf community. These values will be briefly discussed here to provide a clear understanding of what Americans are known for and to serve as a basis for understanding why some Deaf people perceive these traits to be "hearing" culture. In addition, an example or two of how Deaf people's values differ from these typical American values will be offered to provide a glimpse of what topics that will be discussed in greater depth in the rest of the book.

Independence is an important value in America. Children are trained at an early age to be independent. Young adults are expected to move out of their parents' homes once they complete their high school education. Many senior citizens want to hold onto their independence for as long as possible. Moving in with their adult children compromises their sense of independence. By contrast, in many other cultures, families stay together from birth to death. Independence and living apart is a foreign concept to many.

Although Deaf Americans share those values of independence and self-reliance, they also value mutual dependence as a way of survival. Ironically, this mutual dependence (or interdependence) is critical for developing and sustaining independence among Deaf people. For example, during interpreted situations in places such as a classroom or lecture, Deaf people often check with each other to ensure that they are understanding the lecture accurately, which in turn supports their success in the mainstream environment. Another example revolves around the importance of sharing information among Deaf people to compensate for limited information from their hearing contacts.

Americans are also noted for their value of *egalitarianism*. There is no strong class system in the United States (in contrast to the United Kingdom, for example), and for this reason, everyone is supposed to have the same opportunity to succeed or to fail. In addition, Americans pride themselves on their ability to interact with anyone, regardless of their socioeconomic class. For example, it is not unusual for people to chat with their waiters at a restaurant or for a homeowner to give a glass of water to the gardener working in the yard. Because of the relatively small size of the Deaf community, that community is even more harmonized. Deaf people are noted for their ability to interact with one another regardless of their racial, educational, economic, or religious associations, especially when they reside in an area where there are not a large number of Deaf people. In this case, belonging to a linguistic community supersedes everything else and, for Deaf people, ASL brings them together.

AUTHOR'S ANECDOTE

When I accepted a faculty position at San Jose State University (SJSU), I found myself in a completely different environment than my previous place of employment, Rochester Institute of Technology/National Technical Institute for the Deaf (RIT/NTID). This represented a huge shift in communication accessibility for me, from one where there was a large community of signers to being around predominately hearing, nonsigning colleagues. I found myself having lunch with a Deaf groundskeeper on a frequent basis because of our common linguistic and cultural bond. This was in spite of the huge difference in our educational backgrounds and professional status.

The ability to exercise one's *personal choice* is a prominent value in America. Having personal choice can be overwhelming to those who are not accustomed to the American way of life. Choices abound in everything from the selection of snack food and beverages to postsecondary options, living arrangements, mate selection, and so on. However, deaf people's options are often more limited in many venues. Although the civil rights act for people with disabilities, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), allows deaf people to consider any educational or employment opportunity, many deaf people find it necessary to consider the implications of placing themselves in a situation where communication access and/or services would not be optimal. For example, the quality of support services varies a great deal from college to college, from corporation to corporation, from town to town, thus making deaf people pause before accepting educational or business offers. Mate selection can also be a challenge, especially if you are a member of a specific religious or ethnic group. For instance, if you are a Deaf Muslim or a signing martial artist and seek a suitable mate with a similar background or interest, it may be extremely difficult.

Achievement in professional and academic arenas and what one does for living are important to Americans. What you do for a living may be the first topic of conversation, before discussing other personal information such as the number and ages of children you have or the hobbies you enjoy. In addition, your success, whether it be professional or scholastic, is your own accomplishment. Making it up the ladder of success is a personal achievement and a source of personal pride. However, in the Deaf community, the ladder of success often is not considered a personal triumph but rather a shared accomplishment. Members of the Deaf community take pride in the successes of their fellow Deaf individuals. For example, Deaf people are quick to point out if there is a Deaf dentist or a Deaf business owner in town, and will do their best to patronize these businesses even if they are not the closest or most cost effective.

Although most Americans are able to keep their personal and professional lives *compartmentalized*, this is difficult for many Deaf professionals. It's not unlike living in a small community where everyone knows everyone else's business. In this case, Deaf teachers working in a deaf school or Deaf social workers working in a Deaf agency often find themselves socializing with the same people at church, at the Deaf club, and at various Deaf functions. In reality, it is difficult for many Deaf people to keep their personal lives private.

AUTHOR'S ANECDOTE

As a Deaf professor at Ohlone College, where there are almost 200 deaf students, I often find that these students know details of my personal life but not of their hearing professors. My students often happen to be personal friends of my Deaf children, and they know my wife, who works at the local school for the deaf. They know where I live, who my close friends are, and what I may be doing during my nonworking hours.

These are only a few examples of how Deaf people, like many other minority groups in America, need to strike a balance between the practices of mainstream American society, the specific values of the Deaf community, and the expectations of the cultural/ethnic group to which their family belongs. This amalgamation between the “Deaf world” and larger society has long been the experience of Deaf people as they function to the best of their ability, while constrained by the reality of living and coexisting simultaneously in various environments (Ladd, 2008; Murray, 2008). This phenomenon has been described as a “cultural flow,” in which individuals move with the tide, following the demands of various parts of their lives (During, 1999).

Hearing Culture Through the Eyes of Deaf People

Although the term “hearing culture” is not commonly used among average non-deaf people and perhaps is just as anomalous as the term “hearing people,” these two terms are well understood by most Deaf people. Certainly, both Deaf and hearing people share many values as fellow Americans. Yet, there are many specific things that are decidedly “hearing.”

AUTHOR'S ANECDOTE

Every semester, I ask my deaf students to identify how hearing people are different from them and to list what they perceive to be “hearing culture.” The list below is a sampling of the responses I’ve collected over the years. Although the first few entries are rather obvious, the replies become increasingly amusing as the list goes on. For some entries, I provided an explanation about why my students perceived them as hearing culture.

1. Hearing people use their voice to communicate.
2. Hearing people can talk without looking at each other.
3. Hearing people don’t use much facial expression or maintain eye contact while talking.
4. Hearing people talk on the phone a lot.
5. Hearing people love concerts.
6. Hearing people need to hear music while put on hold.
7. Hearing people like to keep their rooms dimmed.
8. Hearing people knock on the door before entering.
9. Hearing people don’t let each other know when they leave the room.
10. Hearing people go home promptly after events.
11. Hearing people use names to get the attention of others.
12. Hearing people are not touchy kind of people. (Hearing people often are startled by deaf people’s attention-getting devices such as tapping each other on the shoulder.)
13. Hearing people are short on greetings and farewells (in contrast to the detailed introductions and prolonged good-byes typical in the Deaf community).
14. Hearing people are more private about personal matters. (Information sharing is an important feature of Deaf culture, and, consequently, many Deaf people find it perplexing when hearing people are not generous about sharing information.)
15. Hearing people love family gatherings and to eat dinner with their family. (Many deaf people have to deal with the dreaded dinner table syndrome, where they are frequently left out by their hearing family members, especially when the gathering becomes large, and it is increasingly difficult to follow spoken conversations.)
16. Hearing people often say “It’s not important.” (This is a typical, yet frustrating response when a deaf person asks what was being said.)
17. Hearing people close their eyes when praying.
18. Hearing people get nervous easy. (This impression is based on the discomfort many hearing people have when interacting with deaf individuals.)
19. Hearing people feel bad for deaf people.
20. Hearing people like to make fun of deaf people.

21. Hearing people like to correct other people's speech. (This is based on their life-long experiences of having their speech corrected by their parents, teachers, therapists, and so on.)
22. Hearing people love centerpieces. (Which makes it difficult for deaf people to see across the table and therefore are not a typical feature of a deaf environment.)
23. Hearing people always use bad words. (Based on the language used in many movies ...Often the only access deaf people have to the mainstream language is the captions they see on the screen.)
24. Hearing people love to sing when they are in love. (As frequently depicted on the big screen.)

Obviously, "hearing culture," from a Deaf perspective, focuses on things people do because they hear and how they orient themselves based on their hearing. This has nothing to do with being an American. In this sense, many of these behaviors are typically universal among people who hear. On the surface level, examples of hearing culture include the use of speech to communicate and artifacts such as radios, alarm clocks, and public address systems. On a deeper level, the focus is on behaviors and attitudes of hearing people and how their world revolves around their sense of hearing.

Frustrations often mount for deaf people because of this orientation toward hearing and speaking. For example, when a deaf person who does not have much confidence in his or her speaking abilities tries to speak with a hearing person, he or she will likely speak in a quiet voice. In reaction, the hearing person often leans forward and turns his or her ear closer to the deaf person's mouth. This is especially frustrating and often distressing for the deaf person because a better solution would be for the person to keep his or her eyes on the deaf person's face and try to lip-read. Another example is when a hearing person discovers that an individual is deaf, he or she might speak louder, as if that will help with communication. Deaf people perceive those behaviors of leaning forward to hear better and speaking louder as "hearing" culture. Another typical feature of "hearing culture" in the eyes of many Deaf people is the relatively easy access to information and communication that is probably taken for granted by hearing people. In contrast to deaf people's ongoing struggle to be kept informed, information is readily available for hearing people as they are able to overhear other people's conversations; talk with neighbors, co-workers, and relatives; listen to the radio; and basically gather information from anyone at any time.

This "anyone, anywhere, anytime, anything" access is a privilege enjoyed by hearing people only. In contrast to deaf people's experiences, hearing people can strike up conversations with anyone, anywhere, about anything, anytime. Hearing people can initiate small-talk while waiting in a line at a grocery store, ask for directions at a corner of a busy intersection, comment on a child's cute dress, elicit a recommendation from the waitress in a restaurant, complain loudly when receiving poor service at a customer service department, and try to talk a cop out of a ticket after being caught speeding. For these reasons, this privilege is perceived as hearing culture.

Double standards are routinely practiced, often unconsciously, by hearing people because of "hearing culture." One example is that, in any public presentation situation, hearing people typically make sure the audio equipment is working properly at all times and suspend everything if the system malfunctions. For instance, if the microphone does not work, the lecturer in a large gathering does not proceed until it is fixed. However, this standard does not always equally apply to the visual component of a presentation. If the lighting in the room is not good or the video system inoperable, making it difficult for the Deaf person to see the signer, the program may proceed regardless of the problem. This happened at the 2001 Deaflympics in

Rome, Italy. There were thousands of Deaf athletes and fans in attendance for the opening ceremony. To ensure that the participants would be able to understand the speeches welcoming people to Rome, the professional event organizers, all of whom were hearing, had set up an elaborate visual system, including two huge television screens and cameras fixed at strategic locations to capture everyone who would be presenting. If a hearing, nonsigning person were to speak, the camera would be focused on the interpreter. If a signing person were to address the audience, the focus of the camera would be on the presenter. Unfortunately, there was a glitch in the system and the entire video system malfunctioned at the opening ceremony, making it difficult for Deaf people to see the signing of the presenters or interpreters. Yet, the local organizing committee, composed of primarily hearing people, proceeded with the program. Out of frustration, one of the Deaf officers from the parent Deaflympics organization quietly unplugged the sound system so that both hearing people and deaf people would share in the frustration. The hearing representatives on the committee immediately stopped the program and insisted that the sound system be fixed right away, whereas, earlier in the ceremony, when the visual system was not working, they thought nothing of proceeding with the celebration.

AUTHOR'S ANECDOTE

When a teletypewriter device for the deaf (TTY) at the main office broke down at the deaf school where my children attended, I was told by the hearing administrator that it would take weeks and weeks to have it fixed and that Deaf parents would have to be patient if they needed to contact the main office. He sent the TTY to a repair shop by regular postage rather than priority mail or overnight service. He made no attempt to find a short-term replacement to accept TTY calls in the interim. Yet, when the regular phone system crashed, this same administrator considered it to be an emergency, and he demanded that the phone be fixed immediately so that hearing parents wouldn't have difficulties reaching the school if needed.

These examples serve as a reminder of how hearing people orient their lives differently than Deaf people do. This was the reason why [Corker \(1998\)](#) questioned how much Deaf people's perception of hearing culture is actually based on hearing people's ability to hear, as opposed to their orientation toward life. [Padden and Humphries \(1988\)](#) explained that these differences are due to the different center in which Deaf and hearing people operate on a daily basis. [Brueggemann \(1999\)](#) contributed to this understanding of the difference by stating that "English and ASL represent not just two very different cultures and languages, but entirely different ways of thinking and seeing the world, manifesting epistemological and ontological (as well as ideological and audiological) distinctions that resound to their very cores" (p. 185). This is not to infer that one way is superior to another but rather stands as a testament to solutions that were created by each culture to allow its people to achieve an effective lifestyle.

CONCLUSION

In closing, there are many different ways in which the Deaf experience can be examined. The cultural perspective allows us to delve into the lives of Deaf people and the solutions they have created for themselves. These solutions make it possible for Deaf people to lead a "hybrid life," in which they move between their Deaf existence and the larger world where most people are not deaf and do not sign. Although the phrase "hearing culture" is not in the vocabulary of most people, it is commonly used among Deaf people when

contrasting their experiences with the lives of the hearing majority.

Throughout this book, we will examine deep elements of Deaf culture to better understand the solutions that have been created by Deaf people for effective living. Along the way, we will discover how these solutions have corresponded with the evolving nature of the Deaf community. We will identify the core values of the Deaf community that have shaped the language, arts, and customs of Deaf people throughout the years. In the end, we will have a clear picture of this dynamic, vibrant community of Deaf people and the culture in which they thrive.

Broken Ears

by Tristan Thunderbolt (2010)

On small reservation in southern Ontario
Learning as I go one experience at a time
This Native boy was not the same as the others
Only if I can catch up with the others I'll be fine.

Once was told that I would not measure to much
I would never go to college or get a degree
My dream to be a doctor I cannot be of such
Watching others dream their dreams and not me.

My Chief said that I should be proud of who I am
And he gave me my tribal name of Broken Ears
This ten year old Native boy only wants to understand
Why this silent world can be so cruel as it appears.

I fought many battles all of them that I have won
For those who laugh at my speech and deaf voice
But did I really win; or what have I done was so wrong
We all know in the day of life we all have a choice.

(verse)

I have been to the our reservation tent revivals to get my hearing back
God must not exist 'cause I'm Deaf, forever
No healings, no sage, no feathers nor sweat lodges
Can help these broken ears of mine, ever.

From the grave of my Chief who named me Broken Ears.
Thanks for your wisdom, I know I have nothing to fear.
I'll walk the Indian Road hopeful of what my future hold
This native boy will stand proud now and when I am old.

(continued)

(verse)

I have been to the reservation tent revivals to get my hearing back
God must not exist 'cause I'm Deaf, forever
No healings, no sage, no feathers nor sweat lodges
Can help these broken ears of mine, ever.

(bridge)

My broken ears will not be my broken spirit

I will forever look for the goodness in others
Just as my elders say you do not need to hear it
It's in your heart, be proud, my broken ears are forever.

For my broken ears
I do not fear.
Maybe God was listening after all.
Maybe God was listening after all.

3 Who Are the Deaf People?



“A Century of Difference,” © Ann Silver, 2002. Used with permission.

Stereotypes, generalizations, and labels can be dangerous weapons. They are often based on incorrect or inadequate information. Any sentence that starts with an overarching statement such as, “Black people ...,” “Jewish people ...,” or “Blond people ...” has a high probability of being erroneous from its very attempt to be all-inclusive. The same holds true for declarations about “Deaf/deaf people.” This chapter will examine the following questions: “Who are the Deaf people?” “Are hard-of-hearing people included in this description?” “What is the difference between Deaf and deaf?” and “What other labels are used to describe people who do not hear?”

Demographic data alone do not paint a clear picture of the deaf and hard-of-hearing population in America. Approximately 17% of the population, or 36 million people in the United States can be classified “hearing impaired,” which includes both deaf and hard-of-hearing people (National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders: <http://www.nidcd.nih.gov/health/statistics/quick.html> retrieved on Feb. 20, 2011; Pleis, Lucas, & Ward, 2009). However, the term “deaf” can be ambiguous due to differing rationales behind defining and categorizing people based on their hearing status (Grushkin, 2003; Leigh, 2009; Mitchell, 2006; Mitchell & Karchmer, 2004a; Singleton & Tittle, 2000).

Not every deaf person uses sign language or participates in events and organizations sponsored by the Deaf community. In fact, a large majority of deaf people do not affiliate themselves with the Deaf community at all, primarily because they became deaf later in life. Conversely, not every person who identifies with the Deaf community has a hearing loss in the severe or profound range. To clarify this seeming contradiction, the practice of capitalizing the “d” in Deaf has been utilized in the literature since the 1980s to make a distinction between people who do not hear but who choose not to participate in the Deaf community and those who embrace Deaf culture. Thus, “deaf” with a lowercase “d” refers to the physiological condition of not hearing regardless of whether or not they choose to identify with the Deaf community. On the other hand, “Deaf” with a capital D, is used to characterize deaf individuals who use sign language as their primary mode of communication, identify with Deaf Culture, and participate in the Deaf community. In this sense, every Deaf person is also deaf, but not every deaf person can be considered Deaf. As an example, a late deafened person who lost his hearing in his 50s or 60s would probably not identify with Deaf culture nor participate in the

Deaf community. This book is written specifically about Deaf people who are members of the Deaf community. Through their interaction over the years, a distinct culture has developed, allowing this population to enjoy an effective way of life.

THE 90% FORMULA

Regardless of their level of involvement in the Deaf community, most deaf people are born to hearing parents and have hearing children of their own (Gallaudet Research Institute, 2001; Marschark, 2007; Mitchell & Karchmer, 2004b; National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders, <http://www.nidcd.nih.gov/health/statistics/quick.html>; retrieved February 20, 2011). To better understand this unique phenomenon, a *90% formula* was proposed by demographer Dr. Jerome Schein in 1989. It states that more than 90% of deaf people are born to hearing parents, with recent studies showing the figure to be close to 95% (Mitchell & Karchmer, 2004b). Ninety percent of these parents have had no experience with deaf people prior to giving birth to their deaf child. Furthermore, 90% of deaf adults have hearing children.

Past studies have revealed communication challenges experienced by many deaf children. For example, 90% of hearing parents are unable to communicate efficiently with their deaf child (Greenberg, 1980; Swisher & Thompson, 1985), and 90% of deaf children are unable to achieve intelligible speech in spite of years of intensive therapy (Neisser, 1983). Ninety percent of those who were born profoundly deaf ended up using sign language at some point in their lives, despite the fact that they were reared in primarily oral environments (Neisser, 1983).

This 90% formula has also been applied to the cultural aspects of the Deaf community. These aspects include sign language usage among Deaf families with Deaf children (Mitchell & Karchmer, 2005) and among Deaf students with Deaf parents attending a signing school (Mitchell & Karchmer, 2004a), and the endogamous marriage rate among Deaf people (Meadow, 1972; Schein, 1989).

An analysis of more recent data suggests that this 90% formula is still appropriate and can even be applied to other aspects of Deaf people's lives. It has been suggested that 90% of Deaf signers were former oralists, making the Deaf populace a community of converts (Bechter, 2008). In addition, as a result of the full inclusion movement in education, close to 90% of deaf children today do not attend a deaf school (Bauman, 2008; Karchmer & Mitchell, 2006). Consequently, 90% of deaf children are not benefitting from a bilingual-bicultural program, as the majority of such programs are housed in a deaf school (Moores, 2010). Despite advancements in hearing aids and assistive technology, deaf children today continue to struggle with language acquisition, with 90% of those raised by hearing parents experiencing significant delays (see, for review, Marschark & Spencer, 2007/2010; Wilbur, 2008). This has deep implications on the way younger generations of deaf people are introduced to the solutions that Deaf culture has evolved for effective living.

INFLUENCE OF DEAF CULTURE ON FAMILIES

The presence of a deaf person in a family and the accompanying influence of the "Deaf way" (of living) on that family usually lasts only three generations, affecting the Deaf individual, his or her parents, and his or her children (Singleton & Tittle, 2000). With the birth of a deaf child, hearing parents are forced to adjust family dynamics in order to better integrate the child into the family. This can be accomplished by learning sign language but is often accomplished by modifying oral communication to allow increased visibility of English

on the lips as they speak. Regardless of the communication modality used at home, many of these families install visual alert systems (for doorbell and phone signals) and utilize specialized communication devices, such as the teletypewriters (TTYs) used to make phone calls in the last half of the 20th century, and more recently, videophones. Furthermore, these families need to deal with the isolation and communication challenges that often accompany the deaf child's experiences growing up in a predominately hearing environment. As the deaf child matures and brings home new solutions for effective living—acquired through contact with Deaf individuals—the family often needs to adapt accordingly (Moore, 2001).

The influence of Deaf culture will also be experienced by the succeeding generation, when these Deaf children grow up and have children of their own, most of whom will be born with typical hearing. These children of Deaf parents (often self-identified as children of Deaf adults or CODAs) will have to negotiate between two cultures for their entire lives, the Deaf culture of their home, and the mainstream American hearing culture of which they are also a part. In a home with Deaf parents, it is not unusual for American Sign Language (ASL) to be acquired as a first language, with English as a second language, whether or not the child hears. Hearing children with Deaf parents internalize the Deaf way of life from their parents, despite their ability to hear. They often witness the misunderstandings that inevitably occur between their Deaf parents and hearing society. And, depending on the family, they may be enlisted to act as go-betweens or interpreters for their parents from a young age. For this reason, many hearing children of deaf parents have to straddle two communities and learn to co-exist between two realities and cultural identities (Bishop & Hicks, 2005; Hoffmeister, 2008; Padden & Humphries, 2005; Preston, 1994; Singleton & Tittle, 2000).

AUTHOR'S ANECDOTE

My wife is one of those people who grew up with a bicultural identity. She was born hearing to a Deaf family and is fluent in both ASL and English. One of my favorite stories related to her two-world life experiences is when she went away to college for the first time. With an extremely chatty roommate, she found it difficult to continue talking after the lights were turned off even with her perfect hearing. She realized later on that she was operating under Deaf cultural norms. Since ASL is a visual language, conversations are possible only when there is enough light, and she had been conditioned to cease chatting when the room became too dark to see.

Unfortunately, usually, the hearing grandchildren of Deaf people don't learn to sign well, and so the influence of Deaf culture on a family begins to disappear (Hoffmeister, 2008). Almost no vestige of Deaf culture remains in the next generation. Because of this, there are few solid familial roots in the Deaf community, resulting in the community being reborn and remade with every generation (Singleton & Tittle, 2000; Wrigley, 1996). This is not to say that there are no Deaf "dynasties." In their study, Lane, Pillard, and Hedberg (2011) trace families with long lines of Deaf people, spanning five or more generations. Based on their findings, they conclude that Deaf people should be viewed as an ethnic group.

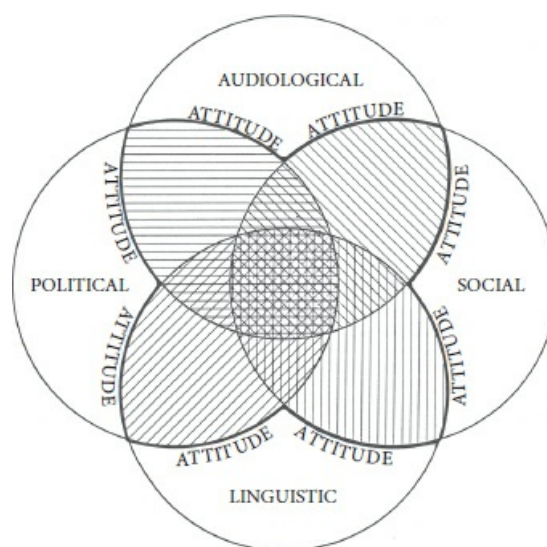
For Deaf families who give birth to deaf children, their experiences are completely different from those of hearing parents. Deaf children of Deaf parents have the benefit of ready-made solutions, thanks to Deaf culture, from the day these babies are born. In fact, the family dynamics of an all-Deaf family closely resemble a typical American family, in which communication access is not an issue. Deaf babies are provided with a fully accessible language through ASL, a barrier-free communication system via signing, and a home environment free of the grief and mourning associated with having a deaf child. Deaf parents keep up a steady

stream of signing to their babies, just as hearing parents expose their hearing children to spoken language long before the child can utter his or her first response. In both families, the day a baby says her first word or makes her first sign is met with much excitement. With an early start on language and solid acceptance from the family, Deaf children with Deaf parents are off to a good start for a rather ordinary upbringing. Research over the years has repeatedly shown that Deaf children from Deaf families tend to be ranked superior to those from hearing families in all areas of development, including academics, personal and social development, language acquisition in both English and ASL, communication skills, and career aspirations (see [Erting, 2003](#), for a review). However, this is not to say that Deaf parents do not experience the same struggles and challenges with raising their children as their neighbors do. As such, many Deaf parents experience many sleepless nights dealing with colicky babies, terrible-two terrors, hormonal preteens, rebellious teenagers, and so on.

For the 90% of deaf people born outside the Deaf community, the question of how a deaf person becomes affiliated with the community is an intriguing one. Some answers are provided below and discussed further in [Chapter 4](#).

MEMBERSHIP

The social position of deaf and hard-of-hearing people can change, depending on how they respond to hearing loss at particular times in their lives ([Andrews, Leigh, & Weiner, 2004](#); [Mitchell, 2006](#); [Padden & Humphries, 1988](#)). In 1980, Baker-Shenk and Cokely proposed a model illustrating four domains that Deaf people must satisfy in order to achieve a comfortable place in the Deaf community. In their diagram, they included audiological, linguistic, political, and social requirements for full membership in the Deaf community. [Baker-Shenk and Cokely \(1980\)](#) theorized that a person needs to possess a hearing level that is substantially different from a typical hearing person, use sign language, have Deaf friends, and exhibit interest in the well-being and integrity of the Deaf community in order to be fully accepted in the Deaf community. Underlying these four facets, Baker-Shenk and Cokely posited, is an appropriate attitude that a Deaf person must exhibit toward Deaf culture and the community of Deaf people in order to claim and enjoy membership in the Deaf community.



Avenues to membership in the Deaf community. Used with Baker-Shenk and Cokely's permission.

Expanding on this model, it seems that the more deeply a person is immersed in these four domains

(audiological, linguistic, social, and political), the easier their route toward full membership will be. For example, a profoundly deaf person will have an easier time asserting his or her place in the Deaf community than someone who appears to be hard of hearing. A person who is fluent in ASL will not have problems assimilating into the Deaf community compared to a novice signer. A person who is very involved in the Deaf social scene will be welcomed more readily than a person who has very few Deaf friends. And, finally, a person who has no interest in the reputation and image of the Deaf community will not be as well regarded as those who work hard to protect the integrity of the Deaf community. Again, the bottom line is the attitude a Deaf person exhibits regarding these four domains.

COMMON LABELS

In addition to the distinction between deaf and Deaf (with the capital D), many other labels are used to identify a person's status and affiliation within the Deaf community. For the purpose of this chapter, the five most commonly used terms will be discussed in the context of the Deaf community's perspectives. These terms are: hearing-impaired, Deaf, hard of hearing, hearing, and "hearing-but." Although there is no clear, consistent definition for these terms, definite implications are associated with each label as used within the Deaf community.

Hearing-Impaired

Beginning in the 1970s, the disabled community attempted to eradicate negative connotations associated with disabled people in general by changing the common terms of usage. Terms such as *visually impaired*, *developmentally delayed*, and *physically challenged* were popularized during that time. In the same spirit, an effort was made to replace the word *deaf* with a new term, "hearing-impaired." The Deaf community however, never accepted this artificially created, seemingly politically correct term (Leigh, 2009; Marschark, 2007; Stewart, 1986). Adding on "impaired" as part of their identity did not sit well with many Deaf people, as the concept seemed demeaning, tarnishing their image as capable individuals with a rich culture. Therefore, the accepted convention within the Deaf community is to discourage the use of the term "hearing-impaired" when referring to deaf people (Moore & Levitan, 2005; Padden & Humphries, 1988). In fact, both the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) and the International Federation of Hard of Hearing People (IFDHHP) formally rejected this label over 20 years ago (Marschark, 2007).

Deaf

Although the general public's perception of deaf people revolves around their inability to hear and the "isolation" of the deaf individual, this is not how Deaf people perceive themselves (Grushkin, 2003; Humphries, 2008). Although the term "deaf" usually describes an inability to hear well, within the Deaf community, the definition is decidedly more socially oriented (Leigh, 2009; Mitchell, 2006; Padden & Humphries, 2005). For Deaf people, the central component of their identity is the use of sign language. (By contrast, hard-of-hearing people often value their speaking ability as a critical component of their essence.) Through the years, Deaf people have created for themselves a strong sense of identity through the use of ASL, an authentic social community, and many cultural traditions based on their visual orientation to the world. As such, they feel little need to be concerned with sound or the mechanics of hearing (Grushkin, 2003). This has occurred because, as Neisser (1983) points out, "no living creature organizes its behavior around something it

does not have” (p. 5).

In recognition of the cultural experiences of Deaf people and the academic community’s need to clearly identify this segment of the Deaf population, [James Woodward \(1972\)](#) became the first scholar to propose the use of the capital D ([Napier, 2002](#); [Padden & Humphries, 1988](#)). This practice of capitalizing the “D” in deaf became conventionalized when [Padden \(1980\)](#) took it further in her pioneering article and specified that those who used signs as their primary mode of communication, in addition to their ties to the Deaf world, should be designated with capitalized Deaf.

The evolution of the term “Deaf” coincided with new ideas being proposed to better describe the experiences of Deaf people. For example, [Bauman \(2008\)](#) proposed that perhaps the “F” in Deaf should also be capitalized to reflect the fluidity of Deaf people’s bicultural lives where they move between both the Deaf and hearing worlds on a daily basis. [Bauman \(2008\)](#) explained, “The DeaF position is to be aspired to where one’s identity is bilingually and biculturally fluid and fluent” (p. 13). Although this concept of using DeaF to describe the hybrid nature of Deaf people’s lives is intriguing, this label has not yet been widely used in the Deaf community.

In brief, the label “Deaf” is used with pride among Deaf people. This term is a shorthand way to encompass all the rich experiences, heritage, outlook, and values of Deaf people.

Hard of Hearing

Although the term “hard of hearing” is frequently used in the Deaf community to describe those who have some use of their residual hearing, the actual meaning of this term is vague ([Andrews et al., 2004](#); [Brueggemann, 2009](#); [Grushkin, 2003](#); [Leigh, 2009](#); [Marschark, Lang, & Albertini, 2002](#); [Mitchell & Karchmer, 2004a](#); [Moore & Levitan, 2005](#); [Nikolarai & Hadjikakou, 2006](#); [Rutherford, 1993](#); [Singleton & Tittle, 2000](#)). One possible reason for this ambiguity is the opposing views of what hard of hearing means to Deaf and hearing people. To many Deaf people, hard of hearing signals experiences that are closer to those of hearing people. In contrast, hearing people typically view hard of hearing as something that is more related to Deaf people’s experiences. To illustrate this point, [Padden and Humphries \(1988\)](#) explain how hearing people view “VERY hard-of-hearing” individuals as being almost deaf, whereas Deaf people consider “VERY hard-of-hearing” as an appropriate label for those who hear almost as well as hearing people.

In general, there is no hard and fast line between deaf and hard-of-hearing people in the Deaf community. Reflecting back to the four domains presented by [Baker-Shenk and Cokely \(1980\)](#), a person who has a lot of residual hearing but functions well in the Deaf community by possessing the three other components would probably consider himself or herself to be Deaf, regardless of hearing level or the speech quality ([Grushkin, 2003](#)). However, some Deaf people may disagree with this designation ([Moore & Levitan, 2005](#)). More hard-liners claim that those who have intelligible speech and can use hearing to communicate with hearing people without much difficulty should be considered hard of hearing regardless of their ability to sign or function in the Deaf community ([Mitchell & Karchmer, 2004a](#)). These differing views present a challenge to hard-of-hearing individuals who are involved in the Deaf community because they may want to avoid presenting an image of themselves that does not conform to cultural norms. For example, it can be awkward for a hard-of-hearing individual to try to handle compliments from the hearing public for his or her superior speaking and hearing abilities. As will be discussed in [Chapter 10](#), one of the cultural norms in the Deaf community is the

mutual respect for all deaf people, regardless of their ability to speak or hear.

To add to the confusion, educational placement can also influence the deaf person's process of identity formation (Grushkin, 2003; Leigh, 2009). Many deaf education programs emphasize the auditory aspect of their curriculum and, for that reason, can be termed "hearing-centric." In this type of environment, Deaf culture and the Deaf community are stigmatized to the point at which a deaf student may feel it is preferable to be called hard of hearing, regardless of his or her actual hearing level. In contrast, many hard-of-hearing students who grew up in a school for the deaf may be called Deaf in spite of the hearing level charted on their audiogram (Moore & Levitan, 2005; Singleton and Tittle, 2000; Thumann-Prezioso, 2005).

Hearing

Although most non-deaf people would not describe themselves as such, the Deaf community frequently uses the term "hearing" to describe people who are not deaf or hard of hearing (Moore & Levitan, 2005). Similarly to the way that Black people refer to non-black people as "white," and Gay people call non-gay people "straight," the term "hearing" is used to refer to members of the majority population whose values, conventions, or behavior depart significantly from those practiced and supported by the Deaf minority.

In addition to using the term "hearing" in a general sense when referring to non-deaf people, the term becomes an even more significant label when a hearing person becomes involved with Deaf people and their community. For example, Bauman (2008) recounted his experiences of "becoming" hearing. He discovered his "hearing" identity when he began his new job as a residential counselor at a school for the deaf, where Deaf students identified him as hearing.

Often, members of a community need labels to distinguish or set themselves apart. Deaf people are no different. However, the term "hearing" is really about more than just one's ability to hear (Lane, 2005). Padden and Humphries (1988) explain how the term "hearing" is not just a category of people who hear, but is rather a term used by Deaf people to identify those who are the opposite of who they are. They gave the example of how Deaf students at a school for the deaf often called their opponents during an athletic competition "hearing" even if the competing team was from another school for the deaf. In sum, the term "hearing" carries significant connotations in the Deaf community and is often used to represent people with an opposing interest.

Hearing-But

Finally, a unique term in ASL that exists in the Deaf community is "HEARING-BUT." This label is designated for hearing people who have exhibited an extraordinarily positive attitude toward Deaf people and a deep respect for Deaf culture in general. These individuals include but are not limited to hearing children with deaf parents who cherish their experiences of growing up signing with their Deaf families, hearing spouses who are actively involved in Deaf community affairs, hearing parents and siblings who embrace the Deaf community, and interpreters who have successfully served as cross-cultural mediators between Deaf and hearing people. Although the "HEARING-BUT" sign is commonly used in the Deaf community, several authors have attempted to coin an English term that describes this group of people. For example, Ramos (2004) proposed "partners" to describe hearing people who believe that Deaf people are their equal, as opposed to "ignorants" for those who look down at Deaf people due to their ignorance. He also designated the

term “plantationists” for hearing people who look down at Deaf people because they do not want to give up power and control over them. [Terrell-Grassman \(1994\)](#) also formulated special terms to describe three different kinds of hearing people, including group 1, the general public—uninformed hearing people; group 2, hearing people—informed yet not sensitized; and group 3, hearing people who have been culturally assimilated into the deaf community—informed and sensitive. This third group would also be considered as “HEARING-BUT.”

Although fluent ASL skills are often necessary to receive a positive label such as informed and sensitive, certain hearing people (with minimal signing skills) who have gone out of their way to support the Deaf cause often receive this designation of HEARING-BUT partners too. It signals a positive difference from the majority of hearing individuals who have little or no understanding of or sensitivity toward Deaf culture ([Napier, 2002](#)). To view how HEARING-BUT is signed in ASL, please go to www.americandeafculture.com.

AUTHOR'S ANECDOTE

Although Gallaudet University is often seen as a place exclusively for deaf and hard-of-hearing students, a substantial number of hearing students are also enrolled there. Most of them are in graduate programs, pursuing a degree leading to a career working with deaf people. During their time at Gallaudet, some hearing students are able to secure the coveted “HEARING-BUT” label after developing close relationships with their Deaf college mates through living in the dormitories and taking classes with them.

During my time at Gallaudet, I made friends with several hearing students and became particularly close with one. I became upset when I learned that she was majoring in audiology as opposed to deaf education, counseling, or psychology, which were usually the majors of choice among the “HEARING-BUT” students. “Why Audiology?”, I asked ... My years of experiences with audiologists told me that none of them had a good understanding of Deaf culture nor were they interested in respecting Deaf people as a cultural entity. Almost none of them could sign well. They had no clue about Deaf culture or Deaf community. They believed that improved hearing is the only way to have a quality lifestyle. Most importantly, I never met an audiologist who had been bestowed with the “HEARING-BUT” label, and I certainly didn’t want my friend to be viewed negatively by the Deaf community.

My “HEARING-BUT” friend explained that she intended to become part of the new generation of audiologists with a different set of attitudes toward deaf people. Skeptical at first, I am pleased to report that my children have a completely different perspective of their audiologists than I did. Unlike my own experience, their audiologists can sign well. They are supportive of my children’s identity as Deaf individuals and work hard to support their hearing needs in the most sensitive manner. They never made them feel like the only way to succeed is through improved hearing.

And my friend never lost her “HEARING-BUT” label after working as an audiologist for 30 years.

OTHER TERMS AND LABELS

Besides these commonly used labels in the Deaf community, a host of other terms are associated with deaf and hard-of-hearing people that are used primarily within the educational and/or medical communities, but not among Deaf people themselves. For instance, distinctions between types of hearing losses and their etiologies are often an important diagnostic factor in determining the kind of services and support provided to a deaf person within school settings, social service agencies, and the medical establishment. The labels below are often assigned to deaf individuals. They are good examples of the pathological view of deaf individuals, which views them as incomplete or damaged.

Congenitally deaf

Conductive loss

Deaf and dumb
Deaf-mute
Hearing-challenged
Moderately deaf
Person with neurosensory impairment
Prelingually deaf
Profoundly deaf
Severely deaf

Ironically, within the Deaf community, these terms are rarely used and would be judged irrelevant by the very people whom they supposedly describe. Generally speaking, Deaf people are not concerned about the medical reason for their hearing condition. If anything, casual discussions of why and how they became deaf are held in the context of discussions regarding family history and their enculturation process.

Often, Deaf people poke fun at themselves by using humorous labels to describe certain types of deaf people. The following terms were listed on a web site asking, "Which Deaf are you?" (retrieved January 20, 2010, from <http://www.deafonline2.com/forums/lofiversion/index.php/t1418.html>):

Baby cry test flunkies
Deaf as a stone
Just plain Deaf
Normal Deaf
Recessive gene Deaf
Unknown Deafness
Usher's syndrome Deaf
Vertigo Deaf
Vibrations only Deaf

Some of these labels have a humorous tone and show that the Deaf community does not always take them seriously. They also represent a significant departure from the more serious implications of professionals using such labels for medical diagnosis or educational placement. As opposed to the traditional, narrow, demeaning labels often used by hearing people, these creative designations are created by the members of a community for themselves.

Similarly, another set of descriptors are frequently used among Deaf people to convey or mock their educational or communicative history:

Acupunctured Deaf
Cochlear implantees
Deaf school switchers
Fingerspellers
Grammatically correct Deaf
Look-ma-no-hands oralists
Mainstreamed Deaf

Mother father strict oral mad rebel now ASL Deaf
PSE signers
Residential school all life
Simcommerz
Strong ASL user
100% pure oralists

(retrieved January 20, 2010, from <http://www.deafonline2.com/forums/lofiversion/index.php/t1418.html>).

Again, the labels listed here are not to be taken seriously as they represent the ability many Deaf people have to make fun of themselves and their upbringing. The labels below, by contrast, sarcastically show a range of different lifestyles to which deaf people may subscribe.

ADA supporters
ASL worshippers
Born again Deaf
Can't live without hearing aid Deaf
Crab theory Deaf
Deaf and bright
Deaf art cultists
Deaf awareness celebrators
Deaf clubbers
Deaf chatroomers
Deaf community activists
Deaf culture vultures
Deaf heritage preservers
Deaf liberationists
Deaf priders
Deaf storytellers
Gallaudetians
Golden silencers
Hearing aid bashers
Hearing aid huggers
Hearing aid squealers
Hearing dog masters
Hearing-minded Deaf
Hear no evils
Hearing world outsiders
ILY sign symbolizers
It's a Deaf world after all Deaf
MacDeaf
Multiple generation Deaf

Music loving Deaf
 NTIDians
 SSI Deaf
 You Deaf? me too!
 What? No cc on TV! Deaf

(retrieved January 20, 2010, from <http://www.deafonline2.com/forums/lofiversion/index.php/t1418.html>).

Because they have grown up experiencing an overwhelming focus on their hearing level by their parents, teachers, therapists, and the medical establishment, many Deaf people find humor in these newly devised labels for themselves:

Audio impaired
 Audio imperfected
 Deaf as hell
 Hearicapped
 Hearing imperfected
 Hearing hardened
 Hearing underdeveloped
 Orally impaired
 Sound proofed

(retrieved January 20, 2010, from <http://www.deafonline2.com/forums/lofiversion/index.php/t1418.html>).

Similar to the situation in other cultures, certain labels are frequently used among Deaf people but would not be appropriate for outsiders to use. For instance, the term “Deafies” is often used among Deaf people when referring to their own kind. However, it can be misinterpreted as having a stereotypical and negative reference to deaf people if used by a hearing person. Similarly, the use of “stone deaf” by a hearing person implies that she or he is focused on the deaf person’s inability to hear, whereas it would be accepted more readily coming from a Deaf person in describing someone who cannot hear anything. The following Acceptable/Not Acceptable table lists provide suggestions on which terms hearing people may use and should avoid when referring to deaf and hard-of-hearing people and those who lost their hearing later in life.

Acceptable	Not Acceptable
Deaf	Deafies
Hard of hearing	Deaf and dumb
Late-deafened	Deaf mute
	Dummy
	Hearing challenged, Hearing disabled
	Hearing handicapped
	Individual with deafness
	Stone deaf

TO LABEL OR NOT TO LABEL

As discussed earlier, Deaf people routinely reject the term “hearing-impaired” because they do not feel impaired in any way (Leigh, 2009). This label is considered demeaning and therefore is not acceptable. Instead, the label *Deaf* is worn with pride (Moore & Levitan, 2005). It is part of Deaf people’s identity. They want to be identified as Deaf. This stands in contrast to a movement within the disabled community that promotes the concept that disability should not be the major identifying factor in people’s lives (Linton, 1998; Shapiro, 1994). To this end, many disability advocates are in favor of doing away with labels or at least making the disability factor secondary to a person’s identity. In their perspective, there should be no mention of a person’s disability in most situations. If necessary, it is more appropriate to deemphasize the disability by using terms such “a person with hearing loss” rather than a Deaf person. However, in the minds of many Deaf people, the opposite is true. They want to be identified as Deaf.

To illustrate this perspective, if there was a story in the newspaper about the athletic, heroic, or entrepreneurial accomplishment of a deaf person, many Deaf people would be extremely disappointed if the article made no mention of this aspect of the person’s hearing status and/or identity. They would expect the article to include some information about the person being deaf, in order to raise consciousness about the abilities of deaf people and to help preserve the record of Deaf people’s accomplishments and contributions. It can be extremely frustrating and difficult to keep track of Deaf people’s achievements, for example, if there is no mention of their hearing/deaf status in published reports. By contrast, Deaf people are not comfortable when their hearing status is mentioned when a negative story, such as robbery or rape, is reported. Likewise, stories about how a deaf person overcomes his or her disability are seen as another attempt to focus on the inability to hear rather than on the cultural elements of his or her identity.

Another example of the importance of being informed about people’s hearing status involves a school board at a state school for the deaf. In every school’s publication, there is a list of the names of board members. However, there is usually no mention of the hearing status of these board members. Many Deaf people feel that an asterisk should be added next to each deaf person’s name. This should be done for two reasons—to demonstrate the school’s commitment to include deaf people in its decision-making body and to provide hope and inspiration for others that deaf people can indeed assume leadership roles in the community.

In summary, many Deaf people do not consider themselves to be disabled and therefore are not comfortable with any label that focuses on impairment or disability. They are usually more comfortable identifying themselves as Deaf, and cherish this term as a badge of pride. The fit, or lack of fit, between the culture of Deaf people and the disabled community is examined in greater depth in Chapter 12.

TOWARD A BETTER DESCRIPTION—LINGUISTIC MINORITY

Deaf people often perceive themselves as more similar to members of various linguistic minority groups than to people with disabilities (Bishop & Hicks, 2005; Kochhar-Lindgren, 2006; Pudans-Smith, 2006; Simms & Thumann, 2007). In examining the lives of foreign-born individuals, there are numerous similarities between their experiences and those of Deaf people. For example, the biggest challenge of these two groups is communication and language. Neither group has easy access to the English language. They often need the services of interpreters. They face frustration in school and the workplace because of constant communication breakdown. They receive inadequate education because educators do not know how to use the languages that

are most comfortable or most accessible for these individuals. Once these individuals are in situations in which their language is spoken or accommodated, their lives improve dramatically. This comparison serves as reinforcement that deaf people are not necessarily disabled but rather are “handicapped” by linguistic challenges and the inadequate level of understanding of their culture by the majority. Hence, it is more appropriate to consider Deaf people as a linguistic minority rather than as members of the disabled community.

By considering themselves as a linguistic minority, several different alternative labels to replace “Deaf” have been proposed to better present themselves as a language community (Bahan, 1989; Obasi, 2008). They include “ASL users,” “signing people,” “seeing people,” and “People of the Eye.” These new labels represent a paradigm shift from the past focus on the inability to hear to the efficient use of a visual language to communicate regardless of hearing level. This label also serves to remind people that it is impossible to separate language from culture and, therefore, the core of Deaf culture is ASL. They also function as a defining parameter for Deaf culture, by excluding deaf people who chose not to learn ASL or embrace the values of Deaf culture, but at the same time may include hearing people who have mastered the language and participate actively in the Deaf community. Just like the new term proposed by Bauman (2008), “DeaF,” these labels have not replaced Deaf as the primary name for this group of people. However, the changing perspective of Deaf people as a linguistic minority may lead to the increasing use of a new label.

NAMING AS A LIBERATING FACTOR

The issue of labeling and naming the community may seem trivial to most people, especially those who are members of the dominant group. It is, however, a sensitive matter for most disenfranchised groups, including Deaf people, as many of these communities have to deal with negative perspectives associated with their minority status (Brueggemann, 1999). It has been noted by scholars such as Butler (2001) that the process of coming up with a culturally sensitive name is an important step in the liberation of a community. Yet, the process of becoming unified by reaching a consensus on the most appropriate name can be a difficult task.

The problem of naming and definition is typical of many disenfranchised groups and has been experienced at the university level with the emergence of ethnic/cultural studies departments (Butler, 2001; Padden, 1999). For example, the process of determining the most appropriate name for a new academic unit focusing on a particular culture is often fraught with conflicts and bad feelings. Issues such as the insider/outsider dichotomy and membership requirements of a specific culture often contribute to the great divide within the community both at the university and outside the university as to what the focus and emphasis should be within the program. To illustrate, some colleges and universities have designated Black Studies instead of African American Studies to focus on the experiences of the entire black population. In a similar vein, departments have been named Latina/Latino Studies instead of Chicana/Chicano Studies or Mexican-American Studies to be more inclusive. Likewise, Women’s Studies are used at some programs instead of Feminist Studies or Gender Studies. One last example in using a more comprehensive name is Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender Studies, which is used by many colleges and universities rather than what may be more controversial, Queer Studies, which is preferred by some community advocates.

The complexities related to naming include the ways that people self-identify with a community and the manner in which a person becomes associated with a particular community. Differing rules and expectations

for membership prerequisites can be confounding, as some requirements are imposed by the government, whereas others are determined by community members. Consider these variations:

According to Halacha (Jewish law), a person can be considered Jewish only if he or she is born to a Jewish mother, regardless of the religion of the father. In the case of a Black person, the color of his or her skin is usually the determining factor. However, it was once a U.S. custom to employ the “one-drop” rule, in which it took only “one-drop” of Black blood to have a Black lineage. This means the person only needed to have one African American relative somewhere in his or her lineage to be considered Black. This distinction was especially important during the slavery era to maintain an adequate pool of slaves to service the agrarian society (Davis, 1991; Wright, 1994; Zack, 1993). The Native American community is also impacted by the policies of the federal government. One example is the rule of blood quantum, where one-quarter of Indian blood is required of the Native American in order to be eligible for federal subsidies (Pincus, 2006).

These examples demonstrate how arbitrary the rules associated with identification can be—some of which are imposed by government, others by religion, and yet others determined by the communities themselves. Because people usually identify with whatever they feel is true for themselves, the distinctions between such categories are unscientific. For example, it is impossible to tell where one race stops and another begins (Butler, 2001; Pincus, 2006). Only when the communities determine the most appropriate labels and terms for themselves can they truly become liberated and empowered.

The issue of identification is also complicated for deaf people (Brueggemann, 1999; Leigh, 2009). The designations made by Deaf people themselves differ a great deal from those imposed by the government. In addition, it is impossible to draw the line between deaf and hard-of-hearing people, as their hearing situations can vary a great deal, in addition to their interest in and ability to make use of any residual hearing (Gesser, 2007; Grushkin, 2003; Leigh, 2009; Marschark, 2007).

There is no one uniform type of hearing loss. Certain physical factors that complicate this issue include a person’s ability to discriminate sounds and a person’s ability to benefit from the use of hearing aids. More specifically, the type of hearing condition can contribute to the person’s physical capacity to discriminate sounds. For many deaf people, it is physically impossible to distinguish differences in vowel sounds, regardless of the intensity of audio amplification. Further, the benefit gained from using hearing aids varies a great deal from one deaf person to the next, again depending on the cause of his or her hearing condition. So, it is not unusual to find a person whose audiogram places him or her in the “profound hearing loss” category, but who is still able to use his or her residual hearing more effectively than peers who technically have more hearing ability. Further complicating this matter is the fact that some hard-of-hearing individuals sign more fluently than deaf peers, making them appearing “more Deaf” than their audiograms would indicate (Burke, 2008).

AUTHOR’S ANECDOTE

My father and I have similar hearing levels that would place both of us in the severe hearing loss category. Although we both attended deaf schools and received intensive speech therapy while growing up, my father was able to benefit from the use of hearing aids and develop intelligible speech. On the other hand, hearing aids were of no benefit to me, and the quality of my speech has been evaluated as “being difficult to understand by the hearing public.” Consequently, people routinely identified my father as being hard of hearing and me as deaf in spite of our having similar hearing levels. The difference in being able to take advantage of our residual hearing has been attributed by the audiologists to the biological differences in our abilities to discriminate sounds.

Yet, federal and state governments have designated specific requirements in order for a person to receive services under the auspices of special education, vocational rehabilitation, or other agencies. These thresholds of decibel loss may have little correspondence to the way in which Deaf and hard-of-hearing people view themselves and, in fact, frequently run counter to their self-identification. Additionally, hearing requirements vary from state to state, and even from one government agency to the next. For example, a minimum of 92 dB of hearing loss is required for a deaf student to be classified as deaf in Nevada, whereas only a 65 dB loss is considered deaf enough for the classification in Georgia ([Moore, 2001](#)). As a benchmark, the lower dB level a person has, the more hearing he or she has, with 0 dB representing the hearing level of a typical hearing person.

CONCLUSION

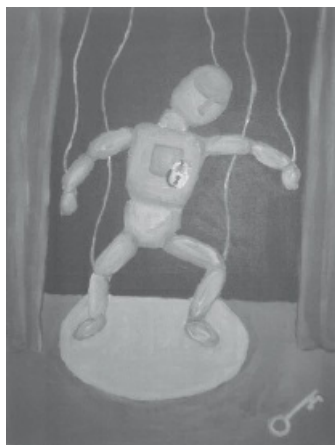
In conclusion, many different facets are associated with being deaf, making it practically impossible to describe a “typical” deaf person. One reason is that a person’s hearing level represents only a small part of who he or she is. Consequently, labels such as deaf, hard-of-hearing, and hearing-impaired are confusing and often misleading. Deaf people are keenly aware of the challenges associated with using potentially stereotypical and negative terms like “deaf” ([Bahan, 1989](#); [Grushkin, 2003](#)). Yet, after wrestling with newer labels such as “hearing-impaired” and “people with hearing loss,” members of the Deaf community have come to a consensus that the traditional label of “deaf” is preferable and should be seen as inclusive of all deaf and hard-of-hearing people with varying types of hearing conditions and life experiences ([Moore & Levitan, 2005](#)).

A Credo for Deaf Americans

by Frank James John Lala, Jr. (1995)

We don't chose to be the common silent minority
It is our right to be the uncommon and noble silent minority
If we can, we seek opportunity, not security
We don't wish to be "kept" citizens, humbled and dulled by
having the state look after us
We want to take the calculated risk ... to dream and to build, to fail and to succeed
We want to abolish stereotyping, and to remove the prevalent public mentality toward prejudice
We will not tolerate biased perceptions, criticisms or censures of our beloved American Sign Language
We will not accept abuse of our Deaf identity by oppressors, nor our rights to self-determination
We refuse to barter incentive for a dole
We prefer the challenge of life to a guaranteed existence; the thrill
of fulfillment to the stale calm of Utopia
We will not trade freedom for beneficence, nor our dignity for a handout
We will never cower before any master, or paternalistic attitudes, nor bend to any threat of discrimination
It is the heritage of our Deaf Culture to stand erect, proud, and unafraid; to think and act for ourselves; to
enjoy
the benefits of our creations, and to face the hearing
world boldly and say, "This we have achieved."
All of this is what it means to be Deaf Americans.

4 Deafhood: A Personal Journey Toward Self-Actualization



“Please Set Me Free” by Mar Valdez. Used with permission.

Deaf people are not alike. Some deaf people struggle with what it means to be deaf throughout their lives. Other deaf people have a strong sense of identity early on. Some deaf people associate more with hearing people. Yet others prefer to have as little to do with hearing people as possible. Some deaf people sign, and others don't. Some wear hearing aids, and others don't. Some have cochlear implants or want them. Others shun them completely. Some use their speech regularly, and others decline to use their voice at all. This chapter examines various cultural identities that exist among deaf people, as well as the stages of cultural awareness many deaf people go through to adopt a comfortable identity as a Deaf person.

Although we may not think much about it, most of us are members of more than one community. There are many subcultures in America to which people subscribe, so that most people have a *composite identity*. This means having multiple, yet shared identities. For example, working for a large business entity requires a degree of conformity with the corporate culture (during one's work hours). Participating in athletics entails specialized knowledge and behaviors related to the world of sports. Those who belong to a certain church or temple are familiar with its specific customs. A community of artists would respect the values unique to their discipline. Sharing an ethnic background with a group may also prompt people to adhere to the values and beliefs of their ancestors. It is possible for one individual to be a member of all these subcultures. For example, an athletic, artistic, churchgoing, African American, white-collar professional would be able to operate according to the expectations of various subcultures while also subscribing to the beliefs and values of the larger American society. In the context of this book, we will define being “bicultural” as belonging to and being able to participate in both the Deaf community and the larger, predominately hearing society. This is not intended to discount other various cultures that exist in America or the complexity of the lives of many Americans today. Rather, with the book's focus on Deaf culture, the dichotomy is a Deaf-hearing one.

Therefore, this chapter will examine the Deafhood journey that many deaf people go through in order to achieve a healthy identity as a Deaf person while living in a predominately hearing world.

It would be practically impossible for a deaf person to avoid any contact with hearing people. Yet, the comfort level among deaf individuals as they relate to hearing people can vary greatly. Obviously, deaf people are Americans first and are part of the mainstream culture. They live among hearing people. They shop for groceries at the local supermarket. They work alongside hearing people. They pay taxes to the government. For these reasons, it is unrealistic to imagine that a deaf person could grow up without having any contact or experience with hearing people.

However, it is entirely possible for a deaf person to live his or her entire life without coming into contact with another deaf person. It is also possible for a deaf person to choose not to have any contact with the Deaf community. Deaf people vary in their amount of desired association with both hearing society and the Deaf community. Variations in their upbringing and numerous other factors will affect the degree of affinity with the Deaf community and the process of identity formation.

AUTHOR'S ANECDOTE

My hearing students often ask me how deaf people feel about entering the “hearing” world, and how a deaf school could possibly prepare students for the “real” world. I find these questions strange because there is no such thing as an exclusive “deaf” world. Almost all deaf people have hearing family members. Almost all students at deaf schools go home every weekend, if not on a daily basis. Almost all deaf adults work alongside hearing people. In this sense, deaf people do not “enter” the hearing world. They are born into it. If anything, deaf schools provide Deaf children a brief respite from the hearing world, where communication is usually difficult and cumbersome. Similarly, the deaf community provides Deaf people a temporary refuge in a place where they are fully accepted, where communication is not a struggle, and where their culture is celebrated.

IDENTITY FORMATION

Several scholars have examined how deaf people’s differing experiences while growing up affect their affiliation with the Deaf community. Other writers have explored the stages in a deaf person’s journey to find the most comfortable identity. Some of these studies are contained in Leigh’s book, *A Lens on Deaf Identities*, published in 2009, by Oxford University Press. A brief summary of relevant findings from Leigh’s book is presented below.

Achieving a positive identity as a Deaf person often requires a long and difficult journey because of the ignorance of many hearing parents and the hearing professionals who work with them. Leigh (2009) notes how “in the eyes of many hearing people, Deaf people appear incomplete because of the lack of auditory connection to spoken language, whereas for Deaf persons themselves ‘Deaf’ asserts a state of being that reflects completeness” (p. 15). This illustrates a dichotomy in perspectives on how deaf children should be raised. For Deaf people, a Deaf identity means a rewarding and full life centered on “wellness and a non-disabled self-schema” (p. 15), and it should be a priority in the child-rearing practices with deaf children. In contrast, most hearing parents of deaf children and many professionals do not see the value of a solid Deaf identity but rather place a heavy emphasis on the development of speech and listening skills in hopes of having deaf children be successfully assimilated into the majority hearing society. Consequently, most deaf people grow up with a lack of experiences and opportunities geared toward the formation of a healthy Deaf identity

and the subsequent association with the Deaf community and the culture of Deaf people.

Almost all the studies contained in Leigh's book point to the detrimental effects of being disassociated from the Deaf community. For example, the conclusion of Schowe's 1979 study on identity and the Deaf community suggests that a dual orientation toward the Deaf community and hearing society at large was the healthiest approach a deaf person could take in achieving a positive identity. Those who struggled most were those who had an orientation away from the Deaf community. Similar findings were reported by [Weinberg and Steritt \(1986\)](#) in their study on Deaf identity. They discovered that Deaf people who had a comfortable relationship with both Deaf and hearing people had the best outcome in academic, social, personal, and family acceptance, whereas those who identified with hearing people only were the least successful.

More recently, both Glickman and McCaw investigated how Deaf identity contributes to a person's sense of well-being. In 1996, Glickman reported that higher self-esteem was associated with a bicultural identity. In this case, Deaf people who were able to affiliate comfortably with both the Deaf community and the larger, hearing world scored higher than those who associated with hearing people exclusively. Similarly, in 2001, McCaw presented her findings that those with a bicultural orientation to both Deaf and hearing people or even those with a primarily Deaf orientation had the healthiest sense of well-being.

The findings listed in Leigh's book demonstrate the importance of providing deaf children with adequate support to function well with both Deaf and hearing people. [Leigh \(2009\)](#) explains the implications,

While deaf identities are an area of relatively recent scholarly interest, there is a long history of deaf identity evolution that indicates how historical contexts have affected the shape of their identities and such historical contexts, containing national, ethnic, racial, religious, regional, and local components and perceptions, colored by culture, ideology, and politics, can have a powerful influence on identity formation of sameness and difference. (p. 87)

CATEGORIES OF DEAF IDENTITIES

Clearly, there is no one typical deaf person, nor a single identity that all deaf people share. Instead, there are at least seven different possible categories that one can ascribe to deaf people including balanced bicultural, Deaf dominant bicultural, hearing dominant bicultural, culturally separate, culturally marginal, culturally isolated, and culturally captive. These categories were based on classroom discussions among Deaf students on the similarities and differences in the formation of their identities ([Holcomb, 1997](#)). Each of these categories is discussed below.

Balanced bicultural Deaf people are individuals who are truly comfortable in both the Deaf and hearing communities. They are equally effective in their interactions with Deaf and hearing people and do not display a preference in terms of associating with one group or the other. They may or may not have the ability to speak fluently. They may or may not wear hearing aids. However, more likely than not, this identity requires the ability to both speak and sign well in order to move freely between these two communities. Yet, it is important to note that speaking ability is not the deciding factor. There are some Deaf, nonspeaking individuals who are successful in their interactions with hearing people and can be considered truly bicultural, just as there are those who can speak but are uncomfortable among hearing people.

Deaf dominant bicultural individuals function well around both Deaf and hearing people but, if given a choice, they would choose to be with Deaf people or, more specifically, people who can sign. However, they would invest time and energy to make their contacts with hearing people as effective as possible. For example, they might teach their neighbors and co-workers to sign. They assert themselves in hearing situations by

requesting interpreters, writing notes to communicate with hearing people, or doing their best to speak and lipread. They enjoy their hearing friends. Because communication is always an issue, however, they find their Deaf contacts more rewarding. So, in this case, they do not avoid opportunities to socialize with hearing people but, if given a choice, usually prefer to be with Deaf people. An example would be if a Deaf person received invitations to join two different bowling teams, one with their hearing co-workers and one with members of the local Deaf club. Although the idea of interacting socially with hearing friends from work is palatable, the opportunity to meet up with Deaf friends on a regular basis is more appealing. Another example is a Deaf person who makes friends with her neighbors and enjoys their company but drives to visit with her Deaf friends whenever possible.

Hearing dominant bicultural deaf people are individuals who can function well within the Deaf community, but who, for one reason or another, have relatively limited contacts with other Deaf people. Perhaps they live in a rural part of the country, far from the closest Deaf community. They may prefer this kind of lifestyle, as opposed to living in a metropolitan area where there are a substantial number of Deaf residents. Consequently, the opportunity to socialize with other Deaf people is minimal. This does not mean that these individuals shun the Deaf community, but opportunities to interact with Deaf people are few and far between. For this reason, these people's lives revolve mostly around hearing people. Another example is a Deaf person who is determined to climb up the corporate ladder at work. This person often ends up with reduced contacts in the Deaf community due to time constraints. In order to quickly move up in a competitive business environment, any employee must dedicate his or her life to the business, working long hours every week and leaving very little time for socializing. For a Deaf person with this kind of drive, this means a life devoted to the corporate world, with limited opportunities for social interaction with other Deaf people.

Another example of someone with a hearing dominant bicultural identity is a Deaf person who has a unique hobby or interest that is not prevalent in the Deaf community. For example, a person who is into competitive cycling would find few opportunities to train or compete within the Deaf community. Consequently, this person would need to turn to mainstream organizations devoted to this activity. Most likely, there would be no other Deaf people involved, so, as a result, the Deaf person would have to choose between continuing her or his involvement with serious cyclists (who happen to be hearing) or giving up this hobby to pursue other interests that are available within the Deaf community. Again, a Deaf person with this kind of identity does not shun the Deaf community, nor does she or he have issues about being with Deaf people, but because of life circumstances or choices, he or she has few contacts with Deaf people and therefore associates mostly with hearing people.

A *culturally separate Deaf person* is someone who intentionally keeps contacts with hearing people to a minimum. After years of frustration with hearing people due to communication obstacles, patronizing attitudes, insensitivity, and oppression, Deaf people with this identity may decide that to live more effectively they need to avoid situations in which awkward interactions with hearing people are required. Perhaps they seek employment in a Deaf setting, such as a school for the deaf or an agency serving Deaf people. If this is not possible, then they might show up at their place of employment, do their job well, but keep to themselves as much as possible rather than spend energy trying to develop friendships with hearing co-workers. At home, since it is impossible not to have hearing neighbors, they are cordial but make no effort to get better acquainted with them. They stop visiting their hearing family members since their parents and siblings have

made no effort to improve communication between them by learning sign language. Instead, they find much happiness and contentment within the Deaf community. They are members of the Deaf congregation of a local church or temple. They bowl in a Deaf league. They participate in a weekly basketball games at the Deaf club. They serve as officers in an all-Deaf investment club. They have Deaf spouses. Almost all their friends are Deaf and they are fine with this situation.

A *culturally marginal individual* does not feel at ease in the Deaf community, but does not feel part of the larger, hearing society either. Perhaps this person does not speak or hear well enough to function comfortably among hearing people and, at the same time, does not possess sufficient sign language skills to fit into the Deaf community. Often, both Deaf and hearing people avoid this person because of difficulties with communication and also because of his or her limited social skills. As a result, this person feels marginalized.

A *culturally isolated individual* chooses not to be affiliated with the Deaf community. The Deaf perspective dictates that to reject sign language and the Deaf culture means a life of isolation and loneliness. The Deaf community is full of “oral failures.” “Coming home” to the welcoming Deaf community is frequently the most important milestone for Deaf people. For this reason, it is common for Deaf people to pity those who reject the Deaf community, for it is believed that they do not know what they are missing. Consequently, the culturally isolated identity is assigned to oral deaf individuals who choose not to associate with the Deaf community or learn the language of Deaf people and remain “isolated” in the mainstream.

Interestingly, many hearing people, especially hearing parents of Deaf children, would probably consider the choice to live among the hearing world to be “assimilation,” the most desirable lifestyle for deaf people. In the eyes of many hearing people, being truly absorbed into hearing society and not needing the “crutch” of sign language would be the essence of liberation. It is for this reason that many hearing parents seek this kind of life for their deaf child. Again, this identity is considered the most demeaning by many Deaf people due to their own struggles growing up under oppressive conditions in which there was lack of access to information because of limited communication. This perspective has been substantiated by research, as discussed in [Leigh's book \(2009\), *A Lens on Deaf Identity*](#).

Finally, there are individuals who grew up without any knowledge of the Deaf community. Perhaps, they have been sheltered from the “evils” of the Deaf community by their parents and the educational system. As a result, they grew up believing that there are no other deaf people like themselves or that no deaf organizations exist to provide support for people like themselves. They do not have the opportunity to meet other Deaf people and explore the possibilities of acquiring a more accessible language, American Sign Language (ASL). They are unaware of the educational opportunities that exist for deaf people, such as schools for the deaf or colleges that have services specifically for Deaf people. They have no idea that a range of services is available to provide them with expanded access. These deaf individuals are considered *culturally captive*.

AUTHOR'S ANECDOTE

In my Deaf culture classes, my deaf students are required to examine their identities and also debate the positive and negative merits of each identity. Over the years, my students have claimed that it is almost impossible for a Deaf person to be balanced biculturally because of the cultural value of having 100% access to communication and the bond of being Deaf. The only possibility, they say, is a hard-of-hearing individual who has enough residual hearing to follow most of the spoken conversation.

They also feel that many children of Deaf adults (CODAs) have the potential for this kind of identity. However, CODAs are not deaf,

and therefore cannot be considered in this discussion. My students often insist that Deaf dominant bicultural is the most prevalent identity among Deaf people because most Deaf people do make an effort to integrate themselves into mainstream society and do their best to get along with their hearing co-workers and neighbors. In addition, most Deaf people will end up having hearing children, and will do their best to provide a positive environment for them.

Some of my students also claim that a culturally separate identity is the least stressful lifestyle for Deaf people. Being primarily in the Deaf community and thereby not having to deal with the frustrations and struggles associated with nonsigners, is often seen as a dream. After all, a Deaf world is considered utopia among many Deaf people. My students argue that this identity is acceptable as long as there is no hostility or anger toward hearing people.

The culturally isolated identity is routinely identified as the bleakest identity for deaf people. For this reason, many of my students are opposed to deaf students growing up in an oral environment, because most of them started out their lives that way—a life without access to sign language and the Deaf community. When challenged that there are successful and happy oral deaf people who are living entirely in the hearing world, my students respond that those deaf people would be happier if they acquired a balanced bicultural identity, as it is “hell” to deny the existence of who they really are ...a Deaf person. They often equate that life to one of a closeted homosexual who maintains a false façade by marrying and having a child and all the while remaining tormented inside about his or her true sexual identity. My students view this identity as the least desirable and most unhealthy one for a deaf person to possess.

Conversely, my students tend to be more forgiving toward those who have a culturally captive identity. They argue that, unlike the culturally isolated person, a person with this identity did not choose to disassociate from the Deaf community. This decision was made for them by someone else—most likely the person’s parents.

There are countless ways that individuals enter Deaf culture, most of which are organized around bilingualism and biculturalism issues. Usually, members of the Deaf community are those who possess one of the bicultural identities or a culturally separate lifestyle. However, most Deaf people do not start out their lives with a bicultural identity, but rather as culturally captive or isolated. Through the process of becoming acculturated, they are affiliated with the Deaf community and adopt one of the bicultural or separate identities. This process of becoming acculturated is discussed in the following section.

STAGES OF CULTURAL AWARENESS

A model of cultural awareness was formulated by [Atkinson, Morten, and Sue \(1989\)](#) to illuminate the experiences of many members of minority and oppressed groups trying to achieve a positive sense of self. It lays out several stages on the road to self-acceptance. The journey to “Deafhood” is often necessary in order for Deaf individuals to create a comfortable and secure place for themselves within their own cultural groups and in the mainstream. This is especially true for individuals who have had limited positive exposure to their own culture and/or live in an environment where diversity is not celebrated or respected. The five stages are: conformity, dissonance, resistance and immersion, introspection and awareness, and these will be examined in the context of the Deaf experience.

In the first stage (conformity), the authors believe that many members of oppressed groups spend years growing up trying to conform to society’s expectations of their disenfranchised community. Unfortunately, those views are routinely negative and derogatory. For example, the stereotypical views of African Americans, Jews, Gay individuals, and other oppressed groups are often destructive and widespread. It is easy to look at an inner-city slum and make generalizations about people of color. It is also just as easy to note a bank president with a Jewish-sounding name and associate the stereotype of the Jewish culture with money. Similarly, watching a spoof on TV about an effeminate gay man reinforces the belief that all Gay men act in a flamboyant manner. Consequently, many children of oppressed and/or minority groups struggle to make sense of the stereotypes they see in media portrayals of themselves, and unfortunately, they may absorb those views

into their own belief systems. As a result, many youngsters from disenfranchised communities are not entirely comfortable being associated with their own people and often display a form of internalized self-hatred.

Many deaf people also grow up in the conformity stage; they have no appreciation of Deaf culture and even shun it because of the negative messages they have received from parents, as well as professionals such as teachers, audiologists, and speech pathologists who completely discount the value of Deaf culture. Similarly, many teachers of the deaf emphasize assimilation into the larger society as a ticket out of the “Deaf ghetto.” For these reasons, it is not uncommon for deaf children to grow up in a deprived environment where they have limited or no access to the positive aspects of the Deaf community and the solutions available through Deaf culture. By not having access to positive Deaf role models and/or the experience of the vibrant Deaf community, these children are reinforced in their thinking that the Deaf community has no positive attributes and is only for those Deaf people who are unable to “make it” in the larger society.

The next step in the cultural awareness model is the *dissonance stage*, in which the person is exposed to the positive aspects of the stigmatized community for the first time, which triggers a reevaluation of his or her affiliation with this group of people. This exposure often results in the person’s considering the possibility of identifying proudly with his or her cultural group for the first time. Many African Americans, Jews, and Gay individuals who grew up in predominately homogeneous white, Christian communities report feeling isolated and alone until they meet a role model who presents an alternative and more positive view of their people. Participating in a rich cultural experience for the first time with others who are just like them is often an eye-opening experience for these individuals. For example, a Jewish child who grew up in a predominately Christian neighborhood and school would be thrilled to attend a cousin’s bar-mitzvah, surrounded by Jewish children and adults joyfully celebrating in the Jewish tradition. This experience could provide this person with much-needed exposure to the positive aspects of his or her Jewish heritage.

Likewise, meeting a successful, well-rounded Deaf person for the first time can be a life-altering experience for deaf people who have been sheltered from the Deaf community. For example, getting acquainted with a Deaf person who uses ASL and supervises a large group of hearing employees at a major corporation would negate the oft-heard message that a person needs to speak and use residual hearing in order to make it in the hearing world. Likewise, discovering a Deaf person with a Ph.D. who uses ASL as his or her primary mode of communication would be a shock, again because the message has always been that ASL is for those who are unable to master English or that ASL would prevent a Deaf person from using English fluently. So, for many deaf individuals, meeting successful Deaf people is a powerful experience that gives them hope for a more rewarding life. Such encounters are often needed for them to progress from the conformity stage to the dissonance stage.

In the following stage, *resistance and immersion*, individuals from disenfranchised groups become determined to learn more about their cultural identity. They attempt to associate with people from their culture as much as possible. Also, during this stage, these individuals often become angry at the deception they were previously led to believe about others like them. Consequently, they shun contact with the mainstream culture because of the pain and self-hatred they experienced while growing up. In this sense, during this stage, African Americans want to be as “black” as possible, Jews try to live a completely Jewish life, and Gay individuals embrace their “queerness.”

Many Deaf people, during this stage, also want to be as “Deaf” as possible. As an extreme example, they

rebel by rejecting anything that relates to the hearing culture. They throw away their hearing aids, stop using speech, and communicate only in ASL and written English. They associate with ASL-using Deaf friends only and terminate relationships with any and all hearing friends, distancing themselves from their hearing families because they believe hearing people were to blame for making their lives miserable for so many years.

In this stage, deaf students often seek to transfer to a deaf school or college with a substantial number of deaf people, to search for a life that is more meaningful and nurturing. For this reason, Gallaudet University, NTID, California State University at Northridge, Ohlone College, and other schools with a large and visible critical mass of Deaf people are often populated with individuals in this stage. They want the Deaf experience. They want to learn how to feel good about themselves for who they really are and to finally feel that it is okay to be Deaf. They feel relieved that they can stop trying to be hearing, something they are not and never will be. This stage can be characterized as tumultuous but necessary, as those in it try to make sense of who they are.

People in the succeeding stage, the *introspection stage*, begin to reexamine the extreme stance they may have adopted in the previous stage. They realize that their effort to be as Deaf possible does not always result in a positive outcome. They recognize that their parents might have had good intentions at the same time they were making their identity formation such a difficult process. They miss some aspects of their old lives. They revisit issues that are relevant to their identity, such as the use of hearing aids, the ability to speak, and the need to attend a deaf school. In this process, new and more appropriate role models are often identified. For example, instead of looking only to people from Deaf families for guidance, they start to seek solutions from those who had hearing parents and upbringings more similar to their own. Newer and more appropriate solutions are learned from these individuals. People in this stage begin to formulate new ways of thinking about who they are, what it means to be a member of the Deaf community, and how they want to relate to their families and the hearing world at large. This introspection leads to the final stage, the *awareness stage*.

Here, Deaf people come to terms with being Deaf. They are at peace with themselves and their relationships with their families and other hearing people. They have achieved fuller control of their lives. For example, they use or do not use their speech at their own discretion, not because their parents say so, not because their teachers insisted, but because they make that choice themselves. They will or will not use hearing aids or cochlear implants based on their own comfort level and belief system. They will associate with hearing people as much or as little as they want. In this sense, they are in complete command of themselves, thus creating opportunities for fuller lives. They adopt whatever is their authentic identity, whether it be a bicultural identity or a Deaf-oriented lifestyle.

AUTHOR'S ANECDOTE

At Ohlone College, where I teach, almost 200 deaf students are enrolled. Some of them choose to come to Ohlone as part of their "Deafhood" journey. They want to immerse themselves in a large Deaf community after spending years isolated in a mainstreamed setting with few or no deaf peers. Because of the isolation from the Deaf community while growing up, they are lacking knowledge of solutions that would have allowed them a better lifestyle.

Many of these students are in the dissonance stage or resistance and immersion stage when they arrive at Ohlone. In search of solutions, they are inspired by older Deaf students and Deaf faculty members, many of whom have similar educational and familial backgrounds. I've spent many hours working with these students, helping them to deal with their anger and move through the stages. By the time of their graduation from Ohlone, they are able to achieve a healthy bicultural identity and are ready for a comfortable existence in the world, both

Although these stages of cultural awareness were not designed with Deaf people in mind, this model is helpful in understanding the Deafhood journey many Deaf people go through to make peace with their Deaf being and their place in the world. This model also helps us understand that this kind of journey is not unique to deaf people but is, rather, something Deaf people share with many members of disenfranchised groups.

COCHLEAR IMPLANTS AND IDENTITY FORMATION

With the prevalence of cochlear implants among the newer generations of deaf children, there are differing opinions of what the implications will be for the Deaf community in general and the identity formation of these children specifically. One view is that because of the improved hearing made possible by implants, the Deaf community is becoming less and less significant, as it is believed that deaf children with implants are more likely to become assimilated into the hearing society, use speech as their primary mode of communication as opposed to signing, and have no need to congregate with other deaf people. The other view is that, regardless of the propaganda being promoted by the cochlear implant industry and its associates, such as speech and hearing professionals, these deaf children's hearing will never be "fully restored." As a result, deaf people will continue to struggle with less than full access to language and communication. Consequently, they will continue to experience being left out and misunderstood by their own families and society. In addition, many implanted children will continue to struggle to achieve a healthy identity as a deaf person. Ultimately, deaf people will still seek solutions from Deaf culture in pursuit of a more effective lifestyle, thus assuring that the Deaf community remains a valuable resource for years to come.

Other divergent perspectives regarding cochlear implants revolve around the debate associated with whether deaf people should be viewed from a pathological or cultural lens. Despite the medical model perspective shared by audiologists, speech therapists, and physicians (the professionals who work most with deaf children and their families), Deaf people have long argued that they are not disabled and therefore not in need of being "fixed." By perpetuating the pathological mentality among deaf children that there is something wrong with them, cochlear implants have been criticized by some Deaf people for creating an additional obstacle in deaf people's struggle to form a healthy identity, as discussed earlier in this chapter.

In addition, sign language usage is frequently discouraged among cochlear implantees ([Meadow-Orlans, Mertens, & Sass-Lehner, 2003](#)). In fact, one requirement sometimes associated with the surgery is a commitment to provide the deaf child with an environment free of sign language. To this end, parents are expected to ban the use of sign language with their deaf child, so that the entire focus is on developing speech and listening skills in order to maximize the benefits of cochlear implants.

This practice of discouraging the use of sign language is contradictory to research findings in which sign language usage is found to be beneficial to all deaf children, including those with cochlear implants. [Marschark \(2007\)](#) explains "There is no real evidence that signing interferes with the development of spoken language after implantation (or at any other time), and, in fact, earlier use of sign language appears to provide cognitive and linguistic support for the acquisition of auditory language after cochlear implantation" (p. 51). For instance, research to date has basically informed us that although cochlear implants may improve hearing and consequently may increase the likelihood of improved speech and listening skills with intensive post-

implant therapy, the findings are not clear regarding the overall development of language skills of the deaf child (see [Marschark et al., 2010](#); [Moore, 2010](#); [Spencer & Marschark, 2003](#); for review).

Further compounding the complications of this discussion is the growth of the number of Deaf adults who have chosen to undergo implant surgery. Although it can be argued that these individuals are perpetuating the perception that there is something wrong with being deaf, they are also reinforcing the concept that there are many different ways of being Deaf. For example, just like the hard-of-hearing members of the Deaf community, most Deaf adults who have cochlear implants have no desire to disassociate themselves from the Deaf community (see [Chapter 13](#) for additional information). Although they don't consider themselves superior to those who have less hearing or believe that all deaf people should be implanted, they have chosen this path to be implanted for different reasons, such as being able to enjoy music more, have an easier time communicating with hearing people, or being more attuned to environmental sounds. At the same time, they continue to enjoy the benefits of Deaf culture, such as full and unrestricted access to communication and information, healthy identity formation, and so on (see [Chapter 6](#) for additional information). Perhaps these cochlear implantees, as well as the hard-of-hearing members of the Deaf community, have much to teach those families who are contemplating surgery for their deaf babies and the professionals involved with the implants regarding their realistic perspectives of what it means to be Deaf.

CONCLUSION

Research has indicated that a bicultural identity is optimal for Deaf people (see [Leigh, 2009](#), for review). An orientation toward Deaf life (or a culturally separate identity) can also result in a positive lifestyle, but only if these individuals have worked through the anger in the third stage (resistance and immersion). For example, some Deaf people find it more effective to cut ties with families who continue to refuse to accommodate their requests to learn sign language or hire interpreters in order to include them more fully in family affairs, rather than being aggravated at every family event because they feel left out.

Unfortunately, the Deafhood journey toward a healthy identity may be a long and difficult one for many Deaf people as they struggle to make peace with their Deaf being. Frequently, they need to seek role models outside of the home in order to be liberated from an oppressive view of what it means to be deaf. By gaining access to the Deaf community, they are introduced to the solutions of Deaf culture. Perhaps the most powerful solution is a sense of completeness as a human being, even if they do not hear well. In this sense, Deaf culture requires the person to celebrate and embrace the very essence of who he or she is and to stop mourning the loss of hearing, especially if it was not something they had in the first place. This shift in perspective, from viewing the deaf existence as a tragic loss to a cultural entity, enables many Deaf people to live fuller, richer, and happier lives.

Lip Service

by Robert F. Panara (1992)

You want to rap
You said
And let it all hang out
This thing about
The communication gap
That keeps us separate
Your kind from mine.
You want to rap
You said
You want to integrate
But you decline
To change your line
Of crap
From speech
To signs.

5 Early Definitions of Deaf Culture



“A Tribute to ‘Fingershell’ painting by Chuck Baird” by Tony McGregor. Used with permission.

It may be surprising to learn that the term “Deaf culture” was not employed until recently. American Sign Language (ASL) was not even recognized as a language until the 1960s. American Sign Language and Deaf Studies classes were not offered at colleges and universities until the 1980s. Instead, “Deaf way,” “Deaf world,” or, as commonly expressed in ASL, DEAF TEND, were used to describe the distinctive way of life of Deaf people. In this chapter, we will discover the pioneering work of early scholars in substantiating the experiences of Deaf people as a cultural phenomena.

Although the term “culture” is commonly used to refer to a broad description of customs, arts, social institutions, values, and behavior, in phrases such as *Japanese culture*, *American culture*, and even *popular culture* or *corporate culture*, Deaf culture is a relatively new term to characterize the Deaf experience. Throughout history, Deaf people have discussed their unique way of life among themselves and published such views in their journals. For example, George Veditz proclaimed, in 1910, that Deaf people are “First, last, and for all time, the people of the eye” (Padden & Humphries, 2005, p. 2). It was not until the 1960s that such discussions were framed by a cultural perspective (Humphries, 2008). In their groundbreaking book, *The Dictionary of American Sign Language* (1965), authors William Stokoe, Dorothy Casterline, and Carl Croneberg included a section on the social and cultural characteristics of Deaf people, which represented a significant milestone in viewing Deaf people from a cultural perspective. Seven years later, Kathryn Meadow (1972) coined the term “Deaf subculture” in her article “Sociolinguistics, Sign Language, and the Deaf Subculture,” in which she proposed that a vibrant subculture exists among Deaf people. And, in a 1977 article, Meadow connected the universal, yet culturally bound rituals of worldwide naming practices to the naming customs unique to the Deaf community, providing additional support for the cultural thesis.

Also in 1977, Roy K. Holcomb published *Hazards of Deafness*, a compilation of humorous anecdotes reflecting the realities of deaf people’s lives. His goal was to provide both deaf and hearing people with new insight into the Deaf community and its unique and distinct lifestyle. He dedicated his book, “to all the wonderful persons in the world who are beginning to let us, the Deaf, be ourselves with pride and dignity.” This classic is now in its fourth edition and has since been renamed *Deaf Culture, Our Way*.

In 1980, Carol Padden contributed an innovative essay to the book *Sign Language and the Deaf*

Community: Essays in Honor of William C. Stokoe. In this article, she described in detail the characteristics of the Deaf community and the culture of Deaf people.

In 1981, the National Association of the Deaf selected Jack Gannon to author a book on Deaf heritage. In its foreword, Ralph H. White, then president of the National Association of the Deaf, described the book as an opportunity to “present in a cogent form the legacy left to us by the deaf people of generations gone by. It would remind our young deaf people that deafness needs not be a barrier to what they can do to enrich the quality of life for deaf citizens everywhere. More importantly, it would make them aware of the rich heritage that has cumulatively been bestowed on them.” This 500-page masterpiece continues to be the most comprehensive documentation existing today regarding the development and accomplishments of the Deaf community.

In 1982, Barbara Kannapell highlighted the cultural beliefs and values of Deaf people as the reason for the existence of the Deaf community. By 1990, the concept of Deaf culture was no longer a novelty, and courses on Deaf culture were commonly taught in universities and colleges throughout America.

Deaf studies, as an academic field of study, parallels the growth of interest in Deaf culture. In [Charles Katz's \(1999\)](#) analysis of the development of Deaf studies curricula in America, he credited Fred Schrieber, the executive director of the National Association of the Deaf, as the first person to propose a paradigmatic shift in the view of Deaf people, in 1971, from a medical model to a cultural focus. Schrieber argued that creating Deaf studies programs in schools for the deaf would be a wise investment because the self-image and, consequently, the lives of future young Deaf children would be vastly improved. During the following year, Gallaudet University (Gallaudet College at that time) established an endowed chair called the Powrie V. Doctor Chair of Deaf Studies and formally established the expanding field of Deaf studies.

PIONEERING WORK

Collectively, these early works represent a significant breakthrough in their representation of Deaf people from a cultural point of view, rather than from the view of the traditional pathological model. The efforts of these pioneers to define Deaf culture were enlightening when they were published, and they continue to be the foundation of many later works in this area. They are discussed in greater detail below.

Contributions by Stokoe, Casterline, and Cronberg

In 1965, William Stokoe, Dorothy Casterline, and Carl Croneberg published the first dictionary of American Sign Language (ASL) and included a section on the social and cultural characteristics of this linguistic community. This pioneering piece of work transformed the examination of deaf people from a negative, disabled-oriented perspective to a more positive perspective of cultural appreciation. For the first time, the terms “minority group” and “linguistic community” were used to describe the experiences of Deaf people, instead of the more prevalent and demeaning descriptions such as “defective” and “handicapped.” Specific aspects of Deaf people’s lives were viewed as normal, biologically driven actions rather than aberrations resulting from the lack of hearing itself. For example, they proposed that the development of ASL and the formation of the Deaf community were natural outcomes of two basic human needs—the innate desire to have an effective communication system and the drive to belong to a group or community.

[Stokoe, Casterline, and Croneberg \(1965\)](#) described typical experiences of deaf people living among the

hearing community—whether with family, friends, or co-workers—as frustrating, limiting, and demeaning. This frustration often led to a search for a better life and, eventually, migration toward the Deaf community. As the newcomers discovered the pleasure of social interaction with other Deaf people, they remained and thrived in the Deaf community. So, in this sense, the authors argued that, for many deaf people, their introduction to the Deaf community was often a much-needed respite from a life of alienation at home and within the hearing community.

Also, patterns of social contact and identification of places where Deaf people tended to congregate in the mid-20th century were examined. Residential schools were identified as the initial place of acculturation. It was through these schools that deaf people were introduced to the extensive social network of the Deaf community. This network ranged from informal circles of friends who visited with each other frequently to religious groups and voluntarily established local, regional, state, and national organizations. As a further support for the extensive networking that exist among Deaf people, the authors cited the fact that several national publications were established to maintain ties among Deaf people on a nationwide basis. The work of Stokoe, Casterline, and Croneberg is significant as the first scholarly representation of the Deaf experience as a cultural phenomenon.

Contributions by Kathryn Meadow-Orlans

Expanding on the idea of a cultural phenomenon, Kathryn Meadow (later Meadow-Orlans) proposed, in 1972, and again in 1975, that the experiences of Deaf people could best be described as a subculture of the American culture. Her intention was to place Deaf culture among one of many cultures that existed under the umbrella of “American culture.” As evidence, she identified marriage among Deaf people as one of the vital components of the culture. Unlike other disability groups, in which most people do not necessarily marry others with a similar disability, more than 90% of Deaf people marry their own kind. She also discussed the way language plays a critical role in the lives of Deaf people and how ASL is a defining cultural mark of the Deaf community. Meadow described how ASL was proudly displayed through performing arts and discussed how the Deaf culture was full of vibrant artistic interpretations of Deaf people’s experiences.

To support her conviction that a culture existed for Deaf people, [Meadow \(1972\)](#) proposed that etiquette associated with signed conversations differed from spoken conversations. For instance, the rules associated with eye contact while conversing were not the same between hearing speakers (hearing–hearing) and Deaf signers (Deaf–Deaf). Meadow suggested that other topics in the area of conversational rules were worthy of study, such as use of space, methods of getting attention, forms of address, and use of names. In fact, a large body of literature has pursued this within a linguistic framework.

Meadow also proposed that residential schools played an important role in the lives of deaf people. It is at these schools that deaf children are delivered from linguistic impoverishment and cultural void. She noted four critical periods during which deaf people are acculturated into the Deaf community through the residential school experience.

Enculturation at Birth

Deaf children who are born to Deaf families get their initial exposure to Deaf culture immediately at birth. Their access to solutions provided by Deaf culture is readily available. Consequently, their language

acquisition in sign language parallels the spoken language development of hearing children. They begin their residential school experience as soon as they are old enough.

Enculturation at the Initial Deaf School Placement as a Young Child

Similar to Deaf children with Deaf parents, these children are enrolled at a deaf school at a young age. However, they often have extremely limited language or communication skills prior to their enrollment, due to the fact that their parents are hearing and unaware of solutions available through Deaf culture. Upon their arrival at a residential school, deaf children receive their initial exposure to sign language and Deaf culture through Deaf peers, as well as through Deaf adult staff. During this process, the children absorb the values of Deaf people and learn their solutions for effective living.

Enculturation After Transferring to a Deaf School

For other children who are not initially placed at a deaf school, the enculturation process does not begin until they transfer to a deaf school at an older age, usually by the time they complete their elementary or junior high career at a local, public school. After years of frustration, they are ready to learn a new and better way of life from their Deaf peers and Deaf adults at the residential school.

Enculturation upon Graduation from High School

The last group consists of individuals who have never attended a deaf school. After years of being restricted from associating with other Deaf people, these deaf adults choose to become involved in the Deaf community. At that point, they begin to learn how to sign and benefit from other solutions made available through the Deaf community.

Meadow's work illustrates the importance of the deaf school setting in creating a sense of community and belonging for Deaf people. The arrival at a deaf school often is a pivotal time in the lives of Deaf people, a time when they are exposed to Deaf culture for the first time, leading to an enhanced life experience.

Another unique feature of Deaf life that suggests the existence of a distinct culture is the naming ritual that exists in the Deaf community (Meadow, 1977). Meadow noted that names were a key symbol and summary of personal identity and that there were special customs, sanctions, rituals, and ceremonies related to the naming of children throughout world cultures. This was also true in the Deaf community. However, in contrast to other world cultures, where children are born and accepted into the culture of their parents no matter where they reside, the majority of deaf children born to hearing parents do not become members of the Deaf community until their parents allow them to do so. Consequently, few Deaf children received their name signs from their parents although they have a name in English. By contrast, 43% of Deaf people reported receiving their name signs from their peers at school, and 13% indicated their name signs as being given by their teachers or dorm counselors at school. Meadow emphasized the importance of naming: "Assignment of a name sign can be seen as a kind of rite of passage, defining this entrance to the community through the bestowing of a name that is signed in the language of the subculture" (p. 239).

Interestingly, many of the name signs Meadow (1977) cites as given in the school environment reflect some aspect of the individual's personal appearance or behavior, in a manner that may appear to be blatantly rude to outsiders of the Deaf community. For example, it would not be unusual to give a name sign associated with the concept "crippled" to a person who limps, or a name sign associated with facial scars or freckles to a

person with this distinguishing facial feature, or one describing the type of hair they have, or even a name sign referring to the person's ample body build. However, the intention is not to offend the person but rather to have a quick, clear reference to the intended party.

Meadow's work illustrates the powerful role residential schools played in the lives of Deaf people because this is where they typically were enculturated and received their first name sign. Her essays also bring to light the importance of congregation for deaf people in creating a quality of life for the majority of Deaf people.

Contributions by Roy K. Holcomb

Confirming the assertion that a unique way of life exists among Deaf people, [Roy K. Holcomb \(1977\)](#) compiled vignettes of the deaf experience and published a book entitled *Hazards of Deafness*. This groundbreaking work was unique in that it was the first to present the singular way of life among Deaf people through their own eyes. Over 650 vignettes portrayed the humorous, hazardous, and sometimes embarrassing experiences of being deaf in a predominately sound-based world. His work also showed how the hearing majority reacted whenever their paths crossed those of deaf individuals, and how their preconceived beliefs and prejudice influenced their reactions to deaf people. This initial work has been expanded and revised by his two sons in subsequent work ([Holcomb, Holcomb, & Holcomb, 1994, 2011](#)) to highlight the evolving life experiences of Deaf people in light of the advent of technological devices such as text pagers and videophones. The most recent edition spotlights unique and humorous accounts of children of deaf adults (CODAs) growing up in Deaf households, as well as cross-cultural encounters between hearing parents and their deaf children. To reflect on the changing nature of Deaf culture, the book has been renamed *Deaf Culture, Our Way: Anecdotes from the Deaf Community*.

Contributions by Jack Gannon

Further verification of the existence of a Deaf culture is the historical process by which the community was formed. In his book, *Deaf Heritage, A Narrative History of Deaf America*, [Gannon \(1981\)](#) provided a detailed account of the way the Deaf community came into existence in America and how it has thrived over the years despite oppression, discrimination, and scorn from the greater American society. The book traces the development of the community, beginning with the arrival of a Deaf teacher from France to start the first school for the deaf in Hartford, Connecticut. Special emphasis is given to the contributions made by Deaf people themselves throughout the years to improve the quality of life for their fellow Deaf people. Examples include the founding of 24 deaf schools, the establishment of a life insurance company to provide Deaf people with much needed protection, the formation of the National Association of the Deaf to lobby for the right to use sign language with deaf school-aged students, and the development of homes for the aged and infirm Deaf. This book can be used as evidence that Deaf culture is a collectivist one; that is, that the accomplishments made by each Deaf individual are considered advancements made by the entire Deaf community.

Contributions by Carol Padden

In honor of William Stokoe's contributions to the field of Deaf studies, in 1980, Carol Padden wrote an essay that is now considered a classic in attempt to understand Deaf culture. In her article, "The Culture and the Community of Deaf People," she described the predominate values of Deaf people. They were listed as

language, disassociation from speech, social relations, and stories and literature.

More specifically, [Padden \(1980\)](#) helped us appreciate that language and culture cannot be separated, and that ASL was born out of Deaf people's desire to have an effective communication system. For these reasons, ASL was truly a mark of Deaf culture.

Padden examined the role of speech in the Deaf community from an insider's perspective. She explained that speech does not carry any weight in the Deaf community. More specifically, speaking possesses neither a negative nor positive value in the Deaf community. Whether a deaf person has speaking abilities is irrelevant to most other Deaf people. By contrast, to hearing people, a deaf person's speaking ability is often the most salient factor used to judge his or her qualifications. This may underscore the reason for the majority of deaf individuals' eventual migration to the Deaf community—their search for full acceptance and respect, regardless of their speech.

Another important value of the Deaf community is the importance of maintaining social relationships with other Deaf people as a way to develop bonds with “other like-minded Deaf people” (p. 97). Padden identified socialization as a critical element of Deaf culture, which explains the extensive social network that exists within the Deaf community.

Finally, because ASL is not a written language, one cannot overstate the importance of oral (signed) history of the Deaf community. Like other cultural communities, people in the Deaf community feel that it is their responsibility to pass down the stories and literature of the culture from one generation to the next. For this reason, Padden considered this one of the most critical components of the culture.

Padden also discussed how Deaf cultural values do not always conform to the values of the larger, mainstream culture. For instance, disassociation from speech does not match the thinking of most hearing people, to whom the ability to speak is “everything.” Because of this, newcomers to the Deaf community must often learn to adjust their personal beliefs and values in order to subscribe to the norms of the Deaf community. Another feature of Deaf culture is that grammatical aspects of ASL require extensive use of eye contact, eye gaze, and facial expressions that are not commonly used among English speakers. Again, expressing their thoughts and feelings in accordance with the conventions of this visual language often requires adjustment by newcomers. Padden also describes the formal and elaborate ritual of introduction and exchanging names as a way to identify a person's place in the Deaf community. In summary, Padden's work illuminates how Deaf people choose to interact in a way that supports and contributes to the advancements of goals that have been set by the Deaf community. She also identified a core value of Deaf people—the desire to be seen as a linguistic and cultural group of individuals, equal to their hearing peers, rather than to be defined by their deficiency.

Contributions by Barbara Kannapell

Elaborating on the point, that shared cultural values keep a community strong, [Kannapell \(1982\)](#) asserted in her article, “Inside the Deaf Community,” that the language provides Deaf people with 100% communication access and that deaf people are drawn to the Deaf community because of need to achieve clear and effective communication. Consequently, the ability to use ASL has become the most important criteria in evaluating a deaf person's affiliation with the Deaf community. To help all people understand the various linguistic abilities among deaf people, Kannapell developed a list of six possible communication styles that exist in the

Deaf community, which will be described in more depth in [Chapter 7](#). It should be noted that Kannapell used the term “communication style” rather than the currently accepted term “linguistic competency.” This inappropriate use of that label may reflect the thinking of that era (just 30 years ago) when language skills were considered personal styles and/or preferences, rather than a set of linguistic knowledge and skills. Nevertheless, these categories help us understand the linguistic variations among deaf people.

In addition, Kannapell identified shared cultural beliefs and values as the primary reason for the existence of the Deaf community. For example, she cited the need not to feel subordinate as the driving force for people to become members of the Deaf community. Because of the oppression and the denial of the Deaf existence, Deaf people feel a bond and develop strong relationships with each other. Through their involvement in the Deaf community, they no longer feel disenfranchised or oppressed. For these reasons, the Deaf community serves as a powerful magnet for Deaf people.

CONCLUSION

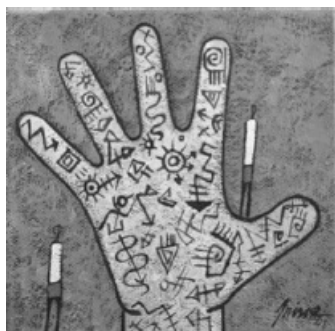
Although the term “Deaf culture” is relatively new, the struggle to validate the Deaf experience and to define who Deaf people are as a community has a long history. Although Deaf people clearly have a language of their own, as well as a rich, thriving culture with particular beliefs and values, it was not until the appearance of the pioneering works summarized here that Deaf people began to view themselves as a cultural entity. The importance of this enlightenment was the promise of culture, which provided Deaf people with the means to validate their existence. [Padden and Humphries \(2005\)](#) explain that “the concept of culture reframed for us the idea of being deaf and allowed us to explore deaf people’s long tradition of language and history as a way of understanding their lives” (p. 3). In the following chapters, we will explore the ways Deaf culture has continued to evolve, with new solutions being continuously created to address the evolving challenges of living in contemporary society.

My Clipped Wings

by Ken Glickman (1990)

Unbeknownst to me, my wings got clipped
A long time ago by somebody
Who found me not responsive
To chirping ...
And who believed the bill speaks louder—
Louder than the wing.
Thus I was grounded—
Holed up in a nest—
And was taught to chirp ...
And to chirp ...
And to chirp ...
Until I was big enough
To go forth on my own ...
Only to soon find out
My wings are for freedom
Of expression, also.
Thus did I try to grow back
A couple of feathers in my wings
Just so that I can soar.

6 Deaf Culture Redefined



"Deaf Hand" by Iris Aranda, Used with permission

Values epitomize what is most important to a culture. Many societies cherish the desire to live in harmony with nature, while others prize respect for elders and ancient traditions or the chance for upward mobility based on an individual's efforts. The study of values does not imply a judgment about which are "better" or "worse." It is more of a shorthand way of getting a handle on complex and multilayered societies. In this chapter, we will examine the following questions: What are the core values of the Deaf Community? Have they changed over the years? How do the contemporary experiences of deaf people impact Deaf culture?

Certain values and desires are universal, regardless of the origins of the community. For instance, the right to dignity, the need for respect, the importance of clear and effective communication, the opportunity for self-determination and the necessity for a healthy sense of self are valued by cultures throughout the world. When these values are repeatedly oppressed or challenged, they often gain prominence as members of a culture struggle to win respect for themselves and the community to which they belong (Andersen & Collins, 2009; Butler, 2001; Johnson, 2006; Pincus, 2006). This is the case for deaf people the world over, as many of these basic values have been denied them due to the dominance of the hearing societies in which they live (Bahan, 2008; Bauman, 2008; Jankowski, 1997). In this sense, one could argue that Deaf values and behaviors evolved in reaction to the influence of and/or oppression by the hearing majority (Corker, 1998). And this may explain the genesis of specific behaviors, such as information sharing and pooling resources within the group (Mindess, Holcomb, Langholtz, & Moyer, 2006; Neisser, 1983). We will now explore each of these values below.

VALUES BASED ON A VISUAL ORIENTATION

In contrast to people who hear, Deaf people's lives revolve around the use of sight and, because of this, much of their culture is based on efficient and effortless visual access to the world (Bahan, 2008; Bauman, 2008). This visual orientation may, in fact, lead Deaf people to develop many of their cultural behaviors and values irrespective of the role of hearing people in their lives (Padden & Humphries, 1988). In short, Deaf culture is

an outcome of authentic life experiences Deaf people share. It is the sum total of solutions that ensure full visual access to communication and information. This, in turn, allows Deaf people a successful integration within the larger, hearing society, resulting in rich and rewarding lives. Thus, the continuing struggle to achieve dignity, respect, and self-determination is a significant aspect of the Deaf culture, and has been throughout its history (see, for example, [Bragg 2001](#); [Gannon, 1981](#); [Gannon, 1989](#); [Jankowski, 1997](#); [Van Cleve & Crouch, 1989](#)).

Every culture is continuously evolving and developing. The same is true of Deaf culture. Although American Deaf culture traces its roots to 1817, when deaf children formally congregated for the first time at the Connecticut Asylum for the Education and Instruction of Deaf and Dumb Persons (now known as the American School for the Deaf), it is still practiced in the modern Deaf community today. Yet, the commonly cited definition of Deaf culture continues to rely on facets that were true historically but may not reflect present-day reality. For example, the residential school experience is often presented as the core of Deaf culture, use of American Sign Language (ASL) identified as the most important factor in Deaf culture, and Deaf clubs cited as the heart of the Deaf community ([Eickman, 2006](#); [Ladd, 2008](#); [Lane, Hoffmeister, & Bahan, 1996](#); [Padden, 2008](#); [Padden & Humphries, 1988](#)). Today, however, these three facets of Deaf culture often do not correspond with the day-to-day lives of many Deaf people ([Murray, 2008](#), [Padden & Humphries, 2005](#)).

TRADITIONAL FACET: RESIDENTIAL SCHOOL

In past generations, residential schools were often the first opportunity for many deaf people to congregate with others who had a similar orientation toward life; that is, a nonhearing one ([Bauman, 2008](#); [Lane, 2008](#); [Padden & Humphries, 2005](#); [Van Cleve & Crouch, 1989](#)). In these schools where they spent their formative years, Deaf people came up with many solutions to achieve an effective lifestyle ([Bauman, 2008](#); [Lane, 2008](#); [Padden & Humphries, 2005](#)). These solutions included communication strategies such as signed language, social interaction strategies such as attention getting methods and turn-taking devices, and successful identity formation through the availability of Deaf role models. It is for these reasons that residential schools have been frequently cited as a fundamental component of the Deaf experience. Because of changes in the way deaf children are educated today, however, residential schools are not the dominant force in the lives of deaf people they once were. In fact, in recent years, most deaf school-aged children have attended a mainstream program, and, in the near future, a majority of Deaf people will not have shared the residential school experience ([Bauman, 2008](#); [Jankowski, 1997](#); [Padden & Humphries, 2005](#)).

TRADITIONAL FACET: AMERICAN SIGN LANGUAGE

The primary communication modality used in early years of residential schools was signing. With emerging communities of signers established at residential schools, a new, visual-gestural language was born. Because ASL was perfectly suited for people who are visually oriented, it became the most cherished cultural value of Deaf people.

Communication and educational philosophies in Deaf education have shifted tremendously over the years. Although ASL was the primary language of instruction at the beginning, oralism took over as the predominant communication method during the early 1900s and continued in preeminence until the mid-

1970s (Neisser, 1983; Padden & Humphries, 1998). During that time, young deaf children were forbidden to use signs in schools, and parents were not encouraged to learn sign language. At deaf residential schools, young deaf children were sheltered from signing by being segregated into buildings separated from the older students and Deaf staff members who knew how to sign. Most deaf children learned ASL at a later age, when they moved to upper departments and interacted with the older signing students and Deaf staff members.

By contrast, due to the popularity of the Total Communication philosophy of the 1970s, many parents learned how to sign as soon as they discovered that their child was deaf. Consequently, during this period, many deaf children started using signs at a young age, both in the mainstream and residential school settings. However, they usually did not learn ASL but rather one of the contrived signed English variations (Jankowski, 1997; Lane et al., 1996; Mahshie, 1995). Their sign language models often were their hearing teachers or parents rather than native signers. To the horror of the older Deaf generation, the signs used by many deaf people educated during that time did not resemble their treasured ASL (Padden & Humphries, 1998).

Today, ASL is once again embraced in schools practicing the bilingual philosophy, but it continues to be shunned by those who advocate the oral/aural method. Consequently, exposure to ASL among deaf children depends on the type of school they attend. Regardless of the choices their parents made for them, many deaf people eventually learn ASL at some point in their lives. Yet, the ASL of today does not fully resemble the language of yesterday (See Chapter 7 for further information).

TRADITIONAL FACET: DEAF CLUBS

It has been noted that among the primary reasons for the existence of the Deaf community are the desire for effective communication, acceptance, and socialization opportunities (Bauman, 2008; Lane et al., 1996). This was especially true in the mid-20th century, when interpreters were not routinely available, making it difficult for deaf people to be integrated into the larger society. Television shows were not captioned, making it harder for deaf people to enjoy programs on TV. There were no TTYs or videophones, making it impossible for deaf people to keep in touch with each other via telephone. For these reasons, Deaf people flocked to Deaf clubs on a regular basis for socialization, information sharing, and emotional support (Lane et al., 1996; Padden, 2008; Padden & Humphries, 1998). Today, the advent of civil rights laws, along with widespread usage of modern technology, have minimized the communicative barriers that have traditionally made it difficult for deaf people to be fully included in the larger society (Brueggemann, 2008; Mindess et al., 2006; Neisser, 1983). With this new access and integration, Deaf clubs are no longer the focal point of the Deaf community (Mindess et al., 2006; Murray, 2008; Padden, 2008; Padden & Humphries, 1988).

In summary, the traditional descriptors of Deaf culture, such as residential school experience, usage of ASL, and participation in Deaf clubs, are not as relevant today as they once were. In fact, most deaf children today attend a mainstreamed educational program in which some form of signed English is typically used instead of ASL. This signed medium is usually introduced and taught by hearing signers rather than by a native community of ASL users. Deaf children often do not have the privilege of being exposed to Deaf adult role models at an early age. And the vast network of traditional Deaf clubs no longer exists to fill the socialization needs of many Deaf people. Nevertheless, this does not mean that Deaf culture no longer exists. Rather, the culture has evolved and adapted to create new solutions that meet the needs of a more

contemporary society.

CORE VALUES

These traditional descriptors of Deaf culture should not be considered obsolete but rather should be viewed as one set of surface solutions obscuring the deeper elements of Deaf culture. Although residential school experience, ASL, and participation in Deaf clubs were visible markers of Deaf culture, they are not necessarily its “core values,” as traditionally discussed by Deaf scholars. Instead, the core of Deaf culture consists of solutions for effective communication, access to information, validation of the Deaf experience, and complete acceptance of being Deaf as a normal existence. Deaf people today, like those in the past, still struggle to make peace with being Deaf, to achieve 100% access to communication, to be viewed as capable individuals regardless of their speech and hearing abilities, and to win acceptance from their hearing parents and society at large. The solutions that have been created by Deaf people throughout the years have evolved and will continue to address these needs (Murray, 2008; Padden & Humphries, 2005). In the following sections, we will examine in greater depth the core values related to full access to communication, ease of access to information, healthy identity formation, and self-determination.

Full Access to Communication

The vast majority of deaf children are born into hearing families, who may be unfamiliar with or opposed to the use of signing. This often means that the deaf child grows up in an environment without optimal access to language and communication (Corker, 1998, Mahshie, 1995; Sheridan, 2001). Communication in the home and community may be limited to spoken English (or another spoken language). For deaf children who struggle to lip-read an unheard language of sound, this means limited ability to communicate with others in their environment, whether it is expressing their own thoughts or participating in social interactions. Like children everywhere, deaf children seek an effective means to meet their needs but they are often alone in their search. Out of necessity, they may invent their own gestural system to communicate with those closest to them. They may adopt an attitude of passivity and resignation when they are not able to actively participate in family discussions. Deaf youngsters certainly make attempts to obtain access to information and communication, but for many, their attempts are not as sophisticated or successful as the time-tested strategies that have evolved within the Deaf community. It is often not until the deaf individual meets other Deaf people that he or she is able to share and benefit from the wisdom and experience of the Deaf way (Bechter, 2008; Drolsbaugh, 2000; Mahshie, 1995).

When deaf people in the United States were brought together, first at the American School for the Deaf, and then at many other schools for the Deaf that were eventually established, they created their own solution to an ineffective communication system (dependence on spoken English) by devising a visual-gestural system of communication (Haualand, 2008). Over years of use, this basic communication system has evolved into a formal, full-fledged language with all the power to communicate complex thoughts (Knapp & Corina, 2008). American Sign Language, like all other languages, continues to mature into an even more effective language through generations of usage. Through ASL, Deaf people have unrestricted access to communication, can converse freely with each other, gain access to spoken words through the use of sign language interpreters, and can express their basic needs as well as abstract ideas.

For this reason, the value of unrestricted access to communication is one of the most enduring values of the Deaf community. This is why Deaf people have sought to preserve ASL, as opposed to giving in to accepting one of the contrived, cumbersome manually coded English systems that have been developed over the years (Bayton, 2008; Padden & Humphries, 2005; Wilbur, 2008) (see [Chapter 8](#) for more details). As experience shows, only a true language like ASL has the capacity to allow signers to express their thoughts and feelings freely and fully. It is obvious that ASL is an effective, historically created solution developed by the community's members, thus making it the most natural language for Deaf people (Fleischer, 2008; Mahshie, 1995).

In addition to the right to use ASL, Deaf people have long fought for unrestricted access to communication at home, at school, in the workplace, and in the community. Without such access, they are excluded from full participation in society and may be treated as second-class citizens. So, as part of this core value, Deaf people have advocated for the inclusion of sign language in homes where deaf children are raised. In addition, Deaf people are becoming increasingly vocal in their support of the dual-language approach in the education of deaf children, in which both ASL and English are taught. The goal is to allow Deaf people to become fully literate and capable of interacting and communicating effectively with their fellow Americans, whether they are deaf or not. This core value of full communication access extends to the availability of high-quality interpreting services, captioned television programs and movies, and telephone relay services, all of which make it possible for Deaf people to become full, productive citizens in society.

Information Sharing

Information sharing is also a notable feature of Deaf culture (Corker, 1998; Mindess et al., 2006). This has at its root the fact that communication with hearing people usually is difficult, cumbersome, and often limited, even with deaf people's own family members. For the majority hearing population, information is primarily available through auditory means, whether in direct face-to-face conversation or through a more indirect avenue. Hearing people are not even aware of the continual barrage of information they receive through their ears. They listen to news shows on the radio while driving, overhear their co-workers discuss a myriad of issues, and participate in chit-chat with family members. By contrast, access to incidental information is usually extremely difficult for deaf people. They may compensate for this lack of information by assuming an attitude of disinterest, or they may try to make sense of incomplete information by filling in the gaps with their own ideas. Over the years, Deaf people have learned to support each other in filling these gaps by sharing information wherever and whenever possible. Consequently, information sharing has become one of the most enduring values of the Deaf community.

Information sharing appears in many forms, which will be discussed in greater detail in [Chapter 10](#). These include participating in "straight talk," making comments about another person's appearance, disclosing personal information, giving detailed introductions, discussing money spent on personal items, sharing personal hygiene tips, exchanging strategies on how to bargain, and providing suggestions on finding helpful people (such as which doctor can sign, which secretary is easiest to lip-read). All of these behaviors allow Deaf people to gain valuable information with which they can make better sense of the world around them and function more successfully in their communities.

Healthy Identity Formation

Yet another core human value is a healthy sense of self. Gaining a positive identity is often a challenge for individuals who are dissimilar from others in their environment, whether through racial, religious, sexual orientation, or any other observable difference. Most deaf children come from homes in which families have no prior experience with Deaf people. Consequently, it can be extremely difficult for a deaf child to develop a healthy, positive sense of self, especially when parents are doing everything possible to minimize what many health professionals refer to as “the debilitating effects of deafness” (Drolsbaugh, 2000; Harris, 1995; Holcomb, 1997; Lane, 2008; Sheridan, 2001). Frequently, hearing parents grieve for their deaf child’s “loss” of normal hearing. They see it as a tragedy rather than as a human characteristic of their child. They may bring their deaf child to a variety of professionals and early interventionists who propagate the perception that their child is in need of medical intervention and intensive therapy in order to lead a “normal” life. As a result, they subject their deaf child to many hours of intensive speech therapy and isolate him or her in a full-inclusion environment, such as a school with all hearing students. The child has no deaf peers with whom to associate. Instead of feeling embraced and accepted by their parents, deaf children frequently report feeling isolated and left out, even in their homes and school environments. It is not surprising that deaf children may develop negative or mixed feelings about being deaf. As a remedy, they may try to adopt the behaviors and mannerisms of their hearing family and peers by trying to pass as a hearing person, frequently with flawed results (Brueggemann, 1999).

Often, it is not until the deaf individual meets other Deaf people that he or she is able to view him- or herself in a different light (Harris, 1995; Holcomb, 1997; Sheridan, 2001). Instead of feeling shame or being embarrassed by their “hearing loss,” members of the Deaf community celebrate their “Deafhood” (Gertz, 2008). For newcomers to the Deaf community, it can be quite liberating to meet other Deaf people who do not pity themselves and do not want pity from others (Harris, 1995; Holcomb, 1997). It can also be quite an eye-opener to discover that deaf children are seen as a prized possession. Often, it is the first time the deaf individual discovers that it is okay to be who he or she is. To suddenly be exposed to this warm, welcoming positive attitude is quite a contrast to the upbringing of those deaf people who grew up in environments in which their condition was pitied. For this reason, many Deaf people see this enlightening view as a tangible gift from the Deaf community—that it is okay to be Deaf, that it is possible to have a good life as a Deaf person, and that being deaf is not necessarily an infirmity that one has to suffer (in the perception of the hearing majority), but is rather a source of pride in one’s connection to other individuals with a rich history and culture. In essence, Deaf culture provides Deaf people with the basic human right of positive self-identity.

Self-Determination

Self-determination is the right to make decisions affecting one’s own community and not to be controlled or dominated by the majority population. This is critical to the respect and preservation of any culture. This basic right has been denied to many disenfranchised groups, including Deaf people (Barnes, Mercer & Shakespere, 1999; Buchanan, 1999; Fleischer, 2008; Gertz, 2008; Longmore, 2003; Obasi, 2008; Van Cleve & Crouch, 1993).

The lives of most of deaf children are controlled by people who have a limited understanding of the Deaf experience (Holcomb, 1997; Leigh, 2008). As described earlier, many deaf children grow up in an

environment in which being deaf is considered a tragic infirmity. Most parents never knew any deaf people until they had their own deaf child. Teachers of the deaf or other professionals who work with deaf children often complete their training without any direct involvement with the Deaf community. Consequently, the agenda of many educational programs bears little resemblance to the values of the Deaf community, resulting in an impoverished academic and home environment for deaf children (Bailes, 2001; Gertz, 2008; Harris, 1995). Exacerbating the situation, generic special education policies are dictated at the federal, state, and local levels without input from Deaf educators, resulting in incompatible practices that are detrimental to the success of deaf children (Jankowski, 1997; Neisser, 1983). The necessity for self-advocacy was evidenced by a proclamation made by Robert McGregor, when he was elected as the first president of the first National Association for the Deaf (NAD) convention in 1880, “We have interests peculiar to ourselves which can be taken care of by ourselves.” This empowering attitude was instrumental in distancing the Deaf community from the disabling perceptions of them by the larger, majority society.

Throughout history, Deaf people have fought for self-determination and worked diligently to improve the quality of lives for their fellow Deaf citizens (Buchanan, 1999; Corker, 1998; Gannon, 1981; Jankowski, 1997; Robinson, 2006; Simms & Thumann, 2007). Laurent Clerc was a pioneer in promoting self-determination among deaf people. He was a well-respected Deaf teacher in Paris, France. In 1816, he accepted an invitation from an American hearing man named Thomas Gallaudet to come to Hartford, Connecticut, for the purpose of establishing the very first school for the deaf in America. One of their founding goals was to empower deaf people to take leadership roles in the Deaf community, especially in the education of deaf children. As a result of Clerc’s efforts and encouragement, Deaf people founded 24 additional schools for the Deaf in America during the mid to late 1800s (Buchanan, 1999; Gannon, 1981). Deaf people today continue to follow this spirit of self-determination and have established at least 10 charter schools in the past 25 years, with a focus on the dual-language approach, utilizing both ASL and English, to combat the chronic poor educational record of deaf children (Mahshie, 1995). Another example of self-determination is the Deaf President Now campaign of 1988 (Gannon, 1989). When qualified Deaf candidates were passed over for the office of president by the predominately hearing board of trustees of Gallaudet University, the college community, consisting of students, faculty, staff, and alumni, shut down the campus for a week to protest this blatant discrimination and demanded that a Deaf person be appointed to the post. This protest generated international attention and resulted in I. King Jordan’s appointment as the first deaf president in Gallaudet’s 124-year history. The impact of this successful protest is far reaching and served as an impetus for the passage, in 1989, of the landmark American with Disabilities Act (Bauman, 2008; Fleischer & Zames, 2001; Shapiro, 1994).

Outside of the educational setting, Deaf people also worked hard to create a vibrant community for themselves. As early as 1854, Deaf people began to formally organize themselves, which eventually led to what Van Cleve and Crouch (1989) called, “a bewildering array of organizations” (p. 87). The first organization, the New England Gallaudet Association of Deaf-Mutes was founded “to promote the intellectual, social, moral, temporal and spiritual welfare of our mute community” (Van Cleve & Crouch, 1989, p. 89). Eventually Deaf people established many more organizations to provide themselves with social, linguistic, and political opportunities (Robinson, 2006).

In 1880, the NAD was formed to assert Deaf people’s commitment to the preservation of sign language in

the face of a movement to abolish sign language in schools for the deaf. To enable Deaf people to protect their families, a group of Deaf individuals formed their own insurance company in 1901, in reaction to discriminatory practices of the insurance industry, which considered deaf people poor risk for coverage and thus denied them insurance. The National Fraternal Society of the Deaf was operated by Deaf people for more than 100 years, with its mission to “uphold honor, fraternity and good citizenship, to encourage industry, ambition, honesty and perseverance; to prevent, if possible, members from being wronged, swindled or imposed upon, or ill-treated in any manner deemed unfair or disgraceful.” A half-century later, once again in reaction to the stigma of disability, the American Athletic Union of the Deaf was formed in 1945 as a vehicle for self-determination. Responding to discrimination experienced by deaf athletes in mainstream sports, the organization was founded to “foster and regulate uniform rules of competition and provide social outlets for Deaf members and their friends.” The organization has since been renamed the USA Deaf Sports Federation (USADSF), uniting 18 Deaf national sports organizations such as USA Deaf Basketball and the U.S. Deaf Soccer. Although the membership of these affiliated organizations is limited to Deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals, they work closely with national mainstream athletic organizations.

In the spirit of self-determination, permanent locations for Deaf meeting spaces or clubhouses were secured throughout the nation, providing Deaf citizens with a “home” where their social needs were met. These Deaf clubs were a source of pride among Deaf people, as they were bought and maintained with their own money. Even with the demise of clubs and the changing focal point of many Deaf communities today (see [Chapter 11](#) for greater detail), the tradition of congregating has continued, albeit in a different form ([Padden, 2008](#)). Instead of meeting at clubhouses, temporary locations such as rented halls or bars are used as short-term physical locations where Deaf people may congregate in a comfortable space for a limited amount of time ([Murray, 2008](#); [Padden & Humphries, 1988](#)).

CONCLUSION

Similar to other disenfranchised groups, we find that Deaf people are not unique in their struggle to develop a strong voice to ensure that the needs and wants of the community are respected and supported ([Bauman, 2008](#); [Branson & Miller, 2002](#); [Corker, 1998](#)). Ultimately, the goal is to prevent future generations from suffering from ill-considered policies that result in the chronic problem of poorly educated, poorly prepared, and poorly equipped individuals ([Bailes, 2001](#); [Mahshie, 1995](#)). Only when wisdom and advice are sought from experienced members of the culture can progressive policies be formulated and the repetition of mistakes prevented.

In conclusion, Deaf people deserve the same basic human rights as anyone else and, to achieve this end, the core values of the Deaf community, including communication access, information sharing, healthy identity formation, and self-determination, allow Deaf people to live their lives to the fullest. The following chapters will expand on these core values and provide more specific illustrations.

When They Tell Me ...

by Pamela Wright (2002)

When they tell me

That my thoughts cannot possibly be powerful

Because my voice cannot create beauty

I feel angry.

But I am not allowed anger

For to be angry is to be defiant.

When they tell me

That to be good I must be obedient, taciturn, never cause trouble

To comply gratefully in the face of insults and humiliation

I feel rage.

But I am not allowed rage

For to feel rage is to be a radical.

When they tell me

I should ashamedly shun the fluency that flows from my hands

And erase the grotesque emotions and information from my face

I feel revulsion.

But I am not allowed revulsion

For to feel revulsion is to be a disgrace.

When they tell me

I should pretend to happily conform

And find satisfaction from a part-time life on the fringe

I feel despair.

But I am not allowed despair

For to feel despair is to be unappreciative.

When they tell me

That my life of silence has no value, no significance, and no sense

For easing the way for those too young to know

I feel hate.

But I am not allowed hate

For to feel hate is to be a militant.

When they tell me

I don't realize how deprived I am, how isolated and behind

And that my people cannot ever succeed without someone holding their hand

I feel aghast.

But I am not allowed aghast
For to feel aghast is to refuse to assimilate.

When they tell me

I cannot be tenacious, I must accept coercion;
I cannot be opinionated, I must accept debasement;
I cannot be intense, I must accept degradation;
I cannot be confident, I must accept abuse;
I cannot aspire, I must accept inferiority;
I am not allowed resentment, I'd be a troublemaker;
I am not allowed fury, I'd be a rebel;
I am not allowed horror, I'd be abnormal
I am not allowed frustration, I'd be insane;

And if I dare ...

I'd be diseased.

How dare I?

Oh, do I dare!

I do dare!

And I can!

But I am not allowed strength
For I am not allowed to be human.

7 American Sign Language—The Language of the Deaf Community



“The Greatest Irony” by Maureen Klusza. Used with permission.

For more than a hundred years, American Sign Language (ASL) was characterized as a crude system of gestures, something less than a “real language,” both by hearing people who had no idea how it worked and by the Deaf people who used it daily. Then, in the mid-20th century, a revolutionary discovery was made when linguists (Stokoe, Cronberg and Casterline, and later Bellugi and Klima) subjected ASL to academic scrutiny and found that it actually did have all the elements required of a “real” language, some in novel forms. American Sign Language has fascinated linguists ever since and has taken its place in the world panoply of languages. Now, Deaf people can feel proud of their unique language and fight for their right to use it.

Deaf people in America are best described as being bilingual because they use two languages, American Sign Language (ASL) and English, in their daily lives, both within the Deaf community and in mainstream society. However, deaf people’s linguistic competence can vary greatly in both English and ASL, from being equally fluent in the two languages to being semi-lingual with weak or no skills in either language. This wide variation in linguistic fluency may stem from differing philosophies about the way deaf children should be raised and taught, ranging from an English-only approach to a bilingual approach in which both ASL and English are used. Because of the predominance of deaf children whose families only use English at home and deaf education programs that are based solely on English, there has been relatively limited success in meeting the educational, linguistic, and communicative needs of deaf children (Fleischer, 2008; Hoff, 2008; Hoffmeister, 1990; Lane, Hoffmeister, & Bahan, 1996; Mahshie, 1995; Wilbur, 2008). As a result, many deaf high school graduates are exiting secondary programs with limited English skills and comparatively poor ASL fluency. Nevertheless, both English and ASL play an important role in the lives of American Deaf people.

Although some form of English is used on a daily basis by most deaf Americans, ASL is considered to be the most accessible language for deaf people because of its visual properties. Kannapell (1989) claimed that only ASL could provide deaf people with 100% access to information, whereas English offers fragmented access because of its limited visibility on the lips and its ungrammatical structure in its Signed English presentation. It can be argued that ASL is the most powerful and important solution created by Deaf people

for effective living. Without a visually based language, deaf people are often doomed to a substandard lifestyle with severely limited access to information.

WHAT AMERICAN SIGN LANGUAGE IS AND IS NOT

For years, misconceptions about ASL were prevalent (Dively, Metzger, Taub, & Baer, 2001; Hoff, 2008; Hoffmeister, 1990). It was long believed that signs were just English words and grammar represented on the hands. And, since many deaf people couldn't master English, their productions of signs resulted in a "broken English" reflecting their limited knowledge of the English language.

Today, with enlightened views of Deaf culture and its language, ASL is recognized and accepted by the majority of linguists and the academic community as a legitimate language, with the ability to express any thought, idea, or concept, just like spoken languages. Research has clearly determined that ASL has an independent grammar that happens to be quite different from English (see Dively et al., 2001 for review). Just like all other languages, ASL possesses a compositional structure at all linguistic levels including phonology, morphology, syntax, and discourse (Liddell, 2003; Lucas, Bayley, & Valli, 2003). Uniquely, though, the linguistic rules of signed languages all over the world have been found to prioritize the need for signs to be formed for clear visibility, ease of production, and the requirements of the body (Knapp & Corina, 2008; Neisser, 1983; Valli & Lucas, 2000). Yet, myths about ASL perpetuate, creating confusion about what ASL is and is not.

All languages utilize arbitrarily created symbols to assign meanings to the objects they represent. Why do the English word "brown," the ASL sign BROWN, the Spanish word "moreno" and the sign MORENO in Mexican Sign Language (LSM) all use different symbols and yet represent the same thing? It is because a certain meaning (the color brown) has been assigned to these four symbols, which are understood by specific language communities. In the case of ASL, using the handshape, B, in a downward movement on the cheek, signals the information BROWN to the ASL using community but does not carry meaning to the Mexican signing community nor to English-speaking people. In all languages, symbols (either words or signs) provide quick, effective, and specific references to the concepts they represent, and the ASL sign for brown does exactly that.

Because of the referential nature of symbols in languages, people are able to discuss not only concrete objects, but also abstract thoughts, such as time, morality, and emotions, with remarkable ease and efficiency. In English, as in ASL, it is quite easy to specify a time in the past or in the future, such as "this afternoon," "next Tuesday," "10 years ago." Abstract concepts such as "unfairness" and "freedom," emotions such as "rage" and "lust" are as easily communicated in signs as in words. People of the same language community recognize their language's symbols and come to the same conclusion. Although languages' symbols can be used to describe every idea, feeling, and object known to man, in different languages, certain ideas may require the use of more than one word or sign to adequately convey a concept. As a real language, ASL has the same capacity to describe physical reality as well as hypothetical abstractions, and ASL users can discuss the tangible and the intangible, real and imaginary, concrete and fantastical, just like the users of any other language.

It is important to note that ASL was developed by Deaf people themselves when the American Deaf community was initially organized with the establishment of the first school for the deaf in Hartford, Connecticut, in 1817. Prior to 1817, indigenous sign systems were in use in various deaf communities, such as

that found on Martha's Vineyard (Groce, 1985). These indigenous signs, combined with the French Sign Language imported by Laurent Clerc, evolved over the years to become a rich, complete, and independent language (Lucas et al., 2003; Singleton & Tittle, 2000; Van Cleve & Crouch, 1989). The phonological, morphological, and syntactic aspects of ASL all conform to the visual properties and requirements that make the language effortless and practical for Deaf people to use. Like all languages, ASL continues to evolve, to become even more efficient, and add terms for new innovations. It is for this reason that ASL, just like spoken English, does not always resemble the language used 100 years ago. For example, in ASL, the location of the sign HELP has changed over the years. Previously, the sign was made at the elbow, but it has now shifted to the more centralized placement on the hand. This phenomenon of language shift is common in spoken language as well (e.g., the English word "can't" is more often used in everyday speech than, "cannot" and the phrase, "God be with you" has morphed into "good-bye," for ease of production). Interestingly, the ASL sign HELP traces its roots to the corresponding sign AIDER in French Sign Language (LSF). HELP and AIDER used to be produced identically, but while ASL HELP has moved its location to the body's center, LSF AIDER has kept its location at the elbow.

All these point to the fact that ASL is not a crude form of communication, nor is it a substandard language with limitations in its power to articulate thoughts, ideas, and feelings. Rather, ASL, like any language, has the capacity to meet the needs of its linguistic community in expressing specific thoughts, ideas, and feelings, as well as abstract concepts.

LANGUAGE, IDENTITY, AND CULTURE

As is true for cultural groups from small tribes to huge nations, language is intertwined with identity. For this reason, it is impossible to separate language from culture, as the elements of a language reflect the values of the community. American Sign Language is an unmistakable marker of the Deaf community (Hoffmeister, 1990; Lane et al., 2011). One example of the cultural significance held by language is its focal vocabulary, which is "a specialized set of terms and distinctions that is particularly important to a certain group" (retrieved on Nov. 27, 2010, <http://www.encyclo.co.uk/define/Focal%20vocabulary>). The focal vocabulary of ASL abounds with signs referring to the Deaf experience (Bienvenu, 2008). There are specific signs for at least a dozen types of deaf people, identifying their affiliation with the Deaf community and identity



Deaf



Hearing person



Deaf with a hearing attitude



Signer

Similarly, there are specific ASL signs for many kinds of hearing people who are involved in the Deaf community, signaling the level of respect these individuals have garnered from Deaf people.

This is not unlike the banks of lexical items that have been developed within the gay community, African American community, Jewish community, and other communities that describe outsiders or those who are perceived to be oppressors, as compared to those who are well-respected and trusted by community members. Similarly, the focal vocabulary reflects the living conditions of the community (Miller, 1999). For example, American English contains scores of words relating to cars and money—not surprisingly, as these items seem to carry great value in our culture. Likewise, the Nuer language in East Africa has dozens of terms for cattle because of the importance of cattle in their lives. For Deaf people, the vocabulary of ASL is rich in descriptors relating to the Deaf experience, with many signs having no simple equivalent or translation in English. Conversely, there are relatively few music-related signs in ASL. For instance, one ASL sign is used to refer to

the terms music, song, sing, and concert. To view examples of focal vocabulary in ASL, please go to www.americandeafculture.com.



Hearing person who signs like deaf people

ANALYZING LANGUAGES

There are two basic approaches to analyzing languages and understanding the ways they are used by members of their linguistic communities. These approaches focus on the prescriptive or descriptive rules of language (Hoff, 2008; Valli & Lucas, 2000). The prescriptive approach examines the rules of the language in the way an instructor or language book might teach its grammar. In this sense, the rules of a language are explained according to someone's idea of correct form and usage. The rules of "pure ASL" can be specified to describe the way it should be presented. Since grammatical rules can be explicitly stated, departing from these rules would make the usage "ungrammatical."

However, not everyone uses a language according to prescriptive standards. For instance, in spoken English, the colloquial use of the term, "I dunno" is commonly heard instead of the more grammatically correct construction "I don't know." Descriptively, some of these variations can be attributed to regional differences, or to the educational background or age and ethnicity of the language user. In the case of ASL, factors such as a person's educational background (whether he or she was taught orally or in ASL or in a variation of Signed English), his or her inclination to think in ASL or English, and parental hearing status can all influence sign production. For these reasons, actual ASL usage does not always conform to its prescriptive rules.

Prescriptive Rules of American Sign Language

From a prescriptive perspective, ASL can be examined at all levels of linguistic analysis: phonology, morphology, syntax, and discourse. Each level will be discussed in detail below.

At the phonological level for spoken languages, words are divided into their smallest contrastive units. This is done to identify and distinguish the sounds distinctive to each language. For example, in English, a certain set of sounds (vowels and consonants) is used, and there are prescriptive rules about which sounds can

go together, whereas other languages contain a different set of sounds, such as clicks and guttural rolled r's.

Similarly, in signed languages, signs can be divided into their smallest contrastive units along four parameters: *handshapes*, *locations*, *movements*, and *palm orientation*. The set of handshapes used in ASL is rather extensive. Yet, there are certain handshapes that are not employed in ASL but are commonly used in other signed languages throughout the world. For instance, the extended middle finger handshape is not used for any signs in ASL, since it is perceived as an insulting gesture in American culture. By contrast, the extended middle finger handshape is used in Japanese Sign Language, Hong Kong Sign Language, and many other signed languages. Conversely, the ASL "T" handshape, where the thumb peeks out between the first and second fingers of a closed fist is commonly used in ASL but not utilized in the sign languages of France, Japan, Philippines, Costa Rica, and many other countries where that gesture is considered obscene.

The second parameter, location, refers to the places on the face or body, or in space where signs are produced. The ability to produce signs on many different locations leads to a rule concerning signs made with either one or two hands. The farther away from the eyes that a sign is located, the more likely it is that two hands will be required. This rule makes it easier for the eyes to capture the handshapes used to produce the sign.

The third parameter, movement, includes an array of specific movements that are used to produce signs. The predominance of certain movement patterns, such as the downward movement and circular movement used in ASL signs, can be analyzed and allows for comparison with other signed languages throughout the world. In fact, movement is so significant an inflector that the same sign produced with different movements can convey a range of meanings (e.g., sick, very sick, chronically sick, repeatedly sick). Such movements can be considered adverbial aspects in ASL.

Palm orientation is another parameter that indicates how a sign should be produced. The orientation of the palm of the hand, whether it is upward, sideways, or downward, is an important aspect of constructing a sign. In many cases, the orientation of the palm establishes the relationship of the speaker to the person(s) addressed, with palm orientation toward the speaker's body signifying relationship to self, such as MINE or OUR, whereas palm orientation away from the body demonstrates relationship to others, such as YOUR or THEIR.

Some linguists, such as [Valli and Lucas \(2000\)](#), have proposed that nonmanual signals constitute the fifth parameter of the language. As such, some ASL signs require the incorporation of nonmanual markers such as facial expressions including specific movements of the eyes, eyebrows, lips, and/or body language, including head tilts and nods, shoulder movements, and many other possibilities. The repertoire of acceptable facial expressions and specific body movement varies from one signed language to another, making it a fascinating unit in the analysis and comparison of signed languages.

Another level of linguistic analysis is an examination of the morphemes that exist in a language. A *morpheme* is the smallest meaningful unit of a word or sign, whether it be spoken, written, or signed. When looking at an English word, it is possible to determine whether or not it contains more than one meaning by counting the morphemes. For example, the word "disappear" signals two different pieces of information or morphemes; the prefix "dis" communicates "not" or the opposite of the root word "appear." By contrast, in the word "disappoint," there is only one morpheme and, in this example, "dis" does not carry the meaning of "not." Similarly, by adding "s" to the end of an English word, an additional piece of information is often

provided, making it a two-morpheme word. Nouns with “s” at the end of the word signal plurality (e.g., dog/dogs). Yet, when you add “s” to a verb, it signals that the verb is attributed to a singular person (walk/walks). It is also possible to determine whether a word is a noun, verb, adjective, or adverb by observing the suffix. For instance, adding -ly to an English word usually signals that the word is an adverb. Similarly, adding -ed to an English word communicates the past tense of a verb (laugh/laughed). “dis,” “s,” “-ly,” and “-ed” are all morphemes that provide additional information about a word and its meaning.

Morphemes also exist in ASL. One example of the morphological aspect of ASL is the numbers incorporated into certain noun signs. It is possible to quantify an ASL noun using only one sign (e.g., 3-WEEKS, 2-PERSONS, 6-YEARS-OLD), whereas two or more separate words are needed in English to express the same concept. Another example of morphemes in ASL is the noun-verb pairs, in which the signs are identical in handshape, location, and palm orientation, but differ only in the movement. The nouns are derived from verbs by repeating the movement. An example of a noun-verb pair is SIT, using one downward movement while a repeated up/down movements is used for the noun, CHAIR. Other noun-verb pairs include FLY/AIRPLANE, PRINT/NEWSPAPER, to OPEN A BOOK/BOOK, and PULL INTO A GARAGE/GARAGE.

Another aspect of morphological studies in ASL focuses on meanings that are conveyed through location. Identical signs that differ only by location communicate information in specific categories. For example, numerical signs produced at the chin location indicate the age of the person, whereas the same sign produced at the wrist location communicates time, and those made at the side of the forehead signal a monetary value of cents (so, the same “5 handshape” would mean 5 years old, 5:00, and 5 cents, made at the chin, wrist, and head, respectively). Other location morphemes can convey information regarding gender. For example, ASL signs produced at the forehead signal male relatives (e.g., FATHER, GRANDFATHER, MALE COUSIN, NEPHEW), whereas the same signs made at the chin location represent the female relatives (e.g., MOTHER, GRANDMOTHER, FEMALE COUSIN, NIECE). Interestingly, while these gender-specific locations around the head exist in ASL, they are not found in most other signed languages in the world. To view the discussion on morphemes in ASL, please go to www.americandeafculture.com.

Unlike the phonological and morphological levels where the basic construction of a single word or sign is the typical unit of study, at the *syntax* level, the focus of analysis shifts to sentences. The study of syntax examines word order and sentence types. Just like any language, syntax in ASL is rule-governed. In ASL, however, certain grammatical delineations are primarily produced through nonmanual markers, such as facial expressions. For example, the use of eyebrows signals the type of question being asked. By raising the eyebrows, a yes or no response is expected. By contrast, wh- questions (where, when, who, what, why), are accompanied by pulled-down eyebrows.

Although the word/sign order in ASL is not extremely rigid and allows for many possible combinations in constructing sentences, it is the accompanying nonmanual signals that make the order grammatical. Many sentences in ASL employ a “topic-comment” structure, in which the topic of the utterance is established first, and then a comment is made about it. The order of such ASL sentences would be object-subject-verb (OSV), following the rule of topicalization in which the topic is clearly stated at the beginning, accompanied by an appropriate nonmanual signal. For example, STORE, ME-GO NOW is a typical OSV sentence structure in ASL, with the grammatical features of the head leaning forward and raised eyebrow made with the sign,

STORE, and then head nod accompanying ME-GO NOW.

The *discourse* level of linguistic analysis focuses on the flow of communication. For example, how conversations begin and end, how turn-taking and interruption strategies are employed, and when the climax of a story is revealed. In spoken English, remarks often flow from the general to the specific. Listeners are used to a possible ambiguity of topic at the beginning of a conversation and understand that the point may be reserved until the last part of the narrative. Unlike spoken English, topicalization is an important element in ASL conversations. The topic is usually made clear by the speaker/signer at the beginning of a conversation to prevent potential misunderstanding. This is accomplished by a quick reply from the listener/receiver that the topic is understood before the conversation can proceed. Otherwise, the receiver of the conversation will indicate frustration or confusion as to what topic is being discussed. At the end of the conversation, the topic is usually reiterated to assure that the point has been clearly made. This process is often called the *diamond structure*, as opposed to the *funnel structure* that could represent the general-to-specific approach typical in English discourse.

Another aspect of discourse analysis involves turn-taking and interruption strategies. In ASL, these elements of conversation are dictated by the use of eye gaze, hands, and facial expressions, whereas tone of a voice serves this function in spoken English. All these conversational regulators function to ensure a smooth linguistic exchange between the parties involved in conversations.

Finally, the study of discourse analysis examines the range of registers in which languages are utilized to address the needs of specific audiences. For instance, intimate utterances exchanged by lovers are drastically different from formal presentations delivered by academicians. Although we know what characterizes Academic English, new findings associated with the linguistic and sociolinguistic features of Academic ASL are beginning to emerge (Harris, 2011; Ross & Berkowitz, 2008). Such findings include a clear diamond discourse structure, proper formation of signs, and reduced use of nonmanual markers, in addition to the use of an unmarked grammatical structure (S-V-0), the use of space for referential purposes, frequent use of fingerspelling and initialized signs, and deliberate use of pausing as a boundary marker. With the ever-expanding pool of Deaf scholars presenting academic work in ASL, the features of Academic ASL will become more delineated with further studies and analysis.

Descriptive Rules of American Sign Language

In contrast to prescriptive rules, descriptive rules of ASL focus on how the language is actually used by people. American Sign Language, like every language in the world, is used by a multitude of people, resulting in many variations. Historically, ASL was transmitted to generations through the residential school setting. Although most schools banned sign language in classrooms with young children from the late 1800s to the early 1970s, outside class, however, older students and Deaf counselors in the residential halls conversed with the children in ASL, serving as language models to the younger generations of deaf students. Today, with the decline in numbers of residential schools and the subsequent growth of mainstreamed programs utilizing Manually Coded English, many deaf children learn how to sign from parents, teachers, and interpreters who are often not fluent in ASL, instead of from Deaf adults. In addition, educational and communicative philosophies differ from school to school, and from region to region. As a result, variations in sign language usage have resulted from these differences (Lane et al., 2011; Lucas et al., 2003).

Since 1975, most deaf children have not been students at residential schools, but instead attend local public schools, only some of which have a specific program for deaf students. Due to the lack of Deaf adults in their environment, deaf students do not usually have access to strong ASL signing models. In addition, the 1970s saw a shift in many schools (both residential and day programs) from an oral instructional method to an English-based sign system (often called SEE or Signed English) with the goal of improving English language acquisition among deaf students (Bornstein, 1990; Branson & Miller, 2002; Marschark, 2007). As a result, the initial exposure to sign language for most deaf children since the 1970s has not been the full-fledged language of ASL, but rather one of the contrived systems (that mix English grammar with signs) used by the classroom teachers (Lane et al., 1996). Nevertheless, as part of Deaf people's journey toward the Deaf community, after leaving school, they usually seek out and gain exposure to Deaf elders, many of whom use ASL. These young adults begin to absorb ASL into their signing repertoire, but their fluency in ASL is often not at par with those who were exposed to ASL from an early age, such as the Deaf children born into Deaf families who learn ASL at home. As a result, language usage in the Deaf community is marked by a wide variety of signing, from a more English-based signing style to a more traditional ASL structure. All these variations call for a descriptive analysis of ASL, with a focus on how people actually use the language.

Because of the confusion regarding the role and influence of English in sign language usage, a continuum of sign language was proposed in 1980 (Baker & Cokely, 1980) to help better understand the variations. Although this model is perhaps outdated, it helps us examine the potential influence of English on ASL. American Sign Language is placed at the left end of the continuum, as a separate language without influence from English. The right end of the continuum features signing that follows English word order (either through Manually Coded English systems or the Rochester Method, where fingerspelling is used to spell out complete sentences in English). And then there is a wide zone in the middle where ASL and English are blended in different amounts to form what is commonly known as Pidgin Sign English. Pidgin languages emerge all over the world and are defined as "the attempts by the speakers of two different languages to communicate and that is primarily a simplified form of one of the languages, with a reduced vocabulary and grammatical structure and considerable variation in pronunciation" (retrieved August 12, 2012 from <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/pidgin?s=t>). Today, the ASL academic community prefers the term "Contact Signing" to describe the phenomenon of fluent ASL signers accommodating novice signers by shifting to more English-like signing. Similarly, many people who learn how to sign later in life are unable to leave behind the English grammar they grew up with when trying to produce signed utterances, resulting in "English-ly" signing style.

Because of the differing ways ASL is used in the Deaf community, Bragg (1990) developed a descriptive model illustrating these differences, including Englished ASL. Other categories in this model are Traditional ASL, Modern ASL, and Rarefied ASL. It is important to note that these variations are not based on prescriptive rules of language but rather constitute a description of how ASL is used by Deaf people today. In this model, Englished ASL is not to be confused with any variations of Signed English systems. In Englished ASL, ASL signs are presented in English word order incorporating ASL grammar through nonmanual markers. As mentioned previously, Signed English systems are not a language, in that the rules of sign usage are contrived. For example, ASL has a sign glossed "RUN," which refers to using the legs to move quickly through space. In some signed English systems, the same sign RUN would also be used in sentences to refer

to homonyms of the English word “run,” such as a run in one’s stocking or running for office, even though ASL possesses other conceptually accurate signs for each of those other English phrases. In addition, Signed English systems require the signers to use invented signs for gender-specific terms such as “HE” and “SHE,” and English suffixes like “-ING” and “-ED,” whereas Englished ASL simply utilizes traditional ASL signs in an English word order. Another aspect of the move to Signed English in the 1970s involved speaking and signing at the same time. This simultaneous use of two language systems is a difficult and awkward process and has been shown to produce unwieldy and often incomprehensible signed utterances. As young deaf people mature and become more assimilated into the Deaf community, they often reject the old school and parental insistence that speech must accompany signs. They begin to sign “more naturally” and more comfortably by dropping speech, resulting in a more traditional form of ASL. Bragg describes this signing style as Modern ASL, as it appears that the signing of a majority of young deaf people today is still heavily influenced by their Signed English background. By contrast, people who sign in a Traditional manner would show minimal influence from newer versions of signing and would approximate the signing style of older generations of signers. For instance, among older signers, very little mouthing and limited use of initialized signs are typical. Finally, Bragg gave the label Rarefied ASL to the type of signing that is poetic in quality. Rarefied ASL is often seen in stage performances. Such eloquent delivery requires careful planning and rehearsal of the way signs are to be presented, resulting in a vividly expressive presentation of ASL. The question as to whether Modern ASL or even Englished ASL can be labeled ASL has been debated among linguists and academicians, but is usually not a concern of average Deaf people. Descriptively speaking, Bragg’s categories are appropriate in describing the variations in ASL usage within the Deaf community. Prescriptively speaking, probably only Traditional ASL and Rarefied ASL can be classified as “proper” ASL. However, like all languages, ASL is evolving through usage—and even misuse—by newer members of the Deaf community (Hoffmeister, 1990). It remains to be seen whether Modern ASL becomes the standard way that ASL is used and described in the future.

Interestingly, many invented signs from the Signed English system have crept into ASL and become standardized in the Deaf community (Hoffmeister, 1990; Gamache, 2004). For example, in traditional ASL, there was only one sign representing the concept of group/community. The same sign (similar to the sign for CLASS) was used for family, group, department, team, office, association, league, and society, whereas in Signed English, different signs were contrived for each of these terms by taking the base sign, CLASS, and using the handshape that represents the first letter of these words. In this regard, the handshape “f” is used for FAMILY, the handshape “g” for GROUP, “d” for DEPARTMENT, and so on. This initialization of signs created an expanded vocabulary for the Deaf community and has since become an integral part of ASL. However, initialized signs for words related to STREET (such as street, avenue, road, way, pathway) have not been accepted by the Deaf community. Similarly, initialized signs for meat-related products (ham, pork, beef, etc.) have been completely rejected. The reasons why certain sets of initialized signs are accepted and used widely while others are completely rejected provides an interesting glimpse into the way ASL, just like any language, has naturally evolved over the years. One contributing factor in the use of initialized signs might be the growth of Academic ASL. Consequently, Academic ASL and the use of initialized signs are often used in academic environments, such as graduate schools, and in high-tech environments where there is a need to express specialized vocabulary (Ross & Berkowitz, 2008; Woodward, 1990).

Bilingualism Among Deaf People

As mentioned before, many Deaf people are bilingual because they live and interact among both deaf and hearing people. As briefly discussed in [Chapter 5](#), linguistic fluency among deaf people ranges from being fluent in both ASL and English to being semi-lingual, in which the deaf person has extremely limited linguistic skills in either language. [Dr. Kannapell \(1989\)](#) identified six linguistic variations among deaf people:

1. *ASL monolinguals*—Deaf people who are competent only in ASL.
2. *ASL dominant bilinguals*—Deaf people who have skills in both ASL and English but are more fluent in ASL.
3. *Balanced bilinguals*—Deaf people who are able to use both languages equally well.
4. *English dominant bilinguals*—Deaf people who are more fluent in English than ASL.
5. *English monolinguals*—Deaf people who have no knowledge of ASL and use English as their primary language.
6. *Semi-linguals*—Deaf people who have limited skills in both ASL and English.

As Americans, it can be assumed that almost all deaf people have some level of English fluency, whereas conversely, not all deaf people know ASL ([Burke, 2008](#)). Nevertheless, ASL has repeatedly been cited as a central icon of the Deaf community and the main reason for its existence. Because ASL was developed by Deaf people themselves and has evolved over the years, it is culturally bound to the Deaf community and has the power to express thoughts, feelings, and ideas that are critical to the Deaf existence.

Exactly how ASL is being used among Deaf people is of little concern to the majority of Deaf people. The same holds true for English usage among Americans, except for outspoken critics on both sides who decry the erosion of proper English and ASL. In light of this, the descriptive analysis of language usage among deaf people and English-speaking Americans demonstrates a wide range of linguistic fluency and variation. However, concern for the proper modeling and instruction of the language for both deaf and hearing children remains in the academic arena, and appropriately so. For this reason, prescriptive rules of language must be respected and taught in school; and for deaf children, fluency in both English and ASL should be the goal. To this end, many Deaf leaders advocate the bilingual model as the best solution to achieve this end, based on the historical success of achieving a high level of fluency in both ASL and English for Deaf children of Deaf parents as well as for Deaf children in bilingual programs.

This philosophy entails a formal and parallel curriculum in both ASL and English for all deaf children throughout their academic career. Just like hearing students who continue to take English classes from kindergarten to high school and even in college, deaf children also need equal exposure and attention to the language that is most accessible to them. Since ASL is attuned to visually oriented people, Deaf students are often able to master the language with ease. With a native-language command of ASL, it is theorized that Deaf children will be able to develop English skills with less difficulty. Some Deaf students will be comfortably bilingual in both ASL and English right from the start and continue to exhibit a strong command of both languages throughout their lives. For others, ASL will develop more quickly because of its visual properties, and, with ASL as a base, these students will eventually master English skills. For some, English will always be a “foreign” language because of the challenges in mastering its nuances. Regardless of the outcome, it is theorized that the century-old challenge of teaching English to deaf children is best

addressed through the bilingual approach (see [Marschark, 2007](#), for review; [Simms & Thumann, 2007](#)).

CONCLUSION

Whether as a teaching philosophy, a linguistic right, or simply a communication mode, ASL is considered to be the primary cultural marker of the Deaf community. Correspondingly, Deaf people have fought long and hard to ensure that deaf children have access to this historically created and most powerful solution for effective living. American Sign Language, even as it evolves over the years, continues to be the primary focal point of Deaf culture and the unifying element of the Deaf community and will continue to be the most visible marker of Deaf culture for years to come.

The Ballet of the Hands

by Lawrence R. Newman (1990)

Observe:

How fingers curl and paint
Until out of airy nothingness
Words and pictures leap and dance
With wondrous grace and beauty of design—
The ballet of the hands.

Reflect:

An open door, a ray of light
A history of struggle to survive
The choking confines of man's mind
Until thrives in home and meeting place
Hands that sculpt, talk and sing—
Our very own. O palpable air!

Think:

Motionless or fluid, curled or uncurled
One finger, one flick of the wrist,
One sweep of the hands speak volumes,
Evoke happiness or grief, stir minds
As if by some magic alchemy.
O for such a gift raise your eyes and praise.

Study:

The face complementary, alive
Vibrant the body, coiled or uncoiled
In muted chorus to the dancing hands
All converging in three dimensional grace.
O communication sure and joyous.

See:

The ballet of the hands,
How they portray
A falling leaf with a feathery touch,
The force and power of Thor's thunder,
The parade of history in one hour,
The soft beauty of confessed love,
The word of God ... O let us all praise
And in chorus sing a tableau of praise.

8 Deaf Lit



“ASL Book” by Shawn Richardson. Used with permission.

*Although it may come as a surprise to some, Deaf people can write! In spite of the challenges of developing English skills experienced by many deaf people, there are those who have not only mastered English but are able to produce masterpieces. A few Deaf authors have even been honored by being listed in *Who’s Who Among North American Writers* and the *Dictionary of American Biography*. Even more exciting and unique is Deaf culture’s unique brand of literary work—American Sign Language (ASL) literature. In this chapter, we will explore both categories of Deaf literature, work done in English and in ASL.*

With the recognition of ASL as a legitimate language comes the growing awareness of and appreciation for Deaf literature, more commonly known as “Deaf lit” in the Deaf community (Bauman, Nelson, & Rose, 2006; Christie & Wilkins, 1997; Peters 2000). No longer do people need to ask if there is such a thing as Deaf lit, as there is an expanding body of literature created and presented by the members of the Deaf community.

American literature has been described as a “smorgasbord that includes Native American literature, African American literature, Chinese American literature, and Hispanic literature” (Peters, 2000, p. 2). Deaf lit is also part of the mix while being, at the same time, a uniquely Deaf phenomenon. For this reason, Deaf lit needs to be viewed as a minority literature reflecting the experiences of people who live in two different worlds, the larger mainstream society and the smaller and often disenfranchised Deaf community. This two-world experience is typical for Deaf people, not to mention the other worlds to which they belong, such as their religious and ethnic communities.

Typically, literature has been regarded as a body of literary work in a printed form. (Brueggemann, 2009; Nelson, 2006; Peters, 2000). However, Deaf lit, similar to the Native American culture, relies heavily on the oral tradition—albeit through sign language—which is handed down through generations in a face-to-face manner with no written form. For this reason, Deaf lit needs to be embraced for what it is—a strong “oral”

tradition presented in a visual manner. Consequently, analysis of Deaf lit should be based on an entirely different criteria than that of general literature (Christie & Durr, 2012; Harmon, 2007; Nelson, 2006; Peters, 2001).

Thus far, however, there has been very little formal criticism or analysis of Deaf lit. Yet, as the field of Deaf lit has evolved and matured, there has been a parallel growth in the formal analysis of deaf people's work (Bauman et al., 2006; Brueggemann, 2009; Perlmutter, 2008; Peters, 2000; Roth, 1999; Sutton-Spence & Van der Hulst, 2001). As a result, Deaf lit is becoming increasingly sophisticated and its artists are creating higher quality work.

Deaf lit was described by Peters (2000) as "mixed, rebellious, and playful" (p. 12) in her book, *Deaf American Literature: From Carnival to the Canon*. She elaborated on the carnivalesque nature of Deaf lit, which includes "a mishmash of everything: ASL and English, ASL vernacular art forms and adaptations, orality and literacy, visibility and aurality, performance and literature, Deaf American and American" (p. 13). This carnivalesque nature of Deaf lit can convey a Deaf epic, or "a certain air of grandeur and sweeping drama" (Harmon, 2006, p. 171).

Therein lies the challenge. As opposed to reading a fine piece of literature in isolation, Deaf lit often requires a gathering place for the artistic work to be presented, shared, and enjoyed by others (Peters, 2000; Rose, 2006). Without such an audience, Peters (2000) claims that ASL literature cannot materialize.

Consequently, large gatherings of Deaf people are the "cornerstone of present-day Deaf Culture" (Peters, 2000, p. 32). Conventions, festivals, timberfests, school reunions, Deaf Way gatherings, Deaf expositions, academic conferences, bowling tournaments, and athletic competitions at the regional, national, and international levels draw great numbers of enthusiastic participants. At these assemblies, people reaffirm and celebrate their culture and language (Bahan, 2006; Lane, 2004). New contributions to Deaf lit are often shared at these gatherings.

The international week-long Deaf Way conferences in 1989 and again in 2002 are good examples, and these gatherings boasted hundreds of presentations, workshops, and performances and thousands of registrants coming from every continent. Deaflympics is another venue where thousands of Deaf spectators flock, not only to see Deaf elite sportsmen and women compete in athletic events, but also to attend cultural exhibitions where the latest work of Deaf lit are showcased. More recently, regional and national Deaf expositions, where Deaf-run businesses, religious organizations, and other organizations that cater to Deaf people are showcased, also have become popular forums in which Deaf lit is presented.

As is common in minority American literature, a major theme associated with Deaf lit is the attainment of a healthy, positive identity as a member of a minority group. In every Deaf performance, a set of shared cultural values is implicit in the use of ASL, with themes revolving around resistance to oppression by hearing people, as well as an affirmation of Deaf culture (Christie & Durr, 2012; Christie & Wilkins, 1997; Davidson, 2006; Padden, 2006; Stremlau, 2002).

For more than 200 years, this strong oral tradition has flourished, with narratives being passed down from generation to generation at deaf schools, Deaf clubs, and other gatherings. As Padden notes, "There are many reasons to group poetry, storytelling, and other kinds of signed performance together as a body of literature ... they share a certain aesthetic of celebration of the signed form, and collectively they touch on many of the same themes" (Padden, 2006, p. 235).

TWO VENUES OF DEAF LIT

Yet, the scope of Deaf lit is not limited to presentations in ASL. It also encompasses pieces written in English by Deaf individuals. Although English and ASL are essentially two completely different languages, reflecting two different experiences, the work of Deaf authors illustrates their “biculturalism, bilingualism and bicognitivism” (Brueggemann, 1995, p. 415). Deaf lit in English is thriving, along with a growing body of ASL literature formally published through the availability of technology such as video. Essentially, Deaf lit uniquely consists of two completely different forms, Deaf lit in written English and Deaf lit performed in ASL, both of which will be discussed in more detail below.

Deaf Lit in English

The bilingual existence of the Deaf community is evidenced by its strong literary tradition, with more than 500 documented magazines, newspapers, journals, and other publications over the years. This is in spite of the challenges associated with acquiring English skills for many deaf people. Interestingly, at least 60 of these publications included the word “Silent” in their banner, demonstrating the solidarity among Deaf individuals in their identity as signing people.

The origins of Deaf lit in the United States go back to 1837, when the first publication by Deaf people was founded (Gannon, 1981). At that time, Levi Backus became the first deaf editor of a mainstream newspaper when he took over the *Canajoharie Radian*, a weekly newspaper in upstate New York in 1837. He added a column consisting of news of interest to Deaf people in the area. He also distributed the *Radian* to Deaf readers throughout the state. Ten years later, in 1847, *American Annals of the Deaf* was established to disseminate information related to the achievements of Deaf people. This work has since become the official journal for a professional teaching organization, the Conference of American Instructors of the Deaf, and is recognized today as the longest continuous running educational journal of any kind in America.

Deaf Lit: Periodicals

Other “firsts” include the first periodical printed exclusively for Deaf people, *The Gallaudet Guide and Deaf-Mutes’ Companion*, which began publication in 1860, and the first weekly newspaper of the Deaf, *Deaf-Mutes’ Journal*, which ran from 1875 to 1951. In addition, the first literary magazine for the Deaf, *The Silent World*, began in 1871. It ceased after a 5-year run. The student newspaper of Gallaudet University had its beginnings in 1892, when the *Buff and Blue* was first published, and it continues to serve the college community today as an online newspaper.

These publications, along with others listed in the Periodicals of the Deaf Community table below, demonstrate the importance of information sharing among Deaf people in the form of periodicals.

Periodicals of the Deaf Community		
Name of Periodical	Year Started	Number of years
<i>The Gallaudet Guide and Deaf-Mutes’ Companion</i>	1860	2
<i>Deaf Mutes’ Journal</i>	1875	76
<i>Silent World</i>	1871	5

<i>Buff and Blue</i>	1892	Still in existence
<i>The Silent Worker</i>	1890	39
<i>The National Exponent</i>	1894	2
<i>The American Deaf Citizen</i>	1929	13
<i>The Modern Silents</i>	1937	2
<i>The Digest of the Deaf</i>	1938	2
<i>The Silent Cavalier</i>	1943	9
<i>Silent Worker/Deaf American/NADmag</i>	1948	Still in existence
<i>The Observer</i>	1952	4
<i>The Silent News</i>	1969	34
<i>Deaf Life</i>	1986	Still in existence
<i>SignNews</i>	2003	8
<i>Kiss Fist</i>	2008	Still in existence

In keeping with the core cultural values of self-determination and positive identity as Deaf individuals, many early articles demonstrated strong political leanings. Examples of such writings include a criticism of mainstreaming by George Wing in 1886 (“The Associative Feature in the Education of the Deaf”), and an assault on oralism by Amos Draper in 1895 (“The Attitude of the Adult Deaf Toward Pure Oralism”) and by Albert Ballin in 1931 (“The Graduate”). Concerns about the well-being of the Deaf community were expressed by authors such as H. M. Chamberlayne in 1859 (“Vagrancy Among Deaf-Mutes”) and (“The Habit of Being Prompt”), which was published in 1902 in *Deaf Mutes’ Journal*. Satires of how Deaf people were being misunderstood and inappropriately treated by the hearing public were also popular in those days, just as they are today. These pieces of work include a parody about hard of hearing people by Edmund Booth in 1877 (“Miss Martineau and Deaf Mutes”). A spoof on the government’s role in promoting oralism was written in 1921 by Warren Milton Smaltz (“The Fable of the Ass Who Was Taught to Whinny”). A semi-fictionalized autobiography was penned by Albert Ballin in 1930 to entertain readers, both deaf and hearing alike. *Deaf World: A Historical Reader and Primary Sourcebook* by Lois Bragg (2001) contains these collections and serves as an excellent resource for historical writings of Deaf people.

The political agenda of the Deaf community is still evident in contemporary periodicals. The National Association of the Deaf (NAD) provides a platform for the members of the Deaf community to express their thoughts and views on issues relevant to their lives through its periodical, *NADMag*, which is distributed six times each year. An independent publication, *Deaf Life*, comes in the form of a glossy monthly magazine. Prominent Deaf figures are spotlighted along with noteworthy events, both historical and current. Two popular weekly e-news publications, *Deaf Digest* (www.deafdigest.net) and *Deaf Weekly* (www.deafweekly.com), provide Deaf people with current news related to the Deaf community. *Kiss-Fist* is an independent, edgy, e-zine featuring photography, poetry, creative writing, and editorials done in a hip-hop style, targeting a younger generation of Deaf people (www.kist-fist.com).

Deaf Lit: Books

A strong literary tradition within the Deaf community was also noted by Gannon (1981) in his book, *Deaf Heritage*. Krentz (2000) reinforces this belief in his book, *A Mighty Change, An Anthology of Deaf American Writing, 1816–1864*, which contains speeches written by Laurent Clerc (1785–1869) along with his autobiography. Both Gannon and Krentz recognized James Nack (1809–1879) as the first deaf author to publish a book in this country. His book, *The Legend of the Rocks, and Other Poems*, published in 1827, was a collection of 68 poems written between the ages of 14 to 17 years. Since then, at least 20 books of poems written by deaf poets have been published.

One of the most prominent deaf poets was Howard Terry (1877–1964). He is listed in *Who's Who Among North American Writers* and had his piece, “The Hollow of the Moon” published on the front page of the *Los Angeles Sunday Magazine* in 1917. Laura Redden Searing was another well-regarded writer and poet. She wrote under the pseudonym of Howard Glyndon, and is recognized in the *Dictionary of American Biography*. Other early deaf writers whose works were published are listed in the Early works table.

Currently, there are at least 130 deaf-authored books on the market (Harris communication, retrieved March 4, 2010). They include autobiographies, biographies, poetry, sport chronicles, educational materials, novels, science fiction, anthologies, and sign language texts. Note that this list does not include over 100 hearing-authored novels with identified deaf characters (www.Amazon.Com retrieved on March 4, 2010; (<http://www.romantictimes.com/forum/viewtopic.php?t=8415> retrieved on March 3, 2010). Such books, including classics such as *Hunchback of Notre Dame* and *Catcher in the Rye*, are not considered part of Deaf lit because, as Rosen (2007) states, “In these literary works, deafness is in opposition to hearing and because of their lack of hearing, the deaf characters are isolated from society” (p. 352). This notion is based on hearing people’s perspective of sound, deafness, and deaf people. In contrast, “Deaf and hard-of-hearing writers create their states of being that are distinct from the isolated, lonely, angry, or quasihearing states of being devised by the mainstream writers.... There are two different states. One is the ‘hearing’ state of being and the other is the deafest state of being....a Deaf-centric, visual-based worldview whereby the entities, relationships, society, and environs are understood as governed by principles of visualism and signing-and-seeing practices of Deaf people” (Rosen, 2007, p. 553).

Early works

Author	Year	Name of the Publication
John Carlin	1847	<i>The Mute's Lament</i>
Adele M. Jewel	1859	<i>A Brief Narrative of the Life of Mrs. Adele M. Jewel (Being Deaf and Dumb)</i>
Mary Toles Peet	1903	<i>Verses</i>
Howard L. Terry	1929	<i>Sung in Silence</i>
Albert Ballin	1930	<i>A Deaf Mute Howls</i>
Earl Sollenberger	1939	<i>Along with Me</i>

Any analysis of contemporary writers must feature Leo Jacobs’ powerful piece, *A Deaf Adult Speaks Out*,

which was first published in 1974 by Gallaudet Press. This book is still being used in Deaf studies programs to help readers better understand the core values of self-determination and healthy identity formation that have been the rallying call for the Deaf community for generations.

The theme of a “Deaf utopia,” often playfully labeled as Eyeth (in contrast to EArth) is also evident in Deaf lit (Bragg, 2001; Krentz, 2000, Robinson, 2006; Rutherford, 1993). *Islay* by Douglas Bullard (1986) is recognized as the first full-length fiction written by a deaf person regarding Deaf culture. In this book, a Deaf world is presented in which being Deaf is the norm and sign language the main mode of communication. With the tables turned, hearing people are relegated to a minority status and are terribly misunderstood by the (Deaf) public. More recently, a novel entitled *Mindfield*, by John Egbert (2006) presented a world in turmoil when a terrorist group releases a deadly bacterial disease, spinal meningitis, that causes people to become deaf all over the world. In the end, Deaf people are seen as heroes with ready-made solutions for effective living. These books are good examples of the mindset of many Deaf people, who have no desire to become hearing but instead dream of a world where everybody is fortunate enough to be Deaf, making the world a better place for all citizens.

Raymond Luczak and Connie Briscoe are probably two of the most prolific deaf authors in recent years. Luczak’s published works strongly revolve around gay themes including: *Eyes of Desire: A Deaf Gay & Lesbian Reader* (1993), *St. Michael’s Fall: Poems* (1996), *This Way to the Acorns: Poems* (2002), *Snotty: A Comedy* (2004), *When I Am Dead: The Writings of George M. Teegarden* (2006), *Eyes of Desire 2: A Deaf GLBT Reader* (2007), *Assembly Required: Notes from a Deaf Gay Life* (2009), *Whispers of a Savage Sort and Other Plays About the Deaf American Experience* (2009), *Men with Their Hands: A Novel* (2009), and *Mute: Poems* (2010).

Although Luczak’s work focuses on the experiences of Deaf people, Briscoe’s does not. Her two books, *Sisters and Lovers* (1994) and *Big Girls Don’t Cry* (1996) made the best seller lists of the *Boston Globe*, *Boston Herald*, *Chicago Tribune*, *New York Times*, *Publishers Weekly*, *USA Today*, and *Washington Post*. Her more recent work includes *A Long Way from Home* (1999), *P.G. County* (2002), *Can’t Get Enough* (2005), *Sisters and Husbands* (2009), and *Money Can’t Buy Love* (2011).

Deaf Lit: Autobiographies

Autobiographies of deaf people reveal two different perspectives of deaf lives. One presents deafness as a major life obstacle to be overcome. The alternative experience presented in autobiographies showcases Deaf culture as a beautiful experience, in which Deaf essence is nurtured and celebrated.

The most visible and perhaps appealing pieces of work to the general public are what Couser (1997), an authority on autobiographies of disabled individuals, calls *autopathography*, in which disabled authors described in detail how they “overcame” their disabilities and learned to function or pass as normal persons. *Deafness: An Autobiography* by David Wright (1994), *Listening with My Heart* by Heather Whitestone (1996) and *What’s That Pig Outdoors? A Memoir of Deafness* by Henry Kisor (2010) are good examples of such books, in which the authors discussed how they were able to successfully compensate for their hearing loss throughout their lives, both personally and professionally, portraying themselves as underdogs triumphing over deafness. This has been likened to the “supercrip” genre, a somewhat derogatory term within the disabled community in which individuals who are unable to “overcome” their disability are put to shame. According to Couser (1997), most life-writers are white, highly educated, upper middle class, and employed in a

professional occupation where proficiency in writing is necessary. This profile holds true for most deaf autobiographers (Breivik, 2005; Brueggemann, 2007). In the works cited above, Kisor is a professional editor and Wright is an English professor and poet. Their stories do not resonate with the majority of Deaf individuals.

Indeed, autobiographies by Deaf individuals are far and few between. Breivik (2005), Brueggemann (2009), Couser (1997), Heuer (2007), and Stremlau (2007) attributed this to several factors. Couser likened the Deaf community to another collectivist-oriented community, Native Americans society, in which written autobiographies are also rare. In both Deaf and Native American communities, tales of personal triumphs, in which the individual rises above others, are frowned upon. Rather than demeaning their fellow citizens, stories of how individuals help preserve the integrity of their communities in the face of oppression are the most respected.

The second factor related to the scarcity of Deaf autobiographies relates to the marketing perspective. Conflicts, problems, and challenges represent niche book selling, especially when it comes to lives of disabled people (Couser, 1997). Heuer (2007) explained that the main conflict in their lives of many Deaf people is not necessarily their being deaf, but rather other major challenges such as molestation, alcoholism, or drug abuse, along with not being accepted by parents and the community. In this sense, the conflict is not an internal one, as in a struggle with being Deaf or Native American, but an external battle, as in being misunderstood and not accepted by the majority society as they try to deal with life challenges. In fact, many of these conflicts are often extremely personal in nature, in which the struggle is specifically with one's parents and their lack of acceptance of the individual in question (Breivik, 2005). This makes it extremely difficult and embarrassing for Deaf individuals to air out their dirty laundry for public view (Brueggemann, 2007; Stremlau, 2007). As in the Native American tradition, personal tales among Deaf people are typically kept within the community. Making these stories available in print, then, is more common for members of the majority culture, rather than for members of these two communities.

Nevertheless, Gallaudet University Press has established the Deaf Lives Series to provide a forum for deaf authors to pen their life stories. This series contains nine autobiographies and biographies, including two by Madan Vasishta. His first book, *Deaf in Delhi, A Memoir* (2006), traces his journey from the time he became deaf at 11 years old in India, a country where deaf people are viewed as “not really human” up to his arrival in Washington, D.C. to study at Gallaudet College. His second book, *Deaf in D.C., A Memoir* (2010) documents his life in the United States from his days as a college student to being a superintendent of several schools for the deaf to his present post as professor at Gallaudet University. Other books in this series include: *Deaf Lives in Contrast: Two Women's Stories* (2008) by Mary V. Rivers and Dvora Shurman; *Day by Day: The Chronicles of a Hard of Hearing Reporter* (2008) by Elizabeth Thompson; *Teaching from the Heart and Soul: The Robert F. Panara Story* (2007) by Harry G. Lang; *Neither-Nor A Young Australian's Experience with Deafness* (2007) by Paul Jacobs; *Deaf Women's Lives: Three Self-Portraits* (2005) by Bairy Cyrus, Eileen Katz, Celeste Cheyney, and Frances M. Parson; *Deaf Hearing Boy: A Memoir* (2004) by R. H. Miller, and *Alone in the Mainstream: A Deaf Woman Remembers* (2004) by Gina Oliva. Even though the Deaf Lives Series has made it possible for more autobiographies to be published in the past decade, the total number of published autobiographies by deaf authors is still comparatively small.

To promote additional autobiographies by deaf individuals, several projects have been undertaken to

document life testimonies in ASL. Self-narratives of 12 well-known Deaf figures are featured in the Deaf Culture Autobiographies and Lecture series. One of the featured narrators in this series is Nathie Marbury, a much loved and well-respected storyteller, poet, and scholar. Because of her legendary status in the Deaf community, Tactile Mind Press produced “Nathie: No Hand Me Downs,” a full-length autobiographical DVD in 2005. Brueggemann’s ASL Digital Media Project: An Edited Compilation of Performances is also an attempt to document autobiographies in the signed medium. The National Technical Institute for the Deaf’s growing collection of visual interviews is yet another effort to make available the lifestories in ASL through the web, <http://library.rit.edu/depts/archives/deafhistory/lifehistoriesproject.htm>.

Producing autobiographies in ASL is a valuable way to document the life stories of Deaf people, because even if a Deaf person is fluent in English, his or her innermost thoughts and feelings may be more freely expressed through ASL. This dilemma was faced by Bernard Bragg (1989), a world-renowned Deaf actor, when he was prompted to write an autobiography. Rather than being saddled by the constraints of English, he signed his life story to an English professor, who in turn, translated it into English. Interestingly, this English professor was also Deaf. Being bilingual himself, Bragg was able to participate in editing the professor’s work, thus maintaining full control of the process. His work represents a genre in which Deaf culture is celebrated, rather than treating deafness as a challenge to overcome.

In keeping with the collective nature of the Deaf culture, Bragg’s tale is not a story of his personal triumphs, but rather of the victories won on behalf of the Deaf community. In his introduction to the book, Harlan Lane explains, “*Lessons in Laughter* is about deaf culture and it is an artifact of deaf culture at the same time. Many of the recurrent themes addressed by deaf authors across the centuries, legends rooted in the deaf collective unconscious, are to be found here freshly presented” (p. x).

The recurrent themes that resonate with many Deaf people’s experiences include being misunderstood by hearing people, the futility of long years of trying to develop speech skills, the endless abuse by oral teachers, the false hope of hearing parents, the importance of sign language, the pranks made by deaf friends at school, and the fond memories of residential school experiences. Lane concludes his introduction to the book, “*Lessons in Laughter* is a cry of outrage at the crimes of the intolerant: the unwillingness of hearing people to allow deaf people self-determination; the recasting of deaf people’s difference as deviance; the fraud perpetrated by hearing people who claim to normalize deaf people; and the refusal of hearing society to acknowledge deaf language and culture” (p. xii). In this sense, Bragg’s triumph was in breaking down the attitudinal barrier imposed by hearing people; winning long-overdue respect, admiration, and understanding from hearing people; and making life better for fellow deaf persons. *Lessons in Laughter* is a rare publication in which the life experiences of a Deaf person are shared for public perusal. This book has since been made available in ASL through DVD.

Two other deaf public figures also worked with professional writers in preparing their autobiographies—I’ll Scream Later by Marlee Matlin (2009) and Listening with My Heart by Heather Whitestone (1996). Although their stories resemble each other in many ways, the authors presented their deaf experiences in completely different manners, as their “conflicts” were rooted on the opposite extremes of their deaf existence, with Matlin embracing Deaf culture and Whitestone viewing deafness as a disability to overcome. Both Heather Whitestone, who was crowned Miss America 1995, and Marlee Matlin, who was awarded the Oscar for Best Actress in 1986, were thrust into the spotlight and became public icons of the Deaf community. They

both struggled with the scope of this responsibility and resisted the burden of being a spokesperson for the Deaf community. Their upbringings were similar in that they both became deaf early in their lives, were provided opportunities to learn sign language and speak at an early age, and were mainstreamed all their lives. After experiencing harsh criticism from the Deaf community for misrepresenting them by not fully acknowledging the value of sign language, they both had to retreat and reexamine their personal identities as deaf individuals and their places in the world. From this difficult experience, they emerged as stronger people but with completely different outcomes. Heather Whitestone became an ambassador of the Alexander Graham Bell Association for the Deaf and was actively involved in promoting treatments for hearing disorders through her association with the National Institute of Health on Deafness and Other Communication Disorder, in addition to being a spokesperson for Cochlear Americas. In contrast, Marlee Matlin became an ambassador of the Deaf community by advocating for full access of public media, such as captioning on television, and eventually received an honorary degree from Gallaudet University for her dedication to and advocacy work on behalf of the Deaf community. In spite of the differences in their missions as ambassadors, they speak eloquently in their books about the difficulties of growing up deaf in hearing families and the loneliness of being the only deaf person in the entire family.

Such experiences are all too typical of deaf children. They are also described in detail in Oliva's book, (2004) *Alone in the Mainstream: A Deaf Woman Remembers Public School*. The author and the majority of 60 informants describe their introductions to the Deaf world as "Metdeafwow": No More Shame" (p. 107). Oliva describes this moment as a turning point in her life, when she learns, at 20 years old, a new way of living that results in her life becoming full, vibrant, and satisfying to the point where she could function to her full potential (p. xvii). Oliva elaborated on the importance of the Deaf community by stating, "Most people have little knowledge of deaf and hard of hearing children and the issues they face. Nor do they know about the Deaf community and the endless array of opportunities it offers regionally, nationally, and internationally ... Deaf and hard of hearing people face many of the same struggles faced by their predecessors of past centuries" (p. 3). She believes that by gaining awareness, her struggles could have been minimized. Her experiences could be described as a "Deafhood" journey.

The works of Oliva, Matlin, and Whitestone along with Sheridan (2001) and Drolsbaugh (2007), are reflective of the experiences of what Brueggemann (2004) calls "modern deaf and hard of hearing people" (p. xi). That is, most deaf and hard-of-hearing people today do not attend a deaf school or have access to the Deaf community until much later in their lives. In the introduction to her book, *Inner Lives of Deaf Children: Interviews & Analysis*, Sheridan (2001) recounts her personal experiences of coming of age with her Deaf identity. She explains, "Gallaudet was a major gateway for me. It was the pot of gold at the end of search for self, and it represented the beginning of the rest of my life. It was at Gallaudet that I discovered what it means to be deaf" (p. 7). She further explains that, "Many deaf adults have similar stories and share my love of Gallaudet and the Deaf community. But each deaf person is different" (p. 8). Sheridan attributes the need for published work devoted to the lifeworlds of deaf and hard-of-hearing children as the impetus for writing of her book.

In a similar vein, Drolsbaugh (2007) provided an opportunity for 50 individuals to share their autobiographical accounts of their experiences of being hard of hearing in his book, *On the Fence: The Hidden World of the Hard of Hearing*. In the introduction, he jokingly described himself as a recovering HOH (hard of

hearing) to illustrate the point that being on the fence between the Deaf and hearing worlds can be quite challenging, and he offered his book as a way to help fellow hard-of-hearing individuals. He also wrote an autobiography in 1997 entitled *Deaf Again*, in which he described the joys of finding deafness as opposed to overcoming deafness, having traveled on a journey as a hearing toddler born to Deaf parents to a hard-of-hearing child to a mainstreamed deaf adolescent to a culturally Deaf adult.

To address the paucity of published information on the lives of Black Deaf people during the era of segregation, Glenn Anderson produced a DVD and booklet entitled *Still I Rise: The Enduring Legacy of Black Deaf Arkansans Before and After Integration* in 2006. This valuable piece of work documents the memories and stories of Black Deaf Arkansans during the years of segregated schooling and the subsequent government-mandated integration in the 1960s, and provides information on historically created solutions on dealing with oppression and discrimination.

These autobiographies are especially critical today since most deaf children are mainstreamed and often deprived of solutions available from older and more experienced deaf and hard-of-hearing people. These books provide a valuable resource by sharing perspectives and strategies and letting deaf and hard-of-hearing children know that they are not alone in their experience of trying to make it in the world.

Deaf Lit: Special Interest Books

The many different segments of the Deaf community make it colorful and vibrant. Some Deaf authors have written about specific entities within the Deaf community. The Special interest books table below provides a sampling of special interest books that have been published.

<i>Special interest books</i>		
Title of Book	Deaf Author(s)	Year
<i>Black and Deaf: Are We That Different?</i>	E. Hairston & L. Smith	1983
<i>Deaf Women: Parade Through the Decades</i>	M. Holcomb & S. Wood	1989
<i>Deaf Sports</i>	D. Stewart	1991
<i>Eyes of Desire: A Deaf Gay & Lesbian Reader</i>	R. Luczak (Editor)	1993
<i>Silence of the Spheres: The Deaf Experience in the History of Science</i>	H. Lang	1994
<i>Sounds Like Home: Growing Up Black and Deaf in the South</i>	M. Wright	1999
<i>Deaf Artists in America</i>	D. Sonnenstrahl	2002
<i>Step into the Circle: The Heartbeat of American Indian, Alaska Native, and First Nations Deaf Communities</i>	D. Paris & S. Wood (Editors)	2002
<i>On the Fence: The Hidden World of the Hard of Hearing</i>	M. Drolsbaugh (Editor)	2007
<i>Silent Magic: Biographies of Deaf Magicians</i>	S. Carmel	2008
<i>Deaf American Poetry: An Anthology</i>	J. Clark (Editor)	2009

“The Deaf poet is no oxymoron, but one might think so, given the popular understanding that poetry has sound and voice at its heart” proclaimed [Clark \(2009, p. 1\)](#) in his book, *Deaf American Poetry: An Anthology*. Although “Deaf writer still seems something of an oddity in the deaf community” ([Stremlau, 2002, p. ix](#)), [Clark \(2006\)](#) retorted, “That deaf people can write is obvious, and equally acknowledged is the power of the written word in poetry” ([p. 3](#)). Despite challenges associated with the nuances of English and the perception that the world of deaf people is void of sounds, there have been a number of acclaimed deaf poets since the early 1800s. A poem by [Curtis Robbins \(2009\)](#), presented here, illuminates this question:

Deaf Poet or What?

They keep asking the same question:
Are you a Deaf poet
or
A poet who is Deaf?
I shudder at the question.
I can’t even think of a better way
to express the rhetoric.
I’m lost.
Did I mention anything otherwise?
Did I falter at my wordsmithing?
Did I recant from something so obvious?
Did I wreak poetic havoc?
Who am I?
or rather
What am I?
Do you sign?
or
Do you sing?
or
Do you truly hear such peripatetic words?
The matter doesn’t warrant an answer—
I am what you read.

The works of deaf poets have been compiled by several scholars, including [John Lee Clark \(2009\)](#) in his definitive anthology, *Deaf American Poetry: An Anthology*.

Books on Deaf poetry

Author/Editor	Year	Name of Publication
Robert Panara, Taras Denis, and James McFarlane	1960	<i>The Silent Muse</i>

Jill Jepson	1992 <i>No Walls of Stone: An Anthology of Literature by Deaf and Hard of Hearing Writers</i>
Christopher Krentz	2000 <i>A Mighty Change: An Anthology of Deaf American Writing, 1816–1864</i>
Tonya M. Stremlau	2002 <i>The Deaf Way II Anthology: A Literary Collection by Deaf and Hard of Hearing Writers</i>
John Lee Clark	2009 <i>Deaf American Poetry: An Anthology</i>

The five books listed in the Books on Deaf poetry table above contain the best and most representative work by deaf and hard-of-hearing writers over the years. Although the selections were limited, in books by [Clark \(2009\)](#), [Krentz \(2000\)](#), [Panara et al. \(1960\)](#), and [Stremlau \(2002\)](#), to those who identified primarily with the signing community, [Jepson \(1992\)](#) was broader in her selection and included poets who were not involved in the Deaf community and did not use sign language but were deaf nevertheless.

Regardless of the presence or absence of sign language in their lives, many poetic pieces include “the profound impact of deafness on the individual’s place in society ... little to do with the inability to hear but much to do with the marginal and stigmatized position of deaf people in an unaccommodating and aggressively hearing world” ([Jepson, 1992](#), p. 6). [Stremlau \(2002, p. xi\)](#) explained how deaf writers “have many different things to say about life as a deaf person, yet their experiences are common to deaf people everywhere.” [Clark \(2009\)](#) expanded on this by discussing how “Poems tell the story of the signing community’s development and how Deaf people struggled against oppressive forces to discover more about themselves and to celebrate who they are” (p. xiii). [Jepson \(1992, p. 1\)](#) summarized the importance of Deaf lit by stating “Literature is a rich and yet untapped source of information about how people perceive the world” (p. 1). [Jepson](#) further asserted that Deaf lit could “serve as a doorway into the world of deafness ... a glimpse into the perceptions, experiences, and ideas of people living with deafness or hearing loss” (p. 1).

[Krentz \(2000\)](#) also discusses the knowledge gained through Deaf lit, “They give us a direct glimpse of the experiences, attitudes, and rhetoric of deaf Americans” (p. xii). He continued, “While some deaf writers sometimes reify traditional constructions of deafness, they also challenge such interpretations” (p. xxvi). [Stremlau \(2002\)](#) elaborated on this point by explaining, “The authenticity with which deaf writers portray the deaf experience makes reading them an ideal way for hearing people to develop a better understanding of what it is like to be deaf.” (p. xi). In this sense, many poets expound the advantages of being Deaf and describe the Deaf experience as a source of pride. “[M]any deaf poets value their deafness. They had long known that there was something beyond sound from which they could create poetry. Indeed, almost every other book in English produced by a deaf poet since the middle of the nineteenth century quotes John Keats: Heard Melodies are sweet, but those unheard are sweeter” ([Clark, 2006](#), p. 6).

[Rosen \(2007\)](#) examines the representations of sound in Deaf lit where Deaf poets “assign sound with different representations” (p. 553). He identifies several themes in the work of Deaf writers. They included the importance of eyes and hands in the lives of Deaf people, since their hands do the speaking and eyes do the hearing. He also noted a pattern associated with the role of acoustics in their lives, both literally and figuratively. Some writers lament the absence of sounds or express confusion at living in a world full of sounds

that they do not perceive. By contrast, Deaf poets often use colors, symmetry, and rhythm as visual representations of sound. In fact, some writers equated sound to a form of feeling, as in feeling God's love or feeling music. All these point to the sentiment that Deaf people experience a rhythm of life that may be distinct from that perceived by those who can hear.

Given the challenges of becoming fluent in English among those who do not have access to hearing the language, it may be surprising to see a strong tradition of written poetry among Deaf people (Peters, 2000; Stremlau, 2002). For many deaf people, English resembles a foreign language, one that became clear only through years of sustained study (Krentz, 2000; Stremlau, 2002). Nevertheless, this tradition has continued today, with new pieces of work shared daily through the internet.

As ASL becomes increasingly accepted as an academic and artistic language, there has been a corresponding interest in and respect for poetry in the signed form. The burgeoning sphere of ASL poetry and ASL literature is discussed in the following section.

American Sign Language Literature

At last, ASL literature has come out of the closet! Prior to the recognition of ASL as a full-fledged language, ASL stories, poetry, riddles, and other aspects of Deaf folklore were limited to deaf clubs, deaf schools, and the homes of deaf people. Deaf people certainly did not see their language, culture, and folklore to be worthy of public view. In contrast, ASL literature today is being mass-produced, marketed, and disseminated on a wide basis, primarily due to the prevalence of ASL classes and the availability of video technology.

Although ASL literature, which focuses on work created and/or presented in ASL, is an important component of Deaf lit, its formal analysis is often limited for several reasons. One is that the meaning of the work is often lost in the translation from ASL to English, making it difficult to compare the quality of ASL works to those in print. A second challenge associated with the study of and appreciation of ASL literature is the overemphasis placed on the linguistic analysis of the ASL work, as opposed to viewing the literature for what it is (Brueggemann, 2009). Third, much of the historical work of ASL literature was lost due to the unavailability of video technology in the early days, making it difficult to trace the evolution of ASL literature.

Fortunately, thanks to the NAD's concern about the future of ASL, Deaf people raised \$5,000 in the early 1900s, a huge sum in those days, to finance a project to film and document presentations and performances made by master ASL users (Bragg, 2001; Schuchman, 2004). Other filmmakers, such as Charles Krauel, recorded deaf people's narratives in ASL during the 1930s. Clearly, they recognized the value of film as a medium for Deaf people. Today, these films serve as the sole and earliest documentation of ASL literature, with several genres represented. The films include poetry performance in translation, personal narrative, dramatic skit, and presentations.

The political agenda of the time is also clearly evident through the explicit messages in these filmed presentations. For instance, "The Preservation of the Sign Language," by George W. Veditz, NAD President 1910, implored people to protect and preserve the beautiful signed language of Deaf people. In this way, Deaf lit generally, and ASL literature specifically, reflect, and at the same time, support the core values of Deaf culture—self-determination, healthy self-identity, information sharing, and full access to communication and language.

ASL Literature: Storytelling

As is true for almost all cultural groups, there is a strong folk tradition of storytelling in the Deaf community (Carmel, 1998; Perlmutter, 2008; Rangel, 1999). Rutherford (1993), an authority on Deaf folklore, explains, “The American Deaf community has a rich folkloristic tradition, which serves American Deaf people the same as any folk group’s traditions do. It entertains and amuses, educates and builds competencies, establishes and maintains identity, validates and regulates conformity of the group” (p. 141). Bahan (2006) expands on this point, “Storytellers also teach Deaf people by giving them a sense of identity and a sense of belonging as well as providing ways of interpreting and comprehending the world collectively, thereby perpetuating the survival of their culture” (p. 26). Coleman and Jankowski (1994) found that stories told by Deaf people “have been used to affirm the culture and identity of Deaf individuals. Such stories often teach Deaf people how to resist obstacles in the environment; how to take risks that may be beneficial to their intellectual, cultural, and psychological growth, and how to develop their imaginations and creativity” (p. 57).

Similar to the written stories previously discussed, themes in ASL stories revolve around the survival mechanisms of deaf people. They include the discovery of a Deaf community and, subsequently, the development of a positive identity; ridiculing the ignorant hearing person; and ASL saving the day (Davidson, 2008; Rutherford, 1993). Deaf people are known for their powerful stories of how the discovery of the Deaf community becomes a defining moment in their lives. More specifically, meeting the first Deaf person, going to a deaf school for the first time, discovering an element of the Deaf community, learning how to sign for the first time, making the first Deaf friend, and gaining information through an interpreter for the first time are all examples of how liberation plays an important part in a deaf individual’s journey toward a comfortable existence as a deaf person. In fact, Breivik (2005) explains that, “solutions are hard to find. The lived lives and stories of deaf people ...suggests ways out of this conceptual mess” (p. 202). Clearly, these stories, as is true for written stories by Deaf authors, serve as lessons for less experienced members of the Deaf community and help encourage them in their own liberation journeys.

The second theme of storytelling common in Deaf folklore is typically known in the Deaf community as “zapping” hearing people or putting them in their place. In these narratives, Deaf people reenact situations in which they come out victorious in their encounters with ignorant hearing people. In these narratives, Deaf people triumph against oppressive actions of hearing people who minimize their capabilities, who place obstacle after obstacle against their desire to succeed, and who create isolating environments for them. The overriding theme of these storytelling sessions—making fun at the expense of hearing people—allows Deaf people to feel good in the end.

AUTHOR’S ANECDOTE: THE LAST LAUGH

All my life, I’ve heard countless stories told by my Deaf parents, grandparents, and their friends about ingenious ways to deal with ignorant hearing people. Almost always, Deaf people come out victorious in these encounters, and hearing people are put in their place. Because of the solutions made available through these stories, I’ve been able to effectively handle practically any situation throughout my life. “The Last Laugh” (which follows) is a good example of this type of story.

At a local bar, a bunch of Deaf people are seated at a table signing away and having a great time. At a nearby table, a group of drunken hearing men start to make fun of them by mimicking their signing and animated facial expressions. Furious, the Deaf patrons try to decide how to deal with this injustice when, all of sudden, one man suddenly gets up and tells his fellow Deaf friends that he will take care of the problem. Anticipating the worst, all his friends tell him to sit down so as not to make matters worse. Spurning their request, he walks very slowly to the other end of the room, passing closely by the hearing men’s table to make sure he has the attention of the drunkards. When he

gets to the phone booth, which is in clear view, he carefully inserts coins into the pay phone and proceeds to have an animated, signed conversation through the earpiece. To make it more dramatic, he waves to his Deaf friends across the room several times to ask them few questions and then relays their answers in sign language to the phone. Upon the completion of the phone conversation, he walks slowly back to the table and tells his Deaf friends to follow him out of the bar. Stunned, they all do. Once outside, he directs them to the bar's window to observe the drunkards crowding around the phone trying to figure out how in the world a Deaf person could sign through a phone. Once it was clear that hearing patrons were duped, he bangs on the window gesturing, "dummy, dummy, dummy" and the Deaf group leaves the scene laughing. The hearing patrons were "zapped"!

Another popular theme describes encounters in which ASL proves to be a critical skill for Deaf people. Tales of warning a scuba partner underwater of an impending danger, communicating an urgent message with someone across the room, and not being affected by a noisy fan during an important lecture are all examples in which knowing ASL becomes a huge advantage. In these stories, hearing people are often left in a difficult situation and have to rely on Deaf people for assistance.

In addition to Deaf-related themes, many mainstream, English-based stories have been beautifully translated into ASL, taking advantage of its vernacular features such as role shifting, classifiers, close-shot, and other cinematic techniques that allow these stories to come alive (Bauman et al., 2006; Krentz, 2006; Radner & Carmel, 1981). Many of the classic children's stories, such as "Goldilocks and the Three Bears" and "Snow White and Seven Dwarves," have been vividly retold with creative use of a visual language.

In summary, ASL storytelling is an important part of Deaf culture. The stories told and retold by Deaf people create a bond, as the experiences related are often shared by all, thus making these stories even more entertaining. Radner and Carmel (1981) summarize this point, stating that, "the deaf assert to each other their own strengths and resourcefulness and achievements, laugh at situations in which the hearing turn out to be dependent, misunderstanding bumbler, and share rueful chuckles at the "hazards of deafness" (p. 22). Coleman and Jankowski (1994) also explained the importance of storytelling, "This growing sense of Deaf identity and Deaf pride—communicated in large measure through storytelling and folklore—is what empowers Deaf people to resist the oppression that also constantly affects them" (p. 60). In addition, the art form of the ASL narrative also allows these stories to come alive.

ASL Literature: Poetry/Songs

Like storytelling in ASL, many English poems and songs have been beautifully translated into ASL. Often, there are as many versions as there are possible translations of the same poem or song. For instance, the ASL version of "The Star Spangled Banner" can vary quite a lot, from a verbatim recitation of the song using ASL vocabulary in English order to a complete reinterpretation of the song following an ASL discourse structure without any specific references to the English composition. Also, whimsical poems such as "The Jabberwocky" have met their match in ASL by famous performers such as Eric Malzkuhn and Joe Velez. If anything, these nonsensical poems convey a little more meaning through their beautiful presentation in ASL.

"Sign play" refers to the linguistic creativity in ASL achieved through playful manipulation of signs (Rutherford, 1993). There is a long tradition of sign play within the deaf schools and deaf clubs, going back to the late 1800s, as evidenced by the existence of literary societies in these venues. However, it was not until the 1970s that people realized that these pieces of work really could be considered a poetic art. Padden (2006) attributed this new enlightenment to the formal recognition of ASL, "The naming of the language as

American Sign Language had a great deal to do with the beginnings of ASL poetry” (p. 236). In the past, it was simply the sign language. Correspondingly, the ASL sign today for “poem” resembles more closely to the sign for “expression.” In contrast, the old ASL sign for “poem” bears a resemblance to the sign for “music.”

After the recognition of and subsequent respect for ASL as a legitimate language, Clayton Valli was instrumental in applying this linguistic knowledge to ASL poetry by formalizing the analysis and criticism of sign play that had been so popular in the Deaf community for so many years (Sanford, 2006). As is true for all poems, some kind of pattern—such as rhyme, alliteration, or assonance—is required to make these works rhythmical. Such rhyme patterns can be found in ASL poetry through repetition in the areas of handshape, location, movement, palm orientation, and nonmanual signals (Valli, 1995).

The *handshape rhyme* is probably the most commonly used constraint in sign play productions. Stories or poems told using the handshape rhyme include:

- *Alphabetical handshape*: The poem/story is recited using the alphabetic handshapes starting with the handshape A, and ending with the handshape Z.
- *Numeral handshape*: The poem/story is recited using the number handshapes in a sequential order, 1 to 10, for example.
- *Particular handshape*: The poem/story is recited using only one or two handshapes.
- *Worded handshape*: The poem/story is recited by using the alphabetic handshapes that correspond with how the English word is spelled.

Examples of such sign play pieces are presented here, even though it is extremely difficult to translate ASL into English. As Clark (2009) rationalizes, “How could something be so beautiful and so powerful in its native airspace be harnessed on paper, in mere words?” (p. 178). This makes it difficult to present and discuss ASL poems in English. Nevertheless, an effort is made here to provide nonsigners with a glimpse into the astonishing world of ASL poetry.

The first example is an alphabetical handshape presentation. The story begins with a sign using the A handshape, followed by another sign using the B handshape, then the C handshape, and ending with a sign using the Z handshape, with all these handshapes telling one unified story in a poetic fashion. A classic presentation deals with a haunted house, starting with the A handshape to represent knocking on the door, B showing the door opening, C illuminating terrified eyes, ending with the Z handshape illustrating the frightened person running away.

A different variation of this poetic style is using the handshapes to represent the numbers in a sequential order to tell a story. As an example, an original poem, “Sweethearts in the Making” is presented using the handshapes 1 to 10. This ASL poem can be accessed at www.americandeafculture.com. To begin,

- The #1 handshape on both hands is used to signifying two individuals bumping into each other;
- The #2 handshape suggesting their eyes catching each other;
- The #3 handshape signing the feeling of awkwardness;
- The #4 handshape illuminating their eyelashes batting;
- The #5 handshape demonstrating a heart beating;
- The #6 handshape illustrating sweating on the face;
- The #7 handshape showing their eyes looking at each other sensually;

The #8 handshape presenting the like sign;
The #9 handshape symbolizing the okay gesture; and finally,
The #10 handshape denoting the sweetheart sign.

An English translation of “Sweethearts in the Making,” is provided here.

A chance encounter
Their Eyes Catching
Overcome with discomfiture
Gently Flirting
Full of fluster
Profusely Sweating
Becoming confident and sure
The feeling of love proclaiming
With a response of a yes with pleasure
Sweethearts in the making.

Yet another ASL poetry style utilizes only one particular handshape to tell the entire story. An example of this is using the #1 handshape. This original poem, entitled “Terribly Misunderstood,” which can be accessed at www.americandeafculture.com, is glossed below and then presented in English.

Left Hand #1: DEAF
Right Hand #1: HEARING
Both hands #1: MEET (in an uncomfortable fashion)
Left Hand #1: SNUB
Right Hand #1: SNUB
Left Hand #1: INSULT
Right Hand #1: INSULT
Left Hand #1: DRY (as in being jaded or fed-up)
Right Hand #1: DRY
Both Hands #1: WALK AWAY
Left Hand #1: THINK
Right Hand #1: THINK
Both hands #1: MEET (cautiously)
Both hands #1: TALK TALK
Both hands #1: DISCUSS DISCUSS
Left Hand #1: UNDERSTAND
Right Hand #1: UNDERSTAND
Both Hands #1: FRIENDS

Meeting for the first time, deaf and hearing
Snubbing and insulting each other
Getting tired of the situation and leave

Pondering what went awry
Getting back together to talk and discuss
Understanding each other better
Resulting in a new-found friendship

Yet another unique feature of ASL sign play is the handshape narrative, in which the verse is constructed out of a fingerspelled word. A classic example is taking the fingerspelled word, GOLF, and turning it into a poem by presenting the handshapes G as a tee; O, the ball; L, the putter hitting the ball; and finally, F, the ball taking off.

Another category of ASL literature, better known as *Deaf song* or *Deaf cheer*, deals with the movement parameter constraint, which makes it extremely rhythmical in a visual sense rather than being sound-based. In ASL, a one-two, one-two-three beat is common, as popularized by the Bison fight song of Gallaudet University, which was based on Dorothy Miles' original Bison song written in 1960. Both Miles' English version and the one, two, one-two-three adaption are presented below:

Dorothy Miles' Original Bison Song

Hail, hail, mighty Bison spirit! Hail to Gallaudet's flag. Its colors are buff and blue.
We challenge the four corners of the world. While we fight, aim, fight to pull our team through. Even though all along we are frustrated.
We are being beaten; we are losing. We wait. We wait. As the sun rises, we practice. The sun comes up, the sun goes down.
We practice. All night, all morning. It's time for the game.
Throw that whistle away. We hear nothing. Why? Why? We are deaf.
Our team, our big team cooperates. Rah, rah, rah, we support our team. We love our mighty Bison.
Up the proud Tower Clock pole is Gallaudet's flag. Its colors are what? Of course, buff and blue.

([http://library.gallaudet.edu/Library/Deaf_Research_Help/Frequently_Asked_Questions_\(FAQs\)/Gallaudet_](http://library.gallaudet.edu/Library/Deaf_Research_Help/Frequently_Asked_Questions_(FAQs)/Gallaudet_)

A video presentation of the Bison Fight song can be accessed at www.americandeafculture.com.

A condensed version of the Bison song with the one, two, one-two-three beat is presented here:

Hail to our mighty bisons!
Snort, Snort, SnortSnortSnort
Spirit! And hail to our Gallaudet flag, the Buff and Blue!
Clap, Clap, ClapClapClap
All our enemies are afraid of our Gallaudet men
Because our Gallaudet men give them ...
Damn, Damn! Hell, Hell, Hell!
Clap, Clap, ClapClapClap
(Padden & Humphries, 1988, p. 78–79)

This one two, one-two-three beat has been popular for a long time in the Deaf community as evidenced by Krauel's film showing deaf people in the 1930s presenting some of the finest literary work in ASL (Padden & Humphries, 1988; Perlmutter, 2008, p. 191). One example of such a presentation is given here:

Boat, Boat, Boat-Boat-Boat
Drink, Drink, Drink-Drink-Drink
Fun, Fun, Fun-Fun-Fun
Enjoy, Enjoy, Enjoy-Enjoy-Enjoy

ASL Lit: Poetry/Sign Play Today

American Sign Language poetry has come a long way, from the rite of passage of telling and retelling ABC and number stories in the form of sign play, to ASL songs presented behind the closed doors of deaf schools and clubs, to today's formal poetic presentations by Deaf poets. [Krentz \(2006\)](#) summarizes this well: "In the last fifty years, we have seen a gradual evolution in ASL poetry ...from ingenious signed renditions of well-known poems in English, such as Lewis Carroll's 'Jabberwocky' to original poems in ASL that make brilliant use of handshapes, rhythm, movement, and space" to "Deaf-related themes including the suppression of ASL and hearing parents' attitudes toward their deaf children" to "playful, circular poems that often blur the boundary between ASL, mime, and performance art" (p. 61). American Sign Language poetry has moved from "romantically conceived pure poetry to a hip street poetry of young ASL poets" ([Padden, 2006](#), p. 239). This shift can be seen in the pioneering work of Clayton Valli and Ella Mae Lentz to the modern-day creations of Peter Cook.

[Clark \(2009\)](#) attributed Valli's work with being "the first to develop a kind of taxonomy of ASL poetry, replete with its equivalents of the line, rhyme, and other parameters, and, unlike some others, his feet stayed on the same spot so the camera angle need not move at all, letting his hands write within the frames" (pp. 178–179). Valli's piece, "A Dandelion" was identified as "hands down, the signing community's best-loved American Sign Language (ASL) poem" ([Clark, 2009](#), p. 178). This ASL poem can be viewed at www.americandeafculture.com. An English translation was superbly crafted by [Raymond Luczak \(2007\)](#).

A Dandelion
Their yellows dotted the field,
their petals waving with the breezes.
An irritated man stared at them, snarling,
"Dandelions!" His hands pulled
some apart, and mowed the rest down
until the field was smoothed out
in green. The rain soon came
and went away; the sun sneaked in,
warming a seed in the soil.
The seed rose, enjoying all nature.
It waved, watching a bee
coming by with a greeting and
going away. Nights it closed
its petals, opening up again
in the morning. One day it turned
into white puffs, their whiskers

a halo, but it still moved with the breeze.
Its seedlings flew off in every direction.
Spotting its whiteness, the man,
enraged, spit out, "There!"
The brave white puff still waved,
still sending off its seedlings.
The man grabbed its stem and pulled out.
The white puff exploded, its seedlings
scattering everywhere on its own.

Lentz's masterpieces are contained in the DVD, "The Treasure: Poems by Ella Mae Lentz," which includes her classic work "Eye Music." The effect of her powerful work on the audience was described by Brueggemann (1999) as "entraptured with the simplicity, the lyrical unity, the flow and rhythm, the body metaphors, the expressions that occur all in this one-minute performance" (p. 211). One of her pieces can be viewed at www.americandeafculture.com.

The work of Peter Cook and his hearing partner Kenny Lerner, through the Flying Words Project, broke the mold by combining several vernacular Deaf traditions including mime, deaf ventriloquism, and storytelling with the use of sound, spoken words, dance, and collaboration (Cook & Lerner, 2008, p. 214). Although their works are sometimes described as performance art, they are included here in the discussion of ASL poetry. Their most powerful piece, "I'm Ordered Now to Talk" employs the "shock and awe" technique, in which viewers are uncomfortably thrust into the politics of the Deaf world and the harsh reality of the systematic oppression imposed on deaf people. In one part of this performance, Cook performs orally like a trained parrot, forcing the hearing audience to strain in trying to understand his mostly unintelligible speech while Lerner interprets with his rather poor ASL skills, making it equally difficult for Deaf patrons to follow. These conventions illustrate the injustice imposed on deaf people by the audist establishment. In addition to creating compelling pieces of work, they use a rather unorthodox way to make their work accessible to both deaf and hearing people. Instead of having Kenny speak the entire script, he provides guidance to the hearing patrons on what was happening on stage while Cook performs. At times, Kenny interprets. Other times, he simply points out (verbally) what's happening on the stage, or helps direct nonsigners' attention to specific aspects of Cook's visual performance (Davidson, 2006). A sample of their work can be viewed at www.americandeafculture.com.

As a result of the pioneering work of Valli, Lentz, and Cook, hundreds of Deaf people have been inspired to create their own artistic presentations in ASL. Deaf children are now encouraged to exercise their poetic creations in ASL.

Although many ASL poems contain political messages relevant to the world of Deaf people, "they are also aesthetic, crafted carefully, they appeal strongly to our intellect, senses, and emotions" (Brueggemann, 1999, p. 210). Clearly, "sign language poetry can develop a further sense of cultural and cognitive solidarity among deaf people" (Brueggemann, 1999, p. 231). Brueggemann (1999) expounds on the politics of signed performance in her book, *Lend Me Your Ear: Rhetorical Constructions of Deafness*, in which she expresses her belief that sign poetry has the potential of "changing hearing (dominant culture) notions of deafness,

language, poetry, persuasion and by also changing among deaf persons themselves, the notions of what deafness, language, poetry, and persuasion are, can be and do” (p. 227).

DEAF LIT: HUMOR

No study of literature would be complete without exploring the important role that humor plays in Deaf culture, as it does in the folklore of all cultures. It illuminates cultural essence by distinguishing insiders and outsiders, celebrates the uniqueness of community members’ experiences, and plays with the constraints of the language. Humor can also be used as a vehicle to influence community members’ behavior by poking fun at or ridiculing them when they do not follow societal norms (Bienvenu, 1994; Jacobowitz, 1996; Moore & Levitan, 2005; Rutherford, 1993; Sutton-Spence & Napoli, 2009).

In general, humor is a source of pleasurable fun. For Deaf people, humor in ASL also provides a special outlet, a welcome release from time spent in the world of hearing people, where communication is often difficult. Regrettably, much of the humor in a visually based sign language is challenging to translate into English and, therefore, like instances of humor in any foreign language, the point may be lost on people who are not fluent speakers. In addition, the subject matter of ASL humor often depicts core values and shared experiences in Deaf culture, which outsiders may not understand or appreciate. Nevertheless, because humor is an important part of Deaf culture, several types of Deaf humor are presented below.

Deaf people have their own singular brand of humor that can be grouped into four categories: Deaf-experience humor, Deaf culture humor, ASL humor, and visual humor. The first category revolves around common daily experiences of Deaf people living in a predominantly hearing world, as exemplified by Holcomb et al.’s (2011) book, *Deaf Culture: Our Way*. These funny narratives do not take the form of formal jokes but are akin to sharing humorous or embarrassing anecdotes that other Deaf people can relate to. Accounts may include strategies for figuring out when one’s name is called in the doctor’s waiting room or ordering drinks on an airplane, as well as the ever-popular tales of the mysterious world of bathroom sounds and other bodily noises. Other stories relate the uncanny ability of Deaf people to identify other deaf people in a public venue despite the lack of visible indicators such as sign language usage or hearing aids. Other popular tales satirize incompetent interpreters, arrogant oralists, and ignorant hearing people. Perhaps the most satisfying narratives, however, feature Deaf people overcoming whatever obstacles are in their path to emerge triumphant in the end (Bienvenu, 1994; Sutton-Spence & Napoli, 2009). The “Last Laugh,” as presented earlier in this chapter, in which hearing patrons in a bar were “zapped” is a good example of this kind of narrative.

The second category, Deaf culture humor, contains invented stories in a conventional joke form. An example of this traditional structure, in which the third iteration provides the punch line, is the following joke:

Three Deaf men, a Russian, a Cuban and an American, are traveling together on a train. First, in the spirit of international goodwill, the Russian man offers his bottle of vodka to his two traveling companions. After sharing a generous round of drinks, the Russian tosses the half-empty bottle of vodka out the window, with a gesture conveying, “There is plenty of vodka back home in Russia.” The Cuban, impressed with this show of gallantry, opens a box of cigars and passes it around to his two fellow travelers. After they each take one, the Cuban boldly throws the remaining cigars out the train window, indicating “There’s plenty more cigars back home.” Now the American is stumped, wondering how he can possibly top that spectacle. Just at that moment, though, an American Sign Language interpreter happens down the aisle and, seeing the three gentlemen signing, introduces herself. At this, the American Deaf man promptly grabs her and throws her out the window commenting, “We’ve got plenty of those back home.”

The third category is humor that depends on an intimate knowledge of ASL and often takes the form of sign play (Bienvenu, 1994; Rutherford, 1993; Sutton-Spence & Napoli, 2009). One variety of sign play takes a common sign and does something creative with it. For example, the sign for UNDERSTAND is usually made with an upward flick of the pointer finger at the temple. To play on this sign, the pinkie finger is used instead of the pointer finger to express minimal understanding, while using all five fingers indicates too much explanation as in “Enough! I understand already.” Another type of sign play is used to reinforce the cultural values of deaf people. This can take the form of ridiculing oralists or ex-oralists with an unflattering sign that exaggerates their excessive lip movements (Sutton-Spence & Napoli, 2009). To view this discussion on sign play in ASL, please go to www.americandeafculture.com.

Interestingly, there is a subcategory of sign play specifically meant for those who appreciate English sound-based humor. An example of this kind of play-on-sign uses the sign for MILK but moves it several times in front of the eyes, from one side of the face to the other while saying, “that’s the sign for pasteurized (past-your-eyes) milk.” This kind of sound-based humor is often appreciated more by hearing signers and not routinely shared between Deaf ASL users (Moore & Levitan, 2005).

The last category of Deaf humor takes advantage of the graphic visual properties of American Sign Language to make humorous stories even funnier. “Dirty jokes” are a classic example of this kind of humor, in which the body parts or intimate actions are explicitly portrayed. Other traditional uses of humor may not take the form of jokes, but render accurate or exaggerated visual descriptions, caricatures, or impersonations, or mockingly making fun of someone’s manners and/or communication style (Sutton-Spence & Napoli, 2009).

As is true in cross-cultural, cross-linguistic situations, it is often difficult to transfer humor from one community to another due to linguistic and cultural differences. As Bouchauveau (1994) explains, “Humor exists for deaf people. It’s undeniable. But note that it is nearly untranslatable: Words that should represent the translation of an image communicate nothing, and the comic aspect totally disappears; the reverse is also true, and it is useless to try to inspire laughter using interpretation—it would be meaningless. What is unique to sign language has nothing to do with words and thus is untranslatable” (p. 27).

CONCLUSION

For better or worse, Deaf lit in recent years has undergone a transformation due to two major influences—the digital age and the academization of ASL. In the past, prior to the formal recognition of ASL as a language and public awareness of ASL literature, Deaf lit was restricted to deaf gatherings, such as deaf clubs, deaf schools, and reunions. Such gatherings were out of sight of the public eye, making such work inaccessible to hearing people. Today, with the proliferation of video technology and web links, along with ASL classes, Deaf lit is now easily accessible to anyone who has any interest in the Deaf community or the language of Deaf people. Bauman (2006) described this new era as the “video period of ASL literature.”

Herein lies the dichotomy. The widespread availability of Deaf lit has resulted in what Krentz (2000) called the “dumbing down of ASL,” while, at the same time, it is subject to a higher level of criticism due to an elevated awareness of the language and expectations by the academic community. To illustrate, a quick look at the internet reveals the popularity of ASL, not only in the Deaf community, but to American society at large. For example, hundreds of songs signed in ASL are available on the web, most of which are presented

by hearing signers. Perhaps as a by-product of the spread of ASL classes, many attempts in ASL poetry are also presented on YouTube. This has led to Krentz's concern about the misuse and abuse of the language among these novice signers, as evidenced by the amateurish presentations available on the Web. However, all is not lost. With a growing market for ASL-related products, professionally made DVDs are being developed and mass marketed primarily for hearing consumers and deaf people interested in the language and culture of Deaf people. As a result, the best of ASL literature is also now available for public consumption. *The HeART of Deaf Culture* (2012) produced by Karen Christie and Patti Durr is an excellent example of such a production.

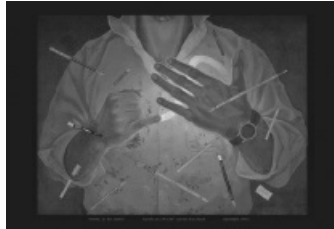
In addition, with the growth of Deaf studies as a field of academic study, comes an elevated level of criticism of Deaf lit. Consequently, many advancements have been made in recent years in the development, categorization, analysis, and presentation of ASL literature. This has resulted in a more sophisticated body of work from Deaf writers, poets, and presenters.

The Poetry of Motion

by Joseph Schuyler Long (1960)

In the poetry of motion there is music if one sees;
In the soaring birds above us there are moving symphonies.
There is music in the movement of a ship upon the wave
And the sunbeams dancing o'er it that the minstrels never gave.
There is music in the rhythm of the waving field of wheat,
In the swaying leaves on tree-tops, and the skip of dancing feet,
There are songs of gladness for us in the opening buds of spring,
And we understand the message that their fuller blossoms bring.
There is music in the motion of the yearly changing scene
As the seasons pass before us changing brown and white to green;
There are songs of rapture for us in the colors of the sky,
In the rainbow and the sunset and in cloud-ships floating by.
There is music in the mountains—in their grandeur as they rise
With their snow-capped summits keeping vigil in the hidden skies.
There is music in the rainfall, and the snowflakes coming down
Giving earth a white-robed mantle and the trees a silver crown.
Though we deaf can hear no music from the touch of vibrant strings,
In the harmony of motion there are songs that Nature sings.
And there's music all around us if we have the eyes to see,
And although we cannot hear it, we can feel its melody.

9 Deaf Art



“Art #2” by Chuck Baird. Used with permission.

The term “Deaf art” might conjure up the picture of a lone painter setting down the images of his or her immediate environment. Yet, as we will see, the world of Deaf art encompasses a multiplicity of media, philosophies, and expressions, as well as a unique way of experiencing the world. The rich heritage of Deaf artistic expression can be attributed to several factors that will be examined in this chapter. We also will explore various genres including visual art, performing arts, and visual media.

Creative work by deaf people in America enjoys a long history, emerging as early as the birth of our country (Lang & Meath-Lang, 1995; Lane, Hoffmeister & Bahan, 1996; Schertz & Lane, 1999; Sonnenstrahl, 2002)—or even before that, considering the possibility of creations by Native Deaf Americans. Among the art of marginalized groups, one can trace two different motifs. A theme of resistance is illustrated by artwork that reflects issues of oppression, identity formation, and political struggles. Another category can be termed “affirmative art,” in which creations by members of a disenfranchised group celebrate and highlight the positive aspects of their culture. Both categories are well represented in Deaf art in various genres.

VISUAL ART

One obvious consideration of Deaf art is that the fabrication of visual art does not require the use of spoken language, a strong academic foundation, or even literacy skills, thus making it possible for deaf artists from a variety of backgrounds to creatively excel. Many Deaf people possess a strong desire to convey their Deaf essence through the mode of visual expression, freed from linguistic constraints. Furthermore, art can provide an escape for those deaf people who live in impoverished communicative environments, surrounded by families, teachers, and co-workers with whom they can’t converse effectively. Finally, there might be a biological basis for deaf people to be attracted to the arts, as purported by several scholars such as Durr (1999) and Lane (2004). These factors are examined further below.

Biological Factor

As “people of the eye,” Deaf people are naturally attracted to the visual arts. Lane (2004) cites research findings in which signing people, regardless of their hearing status, were found to have superior visual

perception and processing, and implies that this may be an underlying reason for the accomplished work of deaf artists. Durr (1999) remarks that, “Deaf people have been noted for their gifted observatory skills” (p. 47), and adds that “their desire to communicate their experiences back to the world in a visually accessible manner” (p. 47) might explain the existence of a strong Deaf artist community.

Isolation Factor

Due to frustration with communication limitations at home and school, many Deaf artists have reported that they often turn to art as a vehicle through which to freely express their thoughts and feelings. Lane (2004) expands on this point, “Deaf Art communicates not the sensory experience of silence but rather the values of Deaf culture. These include the beauty of sign language and its painful oppression, the breakdown of family life when hearing parents cannot communicate in sign language, the joys of Deaf bonding, and the abuses of audiology and otology when the Deaf difference is treated as deviance. Deaf art often includes the expression of turning points in the artist’s acculturation to Deaf culture ...” (p. 119). In other words, art empowers Deaf artists to express their essence and the affirmation of their Deaf experience.

Deaf Essence Factor

This need to manifest one’s essence is not unique to Deaf people, as the cultures of many marginalized communities share a strong artistic component. Lane (2004) explains, “As with the art of other ethnic groups, Deaf Art reflects not only the individual perspective but also the universal experiences of an oppressed group” (p. 120). Deaf art has been likened to the work of other disenfranchised groups, who Durr (1999) states, “communicate their acts of resistance and affirmation via art Some important examples of disenfranchised art movements rest in the Chicano Art Movement, Harlem Renaissance, the Feminist Art Movement, Native American and Deaf View/Image Art. Within each of these movements there are ample examples of how individual artists have been called forth to give witness to a collective consciousness and perception of the other” (p. 48).

DIFFERING FOCI OF VISUAL DEAF ART

Whatever the reason behind the proliferation of Deaf artists, art plays a prominent role in Deaf culture. However, not all Deaf artists specifically deal with Deaf themes. Thus, Deaf art can be categorized into three distinct areas—general art, Deaf culture art, and art about the Deaf experience. The general art category includes pieces by deaf artists that do not contain any reference to the Deaf community or Deaf culture. Landscapes or portraits are good examples of this category. The Deaf culture art category includes work that may appear to be general at first glance, but which include specific details that carry special meanings only to those who are involved in the Deaf community. For instance, on the surface, a portrait of an old man or a painting of a historical building would not seem to indicate any connection to Deaf culture. Noting that the old man featured in the portrait is Laurent Clerc or the building is Gallaudet’s famed Tower Clock, however, would inspire excitement and discussion from those familiar with Deaf culture. Although creations in these two categories are an important part of Deaf culture, the third category, art about the Deaf experience, contains work in which artists explicitly express their feelings about, views of, and experiences associated with being Deaf. Since most Deaf people belatedly achieve a positive identity as Deaf individuals when they finally come into contact with the Deaf community, the common experience of these difficult journeys is the source

of many powerful depictions. Themes of being oppressed and isolated by their nonsigning families and educators are commonly portrayed in this category. On the positive side, the exhilaration of discovering the Deaf community, gaining access to a visual language, and becoming a member of a like-minded group also appear as frequent themes in this category of art about the Deaf experience, or De’VIA as it is called by the Deaf artist community. These three categories will be discussed in detail here, starting with art about the Deaf experience.

Art About the Deaf Experience or De’VIA

The Deaf art movement often revolves around the imagery of signing, handshapes, eyes, and cultural issues that were seen to be central to the Deaf artist’s work. In support of this movement, the concept of De’VIA (short for Deaf View/Image Art) was proposed by Deaf artists in 1989, at the Deaf Way festival in an effort to increase the visibility of and focus on the uniqueness of works by Deaf artists. Such presentations often include “Deaf metaphors, Deaf perspectives, and Deaf insight in relationships with the environment (both the natural world and Deaf cultural environment), spiritual and every-day life” (Sonnenstrahl, 2002, p. 304). The manifesto is presented in its entirety here:

De’VIA represents Deaf artists and perceptions based on their Deaf experiences. It uses formal art elements with the intention of expressing innate cultural or physical Deaf experience. These experiences may include Deaf metaphors, Deaf perspectives, and Deaf insight in relationship with the environment (both the natural world and Deaf cultural environment), spiritual and everyday life.

De’VIA can be identified by formal elements such as Deaf artists’ possible tendency to use contrasting colors and values, intense colors, contrasting textures. It may also most often include a centralized focus, with exaggeration or emphasis on facial features, especially eyes, mouths, ears, and hands. Currently, Deaf artists tend to work in human scale with these exaggerations, and not exaggerate the space around these elements.

There is a difference between Deaf artists and De’VIA. Deaf artists are those who use art in any form, media, or subject matter, and who are held to the same artistic standards as other artists. De’VIA is created when the artist intends to express their Deaf experience through visual art. De’VIA may also be created by deafened or hearing artists, if the intention is to create work that is born of their Deaf experience (a possible example would be a hearing child of Deaf parents). It is clearly possible for Deaf artists not to work in the area of De’VIA.

While applied and decorative arts may also use the qualities of De’VIA (high contrast, centralized focus, exaggeration of specific features), this manifesto is specifically written to cover the traditional fields of visual fine arts (painting, sculpture, drawing, photography, printmaking) as well as alternative media when used as fine arts such as fiber arts, ceramics, neon, and collage.

Themes associated with De’VIA were identified by Durr (2006) and are listed in the *Resistance vs. Affirmation De’VIA* table.

<i>Resistance vs. Affirmation De’VIA</i>	
Resistance De’VIA	Affirmation De’VIA

Audism	Empowerment
Oralism	ASL
Mainstreaming	Affiliation
Cochlear Implants	Acculturation
Identity Confusion	Acceptance
Eugenics	Deafhood

De'VIA: Resistance Art

Many De'VIA works can be categorized as resistance art. Again, this is not unlike art from many disenfranchised communities whose members have to deal with the same issues as Deaf people—namely, trying to achieve respect and acceptance for who they are. Resistance art is a relatively recent phenomenon in Deaf culture. Out of the 27 outstanding deaf artists featured in [Gannon's \(1981\) *Deaf Heritage*](#), only one, Betty Miller, made a political statement in her creations regarding the oppressive practices of hearing educators and families with deaf children. Because of her revolutionary work and advocacy of the deaf art movement, Betty Miller is considered the mother of De'VIA ([Durr, 2006](#); [Sonnenstrahl, 2002](#)).



“Ameslan Prohibited” by Betty Miller. Used with permission.

Miller’s pioneering and powerful images have encouraged Deaf people to come out of the closet and reveal their childhood experiences through art ([Durr, 1999](#); [Lane et al., 1996](#); [Schertz & Lane, 1999](#); [Sonnenstrahl, 2002](#)). Two of Miller’s pieces in [Gannon’s \(1981\)](#) book, “Education for the Deaf,” showing handcuffed deaf children and “Ameslan Prohibited,” depicting hands shackled and fingers chopped off, constitute a compelling denunciation of the oppressive and abusive practices of a deaf education system in which deaf students were routinely punished for their basic human drive to utilize an accessible communication system, in this case, sign language.



"Family Dog" by Susan Dupor. Used with permission.

By 2002, this genre of resistance art was well established, as evidenced by Sonnenstrahl's authoritative book on deaf artists, *Deaf Artists in America* (2002), featuring more than 60 artists from the Colonial era to recent years. The selection of artists was based on several factors, including the fact that they were deaf or had a hearing level that significantly departed from that of hearing people, lived in the United States when creating their work, and had public showings or had their work published in magazines or other publications.



"Freedom to Speak Out in ASL, No. 2," © Ann Silver, 1993. Used with permission.

The last chapter of her book, entitled "Art Imitates Deaf Life," features the works of 13 contemporary artists, including powerful pieces of resistance art by Susan Dupor, Ann Silver, and others. The painting, "Family Dog," by Susan Dupor exemplifies the typical childhood experience of deaf children who are relegated to the same status as a family dog—much loved and well fed, but not intimately involved in family affairs

Along the same line, "Freedom to Speak Out in ASL" by Ann Silver shows a deaf man in bondage against a background of U.S. postage stamps proclaiming "Freedom to Speak Out." Silver explains, "Oftentimes I've had to endure consequences whenever I object to what I find to be unethical, inhumane or unprofessional behavior. More frightening than having the freedom to speak out is not having the freedom to speak out" (as cited in [Sonnenstrahl, 2002](#), p. 328).

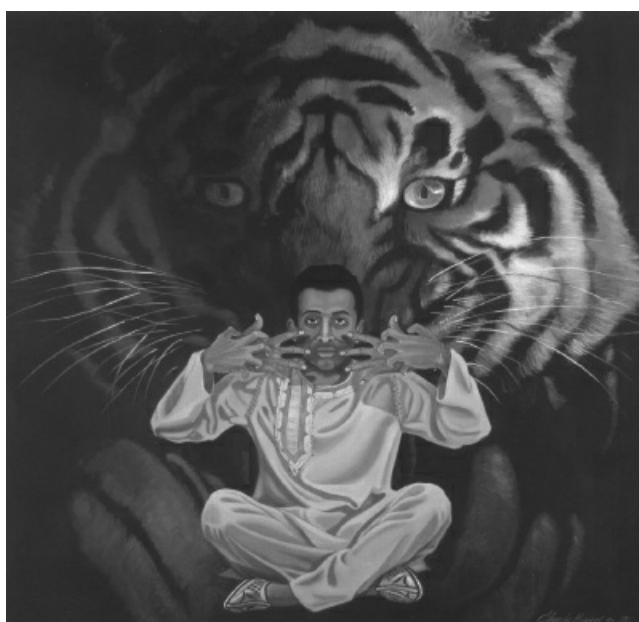
Starting with Betty Miller's work in 1971, resistance art remains an important part of Deaf art or De'VIA today. Many deaf people continue to struggle with a linguistically impoverished upbringing at home and at school thus precipitating new pieces of art that echo the cries of countless Deaf people for better living conditions for future generations of deaf children.

De'VIA: Affirmative Art

Clearly, the Deaf art movement is not just about Deaf people's struggle. In addition to portraying the

struggles associated with being misunderstood and neglected, De'VIA also projects scenes of happy and meaningful aspects of being Deaf that reaffirm the rich lives that many Deaf people enjoy. Chuck Baird is considered the most prolific practitioner in this genre of affirmative Deaf art ([Sonnenstrahl, 2002](#)).

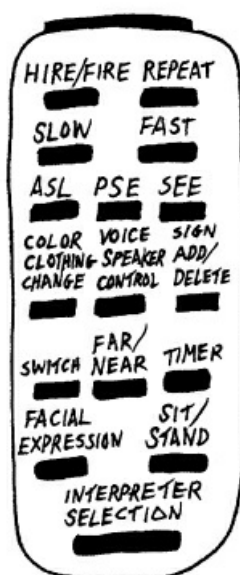
In his work, Baird cleverly incorporates ASL handshapes into the shapes of objects to which they refer. For instance, the sign TIGER uses a bent-fingers handshape depicting claws in an outward movement illustrating whiskers. In his painting, TYGER, TYGER, this sign is incorporated into the picture of a tiger. Another example is Baird's picture entitled "America," in which the stripes of the U.S. flag are incorporated into the sign for AMERICA. Baird's work exemplifies the spirit of De'VIA, in which the focus is on the Deaf experience in general and on sign language specifically. In the presentation of his work, handshapes are celebrated, as opposed to the negative emphasis apparent in the work of others ([Schertz & Lane, 1999](#)). [Sonnenstrahl \(1993\)](#), in the foreword to *Chuck Baird: 35 Plates*, describes Baird as one of the best-known artists in the Deaf community and comments that it is "refreshing to see the wit, humor, cleverness, and gentleness" in his work (p. vii).



"Tyger, Tyger" by Chuck Baird. Used with permission.

In a similar vein, several artists have contributed to this genre in the Deaf art movement by portraying in their illustrations of typical happy moments and/or humorous situations in the lives of Deaf people. For example, Richardson is known for capturing the idiosyncrasies of the Deaf community. His drawings depict typical aspects of Deaf people's lives, in which the use of sign language is central. Spoofs on certain cultural aspects of Deaf people, such as the desire to have an increased control of the quality of interpreters with whom they work, are also prominently represented in his work. Richardson's work is emblematic of Deaf people's ability to laugh at themselves and celebrate their Deaf essence.

INTERPRETER REMOTE CONTROL



SLP

© SHAWN RICHARDSON

"Interpreter Remote Control" by Shawn Richardson. Used with permission.

Deaf Culture Art

The second category, Deaf culture art, is well represented by the artists featured in Gannon's *Deaf Heritage* and Sonnenstrahl's *Deaf Artists in America*. These books highlight John Carlin's charcoal drawing and oil painting of Laurent Clerc, Eugene E. Hannan's sculpture of the Abbe de l'Epee, Felix Kowalewski's oil painting of Chapel Hall and busts of Thomas H. Gallaudet and Edward M. Gallaudet, and Douglas Tilden's sculpture of "The Bear Hunt." Although Tilden's sculpture "The Bear Hunt" does not have any direct link to the Deaf community, the work itself is familiar among many Deaf people as it is a permanent fixture on the campus of the California School for the Deaf at Fremont. Although the pieces listed above generate much excitement among those familiar with Deaf culture, their specific meanings are lost to those outside the culture.

General Art

On the other hand, much of the work by Deaf artists does not revolve around Deaf themes and therefore categorized as general art. This is not to say that these artists do not do any Deaf-themed work. Many of them do!

Some of the most outstanding Deaf artists as identified by [Gannon \(1981\)](#) are listed in the Deaf artists table below.

<i>Deaf artists</i>		
Artist	Category	Year
Hillis Arnold	Sculptor	1906–1988

David Bloch	Porcelain Artist and Woodcut Printmaker	1910–2002
Morris Broderson	Painter	1928–2011
John Brewster	Portraitist	1766–1854
John Carlin	Painter	1813–1891
John Clarke	Wood Carver	1881–1970
Theophilus d’Estrella	Art Instructor and Photographer	1851–1929
Robert J. Freiman	Painter	1917–1997
Louis Frisino	Wildlife Artist	1930
Eugene Hannan	Sculptor	1875–1945
Regina Olson Hughes	Illustrator	1895–1993
Felix Kowalewski	Artist and Teacher	1913–1989
Frederick LaMonto	Artist and Sculptor	1921–1981
Charles J. LeClercq	Illustrator	
H. Humphrey Moore	Painter	1844–1926
Granville S. Redmond	Landscape Artist	1871–1935
William B. Sparks	Portrait Painter	1937
Kevin H. Stevens	Painter	1896–1991
Douglas Tilden	Sculptor	1860–1935
Caldwallader L. Washburn	Drypoint Etcher	1866–1965
James H. Whitcomb	Silhouettist	1806–1849
Tom Wood	Primitive Folk Artist	1902–1986

Pioneers Among Deaf Artists

There are many pioneers among Deaf artists. [Sonnenstrahl \(2002\)](#) identified several firsts among Deaf artists in her book. They are listed in the Deaf artists of historical note table below.

<i>Deaf artists of historical note</i>		
Artist	Year	First
William Mercer	1776– 1839	First known deaf American artist
John Brewster	1766– 1854	First nationally recognized deaf artist
George Catlin	1796– 1872	First artist to travel West with the intention of creating art of Native Americans

James Whitcomb	1806– 1849	Earliest and only known deaf silhouette artist
John Carlin	1813– 1891	First Deaf artist to study abroad
Charlotte Buell Coman	1822– 1924	First known deaf female artist who exhibited in art galleries and museums in America
Theophilus Hope D'Estrella	1851– 1929	First artist to provide a photographic account of social, cultural, and political life of the Deaf community
Douglas Tilden	1860– 1935	First deaf artist to gain international recognition
Betty Miller	1934–	First artist to take a political stand against oppressive measures of the hearing establishment

Books Written About Deaf Artists

Several Deaf artists were prominent enough to have books published about their work. These books are listed below chronologically, starting with the most recent.

The recent discovery of the work of James Castle (1899–1977) has resulted in national acclaim of his unique artistic creations. He used a combination of stove soot mixed with his own saliva as ink that he applied with sharpened sticks and cotton wads. He also utilized scrap paper and cardboard to construct his masterpieces, and produced a large number of unpublished books of his work. He is considered one of Idaho's greatest enigmas, as he led a rather isolated life due to an inability to communicate, either verbally or in sign language, in spite of attending the Idaho School for the Deaf for several years. His life and work have been documented in several books, including *James Castle: A Retrospective* by Ann Percy (published by Yale University Press in 2008); *James Castle: Drawings, Constructions, and Books, Collection of the Boise Art Museum*, compiled by Sandy Harthorn (2005); and Tom Trusky's *James Castle: His Life and Art* (published by the Idaho Center for the Book in 2008). In addition, a documentary film, *James Castle: Portrait of an Artist*, was made by Jeffrey Wolf in 2008.

Like James Castle, John Brewster was a self-taught artist. He is recognized today as one of the best folk artists of post-Revolutionary America. Two books have been written about John Brewster and his contributions to the world of art. In 2006, *The World of John Brewster, Jr.*, published by Fenimore Art Museum, notes John Brewster as “a deaf portrait painter who created beautiful and ethereal images of American people during the formative period of the nation” (D'Ambrosio, 2006, p. 4). In *A Deaf Artist in Early America: The Worlds of John Brewster, Jr.*, by Harlan Lane (published by Beacon Press in 2004), the author provides a comprehensive biographical account of John Brewster. Lane describes Brewster as “arguably the best of the early American portrait painters who painted in a characteristically American style (in contrast with those European-trained artists who employed stylized postures and historical settings often derived from the Italian Renaissance)” (p. xv) and “Brewster's portraits—some valued at more than a million dollars—can be found in numerous American museums: he is considered an undisputed master of the genre” (p. xvi).” In their book, *Deaf Persons in the Arts and Sciences*, Lang and Meath-Lang (1995) noted Brewster's contributions

by identifying him as “one of the best primitive artists of post-Revolutionary America” (p. 57).

In 2002, Suzanne Flynt published *The Allen Sisters: Pictorial Photographers, 1885–1920* (University Press of New England) to provide a biographical account of deaf sisters Frances Allen and Mary Allen and their photographic art. The Allen sisters were associated with the international movement of Pictorialism, which strove to make photographs appear as artistic as possible. They were once heralded as two of the foremost women photographers in America. Their photographs were among the first artistic photographs to be acquired by the Smithsonian Institution in 1896.

In 1994, Mildred Albronda published *Douglas Tilden: The Man and His Legacy*, highlighting Tilden’s accomplishments as a sculptor. In the introduction, Harvey Jones, the senior curator of Art at the Oakland Museum, describes Tilden as “California’s leading sculptor of statuary, fountains, and public monuments at the turn of the last century, Tilden’s artistic legacy endures in several prominent locations along San Francisco’s Market Street and in Golden Gate Park Tilden became affectionately known as the father of sculpture in California” (p. vii). This book was an expansion of her earlier book, *Douglas Tilden: Portrait of a Deaf Sculptor*, published by T. J. Publishers in 1980.

To showcase Chuck Baird’s work, Dawn Sign Press produced a volume entitled *Chuck Baird: 35 Plates* (1993). In the introduction to the book, Elion (p. 1) stated, “Outside of the Deaf community, his paintings are mostly unknown to collectors and art lovers. Yet one does not need to be Deaf to like a Baird, any more than one needs to be African-American to like a Romare Bearden. For viewers who are eager to go deeper into cultural symbols, Baird’s art offers a challenge. In many of his canvases, hands are arrested and arranged in shapes that must be more than elaborate gestures. They are. This is Deaf art, and Baird is among the most imaginative of Deaf artists.”

In recognition of Granville Redmond’s reputation as one of the most well-regarded landscape painters in America, Mary Jean Haley published *Granville Redmond: A Triumph of Talent and Temperament*, in 1988, through the Oakland Museum. Redmond was considered one of the best landscape painters in the early 20th century, and his work was described by Arthur Miller, an art critic, as “unrivaled in realistic depiction of California landscape” (as cited in Sonnenstrahl, 2002, p. 114). He is listed in *Who’s Who in America* and Fielding’s *Directory of American Artists* (Gannon, 1981).

Mildred Albronda also documented the life and work of Theophilus Hope d’ Estrella and published *The Magic Lantern Man: Theophilus Hope d’Estrella*, through the California School for the Deaf at Fremont in 1985. D’Estrella was noted for his outstanding photographic eye and “documented much of the natural beauty of California” (Lang & Meath-Lang, 1995, p. 93). He also was part of the photography movement known as Photojournalism, in which he provided a “photographic mirror of deaf social, cultural, and political life of his time” (Sonnenstrahl, 2002, p. 53).

Websites

In addition to Sonnenstrahl’s definitive book on this topic and Gannon’s chapter on deaf artists, the Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) maintains a Deaf Artist website that contains information on disenfranchised art in general and De’VIA specifically. The website also provides access to articles and videos related to Deaf art, and biographical tidbits on well-known Deaf artists, with samples of their work and self-portraits. This link can be accessed at <http://www.rit.edu/deafartists>, which also contains the International Archive of Deaf

Artists. Another excellent resource on visual arts can be accessed at <http://www.deafculturecentre.ca/public/Default.aspx?I=218&n=Visual+Arts>. For Deaf theatre, the website is <http://www.rit.edu/ntid/deaftheatre>.

PERFORMING ARTS

The visual arts do not hold a monopoly in the Deaf artistic realm. Deaf theatre can trace a long history in the Deaf community and is an intrinsic aspect of Deaf culture. Over the years, students at deaf schools and Deaf adults have staged productions ranging “from mainstream plays, such as Gallaudet University’s fall 1997 production of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, to vaudeville-like productions, such as the National Theatre of the Deaf’s *My Third Eye* and *Parade*. In between are both original but conventional plays focusing on Deaf culture, such as *Sign Me Alice*, *Tales of a Clubroom*, and *A Deaf Family Diary*, and hybrid productions that mix classical and indigenous theatre, such as *Institutional Blues*” (Peters, 2006, p. 71). This performing tradition was initially established at the first school for the deaf in Hartford, Connecticut, and has spread to almost every school for the deaf in the nation, including Gallaudet University and the National Technical Institute for the Deaf at Rochester Institute of Technology (Lane et al., 1996; Padden, 2006).

This theatrical tradition is not limited to the United States, as Deaf performers can be found all over the world, delighting both Deaf audiences and the general public (Peters, 2000; Rose, 2006). A raised platform was always an important component of a typical Deaf club, demonstrating the intention of entertaining the Deaf community and affirming Deaf culture (Baldwin, 1993; Bangs, 1999; Peters, 2000). In addition, many grassroots theatre groups were established in major metropolitan areas to provide Deaf actors opportunities to produce and perform in shows (Baldwin, 1993; Lane et al., 1996).

American Deaf theatre typically tends toward a more intimate style, which allows for a close connection between actors and spectators. One reason is the necessity of having the audience sit close enough to the stage to have a clear view of the actors’ signs. Second, with the small, close-knit community that makes up the Deaf world, most, if not all actors are familiar to the audience members, making the theatrical experience even more intimate. Third, many themes associated with Deaf plays deal with the type of prejudice and social injustice experienced by Deaf theatergoers every day and elicit strong reactions from them.

For Deaf actors to poke fun at the majority (hearing) society on stage is not unique among disenfranchised communities and would be considered part of the underground theatre genre, in which minority actors “performed comic routines that satirized the foibles of the white man” (Bangs, 1999, p. 240). Bangs, in his analysis of Deaf theatre, explains how Deaf people created underground theatre during the first part of the 20th century. During these presentations, Deaf patrons delighted in satires of oppressive hearing people and their ill-fated effort to banish sign language usage among Deaf people. Also popular were skits of lighter fare, celebrating the Deaf experience. These presentations, both in parody and comic genres, continue to be performed by Deaf people everywhere.

The Professionalization of Deaf Theatre

The establishment of the first professional theatre of the Deaf, the National Theatre of the Deaf (NTD) in 1967 and the theatre department at Gallaudet University in 1971 ushered in a new era for Deaf theatre, with professionally mounted productions by groups of well-trained actors. With the support of a federal grant for

more than 30 years, the NTD was able to assemble troupes of Deaf and hearing actors not only to showcase the abilities of Deaf people and the beauty of ASL, but also to present the best of American theatre worldwide.

In addition to being the oldest continually producing theatre company in the United States, the NTD is recognized for being the first American theatrical group to accomplish the following list of impressive feats: it has performed in all 50 states, presented on all seven continents; completed 50 touring seasons; and been selected to perform in the People's Republic of China and tour South Africa. The quality of the NTD's productions received national and international acclaim, including a Tony Award for Theatrical Excellence. By showcasing ASL and the brilliance of Deaf people to the world, "NTD is credited for many of the social and economic improvements in the deaf world due to the positive visibility of deaf culture, ASL and deaf people" (Baldwin, 1993, p. 114). Gannon (1981) also gave the NTD credit for eliminating the stigma associated with sign language usage and made it popular for hearing people to learn the language of signs.

Other professional Deaf theatrical groups have sprouted over the years, including Ohio's Fairmount Theatre of the Deaf in 1975, which has since been renamed Cleveland Signstage Theatre; the Spectrum in Texas in 1977, which was closed in 1981; and most recently, Deaf West in 1991, which has its own theatre space in Los Angeles. Deaf West holds the record for most awards for theatre productions of any Deaf theatre in the nation, with more than 60 industry awards, including an International Fete d'Excellence Gold Medal for Cultural Education in Theatre and a Tony Honor for Excellence.

Although professional companies have brought Deaf theatre to a new level, the very essence of Deaf theatre has been compromised. Instead of performing for Deaf people about themes that are relevant and dear to them, the goal of professional Deaf theatre is often to provide an artistic experience for hearing patrons, resulting in a less than positive viewing experience for many Deaf people. For this reason, a distinction has been made between professional groups "of the deaf" and theatrical productions "for the deaf." The latter includes creative efforts focused on work specifically designed for Deaf audiences (Baldwin, 1993; Bangs, 1992). Regardless of this divide, the professionalism of Deaf theatre has opened many doors for Deaf actors to pursue their theatrical aspirations beyond the Deaf clubroom. Indeed, in the past 30 years, there has been an explosion in the number of Deaf actors making professional appearances on stage, on television, and in film.

Deaf Presence on Broadway

In the world of American theatre, the highest honor that can be bestowed upon an actor is a Tony Award. In the history of Deaf theatre, the most remarkable accomplishment was when Phyllis Frelich won the 1980 Tony Award for Best Actress for her outstanding performance in *Children of A Lesser God*. Previously, in 1978, Bruce Hlibok had a starring role in a Broadway production, *Runaways*, which made him the first Deaf actor to play a deaf character on Broadway. However, the first Deaf group to make an appearance on Broadway was back in 1943, when the drama troupe from Gallaudet College, led by Eric Malzkhun, was invited to perform their production of *Arsenic and Old Lace* in the Fulton Theatre (Baldwin, 1993; Crouse, 1944). Although other aspiring deaf actors have performed in New York City, the individuals cited above have the distinction of "making it big" on Broadway.

Deaf Presence in Hollywood

The definition of “making it big” in Hollywood is receiving a foot-high gold statue named Oscar. Marlee Matlin’s performance in the movie *Children of a Lesser God* won her the Oscar award for Best Actress in 1986, and, after receiving that honor, she has been able to secure roles in 14 additional films and 21 television shows, including as a regular in several TV programs, such as *Reasonable Doubt*, *The L Word*, and *Switched at Birth*.

Phyllis Frelich was also able to capitalize on her Tony Award and played roles in nine films and various television shows, including a lead in the Hallmark Hall of Fame Special, *Love Is Never Silent*. To support the continuing Deaf presence in the film industry, Frelich became the first deaf person to serve on the board of the Screen Actors Guild.

Other award-winning Deaf artists include Julianna Fjeld, who won an Emmy Award in 1986 for Outstanding Drama Special, for her production of The Hallmark Hall of Fame: *Love Is Never Silent*; Peter Weschsberg, who won an Emmy Award for his documentary film, *My Eyes Are My Ears* in 1973, which featured the success stories of Deaf people in California; and Gregg Brooks, who won an Emmy award for his weekly news show. Brooks was the first deaf person to graduate from the prestigious American Film Institute in Beverly Hills, and he has worked for many years in the library of Disney Productions.

Perhaps, the most familiar Deaf face on television belongs to Linda Bove, who appeared as a regular character, Linda the Librarian, on *Sesame Street*, for more than 30 years. She is credited with inspiring thousands of children to learn sign language. In addition to *Sesame Street*, Bove also was a regular in the 1980s on *Search for Tomorrow*, a popular daytime soap opera.

The first Deaf actor to perform on a television program was Audree Norton, who appeared on *Mannix* in 1968, in a featured role. Following this show, she also landed appearances on several other television programs such as *Family Affair*, *Streets of San Francisco*, and *The Man and the City*. However, the first Deaf professional actor was Bernard Bragg, who had his own television show called *The Quiet Man*, in San Francisco, which ran from 1958 to 1961. Bragg also holds the distinction of being the only deaf person to have been trained by Marcel Marceau.

Succeeding as a professional actor is a challenge for anyone, let alone for deaf actors. A documentary film, *See What I’m Saying: The Deaf Entertainers Documentary*, profiles the struggles of four actors in their efforts to make it big in mainstream performing arts. One of the featured actors is internationally known actor, writer, comedian, and performance artist, C. J. Jones, who founded Sign World TV (www.signworldtv.com) to help broaden the opportunities for Deaf people in entertainment. Samples of his work can be viewed at www.americandeafculture.com. Although Deaf artists continue to seek opportunities to appear in mainstream films and television shows, there has also been an explosion of specialized films produced by Deaf people featuring ASL and Deaf culture.

Films in ASL

Since 1975, Deaf filmmakers have released at least 25 full-length features in ASL. A pioneer in film-making, Peter Wolf produced *Deafula* in 1975, a Deaf version of *Dracula*, and then went on to make several other films, including *Think-Me-Nothing*, also in 1975, and *I Love You, But* in 1998. In more recent years, two Deaf filmmakers have gained prominence in producing ASL films. Through the ASLFilms production company, Mark Wood and Mindy Moore produced *Forget Me Not* in 2006, *Wrong Game* in 2007, *The Legend of the*

Mountain Man in 2008, and *Gerald* in 2009. Another Deaf-owned film studio, Mosdeux, with Chad Taylor and Wayne Betts, Jr. at its helm, released several feature films, including *A Permanent Grave* in 2007, *The Deaf Family* in 2008, and *The Caretaker* in 2009.

Although these projects were shot on shoestring budgets, they provided Deaf artists with opportunities to create films for signing audiences from a shared “Deaf center.” In other words, these films were produced entirely in ASL, highlighting those elements of Deaf culture with which both filmmakers and viewers share a profound understanding.

Thus far, one consistent trademark of all these ASL films has been the absence of sound and music. Questions related to the role music plays in Deaf culture have been debated and will be discussed below.

MUSIC: PART OF DEAF CULTURE OR NOT?

Although Deaf culture is certainly not noted for its music, many unique artistic presentations associated with music have emerged from the Deaf community. Watching musical performances in ASL, signing songs in ASL, listening to music, and even creating melodies are wildly popular among some Deaf people, although, at the same time completely ignored or even strongly rejected by others.

This seeming incongruity can be found on the campus of Gallaudet University itself, where the majority of students are Deaf. There, stereos are turned on full-blast in residence halls, giving pleasure to those students who do enjoy music. It is not unusual to see students walking around with iPods attached to their ears and listening to the latest hits. In the college pub, some students can be found dancing to the music and interpreting songs in ASL. Others go off-campus regularly to local bars to enjoy evenings of dancing and music. They also enjoy concerts when ASL interpreters are present. At the same time, other students have absolutely no interest in anything that has to do with sound or music. Some of them even resent this intrusion from the “hearing” culture, preferring to maintain a more Deaf-centric atmosphere at Gallaudet. These differing experiences associated with the role of music in their lives illuminate different ways of being Deaf among Gallaudet students and members of the Deaf community. This is discussed further in [Chapter 13](#), where diversity within the Deaf community is examined.

Regardless of the widely varying sentiment about the role of music in their lives, many music-related performances have been created by Deaf individuals. They range from amateur works of budding performers to professional troupes, including Musign in the 1980s, Rathskeller in the 1990s and 2000s, Beethoven’s Nightmare in the 2000s, and Invisible Hands, Inc. in the recent years. These four performing groups were fully controlled by Deaf individuals, who did everything, from creating the choreography to interpreting songs to writing new pieces to performing before audiences across the nation and the world. These performances were not limited to simply translating lyrics into ASL. Rather, they creatively incorporated movements, lights, and ASL usage to make the songs visually appealing to Deaf audiences, and were wildly popular not only among Deaf people, but among sign language students as well. Footages of these performances can be accessed at www.americandeafculture.com.

Although there are not many professional Deaf musicians, some performing artists, such as Fred Beam, Sean Forbes and Rosa Lee Timm, are passionate about creating a bridge between music and deaf people and have taken action to promote music within the Deaf community. To this end, Beam founded Invisible Hands, Inc. to promote Deaf culture awareness through musical and dance performances such as those by The Wild

Zappers. Forbes is one of the founders of the Deaf Performing Artists Network (D-PAN), with the “goal of creating top-quality ASL-centric music videos, making music and music culture more accessible than ever to millions of individuals worldwide who had traditionally been excluded from participation” (www.d-pan.org). Also, in an effort to promote interest in music among young deaf artists, Timm organized Deaf Music Camp (blog.deafmusiccamp.com).

Although music is an important part of some Deaf people’s lives and is somewhat visible on the Deaf community scene, music is not a prominent feature of Deaf culture. Most Deaf events are conducted without the presence of any type of music. Most religious services conducted by Deaf parishioners are held without music, and many Deaf households do not include any kind of stereo system. Most Deaf individuals do not play any musical instruments. There are no cultural icons related to Deaf music. However, there are many different ways of being Deaf, and music may or may not play an important part in an individual Deaf person’s life.

CONCLUSION

As is true for any disenfranchised group, art is an important expression of Deaf culture. It is through art (both visual and performance) that the Deaf essence is portrayed for public viewing. The presentation of artistic creations serves a dual purpose. For the Deaf audience, this art reflects back their common history, resonates with moments from daily life, and illuminates dreams for the future. At the same time, Deaf art allows Deaf people’s lives to be better understood by outsiders.

Orphans

by Raymond Luczak (2010)

A swirl in the air like snowflakes,
family stories melt before they reach
our lost ears. We lipread what we can
around the dinner table and in cars,
connecting the dots of laughs and looks
to an imaginary sky of constellations
waiting to be explained and pointed out,
filling the missing gaps in plot twists
unfolding before our eyes. Their lives
braid and unbraid like a knitted scarf
flapping in fierce gusts of wind
while we hang on to our scarves
and stare deep into the darkening sky.
Each decibel of their laughs adds slowly
to our tinderbox that no one notices
by the fireplace. When we burst
at last into flames, they act shocked,
disbelieving that we'd count the years
of "I'll explain later" against "I'm busy
right now, can this wait till later?"
against "That's nonsense of course,
you're family!" against "Oh, please"
against "Hearing people don't hear
everything" against "Not everything
we say is important." They never explain
when we demand, "Why say anything at all?"
When we finally stumble and find each other,
usually in the dark of night becoming
day spilling onto our shivering palms,
we gather around tables in well-lit places
and tell each other the same old stories
of how they never took time to explain
to us the spaghetti messes of their lives
all night long until we become family
deeper than blood throbbing in our hands.
Our hugs of understanding grow tighter.

Later does come, and when it does,
our laughter is a tender scrapbook
that not even they can torch.

10 Rules of Social Interaction



“I Love You” by Larry Yanez. Used with permission.

Every culture has rules regarding polite behavior. Although no one appreciates stereotypes, scholars of intercultural communication and insightful world travelers acknowledge that some general characterizations hold true for a majority of people in certain cultures. For example, Latin people touch a lot, Japanese people consult with others before making a decision that affects the group, whereas Germans and Israelis are known for their directness. As it happens, Deaf Americans also share these three cultural propensities: touching, checking with the group, and a direct communication style. As in all cultures, behaviors are dictated by both explicit rules of conduct, as well as by unspoken or tacit convention. In this chapter, we will explore the ways these cultural rules of social interaction have developed and continue to serve as solutions for effective living among Deaf people.

Many experiences are unique to deaf people. Many of the anecdotes in the book by [Holcomb \(1977\)](#) illustrate the mishaps deaf people experience due to their being deaf. For this reason, the book was appropriately titled, *The Hazards of Deafness*, as it provides an insightful, yet often humorous look at the Deaf experience.

However, it is important not to confuse these “hazards” with the culture of Deaf people. For example, the common occurrence of knocking things over at the dinner table while signing does not carry the same significance as the formalized ritual of introductions that is a widespread practice among Deaf people. Likewise, bumping into a pole while signing is not a cultural feature akin to the elaborate attention-getting strategies that Deaf people have employed through the years. Communication breakdown from misunderstandings due to the difficulties of lipreading cannot be equated to the beauty and power of American Sign Language (ASL). Similarly, entering a bathroom without realizing that it is occupied is not a cultural experience, but a “hazard” associated with the Deaf experience. In essence, many of the hazards listed in Holcomb’s book are simply embarrassing incidents that occur as a consequence of not hearing sounds or of using signs instead of spoken words. Interestingly, however, it is part of the culture of Deaf people to take these “hazards” lightly and to laugh at the mishaps that occur on a regular basis. This is not unlike tall people who exchange humorous stories associated with the hazards of tight seating space on airplanes and head bumps from low ceilings.

By contrast, the cultural aspects of the Deaf way of life are shared with pride and celebrated. These will be the focus of the rest of this chapter. Customs are transmitted from one generation to the next, retaining both

historical roots and pragmatic applications. When taught to Deaf children, these culturally appropriate behaviors provide tried-and-true solutions for effective living. Although the original impetus for the creation of these customs may have faded, they still serve a pragmatic purpose, as they continue to enhance the quality of life for Deaf people. These traditions remain a vibrant aspect of Deaf culture and have been transmitted to ensuing generations of Deaf people.

HISTORICAL AND PRAGMATICALLY BASED BEHAVIORS

Every culture retains cultural behaviors whose original purpose is now outdated. For example, in our own American culture, we often shake hands as part of our greeting ritual. Few of us realize that this custom originated from the days when people often feared for their safety when encountering strangers. As a solution, the shaking of hands ensured that no one was concealing a weapon (Hall & Hall, 1983). Today, Americans do not feel the same necessity to check for weapons when meeting new people, yet this custom of handshaking has become an integral part of our greetings. We now turn to examples of customs that Deaf people continue to practice even though their original purpose may have become obsolete.

Leave-Taking

A vestige of a historically based custom within the Deaf community is the formal leave-taking ritual typically observed at Deaf gatherings (Bienvenu & Colonomos, 1992; Mindess, Holcomb, Langholtz, & Poyner, 2006; Senghas & Monaghan, 2002). This practice, entailing a series of lengthy, ritualized mutual good-byes, can be traced to a past era when Deaf people did not have easy access to the technology of the time—the telephone—to keep in touch with each other. Instead, they relied on face-to-face communication for all their socializing, making face-to-face gatherings a treasured event. As part of the traditional Deaf good-bye routine, plans were made for the next meeting, as it was practically impossible to communicate with friends in the interim other than by writing letters. The process of saying good-bye to one's closest friends at a Deaf gathering typically entailed discussing the specifics of the next planned visit with each person, including a discussion on the location, date, and other specifics, and one or more hugs. During the course of delivering individual good-byes to one's friends, there was always the possibility for the conversation to go off on a tangent to discuss additional news and gossip. When this side discussion went on long enough, the round of good-byes and hugs had to be recommenced. It has been noted that the length of time between one's initial declaration of good-bye and the actual departure could run as long as 3 hours (Bienvenu & Colonomos, 1992)!

Today, with the advent of text-pagers, e-mail, videophones, and other communication devices, Deaf people now have the ability to communicate instantaneously with each other just like everyone else. However, the tradition of formal and lengthy departures continues to be a characteristic feature of the culture, earning the descriptor, “the Deaf good-bye.”

This leave-taking behavior can also be examined from a pragmatic perspective. Since the power and ease of communicating in ASL is still better than sending English text on a computer or text-pager, Deaf people usually prefer to converse in person through the medium of ASL. Even videophone chats pale in comparison to face-to-face conversations because of the limitations of a two-dimensional video, as well as the absence of the warmth of a live human interchange. In addition, opportunities for Deaf people to communicate easily with other people who are fluent in ASL are infrequent, especially for those who work in a predominately

hearing environment, which is the case for most deaf individuals. Deaf people often do not have the luxury of impromptu chats with their neighbors, co-workers, and strangers on the street because most hearing people do not possess signing skills. For this reason, chatting with a friend in ASL is indeed a treat and, consequently, ending a visit is a sad occasion prompting an elongated ritual that is often sealed by a hug (Bienvenu & Colonomos, 1993; Moore & Levitan, 2005).

Persistence in Contact

Again, due to the fact that social contacts are cherished and often infrequent, it is expected that Deaf people should be persistent when attempting to contact a friend, either in person or on the phone. When Deaf people show up at a friend's house and receive no response to an initial press of the doorbell, they typically do everything they can to make sure the person is not home before giving up and leaving. For instance, after ringing the doorbell several times and getting no response, a Deaf person might look through the window, walk around the house to the backyard, check the garage to see if a car is there, test the doorknob to see if it is unlocked, and even enter the house. These measures are often necessary to ensure that the person is not at home. If the friend was at home at the time and later found out that his visitor gave up and left prematurely, he would surely be upset and probably express his displeasure with his Deaf friend for not trying hard enough the next time he met with him.

Not responding to an initial doorbell ring is not an uncommon occurrence. Historically, deaf people did not have light signaling systems in their homes, so they learned quickly that getting no answer at the door does not always mean the person is not home. Prior to the invention of flashing light systems that mimic the ringing of the doorbell, visitors were expected to cautiously enter the house to let Deaf people know of their arrival. Today, even with elaborate light signaling systems, it is still possible for Deaf individuals to miss the flashing lamp. Their back might be turned when the light starts flashing. Or the person might be in the bathroom, laundry room, basement, or backyard, where there usually are no doorbell lights. It is also possible that the person is napping and oblivious to the flashing light. Today, it is more customary for Deaf visitors to page/text their friends to let them know that they are at the front door, should there be no answer. Still, it is plausible that the Deaf person inside the house might not have his or her text pager with him or her. Since there are many possible explanations as to why a Deaf person might not be aware that someone is at the door, Deaf visitors have been conditioned to do everything reasonably possible to make sure the person is not at home before giving up.

Persistence is also expected when making a phone call to a friend. Giving up after the third or fourth ring, as many hearing people do, is frustrating and rude to Deaf people because it often means a missed opportunity to connect via phone, usually for the same reasons provided above for missing the doorbell light signal. In the past, when teletypewriters (referred to as TTYs) were adapted so that Deaf people could use them on phone lines to type messages back and forth in English, they were costly items, and Deaf families usually only had one machine per home. So, when the phone rang and the light flashed, one needed to rush to the room where the TTY was located. Callers were aware of this and typically let the phone ring 10–20 times before giving up. Today, videophones have basically replaced TTYs as the primary telecommunication device. Yet, the expectation of letting the phone ring for as long as possible before giving up still remains for pragmatic reasons.

Information Sharing

Keeping others informed is another important characteristic of Deaf culture (Bienvenu & Colonomos, 1992; Holcomb & Mindess, 2009; Lane, Hoffmeister, & Bahan, 1996; Mindess et al., 2006). Historically, deaf people have not had as much access to information as hearing people. Radios were not and continue not to be accessible to deaf people. In the last century, television programs were not captioned, interpreters were not routinely provided for meetings or classes, TTYs and videophones did not exist, nor was the video relay service available. Many hearing families did not bother to learn how to sign. For these reasons, the onus was on Deaf people themselves to keep each other informed about news, gossip, and advice. To withhold potentially valuable and helpful information from others is viewed as unacceptable and may be considered rude and selfish.

In spite of the increased and widespread use of technology, such as closed-captioned television and videophones, and human resources such as interpreters, Deaf people still feel responsible for keeping each other informed. Detailed accounts of how to negotiate a car purchase, how to resolve health problems, or even cautions about the loudness of bodily noises are common topics for discussion among Deaf people (Bienvenu & Colonomos, 1993; Holcomb & Mindess, 2009).

Pragmatically, deaf people still have challenges when securing information. Opportunities for incidental learning are often limited for deaf people. They don't overhear their co-workers talking. They don't hear programs on the radio while driving or hear warnings about traffic conditions. They don't participate in discussions among family members, especially if parents and siblings don't sign. Teachers of the deaf often neglect to sign when talking to hearing adults in the environment, even when deaf students are present. Furthermore, because of limited access to language at home and school due to the inability of many parents and teachers to sign, and the difficulties of lipreading and hearing the spoken language, English is a challenge for many deaf people. Consequently, reading the newspaper and watching captioned television shows do not always provide needed information. Watching interpreters does not always help, especially if the interpreters are not skilled in translating English into ASL. Since the discourse structure of ASL is different from English, making accurate translations can be challenging for many interpreters.

These difficult conditions still exist for deaf people. Understandably, Deaf people continue to feel responsible for supporting each other with detailed accounts of various types of information from tips on finding a good deal to critical health-related issues to rumors about upcoming layoffs (Bienvenu & Colonomos, 1993; Mindess et al., 2006; Moore & Levitan, 2005).

Newcomers to the Deaf community are often shocked at the minute details that are exchanged among Deaf people. What may seem to be "too much information" often turns out to be the only opportunity that a deaf person has to acquire such knowledge, however trivial it might appear. Although descriptions related to the specifics of a gory accident, loose or bloody bowel movements, or the color and texture of vomit might be considered excessively graphic, unnecessary, and inappropriate to outsiders, this information is often otherwise inaccessible to deaf people. Yet, such information might be extremely valuable for health or safety reasons down the road. For example, when a person who was recently treated for colon cancer provides his friends with a detailed account of how he discovered blood in his stool and the subsequent procedure involved in testing for cancer, he actually is supporting his community by disseminating specific information on how

colon cancer is detected and treated. It often takes time for (hearing) newcomers to appreciate the collective nature of Deaf people and the rather personal and revealing stories they share with each other.

Not all narratives shared are of such a serious nature. [Holcomb et al. \(2011\)](#) shared several anecdotes of bathroom tales to illustrate how Deaf people typically exchange stories of awkward yet funny experiences, even if they are personal and embarrassing. The authors noted, “it is often difficult for deaf people to imagine how sounds can carry through walls or realize how far they can travel even with doors closed. For this reason, many stories have been shared about awkward experiences in bathrooms” (p. 25). In their chapter on the meaning of sound, [Padden and Humphries \(1988\)](#) disclose how bathroom stories are often shared among Deaf people as they try to make sense of how sounds operate. The puzzle of the inconsistency of noises coming from stomach rumblings, of the limited soundproofing of closed doors, of the echo effect within confined rooms such as restrooms, and of the loudness of passing gas remains mysterious for many deaf people. As part of Deaf culture, hilarious anecdotes about the mystery of sounds, even those related to bodily functions, are freely shared. American Sign Language, being a visually descriptive language, adds greatly to the humor of these accounts and contributes to the information-sharing feature of Deaf culture.

Letting Others Know of Your Destination

In a similar vein, it is customary for Deaf people to “announce” their destination when leaving the room, even if the person is going to the bathroom. Also common is returning to the room to let people know when you’ve completed your business and that you are now onto the next task at a different location. Pragmatically, this courteous behavior of telling others of your intent of going to the bathroom, to the garage, to the second floor, and so on is a rather simple way to make it easier for the other person to locate you at a later time if needed because they cannot hear where you are going. However, this custom may become less significant with the advent of text pagers, which allow people to text each other with their location.

Reporting Back

Reporting back is also an important feature of keeping each other informed ([Holcomb et al. 2011](#); [Moore & Levitan, 2005](#)). Even with events as trivial as letting the other person know that you have checked the brownies in the oven, closed the windows, or made sure the kids in the other room are okay, telling others of your actions is considered courteous in Deaf culture. Reporting back may be unnecessary for hearing people as they can automatically hear these “safety checks” being performed. For Deaf people, reporting back reduces the necessity for the other person to get up and conduct the same safety check. [Moore and Levitan \(2005\)](#) explained how reporting back is “a part of friendly everyday communication, just as much as checking the stove and faucets or bolting the doors at night are part of the daily household routine” (p. 672). Hearing people can hear these actions and do not need the explicit report.

Detailed Introductions

Because the Deaf community is relatively small, introductions between two people meeting each other are usually detailed and extensive. There is always a good possibility of having a mutual connection ([Bienvenu & Colonos, 1992](#); [Eldredge, 2004](#); [Hoffmeister, 2008](#); [Lane et al., 1996](#); [Mindess et al., 2006](#); [Senghas & Monaghan, 2002](#)). Furthermore, there is a traditional “small-world” intimacy in the community because Deaf people have a limited array of choices in their educational, social, religious, and cultural opportunities. In the

past, there was typically only one educational institution in each state that deaf children could attend, the state residential school. There also would be only one Deaf club in each metropolitan area where Deaf people congregated. Similarly, the choices of churches and temples with services for Deaf people were usually rare, limiting Deaf people to those few places of worship. As a result, almost everyone knew everyone else in the Deaf community. Therefore, when making introductions, it was not uncommon for people to include information about their educational background, circle of friends, Deaf relatives, incidents from life (both good and bad), and even previous girlfriends/boyfriends. This was done to identify shared or similar experiences and make connections to the social network of the person being introduced. To simply introduce a person as “Joe” is not a common practice in the Deaf community and could signal a subtle message that Joe is an undesirable character. Even today, with expanded educational, social, and religious opportunities, the practice of including extensive background information and context in introductions is still generally followed (Eldredge, 2004).

Extensive introductions are such a ubiquitous part of the culture that Bienvenu and Colonomos (1992) proposed a historic formula that typical introductions follow. It includes the person’s name (both first and last), the place they are from (usually the location of their deaf school), work-related information, and names of any Deaf relatives. A different formula applies when introducing a hearing person. If the person being introduced signs well (and could possibly be mistaken for a native signer or deaf person), then an explicit disclosure of the person’s hearing status is necessary. If the hearing person has Deaf relatives, this information is then revealed in an attempt to make a connection. Otherwise, particulars about the reason for learning sign language are shared, with the assumption that the hearing person had a Deaf friend, neighbor, or co-worker. Finally, to validate the legitimacy of the hearing person’s interest in the Deaf community, he or she is expected to share details regarding ASL classes taken and the identity of their teacher(s). This information helps Deaf people establish the hearing person’s connection to the Deaf community.

Today, however, most deaf people do not graduate from a Deaf residential school. In addition, many hearing students are taking ASL classes solely to meet foreign language requirements and may not have any personal connections with deaf people. This changing scene makes the historical formula somewhat outdated. Nevertheless, detailed introductions continue to serve a pragmatic function. They “foster familiarity and sense of unity and additional contexts in which the interaction could be comfortable” (Bienvenu & Colonomos 1992, p. 47). These connections are valuable in maintaining the close-knit nature of the Deaf community.

Name Signs

In many world cultures, naming practices exemplify the values of the community, and Deaf culture is no exception. As discussed in Chapter 5, name signs are another unique feature of Deaf culture that has historical and pragmatic applications (Mindess, 1990; Supalla, 1992). Many Deaf people (as well as hearing signers) receive their name signs as part of their induction into the Deaf community. Traditionally, deaf children were given their name signs when they began their educational career at a deaf school. At that point, their older Deaf schoolmates would provide a descriptive sign that corresponded to their first impression of the new student as a way to identify him or her. Often, that characteristic sign eventually became the person’s name sign. For example, if the new kid had a distinguishing birthmark on her cheek, the sign probably related to this physical feature such as girl-purple-cheek. If the new young boy’s first days of school were full of tears,

the older kids would begin to sign little-boy-crying to identify him. Eventually, the compound sign of purple-cheek and a sign resembling tears became these children's name signs. Although some name signs appear to be inappropriately graphic, highlighting distinctive physical characteristics, they are usually not considered offensive in the Deaf Community but rather perceived to be descriptive, with historical roots related to the Deaf person's entrance into the deaf school.

For babies born to Deaf parents, it is different. The parents themselves usually decide on the name sign. The process of selecting a name sign can be just as difficult and painstaking for these parents as it is to decide on the child's name. For instance, some families insist on having all children's names begin with the same letter. Likewise, some Deaf families want all the children's name signs to be located at the same place, on the chin for example. For other families, there's no rhyme or reason in choosing names or name signs; however, they usually follow those conventions of the culture associated with naming. Unorthodox names such as Woof or Wacko or names that are difficult to pronounce are frowned upon, as are name signs that evoke negative feelings or require unwieldy movements that do not conform to the linguistic requirements of ASL.

AUTHOR'S ANECDOTE

My parents gave me the name sign, the handshape "T" tapping the middle of the chest. All males in my family have their name signs on the same location, with the same repeated movement, along with handshapes that correspond to the first letter of their names. When I discovered my firstborn to be a girl, we were stuck, as we didn't have any family tradition in coming up with a name sign for girls. Fortunately, after few weeks home, I discovered Tara napping with her hand in the handshape of "T" resting on her chin. That became her name sign, "T" on chin. My second daughter, Leala, was given her name sign (handshape "L" shaken several times in front of chest) by her sister Tara, when Tara was 2 years old. My third baby was a boy, which made it easy to create his name sign: "C" on the chest for Cary. It was not as easy when Troy came along, since the "T on the chest" name sign had already been assigned to me. For a long time, he had no name sign as we all fingerspelled his name. Eventually, his 2-year-old nephew, in an effort to spell his name with his tiny hands, ended up with a production that approximates "TY." That became his sign name, the handshape starting with "T," with a downward movement ending up with the handshape "Y." However, during a recent visit to a deaf school in Tanzania, Deaf students there could not accept this name sign, as it was not descriptive enough. They quickly agreed on a new name sign for him, one that singles him out for his straight, red hair in contrast to the standard curly black hair of the student body.

According to [Supalla \(1992\)](#), an authority on name signs, there are two basic systems for name signs. In the *arbitrary name sign system*, the name signs created do not refer to any personal characteristics or physical appearance. Instead, a neutral space, a single location on the body, or dual locations on the body are typically used, along with the handshape of the first letter of the person's name, just like the name signs for Thomas, Tara, Leala, Cary, and Troy discussed in the box on [page 205](#). Another system is called the *descriptive name sign system*. A descriptive name sign is assigned to a person as a description of his or her clearly identifiable personal characteristics or idiosyncratic behavior. As discussed earlier, the signs purple-cheek and a sign resembling tears are examples of descriptive name signs. To view the discussion on Name Signs in ASL, please go to www.americandeafculture.com.

Today, although most deaf people do not attend residential school, many of them acquire name signs when they become involved in the Deaf community. However, with an increasing number of parents learning how to sign, this practice of name signs being given by the Deaf community is disappearing. Instead, in many signing schools, the teachers often invent name signs for their students or encourage parents to create one for their child. Unfortunately, many of these teachers and parents are not aware of the rules associated with name

signs, resulting in monikers that are ungrammatical and unsightly to the Deaf adults in the community (Supalla, 1992).

Besides the unique formation of name signs, two aspects of their usage in the Deaf community are also distinctive and culturally bound (Mindess, 1990; Supalla, 1992). First is the community's practice of assigning newer and more culturally appropriate name signs to replace unwieldy, nontraditional, or ungrammatical ones. For example, if a deaf child named Karen was given an inappropriate name sign by her kindergarten teacher (despite good intentions)—for example, the name sign “K” on both hands with a clapping movement to mimic Karen's tendency to clap her hands in school—members of the Deaf community might eventually assign her a new name sign that is more conventional, such as one that uses only one hand with the handshape “K.” Second, name signs are rarely used in the presence of the person to whom they belong. If the person being discussed is in the same room with the speaker, pointing is typically used to refer to that individual. A name sign is mainly used when the person to whom it refers is not present and, then, primarily for identification purposes. For example, Deaf teachers rarely call on their students by their names and instead point to them. However, they use name signs to refer to students when these individuals are absent. In the same vein, Deaf parents typically do not use sign names to attract the attention of their children. Instead, they employ other attention-getting devices, such as hand waving, foot stomping, and shoulder tapping. These attention-getting devices will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter.

By contrast, hearing people often use names when the person is present. For example, hearing people may include the person's name as part of greetings such as “Tom, how are you today?” or use the name as a casual greeting made in passing, “Hi, Tom,” with a head nod, or interject the name throughout a conversation, either online or in person, such as “Oh Tom, I must tell you something,” “Tom, I am so happy for you.” This use of direct reference is rarely done in ASL within the Deaf community.

As is true for most cultural behaviors, Deaf people do not learn these rules from etiquette books. Rather, the expectation to conform to cultural norms is tacit, or generally implied and understood. As such, people typically learn the rules of appropriate conduct from the more experienced members of their community. In the following section, we will examine behaviors governed by rules that are usually explicitly stated by members of the Deaf community. In addition, we will explore other examples of cultural behaviors that are passed on in a more implicit manner by community members, as well as those that are considered emblematic of the Deaf culture.

THREE CATEGORIES OF SOCIAL BEHAVIOR

In the cultures of the world, some behaviors and acts have been formally debated by community members and explicitly described in absolute terms. These end up regulated by rules, policies, or laws. Yet other conduct is regulated by unspoken rules among community members. Finally, some characteristics can be considered emblematic of a certain culture. All three categories are discussed below with specific applications to the Deaf culture.

Explicit

An example of American culture that has been explicitly decided is the constitutional right to bear arms. This cultural value is unique to Americans and is often viewed as bizarre by many people throughout the world.

The fact that citizens can carry shotguns in their pick-up trucks is decidedly an example of American individualism. Freedom of speech, religion, and assembly are other ideals that are explicitly set forth in the U.S. Constitution, and they are enduring values of American society. The cultural value of equal protection under the law for all citizens is also an explicit American value that has been legislated. The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 are examples of ways that this value has become the law of the land.

Other laws are enacted to ensure safety for all citizens. Traffic laws are a good example. Americans are required to drive on the right side of the road, stop at red lights, and drive within the posted speed limits. The reasons that we drive on the right side of the road instead of the left side, why the color red was chosen instead of blue, and why 65 mph is typically the speed limit as opposed to 67 are all arbitrary, yet the laws based upon these assumptions serve Americans well. Because these rules were arbitrarily created, they are not necessarily uniform throughout the world, as evidenced by the fact that in other countries (e.g., Australia, England, India, Japan, and Tanzania), drivers use the left side of the road.

Across the globe, there is a wide range of laws dictating sexual behavior. In some countries, such as Iran, Yemen, and certain parts of Nigeria, participating in homosexual acts is considered a crime and punishable by death (www.ilga.org, retrieved on January 15, 2011). In America, gay rights are increasingly recognized by many states and cities, yet the right to marry has been denied by most. In other countries, such as France, Japan, Portugal, and Brazil, gay people have been given the full protection of the law since the 19th century. Another example related to sexual behavior are the laws associated with polygamy, which is outlawed in some countries and encouraged in others, depending on the beliefs and values of the community.

Tacit

Clearly, not every cultural behavior is explicitly regulated by the government. Rather, many behaviors are tacitly monitored by the members of the community themselves. For example, rules associated with names are complicated, with only a few explicitly spelled out by the law, whereas others are implicitly understood by common practice. By law, every newborn baby in America must be registered with a name and assigned a social security number before leaving the hospital. Beyond that, however, the social rules associated with names are not bound by government regulations. They are something we have internalized, so that while names such as Ruby, Daisy, and Austin are acceptable, we instinctively know that Amethyst, Hibiscus, and El Paso would not be.

In terms of usage, Americans are notorious for the friendly, yet often superficial nature of their relationships with others, as exemplified by our casual use of first names, even with strangers. This practice has caused confusion among foreign visitors to the United States because, in much of the world, the use of first names is typically reserved only for one's family and closest friends. Here, in the United States, however, wait staff at restaurants are often instructed to mention their first names as part of their tableside greeting. This conforms to the expectation that they relate to us in a friendly, chatty, equal manner while they work at our table. However, we do use formal names in academic environments and sometimes in the workplace.

Tipping is another example of the tacit rules that govern people's behavior. The rule of leaving a 15%–20% tip is not compelled by any law but is definitely an American custom and expected of restaurant patrons. By contrast, service fees are already figured into the bills of many other countries.

Although certain laws prohibit sexual behaviors, such as polygamy and rape, most expectations are tacitly monitored by the members of the community. For instance, a traditional American expectation is not to kiss on the first date, although this rule has become more flexible in recent times. Again, this behavior is not regulated by law but by the common sentiment of people in this country. However, in some countries, dating and sexual behavior are indeed regulated by law. For example, the age of consent can be as young as 12 in certain countries, such as Angola and Zimbabwe, whereas it is illegal for anyone under the age of 18 to participate in sex in countries such as Costa Rica, Egypt, Kenya, and Ireland. In some countries, such as Iran and Pakistan, it is a crime for individuals to have sex if they are not married to each other. (www.avert.org/age-of-consent.htm retrieved on April 27, 2010).

Expectations associated with eating habits, personal hygiene, and forms of greetings are also examples of behaviors that are tacitly controlled by members of the culture.

Emblematic

We can delineate a third category of behaviors that are attributed to a culture. This would include behaviors that are not necessarily required or even expected of community members, but are not shocking or inappropriate if exhibited. In this sense, these behaviors are *emblematic* or associated with a particular group of people. For example, at many European beaches, women go topless. This behavior is not required or expected of all women, although no one would raise an eyebrow if a woman removes her top on the sands in the south of France. On an American beach, however, this behavior could get a woman arrested for indecent exposure. Another example of emblematic behavior would be Americans ordering super-sized meals. This behavior is uniquely American, although the majority of Americans do not consume this vast amount of food and drink at one sitting.

Applications to Deaf culture: Explicit

Not many behaviors in Deaf culture are written down or regulated by formal policies. Nevertheless, those that are formalized mostly relate to the value of self-determination and communication access. For example, many Deaf-run organizations' by-laws include a clause requiring officers to be deaf while opening the membership to non-Deaf people. Similarly, many Deaf-run organizations require the majority of board members to be deaf. This is done in order to assure a strong Deaf perspective and Deaf ownership of these organizations.

However, as discussed in [Chapter 3](#), there is no clear definition as to who can be considered deaf or even Deaf. Consequently, requiring a specific hearing level to qualify as "deaf" is often vague and controversial. Contributing to this controversy are questions such as "Would a profoundly deaf person with no signing skills be suitable for presidency of a Deaf club?" "Would a hard-of-hearing person be 'deaf enough'?" and "Would a recently deafened person have enough cultural upbringing to lead a Deaf group?" These questions often create debate, disagreement, and uproar among the Deaf members of an organization.

Finally, the need for explicit rules is evident in the eligibility requirements for participation in Deaf athletic events. As discussed in the following chapter, athletic tournaments are an important part of the Deaf social scene. To prevent teams from acquiring hearing players of outstanding caliber in order to win a tournament, a specific hearing level is mandated in order to participate.

Other than the need for self-determination and to limit participants to "legitimate" Deaf people, not many

rules are explicitly demarcated in the Deaf culture.

Applications to Deaf Culture: Tacit

Most expectations typically found in the Deaf community are tacit. That is, they are expected of members in the Deaf community but are not necessarily written in any by-laws or policies. In fact, these rules probably have not been formally debated and voted on among Deaf people, but they are still generally understood and accepted. This includes some of the culturally appropriate behaviors examined in the previous section, such as leave-taking, keeping others informed, detailed introductions, persistence, and name signs. Additional examples of tacit rules are discussed below.

Excluding the Deaf Person from Conversation

One of the biggest taboos in the Deaf community is to intentionally exclude a Deaf person from a conversation (Mindess et al., 2006). A person with signing abilities choosing not to sign in front of a Deaf person without any explanation and, by so doing, excluding the Deaf person from the conversation, is considered rude. Similarly, for a Deaf person with good speaking abilities to exclude another Deaf person by speaking (without signing) is the fastest way to lose the respect of fellow Deaf individuals. For this reason, a deaf person with oral skills needs to learn the culturally appropriate behavior associated with the use of speech in the presence of other Deaf people. These culturally appropriate acts may include signing and talking at the same time when interacting with nonsigners, asking the Deaf person to wait while speaking to the nonsigning person and then catching the Deaf person up on the conversation, or explaining why it is necessary not to sign for a while and then apologizing profusely for the exclusion.

Although the previous rule also applies to hearing people who know how to sign, many hearing signers are insensitive to what seems to be the common courtesy of not excluding people from conversations. The practice of not signing in the presence of Deaf people (because they were talking to other hearing people) is observed frequently among hearing parents, hearing teachers of the deaf, and other hearing service providers. Consequently, because of their blatant disregard of Deaf people's feelings, these hearing individuals are usually not considered insiders by the Deaf community. By contrast, hearing signers who make a point of always signing when Deaf people are in the environment are more likely to be fully embraced by the Deaf community and be considered "HEARING-BUT."

People in any culture would agree that intentionally excluding someone from a conversation is rude, so this expectation is not limited to the Deaf community. Obviously, the tacit rule of always signing when a Deaf person is in the environment is about common sense and courtesy.

The Role of Speech in the Deaf Community

The role (or lack of role) of speech in the Deaf community has been discussed by various scholars. Sussman (1974) identified this as the ability to place speech ability in proper perspective. Padden (1980) refers to this as "disassociation from speech." Moore and Levitan (2005) emphasized that most Deaf people are not against speech training, but believe that it should not take precedence over literacy development and education. Mindess et al. (2006) discussed the lack of importance of speech in the Deaf community as a hallmark of Deaf culture.

In contrast to hearing, mainstream society, which places a high value on the ability to speak, speech carries

no weight in the Deaf community. It is neither a negative nor a positive asset. Whether a person can speak is irrelevant to most Deaf people. It does not elevate or diminish a person's status within the Deaf community. The ability to speak does not make a Deaf person more admired or respected in the Deaf community.

To illustrate this point, the ability to speak is almost never considered a necessary or critical qualification for a leadership position within a Deaf-run organization. If deaf candidates promote their speech skills as the reason why they should be elected, they would most likely lose the election. In many cases, Deaf people do not even know which ones of their fellow deaf peers can speak well and, in most cases, they could not care less.

In most Deaf gatherings, speech is not used. However, in some situations, a Deaf person with usable speech might be singled out to facilitate communication in the spirit of collectivism. For example, at a fast food restaurant, it might be easier and quicker for a Deaf person with intelligible speech to place an order for other nonspeaking individuals. For this reason, it is not unusual for Deaf people to be identified for their speech abilities, but only if they have a history of being humble about it. By contrast, if certain individuals have the reputation of using speech to elevate their status, it is more likely that Deaf people would opt for other ways to place their orders, such as writing them down themselves.

This is often a difficult concept for a newcomer to the Deaf community to understand. Many deaf individuals from an exclusively oral background have been raised to believe that their speech skills are highly valued, make them superior to others who do not possess the same facility, are an important measure of their ability to succeed, can be equaled to intelligence, and make them "normal." In this sense, they were taught that their value as individuals is tied to their speech abilities, as this skill has always been encouraged and praised. In addition, the first thing many hearing people do when meeting a deaf person is determine whether they can speak, and then compliment them for this feat. This is in stark contrast to practices in the Deaf community, in which the ability to speak is considered a nonissue.

To reiterate, the ability to use speech or residual hearing is not perceived as a negative thing, but it does not elevate a person's status in the Deaf community. The intelligence level, personality, and other more human qualities are what make a person valued. This is a tacit value in the Deaf community.

AUTHOR'S ANECDOTE

In my 30-year teaching career, I have no idea which of my deaf students can speak and who cannot. It does not matter because this has no bearing on their ability to succeed in the classroom environment. I've had hard-of-hearing students with poor English and academic abilities. I've had Deaf students coming from deaf schools with superior academic skills. It is clear to me that speech has nothing to do with a student's ability to succeed in an academic environment.

Privacy

The concept of privacy is played out differently in Deaf culture than it is among hearing people. In general, hearing people can achieve a private chat when auditory access is eliminated for other people. This is usually done by lowering one's voice or whispering in the other person's ear. By contrast, privacy is only possible among Deaf people when visual access is blocked. For example, a closed door makes it impossible for a deaf person to know what's going on behind it, whereas a hearing person could still listen through the door or wall. For this reason, a closed door does not assure complete privacy for hearing people, but it does for deaf people. Obviously, visibility is what determines the level of privacy for a Deaf person. So, in an environment where

Deaf people are present, it is appropriate for individuals who desire to have a private chat to remove themselves from the scene to a location where they cannot be observed. Turning one's back or signing beneath a shirt to have a personal conversation is considered extremely inappropriate and rude. Even more impolite is for the person (either deaf or hearing individuals who can both speak and sign) to stop signing and start speaking to exclude other Deaf people from the conversation. By contrast, in a hearing gathering, it is more acceptable for hearing people to have a private chat if they remove themselves to a quiet corner and lower their voices, even in the presence of others. Although hearing people don't need to physically leave the room, Deaf people are expected to be physically invisible if they desire a private discussion. Otherwise, it is fair game for others in the room to glance over at their conversation. In addition, those individuals who choose to speak and not sign run into the risk of offending Deaf people in the room for not being culturally sensitive.

The key to the differences between Deaf and hearing people's conversations is the visual nature of sign language. It is possible to eavesdrop on a signed conversation from across a room, which emphasizes the necessity of physically moving to a different room for a private chat. Conversely, it is possible for hearing people to eavesdrop on a conversation even if the private conversation is taking place in a different room. (Imagine two women conversing in adjoining bathroom stalls, who do not realize that someone in a third stall is listening in.) So, compared to hearing people, a closed door has a different meaning for deaf people: It represents complete privacy.

Consequently, Deaf people are often appalled by the fact that, despite closed doors, hearing people can still know what their neighbors are doing in a motel room or a restroom.

AUTHOR'S ANECDOTE

I was shocked when a hearing friend told me that he could practically hear everything that goes on in the bathroom at his house. He can tell whether the person is doing number one or number two. He knows if the person has a full bladder or a bad case of diarrhea. He knows when the person is done sitting on the toilet. He knows if the person neglects to wash hands after doing his business. I was appalled, as I considered the bathroom a sanctuary for private business and assumed that the closed door would assure complete privacy. I could not accept his reassurance that most people do not bother listening and do not want to know what's going on in the toilet. As a Deaf person, I find it extremely rude that people know my business even with the door closed.

To sum up, a closed door signifies a completely different experience for Deaf people than it does for hearing people. For Deaf people, it represents complete privacy and symbolizes a complete separation from the rest of the world, whereas for hearing people, it is a barrier but does not necessarily guarantee complete privacy.

Attention-Getting Devices

As discussed in the previous section, using a deaf person's name to get their attention is not the Deaf way. It comes as no surprise that this is not part of Deaf culture, because verbally calling someone by his or her name does not work. [Bienvenu and Colonomos \(1992\)](#) state that, "Attention getting devices are an important part of deaf culture since they differ significantly from sound-based techniques by non-deaf. Body-tap is a common way to get attention. Hand-wave is another. Foot-stomp and light-flashing are others" (p. 11). There are tacit rules as to how each technique is applied, depending on the distance between the two people, how they are positioned (sitting or standing), the formality of the environment, and the presence of hearing

people (Moore & Levitan, 2005).

In the absence of hearing people, foot stomping and light flicking are usually effective in getting the attention of other Deaf people, especially in a large gathering. Even screaming works well if you are directing your efforts to a Deaf person in a private setting who has some residual hearing. However, these techniques rarely are used when hearing people are present, as their reaction to these approaches is predictably negative.

In smaller groups, hand-waving and body-tapping are typically used as they are less intrusive. Tapping the shoulder is the most common form of attention-getting when two people are in close proximity. Tapping the other person's leg is acceptable only if the two people are seated next to each other. Tapping is preferable to waving in front of the other person's eyes. Instead, waving is used only when the intended person is not close enough to be tapped. The size of the hand-wave depends on the distance between the two people.

Precise Descriptions

Police reports are noted for their precision, in which the perpetrator is described as accurately as possible for immediate identification. This often includes the person's body type (e.g., muscular/petite), race (e.g., Caucasian/Asian), height (e.g., 5'4"/6'2"), and any obvious physical marks (birthmark on cheek/tattoo on left arm). This same kind of information is typically exchanged in the Deaf community when trying to describe or identify a person. Vaguely hedging with what seems to be a "more polite" description of a person by describing the person's hair or profession is often perplexing to Deaf people, especially when more obvious physical traits can be more easily associated with the person. As an example, trying to describe John as a tall man with black hair who works at Macy's in New York City would not do as well as the more typical way that the Deaf community would describe John—as an obese black man whose hairline is receding to expose his oversized ears. The intent is not to make fun of the person but rather to identify him as quickly and accurately as possible.

Applications to Deaf Culture: Emblematic

Certain behaviors are emblematic of the Deaf community. In this sense, not all Deaf people employ these behaviors, but it would not be unusual to experience or witness such actions within the Deaf community. These would include straight talk, openness, and a desire for Deaf children.

Straight Talk

Although being direct is a desirable value in many cultures (but not in American culture), newcomers to the Deaf community may be startled by what they consider to be a "blunt" or "brutally honest" communication style. As discussed earlier in this chapter, information sharing is a prominent value of Deaf culture. It is not unusual to have information provided in a straightforward manner with little or no beating around the bush.

This behavior can be traced to the need for clear communication. Too frequently, deaf people experience miscommunication and poor communication with hearing people, resulting in misinformation and ambiguity. For this reason, a clear and explicit exchange of information is often appreciated and a welcomed change within the Deaf community.

In addition, access to information for many deaf people is frequently difficult due to inaccessibility to spoken English and/or limited skills in reading English. As a result, Deaf people depend on each other for the exchange of critical information. For this reason, information that is presented in a straightforward manner is

greatly appreciated.

Also, in the past, many deaf people grew up in residential schools, where their friends were often considered family. Even today, deaf students who are mainstreamed often migrate to a close, family-like Deaf community. Consequently, Deaf people often feel comfortable enough to tell each other exactly what's on their minds because they feel like they are all part of the family.

Being in a big “family,” some Deaf people feel they are allowed or even obligated to comment directly on other people's appearance and actions. For example, it is not unusual for some Deaf people to provide direct, yet unsolicited comments on an unflattering haircut or unbecoming clothes that typically elicit a more gentle or sensitive handling among most other people, both Deaf and hearing. It is important to note here that it is not that unusual for siblings (hearing and deaf) to be brutally honest with each other about a bad haircut. In this sense, it's more about the feeling of being in a family than anything else. Newcomers to the Deaf community would do well to learn to good-naturedly accept any direct comments they receive from Deaf people, while keeping in mind that these statements are meant to be helpful. Remember that if a Deaf person didn't care about you, she would not waste her time giving you her thoughts and advice.

So, in this sense, the “hearing” way of providing feedback by giving just enough constructive feedback in hopes that the person will understand what needs to be done does not work for many Deaf people. Rather, being explicit with what you want to say, while remaining tactful, is preferred.

Frequently, complaints have been lodged against hearing people and especially interpreters for not employing the “straight talk” technique during their work with Deaf people, resulting in confusion and miscommunication. For instance, while interpreting what can be rather an embarrassing session with a gynecologist or urologist, interpreters are often too “nice” and ambiguous in their interpretation, resulting in a less than satisfactory and rather confusing meeting, especially if the deaf person does not understand fingerspelled words such as “external genitalia examination,” “speculum,” “rectum,” “scrotum,” and “testes.”

Openness

Some Deaf people are known to be “an open book,” meaning that they are quick to disclose the personal aspects of their lives—whether it be their accomplishments or frustrations—to people they have just met. Occasionally, accounts of marriage problems, health issues, and work-related frustrations are recounted with new acquaintances. Likewise, stories of recent job promotions, romantic flings, and adventurous experiences are also shared.

The need for information-sharing may be the reason behind the eagerness of some Deaf people to so freely disclose the stories of their lives. Another factor might be the limited number of people in their lives with whom they can communicate. As a result, these Deaf people are quick to chat with almost anyone who can sign. The behaviors listed above, however, are not necessarily practiced by most Deaf people. Rather, they are emblematic of Deaf culture, in which some Deaf people might have the need to be exceedingly open about their lives. For this reason, newcomers to Deaf culture should not attribute these behaviors as typical of all Deaf people but should be prepared to encounter this kind of experience within the Deaf community.

Desirability of Deaf Children

The high desirability of having deaf children is emblematic of the culture. A deaf child is cause for celebration rather than pity (Lane et al., 1996; Moore & Levitan, 2005; Tucker, 1997). As discussed in [Chapter 3](#), 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. By contrast, those with Deaf parents usually do not have to deal with these issues and instead spend their childhood focusing on typical developmental challenges such as separation and independence, not unlike their hearing peers. Often, these children are the envy of the Deaf community because of their relatively normal upbringing without the usual disability-centered agony experienced by so many deaf children from hearing families. Furthermore, the beauty and cuteness of young children's tiny hands signing always elicits flattering responses from all viewers.

When it is their turn to procreate, some Deaf people dream of having Deaf offspring, to ensure that they have a more conventional family experience, free from the communication challenges that typically exist in mixed (deaf/hearing) families. They want something different and better for themselves, and they see that possibility only if they have Deaf children. Some talk about adopting a deaf child.

Yet, it is important to note that some deaf people recall their difficult childhood and wouldn't want to wish that kind of experience on their children. For them, hearing children are preferable. Regardless of these desires and hopes, it is (still) impossible to predetermine the hearing status of one's offspring. Most Deaf people love their children regardless of their hearing status and raise them to the best of their ability.

AUTHOR'S ANECDOTE

With three Deaf children and one hard-of-hearing child, I've had so many Deaf people approach me, telling me how lucky I am to have Deaf children. Many of these people have hearing children of their own and struggle to have clear communication at home. This serves as a reminder of their own struggles growing up in a hearing household. They love seeing the little hands signing. They delight at the access I have to their world. They envy the connectedness I have with my children.

CONCLUSION

We have explored different aspects of social interaction among Deaf people in this chapter. The rules of social interaction are historically created solutions developed by Deaf people themselves over the years. These solutions have allowed Deaf people to create an effective lifestyle for themselves, which in turn has enabled their communities to thrive. In the next chapter, we will learn why the Deaf community is a wonderfully supportive solution created by Deaf people themselves for effective living.

Long Goodbyes

by John Lee Clark (2009)

I miss all of the long goodbyes
of my parents' guests
taking their leave by not leaving
when it was time to go. Someone would sign
Better go home we but hours would pass
around our round table—
the bowls of our hands offering
confession after confession
assuring us that we are we-
before anyone stands up.
the others, sighing, will stand up
slowly and slowly walk
through our house, pausing
where the walls offer stories,
reasons to stay longer
and touch more things with our hands.
I remember how long,
how wonderfully they stood
unwilling to open the front door,
signing away with warm faces
and hugging goodbye again
before going gently into the night.
My family would huddle to watch
their cars' headlights roll away
but pause to flash in the deaf way,
waving goodbye to our house.
How we children dashed inside
to light switches for our house
to wave back goodbye,
light to light bright in the night!
Now that I am grown
and have my own family, do come
for a visit but do not leave
when it is time to go. Sign, do sign
better go home we and our hands
will make time go suddenly slow.

11 The Vibrant Deaf Community



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*Hollywood has typically portrayed deaf people as pitiful, lonely, and isolated, as exemplified in classic movies such as *Johnny Belinda*, *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, and more recently, *Children of a Lesser God*. In reality, Deaf people today, as in the past, are involved in a vast network of organizations that span the globe and represent a wide array of interests, identities, and political persuasions. In this chapter, we will explore the set of connections that link Deaf people locally, nationally, and internationally.*

Rather than being a loose collection of people who happen to share the physical trait of not being able to hear, the Deaf community is woven together by an extensive web of clubs, alliances, and associations that date back to the early 1800s, when the first deaf schools were established (Singleton & Tittle, 2000). In fact, Wrigley (1996) insisted that Deaf culture was an accidental outcome of the days when deaf people were “warehoused” in these institutions. Accident or not, the foundation for a vibrant social life was laid by these schools, which paved the way for the establishment of a well-coordinated community, equipped to meet the spiritual, athletic, political, cultural, and communicative needs of its Deaf members.

SOLUTIONS FOR EFFECTIVE LIVING

The Deaf community “has evolved over nearly two centuries and is based on the shared experience of a particular human condition, that of deafness. To gain entry into this community, one must adopt a cultural view of deafness and be proficient in ASL” (Singleton & Tittle, 2000, p. 222). By 1974, more than 1,000 organizations for Deaf people existed across America (Schein & Delk, 1974), making them a most powerful solution for effective living among Deaf people. Such organizations and other associations provide social and cultural activities, athletic events, political and self-advocacy functions, and spiritual experiences to allow for effective living.

Solution for Effective Living: Social Activities

In local communities across America, Deaf people also have been enterprising in creating opportunities for social interaction (Moore & Levitan, 2005). Traditionally, this took the form of founding Deaf clubs, where members could go to meet a range of social needs (Burch, 2004; Padden, 2008). In many communities, Deaf clubs were so popular and profitable that they were able to pay off and tear up their mortgages in a relatively short period of time. In the past, clubs served the need for entertainment. Captioned movies provided by a federally funded program were a popular draw, since television shows were not captioned. Card games, dart

competitions, and other social activities provided Deaf club goers a much-needed respite from the everyday tedium of strained communication with hearing people. Clubhouses were also the place where political meetings were held under the auspices of state associations of the deaf. However, the dispersion of deaf students into local public schools (instead of enrollment in traditional, centralized state schools for the deaf), plus the growth of the Deaf middle class and improved technology, such as captioned TV, videophones, and text-pagers, have brought about sweeping changes to the social landscape (Padden, 2008). Today, in place of the traditional Deaf club, many Deaf people favor temporary, predesignated meeting spots such as bars, coffee houses, private homes, or other places where a Deaf space is created for few hours of socialization. Although Deaf clubs are fast disappearing from the Deaf culture scene, they still doggedly hang on in a few locations (Padden, 2008; Murray, 2008).

Solution for Effective Living: Athletic Events

In the sports world, all-Deaf athletic teams are routinely formed in cities across the nation, thus providing Deaf athletes opportunities to play against hearing teams in local leagues, as well as to participate in regional and national Deaf tournaments. The United States Deaf Sports Federation (USADSF), a Deaf-operated sports organization affiliated with more than 18 independent Deaf sport associations, takes on the role of organizing these tournaments. National baseball and basketball tournaments are extremely well attended, drawing thousands of fans annually. Bowling teams are also popular in many communities, with Deaf teams competing in local “hearing” leagues. Huge monetary prizes draw serious bowlers to all-Deaf regional and national tournaments, often with as many as 100 teams competing. On a smaller scale, ski clubs, flag football competitions, golf tournaments, and racquetball matches are also held regularly, providing opportunities for Deaf athletes to compete in regional, national, and even international venues. Internationally, the USADSF is responsible for organizing U.S. teams to participate in the Deaflympics winter and summer games, where hundreds of athletes compete for the gold, silver, and bronze against elite competitors from around the world (see www.usadsf.org for more information).

Solution for Effective Living: Political Function

In addition to working together to enrich their lives in the religious, social, and athletic arenas, Deaf people are also politically active in ensuring that their rights are fully protected. To accomplish this end, the National Association of the Deaf (NAD) is organized as a federation with 50 state associations and many more local, affiliated civic associations that coordinate the Deaf community’s political agenda. The NAD was initially established in 1880, to preserve the right of Deaf Americans to barrier-free communication through the use of sign language. At that time, a big shift occurred in the education of deaf children; the previously prevalent use of Deaf teachers and sign language were being abandoned in favor of oral-only methods. Deaf people at that time feared that sign language would become extinct and, as a result, the best solution for effective living would be lost to deaf people. It took almost 100 years of advocacy before Deaf people were allowed back into schools in administrative roles that allowed them to reverse the disastrous actions of some misguided, hearing educators. That century of regressive educational policies has had far-reaching and tragic effects, creating generations of illiterate deaf children (see Marschark & Spencer, 2003, 2010 for review).

Solution for Effective Living: Self-Help

As another testament to the spirit of self-determination, Deaf people formed their own insurance company, the National Fraternal Society of the Deaf, in 1901, at a time when mainstream insurance companies refused to sell life insurance to deaf people because they were considered “poor risks.” After more than 100 years of service, regulations have changed, and deaf people are able to purchase insurance from any insurance company at competitive rates. So, having fulfilled its mission, the National Fraternal Society for the Deaf has closed its doors.

More recently, Communication Services for the Deaf, begun in 1975, strongly exemplifies the value of self-reliance. After years of receiving mediocre service from various agencies, a grassroots movement was initiated in South Dakota to improve access for deaf people. The goal was to have Deaf people design and operate the services themselves, to improve the quality of life for all deaf people. Today, Communication Services for the Deaf is a multimillion dollar enterprise headquartered in Sioux Falls, with services in at least 10 other states providing interpreting, technology, and advocacy for deaf people. It has a nationwide workforce of approximately 2,000 people. The organization continues to be operated primarily by Deaf people and works hard to maintain ties with deaf people at all levels of society.

Solution for Effective Living: Special Interest Groups

Just like any large community with a diversified population, special interest groups abound in the Deaf community, each meeting the needs of a specific sector. On a national level, Deaf senior citizens established Deaf Seniors of America (DSA) in 1992, and they sponsor biennial conferences that draw thousands of attendees. Deaf Women United (DWU) was formed in 1985, to provide an organization for Deaf women that focuses on advocacy, education, and outreach. National Black Deaf Advocates (NBDA) was founded in 1981, to bring together the members of Black Deaf communities for self-advocacy and inspiration. The National Asian Deaf Congress (NADC) was formed in 1997, to unite Asian Deaf people living in America. Likewise, the Intertribal Deaf Council (IDC) was established in 1992, to support Deaf Native Americans in identifying with their heritage. The Rainbow Alliance of the Deaf (RAD) was established in 1977, to promote fellowship and protect the educational, economic, and social rights of Deaf gays and lesbians. The American Association of the Deaf-Blind (AADB) was founded in 1937 (as the American League for the Deaf-Blind), to provide services for deaf-blind individuals. It became a membership organization in the 1950s, with the mission of supporting deaf-blind people’s independence, productivity, and socialization. Many of these organizations also have branches to serve the needs and interests of local communities. For example, current websites display 11 local affiliates for the DWU, 20 for the NBDA, 16 for the RAD, and 7 for the NADC. Although the DSA does not maintain chapters, its website provides a list of contact information about where local Deaf seniors can meet on a regular basis at 33 different locations throughout the United States.

Leisure sports and interest groups are also widespread in the Deaf community. A sampling of organizations and events is given here to provide a taste of the available offerings. The United States Deaf Cycling Association promotes cycling interests among Deaf people and is instrumental in establishing local chapters, such as California Deaf Wheelers and dVELO in Washington, D.C. Poker tournaments are extremely popular in the Deaf community, and the National Deaf Poker Tour draws hundreds of poker players to cities such as Atlantic City and Las Vegas. Golf tournaments are regularly held both regionally and

nationally under the sponsorship of the U.S. Deaf Golf Association and internationally through the World Deaf Golf Championships. United States Deaf Ski and Snowboard Association promotes winter sports among Deaf people and organizes competitions. The United States Deaf Surfrider Association was established to provide Deaf surfers opportunities to surf together. Bowling tournaments attract a large number of bowlers throughout the year, through regional and national tournaments organized by groups such as the Eastern Association of Deaf Bowlers, Dixie Deaf Bowlers, Great Lakes Deaf Bowling Association, and Pacific Coast Deaf Bowling Association. U.S. Flag Football of the Deaf is becoming increasingly popular and visible, as evidenced by its recent 25th National Championships in Columbus, Ohio, with 20 teams coming from across the country to compete. To nurture the love of sports among Deaf youth, a Deaf Youth Sports Festival is organized every year to bring together young deaf people and Deaf coaches.

Solution for Effective Living: Spiritual/Religious Support

From the beginning, religious organizations have played an important role in many Deaf communities, where hearing families and mainstream religious assemblies are unable to meet the spiritual needs of Deaf congregants. Although many religious congregations today have become increasingly responsive to their members' needs and provide interpreters so that Deaf congregants can access their regular services, some Deaf people prefer to worship in sign language among their peers. In smaller communities, Deaf-led prayer groups are typically organized, whereas in larger communities, Deaf or signing religious leaders lead services in a borrowed space in mainstream churches and temples. In some metropolitan locations, Deaf people are able to purchase their own house of worship, making them fully autonomous. Many religious groups maintain a national or even international Deaf association, as evidenced by organizations such as the Deaf Baptist Fellowship of America, International Catholic Deaf Association, International Lutheran Deaf Association, Jewish Deaf Congress, and United Methodist Congress of the Deaf, to name a few.

Solution for Effective Living: Large Gatherings

For the general population, the last 20 years has seen an explosion of Deaf expositions, where thousands of Deaf people gather not only to view the latest technological gadgets, products, and services that appeal specifically to them, but also to enjoy entertainment, education, and camaraderie. A few competing companies sponsor expositions several times each year at different locations. The largest and most well known company, Deaf Nation, describes itself as "the foremost touring tradeshow for, by, and about deaf people. DeafNation provides exhibitions and entertainment around the United States at no charge to the public." Popular vendors at these exhibitions include video relay operators, educational institutions, religious organizations, organizations of the deaf, publishing companies, and small business owners selling their wares. Although most exhibitions draw several thousand people, the world's largest Deaf exposition, held in Las Vegas in 2010, attracted almost 25,000 people.

Indeed, the idea of attending an event with throngs of signing people is appealing to many Deaf people. In addition to Deaf expositions, Deaf-led travel tours and cruises are also popular. Deaf Freedom Cruise 2007 was marketed as the world's largest cruise for Deaf people and attracted more than 4,000 Deaf vacationers for its tour of the Caribbean.

Certainly, this list of events and organizations is not exhaustive. This vast array of opportunities is an

indication of the extensive network that has been established by Deaf people in pursuit of their spiritual, athletic, political, cultural, and communicative interests.

OF/FOR/BY THE DEAF

Although the organizations described above are operated by Deaf people for their own benefit, there are also agencies dedicated to providing services for deaf people and their families. However, these agencies do not always share the same goals and philosophy as the Deaf community. Hence, it is important to note the distinction between organizations “of” the Deaf and those “for” the Deaf. The latter are usually run by hearing people, whereas the former are operated by Deaf people. For instance, the Alexander Graham Bell Association for the Deaf (AGBAD) subscribes to the belief that deaf people are disabled and in need of rehabilitation or therapy to remedy their hearing impairment. Its membership consists primarily of hearing people who earn their living working with deaf children and their families. This organization does not deal directly with the Deaf community and has relatively few deaf members. By contrast, the NAD is a consumer-based organization. Its agenda is determined by the membership, and its elected officers and paid staff are almost entirely Deaf. So, in essence, the AGBAD advocates policies that address the interests of hearing parents of deaf children and professionals who work with deaf children, whereas the NAD responds to the needs and wishes of the Deaf community (Lane, 2006).

Many service agencies that provide services to deaf people are run by hearing people, although some organizations are aggressive in hiring Deaf employees and are committed to a dominant deaf presence on their boards or policy-making bodies. The differences between these two types of programs can be profound. For instance, schools for the deaf, such as the California School for the Deaf at Fremont, the Maryland School for the Deaf, and the Indiana School for the Deaf have a healthy mix of Deaf and hearing teachers and administrators (about 50–50). This has created vibrant learning environments for the deaf children at these schools. By contrast, most other educational programs for the deaf have only a handful of Deaf teachers and staff, resulting in educational practices that often do not reflect the Deaf community’s dynamic spirit. To cite just one example, as discussed in [Chapter 9](#), one of the biggest taboos in Deaf society is to exclude deaf people from conversations by “forgetting” to sign. In many deaf schools, it is common for hearing teachers to have verbal conversations in public areas during breaks with other hearing people without the courtesy of including Deaf people by signing. This creates a feeling of “second-class citizenship” among Deaf teachers, as well as among Deaf students at the school as they are excluded from conversations that are occurring right before their eyes.

It is often for this reason that Deaf people seek refuge in Deaf-run organizations where they do not have to deal with the feeling of exclusion. In such organizations, American Sign Language (ASL) is the primary mode of communication, and Deaf people have full access to communication at all times. This is the primary reason that Deaf people have formed their own bowling leagues, poker tournaments, cycling groups, and the like.

PUBLICATIONS/MEDIA

As discussed in [Chapter 8](#), publications in the Deaf community have long played an important role in keeping members informed and entertained, and, in former times, there were several competing publications. Today,

with the advent of computer-based newsletters (e-news), there remains only one monthly magazine, *Deaf Life*, published and distributed by Matthew S. Moore, Inc. Other print publications are available only to the members of organizations, such as the NAD's *NADMag*, and the Deaf Seniors of America's *New Horizons*.

In lieu of traditional publications, there has been a remarkable growth in electronic publications, including e-magazine and e-news of/for/by the deaf, thanks to the proliferation of web-based programming. The most popular ones are Deaf Digest (www.deafdigest.net) and Deaf Weekly (www.deafweekly.com). A relative newcomer is the popular e-zine called Kiss Fist, which features photography, poetry, creative writing, and editorials done in a hip-hop fashion. This magazine can be accessed through www.kiss-fist.com.

The most well known and perhaps most professional looking video news site is www.ideafnews.com. This site offers feature films in addition to news programs, public announcements, and performing arts, all presented in ASL and captioned in English. Other productions, such as www.deafnewspaper.com, may be less professional looking, and these sites focus their delivery of news more toward the average Deaf person. For example, most newsworthy pieces are delivered in an "information sharing" format in which the newscaster advises Deaf viewers to watch out for current scams going on in the Deaf community, be mindful of new laws that have recently been implemented, or praises extraordinary achievements of Deaf individuals.

Along with e-news, many additional websites have been established to address the particular needs and interests of Deaf people. For instance, there are websites devoted to Deaf dating and social networking, Deaf cyclists, and Deaf yoga. Nowadays, the internet has made connecting to special interest groups as easy for deaf people as it is for the general population. Social media and vlogs have enhanced Deaf people's access to each other and allow for the exchange of ideas in ASL. Consequently, these electronic resources make it less necessary for Deaf people to travel to or live in cities with a substantial number of Deaf residents in order to meet their social and communicative needs.

MECCA/UTOPIA

What do the communities of Cave Springs, Sulphur, Devil's Lake, Delavan, Fulton, Gooding, Faribault, and Danville have in common? These tiny enclaves are home to deaf schools in the states of Georgia, Oklahoma, North Dakota, Wisconsin, Missouri, Idaho, Minnesota, and Kentucky, respectively. Hidden away in remote locations, these schools were established in the 1800s to shelter deaf children. By contrast, states such as Arkansas, Indiana, Mississippi, New Mexico, Ohio, Rhode Island, and Texas established their schools in central locations, such as in the state capital or its biggest city, to promote integration and assimilation.

Regardless of the size of the community, the mere presence of a deaf school makes the community a magnet for Deaf people. Over the years, some of these communities have turned into virtual "meccas" for Deaf residents. A marketing and public relations company, Deaf411 Inc., conducted a survey in 2008 to determine the most "Deaf-Friendly Cities in the U.S." and identified 20 such locales. These locations were found to share the following features: local governments that include Deaf people in the political process, a Deaf community large enough to host activities and deaf services, positive and open-minded attitudes among hearing residents, and a local deaf education center nearby.

Fremont, California, and Rochester, New York were among the cities identified by this project. They are spotlighted here to give a snapshot of what Deaf people and their hearing allies have done to create positive communities for themselves. These two places were selected specifically because their anchors are tied to two

completely different educational facilities, yet both boast dynamic, vibrant communities.

Deaf Community with a Traditional Anchor: Fremont

The Fremont and the surrounding Bay Area Deaf community is based largely on the presence of the California School for the Deaf (CSD), which was established in 1860, in San Francisco. The CSD has since relocated twice, first to Berkeley in 1869 and then to Fremont in 1980. The school has always been considered progressive, thanks to its tradition of having a substantial presence of Deaf staff. Currently, it enjoys one of the largest student enrollments in the nation, with close to 500 students. In addition, the CSD has attracted contingents of Deaf families who have relocated to Fremont in search of a better educational environment for their children. In many other states, by comparison, deaf schools suffer from declining enrollment, making it difficult to offer a comprehensive curriculum. In addition, many mainstream programs provide subpar scholastic and social experiences, thus motivating families to seek alternative educational placement for their deaf children.

In the thriving CSD community, more than 50% of the teachers, staff, and administrators are Deaf. This strong presence of Deaf people has resulted in pedagogical approaches that are visually oriented and Deaf-friendly, which have translated into higher academic performance compared to deaf peers in mainstreamed settings. For example, in 2006, 40%–50% of CSD graduates were able to pass the California statewide high school exit exam, compared to only 10% of deaf students in the mainstream setting in California. Even more striking is the fact that 80% of those who began their educational career at the CSD successfully passed the exit exam (Holcomb, 2010).

In addition to its superior educational offerings, students at the CSD have a wealth of co-curricular opportunities such as varsity sports, dramatics, social clubs, and support groups. The CSD welcomes community members to many of its activities. Its annual drama productions, open house, and sporting events—such as the classic Homecoming game—attract thousands of deaf and hearing people every year, signers and nonsigners alike. The warm, welcoming feeling at school events is an important part of the cultural experience for people in Fremont and the surrounding areas, both for CSD alumni and nonalumni.

With the CSD as an anchor for the Deaf community, many alumni remain in the area. Over the years, they have worked hard to create a vibrant Deaf community, separate from the school. When Fremont was selected as the new site for the CSD in 1980, the Deaf community there convinced a local community college, Ohlone College, to establish sign classes for the hearing public in order to promote an inclusive environment for new Deaf residents. Eventually, the program grew to include specialized classes for deaf students. Currently, the Center for Deaf Studies at Ohlone College enrolls nearly 200 deaf and hard-of-hearing students (with approximately half coming from the CSD and the remaining from mainstreamed programs elsewhere), as well as 600 hearing students who wish to pursue studies in ASL, interpreting, and Deaf culture. Together, they organize cultural events such as international luncheons, drama productions, and pizza nights, all of which contribute to the busy social scene of the Deaf community in Fremont. As an added bonus, Deaf patrons often find Ohlone's ASL students working at local restaurants and stores, making their shopping and dining experiences even more pleasant. In the collectivist tradition, Ohlone students often volunteer at the CSD and other Deaf-based organizations, such as Fremont Oak Gardens (FOG) Senior Housing, Deaf Counseling, Advocacy, and Referral Agency (DCARA), and Deaf Hope (an agency that helps deaf victims of

domestic violence and sexual abuse).

Fremont Oak Gardens is a senior citizen complex that was designed specifically for Deaf elders, with open spaces and unobstructed views throughout the facility, along with visual alert systems inside the apartments. The concept for FOG was first proposed by CSD alumni to provide Deaf seniors with a Deaf-friendly environment to live in during their twilight years. After years of fundraising and advocacy, the project became a reality in 2005. Many activities are planned specifically for the Deaf residents, and Deaf seniors in the community are also welcome to participate. A paid staff member is provided by DCARA to assist with programming and counseling as needed.

The DCARA is a state-funded, deaf-run, service agency that was founded in 1962 by a group of CSD alumni and other supporters. Today, DCARA provides services to the Deaf community through satellite offices scattered throughout the Bay Area, including one in Fremont. Support, in form of counseling, advocacy, and referral, is available to any deaf or hard-of-hearing person in need of assistance. The DCARA also rents out its community hall for use by Deaf organizations. In addition, it maintains a calendar of activities that can be accessed through its website, www.dcara.org. A glance at the calendar reveals the rich social and cultural life for the Bay Area's Deaf residents. In support of the Bay Area's diverse population, DCARA has collaborated with various ethnic communities to host cultural events that spotlight their cultures. Recent activities included a Black Deaf cultural presentation, a Cinco de Mayo event, and a Lunar New Year celebration. Other cultural events sponsored by DCARA include a Mosaic workshop, a Literacy Festival, and a Deaf-made feature movie in ASL. Deaf entrepreneurship is encouraged through workshops such as "Business Formula for Deaf Artists" and the establishment of an organization called the Deaf Business Association. Self-improvement sessions, such as parenting classes, antidepressant workshops, basic computer skills courses, legal rights training, and a Deafhood Forum are routinely offered to the members of the Deaf community. To promote Deaf-hearing interactions, social activities such as coffee night at local coffee shops, pizza nights, and sign-and-dine programs are organized. Informative sessions, such as Workshops on Assistive Devices and ASL classes, are provided to assist newcomers to the Deaf community.

Deaf Hope is another Bay Area organization that was established by members of the Deaf community. Its mission is to end domestic and sexual violence among deaf people by providing shelter to battered women and their children, providing counseling and legal support, and by providing workshops in the community to educate deaf people about domestic violence. This is another example of the collectivist nature of the Deaf community.

In following this collectivist spirit, two separate groups of Deaf entrepreneurs near Fremont have recently entered the highly competitive video relay service business with the promise of superior, Deaf-centric service for their consumers and with profits going back into the Deaf community. These two companies boast total Deaf ownership and control of their companies as a guarantee that the Deaf community would be better served by their companies than their competitors.

Deaf residents of Fremont and nearby cities also enjoy a range of leisure activities conducted in ASL: Deaf bowling leagues and poker groups play almost every weekend. Local sports teams are formed annually to compete in the Northwest Athletic Association of the Deaf, with the goal of going on to the national championship sponsored by the USADSF. Deaf golfers tee off every week. California Deaf Wheelers organize cycling trips several times a month. In addition, religious services abound for Fremont Deaf

residents, from interpreted services to Deaf-run congregations, to meet a variety of spiritual needs.

Although Deaf Fremonters enjoy these opportunities to congregate among themselves, they also have opportunities to attend mainstream cultural events in the community. DEAF Media, Inc., whose mission is to provide meaningful access and participation for the Deaf community to Bay Area cultural institutions, organizes interpreted tours and/or tours led by Deaf docents at community resources, such as the Oakland Museum, the De Young Art Museum, and the Jewish Museum of San Francisco. Professional theatre houses provide interpreted shows for Deaf patrons. The National Park Service organizes interpreted tours of Alcatraz Island and other national parks in the area. All of which make it possible for Deaf residents to be fully included in the local community.

As a traditional anchor, the CSD is the largest employer of deaf people in the area, with over 200 Deaf employees holding positions from administrators to classroom teachers to school psychologists to dorm counselors to custodians. Many of these employees grew up in a mainstream environment and sought employment at the CSD in order to benefit from a Deaf-centric environment that had long been missing in their lives.

With the CSD as the hub and CSD alumni providing the early groundwork for a fully accessible community, deaf people from all walks of life can enjoy many opportunities to lead rich, fulfilling lives in Fremont and the surrounding areas. However, CSD alumni no longer hold the monopoly on the Deaf community. Today, Deaf people from mainstream educational backgrounds are as equally active in the Deaf cultural, educational, and political scene as their peers from CSD, as evidenced by the membership rosters and the leadership profiles of Deaf organizations. For instance, the leaders of organizations such as DCARA and Deaf Hope have included Deaf individuals who did not attend a traditional deaf school. Although they learned sign language as young adults, these individuals are very much part of the local Deaf community scene and work hard to support deaf people in the area. Clearly, they, along with many other newcomers to the Deaf community, have mastered the rules of social interaction as discussed in [Chapter 9](#) and embraced the cultural values of Deaf people.

Although there is one overarching Deaf community in the Bay Area surrounding Fremont, other clusters of Deaf communities throughout the area cater to the specific needs of all kinds of Deaf people, including people of color, those with a specific sexual orientation, people of different age groups, those with varying educational or religious backgrounds, and more, all united in their experiences as Deaf people. There is no reason for Deaf people residing in the Bay Area to experience a lonely or isolated life with such a vibrant Deaf community and an accessible society.

Deaf Community with a Contemporary Anchor: Rochester

The Rochester Deaf Community in New York is also known for its vitality. The anchor of the community, however, is not the local deaf school there. Although the Rochester School for the Deaf (RSD) does have a long tradition of educating deaf children, the presence of the huge Deaf community is not a result of the school itself. Rather, being named one of the most Deaf-friendly cities in the nation stems from its greatest per capita deaf population in the nation, along with a large number of hearing people who can sign. This large contingent of signing people is a result of the establishment of the National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID) at Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) in 1965, which has produced scores of alumni who chose

to remain in the area, along with the alumni of RSD and graduates from mainstreamed programs in the area.

The NTID primarily draws students from public high schools throughout the nation. Many of these students arrive in Rochester with little or no knowledge of sign language. Students are drawn to NTID because it is one of eight colleges that make up RIT. This makes it attractive for those who desire to have an integrated college experience, as the 1,200 deaf students live alongside 14,000 hearing students on campus.

During their time at NTID/RIT, deaf students are exposed to new ways of living by interacting with more experienced Deaf people, including over 100 Deaf faculty and staff members, many of whom hold terminal degrees in their fields. In addition, since NTID/RIT is a selective school, the deaf and hard-of-hearing students who are accepted are among the brightest deaf people in the world. Yet, their educational and communicative backgrounds vary a great deal, ranging from those from Deaf families to those who had never met a deaf person before coming to Rochester. Especially for students in this latter group, the exposure they receive at NTID leads them to see their Deaf identity emerge as they go through the five stages of cultural awareness discussed in [Chapter 4](#). They come to appreciate full, unrestricted access to communication with their Deaf peers through sign language, and with hearing people through the use of interpreters. Better yet, many hearing people at RIT are accustomed to the presence of Deaf people and often are skilled in sign language themselves. Ultimately, deaf students learn the advantages of a bicultural existence, as they take the best that the Deaf community has to offer and, at the same time, expect more from the larger, mostly hearing world.

In appreciation for the solutions provided to them by the more-experienced Deaf residents of Rochester, many graduates become active in the Deaf community, either in Rochester or elsewhere. Although Rochester had an active Deaf community long before the arrival of the NTID, its alumni were instrumental in elevating Rochester to become one of the most vibrant Deaf communities in the world. For example, Rochester Recreation Club for the Deaf, founded in 1945, is one of few Deaf clubs in the nation that still owns its clubhouse. The organization remains viable due to the unity of Deaf community members, including RSD alumni, NTID alumni, and those from mainstreamed programs in the area. In this sense, the Deaf community scene in Rochester reflects the recent shift in education, in which most deaf people do not attend a deaf school. Yet, they continue to migrate to the Deaf community in large numbers and become involved in activities and organizations designed by Deaf people themselves.

Opportunities to congregate abound in Rochester, with a wide array of organizations geared toward Deaf people. To name only a few, these include the Deaf Elders Around Rochester, Deaf Rochester Film Festival, Deaf Roots and Wings (Yoga), Deaf Rec., Deaf Ski Club of Rochester, Deaf Women of Rochester, Greater Rochester Deaf Golfers Association, Greater Rochester Recreation Association of the Deaf, Lilac Rainbow Alliance of the Deaf for Deaf Lesbians and Gays, Rochester Deaf Rotary Club, and Rochester Rascals Deaf Softball Organization.

To serve the burgeoning Deaf populace, many professional organizations have also been established to cater to this community. Rochester boasts at least five independent interpreting referral agencies, one of the most comprehensive deaf-related collections at the local library, a local newspaper reporter assigned to cover Deaf community events, a local cinema with round-the-clock, open-captioned first-run films, and organizations such as Advocacy Services for Abused Deaf Victims; Substance and Alcohol Intervention Services for the Deaf; and Big Brothers, Big Sisters—all designed to provide support to deaf people in need.

In addition, six Deaf medical professionals, including physicians, dentists, and a veterinarian, have their practices in Rochester.

To capitalize on the large deaf population in Rochester, the University of Rochester has applied for and received several major national grants designed to support the Deaf community. Grantees include the National Center for Deaf Health Research and Deaf Wellness Center, under the auspices of University of Rochester Medical Center, along with research in ASL within the Brain and Cognitive Sciences, and Linguistics program.

To support all these activities, Rochester is also home to the world's largest pool of certified and precertified interpreters. It's no wonder that the *New York Times* called Rochester the place where "the world of the deaf intersects the world of the hearing as in no other city" (Michelle York, Dec. 25, 2006). Similarly, a CBS *Sunday Morning* television show did a special in 2002 on the uniqueness of Rochester and dubbed it "Sign City" (Andrews, Leigh, & Weiner, 2004). As is true in many Deaf communities today, the hub of the Rochester deaf community is no longer tied to the deaf school, but rather is a patchwork quilt of Deaf individuals from all types of educational, communicative, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds.

Both Fremont and Rochester have been described as having "mythical status within the Deaf world, equivalent to the great modernist metropolises of Paris, London, and Zurich. These places are identified not only with deaf schools but also with the communities that form around them, the institutions and businesses that support these communities, the families that raise children, deaf and hearing, within them" (Davidson, 2008, p. 186).

Deaf Communities All Around the Country

Although Rochester and Fremont represent the best Deaf communities, with their elaborate network of educational, social, and religious services, along with strong Deaf leadership and involvement, each Deaf community throughout the nation is unique, with its own characteristics and strengths. For instance, Washington, D.C. has its own brand of Deaf community featuring a large number of deaf federal employees and a strong presence of Black Deaf individuals, in addition to being home to Gallaudet University. Seattle's and Baton Rouge's Deaf communities are enriched by the large presence of Deaf-blind individuals. The Deaf communities in Boynton Beach, Florida and Surprise, Arizona have created a rich and active social agenda geared toward senior citizens. With Sacramento, Salt Lake City, Sioux Falls, and Tampa serving as headquarters for Video Relay Service companies, the large numbers of Deaf technologically savvy employees in these cities have contributed to the evolution of the Deaf communities there.

CONCLUSION

There are thousands of Deaf communities throughout the nation, each unique in its own way. Some are shaped by their close proximity to big cities. Some are influenced by geographical location. Some have been shaped by the historical influence of the local deaf schools and/or religious establishments in the area. However, the common denominator of Deaf communities, both large and small, is the desire of Deaf people to congregate with like-minded people in an environment where communication is not an issue.

The Deaf community has been said to possess a small-town feeling, in which everybody knows everybody else's business. Just as residents of any small town would attest to, living in close-knit, intimate communities

has its advantages and challenges. Constraints may include the lack of privacy and pervasive gossiping—typical of Deaf communities, in which shared news travels fast. However, the advantages of living in small towns also apply to the Deaf community: a strong sense of belonging, brotherhood, and mutual responsibility, where everyone watches out and takes care of each other.

Be Tellin' Me

by Kristi Merriweather (2009)

People tell me
what they think
a black deaf female is
People tell me
what they think
they know
what a black deaf female is
People tell me
they know the deal
behind all deals
just a simple solution
mix in the deaf culture,
add an equal amount of
black culture,
stir until smooth,
pronto, the black deaf culture,
I say
excuse my standard English, but
_____ you
I don't take no
second-handed,
mulatto,
prescribed,
whittled-down,
semi-that,
half-here
part-this
culture,
uh-huh,
I be cookin' up my own recipe,
spicy, like mama taught me,
no, don't need your bowl,
thank you very much
only I be
tellin' me
what a blakdeafemale is.

12 The Collision Between Culture and Disability



“Killing My Deafness” by Leon Lim. Used with permission.

In the hierarchy of disability, being deaf has been repeatedly identified in the literature as one of the most debilitating disabilities. Many Deaf people are perplexed by this condemnation because they celebrate being Deaf. They cherish their language and culture so much that they often long for Deaf children, so they can pass along their language and culture to future generations. In fact, Dr. Roz Rosen, when she was president of the National Association of the Deaf during the early 1990s proclaimed, “it’s dandy to be deaf.” Why this disconnection between the experiences of Deaf people and the perspectives of the larger society? The question of whether Deaf people are indeed disabled will not be definitively answered in this chapter. Rather, we will examine some of the similarities and differences between these two populations. We will also attempt to better understand the reasons that many Deaf people feel so strongly about disassociating from the disabled community and actually do not consider themselves to be disabled at all.

As early as the 1800s, Deaf people claimed that they were normal in every sense except for this minor inconvenience of being unable to hear (Burch, 2006; Davis, 2006; Robinson, 2010). Back then, they believed—as they still do today—that thanks to the use of sign language, this inconvenience becomes so insignificant that Deaf individuals are not disabled at all (Burch, 2004; Padden & Humphries, 2005). Supporting this perspective is the argument that Deaf people are physically and mentally normal in every (other) way. This means they are capable of pursuing the same job opportunities and performing the same job duties just as well as their fellow hearing citizens (Buchanan, 1999; Van Cleve, 1993). In fact, the slogan of the National Association of the Deaf (NAD) during the mid 1900s proclaimed “Deaf People Are Good Workers!” Deaf people also believe they are capable of obtaining the same level of education as their hearing peers. It is for these reasons that Deaf people have long advocated for better educational and training opportunities for deaf children, as discussed in Chapter 11.

When planning to write this chapter and then immersing myself in the literature on disability studies, I discussed the project with my friends and colleagues, who would repeatedly question my motives. They asked me, “Why in the world would you want to write about that, when Deaf people have nothing in common with the disabled community?” or “Why would you want to make any connection between us and them when, in fact, we have worked so hard to disassociate ourselves from the disability label?”

GUILTY OF ABLEISM?

Based on terms such as “racism,” “ageism,” and “sexism” that focus on discriminatory attitudes regarding specific groups of people, “ableism” was coined by the disabled community to depict discrimination experienced by people with disabilities (O'Tootle, 2010; Schweik, 2009). Clearly, deaf people are often the subjects of ableism, as the hearing public frequently misjudges their capabilities. Furthermore, most hearing people view deaf people as disabled, lumping them together with the blind and physically disabled (Burch, 2006; Fleischer & Zames, 2001; Neito & Johnson, 2007). Interestingly, however, Deaf people rarely use this term when addressing the oppression and discrimination they face. Instead, Deaf academics and advocates have promoted the use of *audism* and *linguisticism*, rather than ableism, as the terms that best characterize the bias and intolerance they face.

Audism, as initially coined by Dr. Tom Humphries in 1975, is defined as “the notion that one is superior based on one’s ability to hear or behaves in the manner of one who hears.” Lane expanded on this definition in 1992 by including “the corporate institutions for dealing with deaf people, dealing with them by making statements about them, authorizing views of them, describing them, teaching about them, governing where they go to school and, in some cases where they live; in short, audism is the hearing way of dominating, restructuring and exercising authority over the deaf community.” In recent years, audism has become the popular term within the Deaf community for describing such situations (O'Tootle, 2010).

Although not used as widely as audism, there is another term that has been circulating within the academic community referring to the denial of American Sign Language (ASL) in the lives of deaf people, especially within educational settings. This term, “linguisticism,” describes the false belief that ASL contributes to difficulties in learning English among deaf children and therefore should not be used by parents and educators. Consequently, many deaf children grow up without access to the most powerful solution devised for living effectively as deaf individuals. Other myths regarding ASL discussed in Chapter 7 have also resulted in the disparagement of the language.

With the attitude and belief among so many Deaf people that they do not feel disabled, do not look disabled, and are, in effect, not disabled, we need to address the question of whether Deaf people themselves are guilty of ableism. Almost 200 years ago, Deaf people tried to disassociate themselves from the disabled community by eliminating the word “Asylum” from educational settings serving deaf children (Edwards, 2001; Robinson, 2010). In the early 1800s, many deaf schools had Asylum in their names, such as American Asylum for Deaf-Mutes in Connecticut; Asylum for Deaf and Dumb Mutes of the State of Maryland Deaf, and Texas’ Deaf, Dumb, and Blind Asylum for Colored Youths and Orphans. Deaf leaders in those days sought to improve the image of deaf people by insisting that these asylums be renamed to erase any connection to other institutions that were established for those people who were called “feeble-minded”. Clearly, Deaf people’s desire to disassociate from other disabled groups was already evident in the 1800s, and has continued to this day (Baynton, 2001).

At the same time, Deaf people who are not properly contributing to society are often shunned or ostracized by their fellow Deaf citizens for pulling their peers down to the level of people who are truly incapable (Snyder & Mitchell, 2006). Indeed, one of the most pressing issues at the turn of the 20th century were deaf peddlers or beggars who prowled around the streets asking for handouts (Gannon, 1981; Padden & Humphries, 2006; Robinson, 2010; Schweik, 2009). The leaders of the NAD wanted them arrested for casting such a negative image on Deaf individuals who were otherwise perfectly capable of finding jobs and making contributions to the society, insisting that “Those of us who are deaf and dumb do not beg” (Schweik, 2009, p. 253). To support this view, the official publication of the NAD from 1888 to 1929 was called *The Silent Worker*, which illustrates the emphasis that Deaf people were indeed a capable group of contributors to society (Burch, 2006).

AUTHOR'S ANECDOTE

My grandfather was always proud of the fact that he worked for the Goodyear Tire Company for 44 years without missing a day of work. Together with my grandmother, who also worked for the company for many years, they were part of a large Deaf workforce that was recruited by the rubber industry in Akron, Ohio, during both World Wars. Grandfather pointed to his and other Deaf people's hard labor assembling war machinery as the reason for the Allied victory. Because of the excellent treatment Deaf workers received from Goodyear during those years, my grandparents were extremely loyal to the company. To this day, my family still equips our cars with Goodyear tires.

As stated earlier, many Deaf people believe they do not have any physical defect or limitations. In fact, they point to outstanding athletes, capable fire fighters and peace officers, beautiful actresses, and sexy models as proof that they are not disabled at all. For example, deaf athletes like Matt Hamill, a contender in the Ultimate Fighter League; Shelley Beattie, a professional body-builder and participant on the TV show, *American Gladiators*; and Curtis Pride, who played professional baseball with the Montreal Expos, Detroit Tigers, and Atlanta Braves all serve as evidence of athletic prowess among deaf people. Internationally renowned deaf dancers such as Antoine Hunter, Nyke Prince, and Michael Thomas, who all worked with professional dance companies, provide more compelling evidence that deaf people are not physically disabled, and that their being Deaf did not preclude them from pursuing a career that revolves around music. Other examples of physically capable deaf individuals are those who work in the area of public safety, such as LeRoy Colomnos, who holds the record in the Guinness' Book of World Records for the number of lives saved (409). He accomplished this impressive feat during his 40-year tenure as a professional lifeguard. Other deaf public safety workers include Mervol “Skee” Flynn, who served as a sheriff in Montana; Sgt. Tony Wallace, who served as a police officer in Hoonah, Alaska; and Mark Kite, Sr., who served as fire chief in South Huntingdon, Pennsylvania.

Deaf people can also be beautiful and sexy icons. Marlee Matlin, who won the Oscar for best actress in 1986, was named that same year as one of the ten most beautiful women by *Harper's Bazaar Magazine*. Similarly, two Deaf male models, Warren “Wawa” Snipe and John Maucere, posed for *Playgirl* magazine, showing off their perfect physiques. These examples reinforce Deaf people's argument that they are not disabled in any way at all. Yet, this perception also contributes to the practice of ableism among Deaf people and encourages them to distance themselves from whoever is perceived to be inferior.

In the intellectual domain, the Deaf community is also home to many brilliant and capable Deaf people,

which further supports the view that they are not disabled. These include scholars, administrators, physicians, dentists, attorneys, and scientists, to name only a few. Among well-respected, published Deaf scholars are Dr. Harry Lang of National Technical Institute for the Deaf at Rochester Institute of Technology and Dr. Carol Padden of the University of California, San Diego, a 2010 prestigious MacArthur Fellow. Dr. I. King Jordan, Dr. Robert Davila, and Dr. T. Alan Hurwitz, all of whom have served as President of Gallaudet University, demonstrate the ability of Deaf people to lead institutions of higher education. Similarly, outstanding administrators such as Dr. Angel Ramos, who used to head a charter school in Arizona (Sequoia Charter School) and is currently superintendent of a deaf school in New Jersey, and Dr. Laurene Simms, who worked at the Indiana School for the Deaf, have served well at the K–12 level. Dr. Thomas McDavitt of Chicago, Dr. Carolyn Stern of Rochester, New York, and Dr. Stephen Rattner in Maryland are among the growing number of practicing Deaf veterinarians, physicians, and dentists. Among the burgeoning community of Deaf attorneys are Susan Gonzalez, who has a private practice in San Francisco; Claudia Gordon, who was appointed in 2010 as Special Assistant to the Director of the U.S. Department of Labor’s Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs (OFCCPP); and Greg Hlibok, who was promoted in 2011 to Chief of the Federal Communications Commission’s (FCC) Disability Rights Office in the Consumer and Governmental Affairs Bureau. Noted Deaf scientists include a Fulbright scholar, Dr. Caroline Solomon, and a professor of experimental surgery, Dr. Donald Ballantyne. Many Deaf advocates point to these brilliant deaf individuals as evidence that deaf people are not mentally challenged and therefore not disabled.

Another factor that may contribute to an attitude of ableism among Deaf people is the Deafhood journey that many undertake in search of a positive identity, as discussed in [Chapter 4](#). After dealing with the grief of their family members and years of being subjected to intensive therapy and rehabilitation in an attempt by parents and teachers to fix their so-called defect, many deaf people desire a different outlook about themselves. They often seek relief from the negative and pathological projections imposed upon them by embracing the enlightening and liberating community of Deaf people. This process often requires Deaf people to reject the disability label with its associated limiting and demeaning audilogically based and disabling definition of deafness ([Robinson, 2010](#)).

To the dismay of disability rights advocates, many Deaf people subscribe to the mainstream perspective of what the term disability means ([Burch, 2006](#); [Charlton, 1998](#); [Davis, 2008](#); [Doe, 1999](#); [Fleischer & Zames, 2001](#); [Lane, 2006](#); [Longmore, 2003](#)). In short, it is assigned to people who are handicapped, to broken people who deserve their pity, and to people who are unable to fit into society, all of which images Deaf people reject for themselves. [Burch \(2006\)](#) explained, “Deaf activists sought to preserve and protect their society by distancing themselves from other disabled people and emphasizing their commonalities with mainstream, middle-class society” (p. 243). Nadina LaSpina, president of Disabled in Action (DIA) provided a criticism of this exclusion of the disability label by stating, “it is obvious that Deaf people have accepted the nondisabled majority’s definition of disability. We don’t want all the negative baggage either and we need to work together to eliminate the stigma associated with disability. They are not really helping themselves since the nondisabled majority is still going to think of them as disabled” (as cited in [Fleischer & Zames, 2001](#), p. 27). Considering the examples cited above, it may be true that many Deaf people are indeed guilty of ableism.

From their point of view, however, Deaf people have suffered for years from being associated with the disability label. By being designated as disabled, ill-conceived solutions have been applied to them in an effort

to remedy their so-called deficiencies. With the label of disability comes the focus on “fixing” deafness even if Deaf people themselves do not perceive themselves as in need of being fixed (Robinson, 2010).

Instead, Lane and colleagues (2011) proposed that Deaf people should be more appropriately considered as an ethnicity, with cultural features including feeling of community, norms for behavior, distinct values, culture-specific knowledge, customs, social structure, language, art forms, history, and kinship, all of which are historically created solutions by Deaf people themselves.

AUTHOR'S ANECDOTE

While riding on a school bus transporting a variety of disabled children to a regional program, my Deaf friends and I routinely made fun of other children by mimicking their handicapping conditions. One day, my friend was caught and his parents were called to school to discuss this inappropriate behavior. In an attempt to explain the severity of such behavior, the principal asked him how the boy would have felt if other people made fun of his being deaf and his use of sign language. After pondering for a moment, he asked, “Why should they?” At that point, his mother, who happened to be hearing, burst into tears as she realized her son had benefitted from the solutions of Deaf culture to the point that he had no idea that he was supposed to “suffer” from the “disability” of being deaf.

DISABILITY RIGHTS MOVEMENT/DISABILITY STUDIES

Regardless of the disdain many Deaf people feel for being affiliated with the disabled community or the concept of being disabled, it is worthwhile to explore the Disability Rights Movement and identify parallel milestones between Deaf and disabled communities. A number of scholars, including Andrews et al. (2004), Baynton (2004, 2008), Berbrier (2002), Brueggemann (2009), Burch and Kafer (2010), Corker (1998), Foster (2001), Gertz (2008), Humphries (2008), Jankowski (1997), Johnson and McIntosh (2009), Lane et al. (2011), Obasi (2008), Tucker (1997), and Williamson (2007) have examined the fit, or lack thereof, between the perspectives and experiences of Deaf people and the disabled community. Both points of divergence and areas of convergence between these two communities are discussed in detail below.

Areas of Convergence

The disability rights movement strives to shift the dominant society’s paradigm. Instead of viewing disabled people from a pathological perspective, as objects of pity who need to be fixed or rehabilitated, disabled activists want their community to be acknowledged as a cultural entity (Branson & Miller, 2002; Garland-Thomson, 2006; Johnson & McIntosh, 2009; Longmore & Umansky, 2001; Schweik, 2009). Indeed, it has been proposed that the term “disability” be eliminated and any variation of ability be considered as part of the diversity that exists within the human race (Charlton, 1998; Fleischer & Zames, 2001). This transformation of perspectives has advanced the dialogue about disabled people from a purely medical model to a social model to a current cultural model (Longmore & Umansky, 2001; Schweik, 2009). Perhaps, in fact, the Deaf community has been a leader in the disability movement without realizing its influence (Doe, 1999).

For example, the well-publicized protest at Gallaudet in 1988, known as Deaf President Now, is often cited in Disability studies literature as a pivotal period in *its* history (Andrews et. al., 2004; Longmore & Umansky, 2001; Longmore, 2003; Shapiro, 1994). Interestingly, this perspective is rarely discussed within the Deaf community, as Deaf academics consider the protest exclusively as an important part of the Deaf civil rights movement, without considering its impact on the larger disabled community (Fleischer & Zames, 2001,

Lane et al., 2011).

Although the Deaf community has worked long and hard in its fight against oppression, the political agenda of the disabled community mirrors its objectives in educational, employment, social arenas, and, most importantly, in the homes in which they grew up (Foster, 2001; Longmore & Umansky, 2001). The Deaf community works tirelessly to promote self-determination and to reject the idea that people who are not Deaf are capable of making decisions that impact their lives and the lives of Deaf children (Burch, 2001; Gannon, 1981). Disability advocates argue the same point (Davis, 2006; Fleischer & Zames, 2001; Longmore, 2003; Snyder & Mitchell, 2006).

It is for this reason that early-intervention programs that currently screen more than 97% of all infants for “hearing loss” (<http://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/hearingloss/index.html>) are of concern to many in the Deaf community. Although the practice of screening infants’ hearing as early as possible is admirable to ensure an early start to language, social, and communication development, the intervention strategies provided by many professionals are not. Instead of providing families with culturally based, time-tested solutions, such as the use of sign language to allow deaf infants and their families to have immediate and effective communication, the field of early hearing detection and intervention (EHDI) reinforces the notion that being deaf is a bleak, debilitating condition. From this perspective, the priority is identifying a “cure,” that often includes invasive medical intervention, such as surgeries, and/or intensive rehabilitation, such as auditory verbal therapy in which children undergo hours of intense training to learn how to speak and listen, all with varying degrees of success. This rehabilitative emphasis has resulted in a prolonged period of grief for many families and an unhealthy home environment for the deaf child, one in which she or he is expected to labor diligently to “overcome deafness.” Consequently, the difficult journey discussed in Chapter 4 is being experienced by yet another generation of deaf children due to inappropriate and ineffective pathology-focused early intervention strategies.

This troubling scenario contrasts with the experiences of deaf children who are enrolled in early intervention programs that enjoy close partnerships with the Deaf community. In these venues, deaf children are able to benefit from the solutions devised by generations of Deaf people, most of who came from hearing families. Consequently, these children are able to enjoy fuller access to communication at home, providing more inclusive family relationships. Regrettably, this unfortunate state of affairs is not unique to Deaf education. Many Special Education policies are shaped without input from the disabled community that they directly impact, resulting in poorly conceived practices for families with special needs children.

In her study, Foster (2001) identifies as a common goal for both Deaf and disabled communities: the desire for “quality education, opportunities for employment and career advancement, and the ability to enjoy the same level of resources and services as are available to all citizens; in this regard, they are the same as other members of American Society” (p. 116). Her study affirms many commonalities between the goals and desires of Deaf people and the disabled community.

Areas of Divergence

Yet, Deaf people, when liberated from the oppressive and paternalistic views of their families and the educational system, have a strong need to disassociate themselves from any vestige of the disability label. By associating with the disability community, they feel disabled, they are disabled, and they become disabled

(Lane, 2006; Padden & Humphries, 2006).

Not only is this association with the disabled community seen as disabling, actual interactions with various disabled individuals are often difficult, even more so than with the general public. The most salient fact is that the disabled community is populated by hearing people, albeit with various disabilities. Specifically, most members of the disabled community do not sign. Consequently, there is no distinction in many Deaf people's mind between disabled hearing people and hearing people in general. Indeed, communication challenges may be even greater between Deaf and certain disabled populations who do not have the use of their arms or sight. For example, it is virtually impossible for a Deaf person to converse in sign language with a blind individual, let alone try to write back and forth. Similarly, it is extremely difficult to lipread someone who has a speech impediment or to understand a person's signing if he or she has a motor disability. So, in this sense, Deaf people often feel more at a disadvantage among disabled individuals than they do with nondisabled people, and, therefore, they resist placing themselves in situations where communication will be difficult and cumbersome.

This leads to another important distinction between these two communities. The Deaf community is primarily a linguistic community; therefore, the issues the Deaf community faces are more similar to other linguistic minorities than to those of various disabled communities (Davis, 2006; Fleischer & Zames, 2001). For example, the opportunity to congregated with others who share the same language and culture is highly valued among Deaf people, just as it is for many new immigrants to the United States. In fact, many Deaf people view their desire to congregated among Deaf and hearing signers to be similar to ethnic communities that have their own newspapers, religious services, and so on (Baynton, 2006). This perspective counters the assertion of some disability rights advocates that deaf people were forcefully and inappropriately segregated into special schools, like many developmentally delayed individuals and other disabled people were in the past (Barnes, Mercer & Shakespeare, 1999; Wolfensberger, 1975). Although many disability rights advocates support a cross-disability service model, this pan-disability approach translates into continued severe linguistic and communication obstacles for Deaf people, again because most disabled people and service providers do not sign fluently.

AUTHOR'S ANECDOTE

A few years ago, I resigned from a cross-disability committee because of differing opinions on how deaf people should be viewed and supported. The charge of this particular committee was to review grant applications from disability-related organizations and rank the strength of the proposals. Those applications with a cross-disability focus were to receive higher priority than those that focused on the needs of a specific group. My appeal to change the scoring formula to take into consideration that unique needs of certain groups might not be adequately addressed through a cross-disability service model "fell on deaf ears," to use the popular cliché. Consequently, all proposals from Deaf organizations addressing the linguistic and communicative needs of Deaf people received low scores and did not qualify for any grants. Unfortunately, Deaf people continue to be poorly served not only by mainstream service providers, but also by disability-focused organizations.

Therein lie the differences in the advocacy priorities of the Deaf and disabled communities. Although the disabled community has advocated for full inclusion, or the right for disabled children to be educated in the mainstream alongside their nonhandicapped peers, the Deaf community has fought long and hard to preserve schools for the deaf as a viable option for Deaf children, in addition to mainstream options (Barnes & Mercer,

2003; Shakespeare, 2006). For this reason, Public Law 94-142, which was later called the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, is often viewed as the most destructive law in the history of Deaf education with its Least Restrictive Environment provision (Shapiro, 1994). In sharp contrast, this same law is considered by many in the disabled community as the most significant breakthrough to provide disabled children with equal rights and access to education (Barnes & Mercer, 2003; Saxton, 2006; Shapiro, 1994). One reason for this polarity of opinion may be that the negative effects of institutionalization experienced by many disabled people in the past were never really felt by Deaf people. On the contrary, attending residential schools provided deaf children with respite from a lonely life in a home where family members and community members do not sign (Burch, 2001; Charlton, 1998; Padden & Humphries, 2005). For this reason, deaf schools hold a special place in the hearts of many Deaf people. Another possible reason that residential deaf schools are so cherished is that Deaf people were responsible for the establishment of at least 24 such schools and spearheaded the battle to keep them open. They represent a place where the language, culture, and heritage of Deaf people are revered and preserved (Longmore & Umansky, 2001). To replicate the experiences of residential schools, the Deaf community has been instrumental in establishing centralized living communities for Deaf senior citizens, such as the Columbus Colony in Ohio, the New England Homes for the Deaf in Massachusetts, and the California Home for the Aged Deaf. Within such establishments, Deaf senior citizens would not have to suffer from linguistic isolation among nonsigners during their twilight years. In fact, creating signing communities has long been the mission of Deaf leaders, an idea that runs counter to disability advocates' efforts to do away with segregated housing, education, and socialization.

Another area of divergence relates to the role of community. Although the disability community is organized primarily with the goal of advocating and advancing the rights of disabled people, the Deaf community emerged immediately after the establishment of the first school for the deaf in 1817, for the purpose of socialization and congregation (Lane, 2006). In fact, social and athletic events, such those being organized by the United States of America Deaf Sports Federation (USADSF), consistently outdraw the political conferences sponsored by the NAD, the political organization of the Deaf community.

Further reinforcing the divergence in the character of the disabled and Deaf communities are the dissimilar foci of the academic studies of these two populations (Barnes & Mercer, 2003). In the past, disability studies programs typically focused on advocacy and politics, although the emphasis has shifted toward the cultural aspects of the disability community in recent years (Fleischer & Zames, 2001; Snyder & Mitchell, 2006). By contrast, since their inception, Deaf studies curricula have emphasized cultural elements, such as language, history, and art, which embody the pride Deaf people feel about their heritage. This may explain why many Deaf people, unlike most disabled people, would welcome the birth of a Deaf child and the opportunity to pass down the beautiful culture that they have come to know and love (Fleischer & Zames, 2001; Lane, 2006).

AUTHOR'S ANECDOTE

With four Deaf and hard-of-hearing children of my own, I find it fascinating to notice how different people react to finding out about their hearing status. Hearing people without any knowledge of Deaf culture often express pity and sorrow. Their first question is often "can they talk?" By contrast, Deaf people delight in the news and fuss over my children, taking special pleasure in watching their tiny hands signing.

Through their culture, Deaf people celebrate their Deafhood, an illustration of their feeling that being Deaf is not a disabling condition. Deaf people see themselves as capable of doing anything, and thus not disabled in any way. Many Deaf people prefer to marry within the community to ensure full communication access and shared cultural experiences. This often is based on their difficult experiences growing up in hearing households where parents and relatives rarely learn to sign well enough to make them feel fully included (Bodner-Johnson, 2003). The cultural claim made by Deaf people is further reinforced by the fact that the Deaf community, not the disabled community, has the prerequisite language component required by the cultural model, with ASL as the defining characteristic of the Deaf culture (Barnes & Mercer, 2003; Shapiro, 1994).

All these divergences have led many Deaf people to believe that they have very little in common with the disabled community. As Lane (1995), a leading scholar in the field, argues, “The values and goals of people in the DEAF-WORLD are so radically different from those of people with disabilities that it is hard to imagine anything useful being achieved when neglecting those differences and conflating the two groups” (p. 315).

DISABLING EFFECTS OF BEING DEAF IN A PREDOMINATELY HEARING WORLD

In spite of this perspective that Deaf people are not disabled, being deaf in a predominately hearing world does pose challenges that perhaps warrant intervention by the government. One major distinction between Deaf people and other linguistic minority groups is that Deaf people do not enjoy automatic access to much-needed life solutions through their parents. In spite of their minority status, in almost all other linguistic minority groups, families speak the same language within the household, thus enabling children to acquire language skills and a cultural sophistication to negotiate with the larger society, as well as with their own community.

The cultural claim made by the members of the Deaf community does not mean that their needs and rights to protection and services under the umbrella of disability rights should be eliminated. For instance, some critics view deaf schools as the “breeding ground” for Deaf culture, as it is the place where many deaf people become acculturated into the Deaf way of life. These people have argued that if it is the purpose of these schools to provide a training ground for Deaf culture, then tax dollars should not be used, as the government is not in the business of promoting any particular culture within the educational system. As such, parochial schools generally do not receive government funding.

This argument does not succeed for several reasons. First, each community has its own unique solutions for effective living. For some disability groups, becoming fully assimilated is the preferred solution. For other groups, technological advancements to minimize the effects of the disability are advocated. For Deaf people, the adoption of a linguistic-cultural model allows for the most effective lifestyle. So, in this sense, deaf schools provide deaf students with access to solutions that their hearing parents do not possess and are therefore unable to provide.

Second, in spite of solutions readily available in the Deaf community, many deaf children are denied access and exposure to Deaf role models who have successfully dealt with audism. Without access to Deaf adults and their historically created solutions, deaf children are left extremely disadvantaged in their struggle to develop language, build an effective communication system, obtain world knowledge, develop positive self-esteem, and

learn how to deal with potential discrimination and oppression. For this reason, the argument that tax monies should not be used on deaf schools and programs in which Deaf culture is nurtured is misguided. In reality, such expenditures help Deaf children thrive in a predominately hearing world by providing solutions that have been fine-tuned through the years by Deaf culture.

Third, for some, the effect of being deaf in a predominately hearing world can be devastating. The lack of educational opportunities, bleak employment picture, and isolating effect have been well documented, all of which can be attributed to lack of exposure to solutions available within the Deaf community. Consequently, it is the experience of growing up isolated from other Deaf people that can lead to an extremely disabling condition.

Fourth, discrimination against deaf people is widespread because of the public's ignorance about their abilities. For this reason, legal protection is much needed to allow deaf people equal opportunities for employment, education, and government services. In addition, government subsidies such as Social Security Disability, reduced fees for mass transit, and vocational rehabilitation are often necessary to assist with daily expenses until deaf individuals are afforded opportunities to become tax-paying citizens.

Legal Protection Under Disability-Related Laws

Civil rights laws enacted in the United States can trace their roots to the 14th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which guarantees every U.S. citizen equal protection under the law and the right to due process. Throughout history, however, people of color, women, members of various religious/cultural groups and sexual orientations, disabled individuals, and deaf people have had to endure both overt and covert discrimination in spite of the protection supposedly guaranteed by the 14th Amendment. Only with the passage of laws that specified the protection afforded these aforementioned groups did the 14th Amendment explicitly apply to these disenfranchised peoples. Such laws pertaining to deaf people and disabled groups are discussed below.

It was not until 1973 that disabled and deaf people were provided with legislation protecting their rights under the federal government. The Rehabilitation Act of 1973, modeled after the Civil Rights Act of 1965, made it illegal for any federal government agency to discriminate against disabled and deaf people in both the provision of services and employment practices. The most relevant portion of this act is Section 504, which explicitly states that agencies receiving federal funds must provide equal access to disabled and deaf individuals. For deaf people, this act resulted in increased opportunities to attend colleges and universities with appropriate support services, the provision of interpreting services when hospitalized, visual access to information at public agencies, and many more services.

Public Law 94-142, now known as Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, was enacted in 1975 to provide deaf and disabled children with access to free, appropriate, public education. As a result, deaf and disabled children have the right to attend a local school if it is determined to be "the least restrictive environment" for them (with the provision of appropriate support services) or be placed at a specialized school, according to their individualized education plan. No longer are deaf and disabled children denied the opportunity to receive education simply because they do not hear or have some kind of disability, which was often the case prior to 1985.

In 1990, after intense lobbying by the disabled community, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)

was enacted to expand the protection of law to disabled and deaf citizens in almost every aspect of life. Specifically, the law covers employment, transportation, public accommodation, and telecommunications. The ADA represented a significant advancement in the quality of life for deaf and disabled people, in which they have the right to compete on an equal basis for employment, educational, and civic opportunities.

The passage of the ADA has had far-reaching implications for the Deaf community. It permits deaf people to pursue jobs for which they are qualified and to be provided with appropriate support services to allow them to perform their job duties. In the educational arena, deaf people cannot be denied admission to colleges or universities solely based on their hearing ability, if they are qualified in every other way. For public transportation, visual paging is required to keep deaf people informed of route changes and updates. Hotels are expected to provide visual alert system for deaf patrons. Telephone and video relay services are available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Television shows are routinely captioned. As technology continues to advance, the federal government has a commitment to make sure deaf and disabled people are not left behind.

Although it is clear that the ADA has done much to enrich the quality of life for deaf people, technically, however, the law does not mandate “full access.” Rather, it states that deaf and disabled people must be provided with “reasonable accommodation.” Consequently, this has created confusion as to what equates “reasonable accommodation” for deaf and disabled people and has led to numerous court cases in an attempt to define this provision. Generally speaking, access must be provided to allow deaf and disabled people to benefit from services and programs that exist for the general public, unless it can be shown to be “an undue hardship” on a business and is not “life-threatening” to deaf and disabled individuals. Therefore, for example, it is reasonable to expect interpreting services at hospitals but not at restaurants. Yet, restaurants are expected to find ways to accommodate deaf patrons through alternative means such as picture menus, paper and pencil, or gesturing if needed in lieu of providing interpreting services. In contrast, these alternatives are not acceptable for hospitals due to the nature of their business.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, one could say that Deaf people do not feel disabled within the Deaf community, as their access to communication is not restricted in any way. Their sense of autonomy is strong, because they can make the decisions that affect their lives. When they venture outside the Deaf community, however, which they need to do on a daily basis, the disabling effects of being deaf are often felt in several areas. Most hearing people do not know sign language, and most deaf people do not have full access to spoken language, regardless of the intensity of their oral training. In addition, most hearing people have limited understanding of Deaf culture and are unable to go beyond the stereotypical images of deaf people. Furthermore, because of restricted educational opportunities and the poor communication skills of many parents, deaf people often suffer from linguistic impoverishment and consequently have gaps in their knowledge. All of this points to the necessity of the ADA to ensure that deaf people are given appropriate access to information, communication, and services.

In spite of perceptions among many Deaf people of a poor fit between the Deaf experience and that of the disabled community, both groups routinely receive governmental services and supports that are designed for the entire disabled population. Deaf education programs are usually administered by the Department of Special Education. Many deaf people receive financial assistance from the federal government in the form of

Social Security Disability and/or vocational rehabilitation, programs established primarily to provide support for disabled people. Deaf people also enjoy subsidized passes given to disabled riders for mass transit. Some deaf people can rationalize their benefitting from services geared “for the disabled” while still not identifying as being “disabled,” since most deaf people experience a substantially lower standard of living than most Americans due to the chronic problem of underemployment and unemployment. This situation is often directly related to the relatively poor education deaf people received, which make it difficult to obtain well-paying jobs. By taking advantage of these services identified for the disabled population, however, deaf people seem to be accepting the “disabled” designation. [Padden and Humphries \(2006\)](#) noted that Deaf people often apologize to each other for what seems to be a contradiction between their actions (accepting government subsidies) and their belief (that being Deaf is not a disability).

It is worth noting that some Deaf leaders express criticism of this willingness to sacrifice cultural pride in order to benefit from government handouts ([Kurs & Bahan, 2001](#)). They feel Deaf people should, instead of accepting disability benefits from the government, fight for more culturally appropriate access in the areas of education, employment, or civic participation.

Other advocates, such as [Ladd \(2003\)](#) and [Lane \(2008\)](#), believe the Deaf community has been, in fact, colonized, thus rendering deaf people disabled and dependent. In this regard, policies regarding the education and social welfare of deaf people are typically determined by the hearing establishment, whereas schools and agencies are run by people with little understanding of Deaf culture, resulting in disastrous and disabling outcomes for many deaf people. Compounding the problem is the lack of contact and interaction between hearing parents of deaf children and the Deaf community. Consequently, hearing parents who are unaware of solutions available through Deaf culture allow their deaf children to grow up believing they are severely disabled and dependent. Advocates like Ladd and Lane argue that the Deaf community, like most other disenfranchised groups, needs to reclaim its authority by assuming control of the deaf education system, working closely with parents, and being primarily responsible for providing services to deaf adults. Such actions correspond to the value of self-determination, which is the core value of many oppressed groups throughout the world, including deaf people.

Regardless of the differing perspectives outlined above, Deaf people, just like everyone else, lead their lives the best they can. Those with access to Deaf culture certainly do not spend their time thinking about whether they are disabled. They are too busy holding jobs, marrying and raising families, and doing the same things that most Americans do on a daily basis. And when they are faced with blatant audism, they have the support of their peers from the Deaf community to help them deal with discrimination and oppression in the most effective manner.

Questions for a Cochlear Surgeon

by Salvatore Parlato, Jr. (1994)

Your kind concern, Doctor of the ear,
 (though sincere and here respected)
 that Deafness-it is be corrected
 sooner may earn you a rich return
 if somewhere else re-directed.

For, seem we as those so childly naïve
 As to tolerate woes past our power to relieve?
 Or think you we lead lives somewhere in between
 Your world of words and ours of the seen?
 If so, of the few of us caught in-bewixt,
 How know you who of us ought to be fixed?

Should we tell a youngster: Dearest one, we fear
 That, with your audio circuit naturally half broken,
 Imperfect, may not freely hear
 Every single syllable that someone else has spoken?

Must that minor therefore patient-ly endure
 Years of batteries and surgical assault
 Unsure that your probes of either of her lobes
 Can Lourdes-like cure her of her aural "fault"?

And isn't it true that the tactical premise
 Of your state-of-the-art high but crude electronics
 Base its case on the practical promise
 Of, at heart, only slightly better new sonics?

Also be it told: Will the hoped-for release
 To be gained, as sold, by such new-found noise
 Exceed the manufactured unnatural ill-ease
 Decreed by your medically magic sound-toys?

Thought: Still untaught, ought a trusting child feel
 As if caught in a world neither fowl's or fish's
 Confused over which of her two lives is real:
 Her own or that of some grown-up's wishes?

No wonder Deaf parents feel offended and nervous
 Almost as under a wait-for-me vulture:
 Kindly you offer a well intended service
 But blindly ignore their touch-and-see culture.

Finally, fine physician: Won't the bitter pill cost

Of your highly positioned drastic drill so large

Exhaust (as a lottery or Las Vegas lost)

Their shiny plastic Visa or Master Charge?

So, if searching, Madam/Sir

For problems to be solved

Why not find the answer to how *this* one first solved?

13 Diversity in the Deaf Community



“Embrace” by Warren Miller. Used with permission.

When you see the term “diversity,” the first image it conjures in your mind probably relates to the inclusion of different types of people, such as those of various races, religions, ethnicities, ages, sexual orientation,, and gender. This chapter attempts to go beyond the usual connotation of the term by examining additional variables that need to be considered in a discussion of diversity in the American Deaf community. Not only does the Deaf community parallel the American community in its racial, ethnic, and religious diversity, it also recognizes diversity among its own unique variants. The picture we will paint is not unlike America, composed of many distinct communities scattered across the country, all shaped by distinct characteristics but united by one flag representing equality and justice for all. For Deaf people, the unifying flag is the shared experience of being Deaf.

The Deaf community is diverse in more ways than just various racial, religious, ethnic, and economic backgrounds. Within the Deaf community are members with different levels of hearing, different personal histories associated with sign language usage, different educational and communicative backgrounds, different degrees of parental acceptance and support, and different degrees of identification with other Deaf people. Furthermore, each local Deaf community is unique, as any of a number of factors may or may not have had an impact on it, such as the presence of a deaf school, the number of Gallaudet and National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID) alumni living in the area, the racial and ethnic diversity that exists in the locality, and the size of the Deaf community itself. In this sense, there is not just one Deaf community in America, but many Deaf communities, all of which collectively make up the American Deaf community.

As Americans come face to face with growing diversity within the country, many Deaf people find themselves with the option having of more than one heritage to fall back upon for solutions. For instance, a Black, Deaf, Catholic, Gay feminist has the legacies of the Black community, Deaf community, Catholic community, Gay community, and Feminist community for support as a multicultural individual. In some

cases, being Deaf is not experienced as the overarching identity and, therefore, specific solutions are available through other communities.

TWO OPPOSING PERSPECTIVES ON DIVERSITY

There are two contradictory views of how diversity is embraced within the Deaf community. One perspective holds that the Deaf community is especially accepting of differences. Since American Sign Language (ASL) and the Deaf experience are the common bonds that hold Deaf people together, all racial, religious, sexual orientation, and other personal or cultural differences become secondary. As a result, the Deaf community is perceived to be extremely tolerant and supportive of various lifestyles and backgrounds that exist among deaf individuals.

The contrasting perspective is that, because of limited access to information on multiculturalism, Deaf people are more conservative regarding diversity than their fellow hearing Americans. In this scenario, Deaf people of color or those from a minority background often face discrimination and exclusion, even within the Deaf community. In actuality, both perspectives are probably correct. The Deaf community certainly is not free of bigotry and, just like other Americans, Deaf individuals are influenced by the environments in which they were raised and where they currently reside (Doe, 1994). However, due to the common experience of communication difficulties with hearing people, including their families, many Deaf people seek refuge among others like themselves, regardless of their ethnicity or other diverse identities.

Deaf people's lives are also affected by other unique factors that influence diversity. For example, deaf educational programs are usually regionalized, serving students from a large geographic area. This often results in deaf children from various backgrounds receiving their education together and being exposed to a variety of cultures that may not exist in their neighborhood schools. Additionally, it is typical for state-run deaf schools to have only one school serving the entire state. Consequently, students at these schools come from various regions, both rural and urban. A variety of cultural, ethnic, religious, and economic groups are represented in these student bodies, affording Deaf students unique opportunities to meet and develop friendships with members of diverse groups.

DEAF COMMUNITY OR DEAF COMMUNITIES?

When people think of Deaf communities, they tend to think of a city like Frederick, Maryland, because of its high concentration of Deaf-related activities and services and the large presence of Deaf professionals from the nearby Maryland School for the Deaf. However, this perspective has been criticized as being too narrowly focused on the majority (white) population or the "elite" Deaf population who had the privilege of attending and graduating from a university and working in well-paid jobs (Lakoff, Wang, & Perkins, 1999).

AUTHOR'S ANECDOTE

When I attended a regional program in Orange County, California, I frequently exchanged my ham sandwich for an exotic home-made bean burrito from my Hispanic classmates. When my mother found out, she got upset because she didn't want to spend money on expensive meat if she knew I would be giving it away! This experience, along with other encounters with my classmates, has made me a more open-minded person. For example, I understood better the need to cling to traditions when I was invited to attend a powwow with my Native American classmate. When visiting the homes of my Black friends, I learned of the importance of Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King, and Jesus in their lives, as evidenced by portraits of these individuals hanging in their living rooms. I understood the meaning

of persecution when attending a Latter Day Saints church service with my Mormon friend. I appreciated the uniqueness of the Jewish experience when celebrating with my friend at his bar mitzvah. Eating dinner with a Chinese family whose parents could barely speak English was an eye-opening experience. All of these gave me a personal appreciation of the diversity that exists in America, thanks to my Deaf friends.

To gain a broader perspective, one must also recognize that Maryland is home to a large presence of Black Deaf people in Baltimore, Deaf Gay and Lesbian individuals along with Deaf-Blind residents in nearby Washington, D.C., and NTID alumni in Rockville, many of whom do not consider Frederick as the center of the local Deaf community. Instead, these Marylanders congregate and organize events in their neighborhoods to meet their specific cultural and social needs. Many of these gatherings operate “under the radar” and thus are unknown to the majority of Deaf people. Although some of these events are exclusive and not technically open to outsiders, other functions are open and welcoming to anyone with an interest in that particular group. Some individuals from these smaller communities are actively involved in the “mainstream” Deaf community, whereas others prefer to associate primarily with individuals who possess a similar life orientation or background. Yet other Deaf people enjoy being actively involved in a variety of communities and benefit from them all. For example, a Hispanic, Catholic, Deaf person may affiliate herself with the larger Latino hearing community to celebrate major religious or cultural holidays, as well as with the smaller Latino Deaf community for intimate get-togethers, and she may attend sporting and political events with the larger Deaf community, making her simultaneously a member of three distinct communities.

Hard of Hearing

It is noteworthy that hard-of-hearing individuals make up a significant component of the Deaf community. Unlike members of the Hard-of-Hearing community who identify themselves primarily by their ability to hear and speak, these hard-of-hearing members of the Deaf community usually sign fluently and play down the fact that they can speak and hear, in observance of the cultural values that Deaf people assign to speech, as discussed in [Chapter 10](#).

AUTHOR'S ANECDOTE

Many of my friends are hard-of-hearing in a strictly audiological sense, but Deaf culturally. They hear well enough to understand most one-to-one conversations and have developed intelligible speech. However, they fought for the right to attend a deaf school. If this was not possible due to their high level of hearing, they chose to attend Gallaudet or NTID for their college experience. They sign fluently and can pass as a Deaf person.

When I asked them why they choose to associate with Deaf people as much as they do, they provided several different reasons. One is that, with hearing people, they always receive fragmented information because of their limitations associated with hearing and speech-reading. By contrast, with a visual language, they have 100% access to the information being shared. This full access through ASL makes conversations less stressful. In addition, sign language interpreters allow them to receive information fully and easily in hearing settings.

Also, when associating with Deaf people, they don't have to explain themselves, while with hearing people, my hard-of-hearing friends tell me, they must repeatedly deal with ignorance and provide long explanations of their particular situation. For instance, people often assume that because someone speaks well, he or she can hear without any difficulty. Similarly, hearing people keep forgetting to keep their lips visible when speaking with hard-of-hearing people. It is for these reasons that some of my hard-of-hearing friends do not even bother using their voice with hearing people. They find it more effective to pass as a Deaf person. That way, hearing people work harder in trying to communicate with them, rather than expecting hard-of-hearing people to do all the work trying to listen and lip-read.

Additionally, some hard-of-hearing people choose to pass as Deaf in camaraderie with their fellow Deaf friends. For some hard-of-hearing people, this is important because all their lives, they have been told that they are better off than their Deaf peers. They were seen to

be smarter, luckier, and more capable than their deaf friends because they could hear and speak. They don't like being singled out simply for their speaking ability while their Deaf friends often have superior skills in other areas. Consequently, they often choose not to use their speech when they are with other Deaf people in a show of solidarity and to give others opportunities to "shine."

It's notable, however, that none of my hard-of-hearing friends would give up their ability to speak or hear. Most of them enjoy the convenience of having speech skills, the opportunity to listen to music, and so forth. Yet, they love being with Deaf people for the 100% access to language and communication available through sign language, for being totally accepted for who they are, and for the opportunity of associating with like-minded Deaf and hard-of-hearing people.

Deaf People from the Mainstream

Today, most deaf people attend mainstreamed educational programs and do not graduate from a deaf school. Therefore, many members of the Deaf community, especially those who do not live near a deaf school, do not feel connected to deaf schools, in the way that past generations did. Rather, the majority of Deaf community members discovered the community as they navigated the mainstream setting while growing up. Some even discovered the community after they graduated from school. Regardless of when they join the community, Deaf people from the mainstream environment are well represented in the Deaf community today.

The Elite Deaf

Despite widespread poor education provided to deaf children and the linguistically impoverished home environments of many, deaf people have managed to achieve high levels of academic success and pursue their higher education aspirations. The Deaf community is also home to a growing group of Deaf professional middle-class individuals, or what some people call the Elite Deaf (Padden & Humphries, 1988; Robinson, 2010; Snider, 1993). Many of these individuals have college degrees, hold professional jobs, and make comfortable livings. They often are among the political leaders in the Deaf community as they work to improve the quality of life for future generations of deaf people. As such, they are active in state and civic associations of the Deaf and advocate for an improved quality of life for all deaf people, and for better educational opportunities for deaf children. In many larger cities, these individuals find support and camaraderie in social gatherings such as Deaf professionals happy hours, literary societies, and book groups, where they congregate to network and socialize with others who have similar educational advantages.

The Grassroots Deaf

In contrast to the small percentage of the "elite" Deaf, it's the "average" Deaf people, or what is commonly called in the Deaf community "the grassroots Deaf," who make up the majority of Deaf people (Ladd, 2003; Padden & Humphries, 1988). Most of these are individuals who, for a variety of reasons, did not or could not continue their education beyond high school. Nevertheless, the Deaf community, like many other communities, can be viewed through the lens of socioeconomic strata that includes both "elites" and "nonelites."

Regardless of their educational backgrounds, most Deaf people manage to lead productive lives, thanks to the solutions available through Deaf culture (Ladd, 2008; Padden & Humphries, 1988). This includes being actively involved in the Deaf community. Along with the elite Deaf, some of them are leaders in local Deaf clubs, state associations, and national organizations. Some participate in leisure activities, such as weekly bowling leagues or monthly poker tournaments. Some hold prominent roles in their religious organizations.

The cohesion between the elite Deaf and "regular" Deaf people varies from one Deaf community to the

next, ranging from a strong “class” system that exists in some large metropolitan areas to places where all Deaf people coexist in one unified community with little or no distinction between educational or occupational status (Padden, 2008). It should be noted that this phenomenon is not limited to Deaf people, as it is also found among many other cultural groups. When a community has relatively few members, by necessity, it is usually much more inclusive. By contrast, when a community grows large enough to allow this kind of luxury, people will often choose to associate with a smaller group of people who share similar interests and abilities.

Regional Differences

Deaf people here in the United States are Americans first and, consequently, the Deaf community is a microcosm of the larger society in its demographic make-up. Just like the hearing populace, there are more Deaf Baptists in the deep south, more Deaf Jews in large metropolitan areas in the Northeast, more Deaf Native Americans and Latinos in the Southwest, more Deaf cowboys out west, more Deaf fishermen on the coast, more Deaf skiers in the Rockies, and so on. Accordingly, the Deaf communities in these regions are shaped by regional differences.

It is outside the scope of this book to delve deeply into these fascinating differences among various groups that exist within the Deaf community. Fortunately, there are resources, albeit limited, that provide information on the unique experiences of Deaf people from various ethnic groups. For example, National Black Deaf Advocates (NBDA) has a detailed website that showcases role models from their community (www.nbda.org).

NOT DEAF ENOUGH? NOT DIVERSE ENOUGH?

The historic Deaf President Now demonstration at Gallaudet in 1988 had a clear focus: put an end to the hearing dominance of the Deaf education system and affirm the need for Deaf leadership in affairs related to Deaf people. This was accomplished by insisting on the selection of a Deaf person as president and a Deaf majority on the Board of Trustees (Ramos, 2003). By contrast, the focus of a second protest in 2006—again related to Gallaudet’s choice for President—was less clear (retrieved on October 23, 2010, from <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/05/13/us/13gallaudet.html?ex=1158811200&en=f75aa9c5d1e56b07&ei=5070>).

It presents an interesting case study regarding a growing tension over diversity that seems to be appearing in the Deaf community. The events in 2006 drew attention to both the cultural and ethnic transformation of the Deaf community and the growing presence of Deaf people from nontraditional deaf school settings. The dispute was set in motion when, after 18 years of service as the first Deaf president of Gallaudet University, it was time to pick I. King Jordan’s successor. For some, the 2006 protest began with concerns among various segments of the Deaf community that the selection process was not inclusive enough. Specifically, their concerns centered on the lack of diversity in the final pool of candidates for the presidency and the exclusion of a well-regarded Black, Deaf academician. The university’s search committee quickly dismissed these criticisms (Holmes, 2006). Emotions flared, however, when an unpopular Deaf provost was offered the job as the new president of Gallaudet. Despite votes of no confidence in this selection by college faculty and students (Garretson, 2010), the university administration stood by its decision and, in an attempt to win public support, issued a statement which, in essence, played the deaf equivalent of the “race” card (retrieved on

October 23, 2010, from http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/10/22/AR2006102201086_3.html).

In this case, however, the point of contention was not the color of the new president's skin. The university administration condemned protestors for not accepting the president designee, Dr. Jane Fernandes, because she was not "Deaf enough" (Garretson, 2010; Holmes, 2006). This referred to the fact that she did not grow up using sign language and was fully mainstreamed during her school years. Like many other deaf people, she migrated into the Deaf community later in life, in search of a more effective lifestyle. But because of her late start, her sign language fluency was not native-like, making her "not Deaf enough" for the protestors, according to the university's public relations office.

Leaders of the campus protest denied that characterization of the reason behind their protests and insisted, rather, that their opposition was to her history of poor leadership on campus, as well as their original concern that the selection process was not inclusive and transparent enough. Dr. Fernandes was eventually asked to step down by the board when it became evident that she would not have the support of the university community to successfully lead the college. Dr. Robert Davila stepped in, first as an interim president, and he eventually served as ninth president for 4 years while the university regrouped and conducted a new search for a president who would meet the needs of the university community. After a careful and transparent selection process, Dr. Alan Hurwitz was selected as the tenth president of Gallaudet, with full support from the university community. Interestingly, the profile of Dr. Hurwitz is remarkably similar to Dr. Fernandes: Both were raised orally and mainstreamed all their lives. Also, both do not sign in "Strong ASL" but rather in a style that is heavily influenced by English. In point of fact, the selection of Dr. Hurwitz (with the community's involvement and approval) negates the university's earlier insistence that the 2006 protest was about Dr. Fernandes "not being Deaf enough." Clearly, the selection of Dr. Hurwitz—who at that time was the highest ranking deaf person in an administrative position as the President of the NTID at Rochester Institute of Technology in Rochester, New York—was based on his qualifications, skills, and the experience needed to successfully lead the university.

Nevertheless, this painful and divisive chapter in Deaf history illustrates the tension facing the Deaf community today as it evolves from a predominately white, male, deaf-school-centric profile to an increasingly inclusive group of Deaf people from a variety of educational, communicative, racial, and religious backgrounds.

TO ACKNOWLEDGE OR NOT TO ACKNOWLEDGE

As discussed in Chapter 3, Deaf people, as a group, often feel extremely frustrated when the accomplishments of a Deaf person are acknowledged, but without mentioning that person's hearing status. It represents a lost opportunity to plant in the public's mind the image of a successful Deaf person. Similarly, in newspaper accounts, for example, of heroic, educational, or professional accomplishments by a deaf person, it is often difficult to determine whether or not the featured deaf person is also a person of color or from a minority community. For this reason, individuals of color who were mentioned in this book are spotlighted here, not as an afterthought, but to showcase their contributions and accomplishments. This list is not intended to be a comprehensive list of outstanding Deaf individuals or to minimize the contributions of others who are not included in this book. All individuals featured in the book, including those of color, were selected to represent

the Deaf community as a whole. In table Deaf individuals of color who were mentioned in the book are listed along with their noteworthy accomplishments.

Deaf Individuals of Color Mentioned in the Book

<i>Deaf Individuals of Color</i>	<i>Chapter</i>	<i>Noteworthy Accomplishment</i>
Glenn Anderson	8	Author and producer, <i>Still I Rise</i> Chair, Board of Trustees, Gallaudet Professor, University of Arkansas, Little Rock American Athletic Association of the Deaf Hall of Fame Gallaudet University Athletics Hall of Fame National Hall of Fame for People with Disabilities
Iris Aranda	9	Artist
Fred Beam	9	Performing Artist Founder, Invisible Hands, Inc.
Melaine Bond		Poet
Connie Briscoe	8	Best-selling author
Robert Davila	12	President, Gallaudet University Vice President, Rochester Institute of Technology/National Technical Institute for the Deaf Headmaster, New York School for the Deaf Assistant Secretary, Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services of the U.S. Department of Education 1st Deaf President, Convention of American Instructors of the Deaf 1st Deaf President, Conference of Executive Administrators serving the Deaf 1st Deaf President, Council of Education of the Deaf
Susan Gonzalez	12	Attorney Community activist
Claudia Gordon	12	Attorney Senior Policy Advisor, Department of Homeland Security, Office of Civil Rights and Civil Liberties
Ernest Hairston	8	Author, <i>Black and Deaf: Are We That Different</i> Chief of the Captioning and Adaptation Branch of OSEP
Antonie Hunter	12	Professional dancer Dance instructor Recipient of FAME award
C. J. Jones	9	Performing artist

		Founder, Sign World TV Director, <i>Hands Across Communications</i>
Mervol “Skee” Flynn	12	Sheriff
Leon Lim		Artist
Nathie Marbury	8	Performing artist Storyteller Professor
Tony McGregor		Artist Co-Founder, National Association of Native American Deaf
Kristi Merriweather		Poet Advocate
Damara Goff Paris	8	Co-Author, <i>Step into Circle</i> Co-Author, <i>Deaf Women: A Parade Through the Decades</i>
Curtis Pride	12	Professional baseball player, Montreal Expos, Detroit Tigers, and Atlanta Braves Varsity baseball coach, Gallaudet University
Nyke Prince	12	Model Dancer Drummer
Angel Ramos	12	Superintendent, New Jersey School for the Deaf Superintendent, Sequoia Charter School for the Deaf and HH Superintendent, Idaho School for the Deaf Founder, National Hispanic Council of the Deaf and HH Fulbright Scholar Author, <i>Triumph of the Spirit: The DPN Chronicle</i> Commissioner, Arizona Commission for the Deaf and HH
Roy Ricci	9	Artist
Shawn Richardson	9	Cartoonist
Laurene Simms	12	Professor/Director, Deaf Education Program at Gallaudet University Professor, Western Oregon University Assistant Superintendent, Indiana School for the Deaf
Warren “Wawa” Snipe	12	Actor Model
Linwood Smith	8	Author, <i>Black And Deaf: Are We That Different?</i>
Mar Valdez	9	Artist
Tristian		Poet

Thunderbolt

Rosa Lee Timm	8/11	Co-Founder and editor, Kiss-Fist Magazine Creator/Performing Artist, Rosa Lee Show
Madan Vasishta		Author, <i>Deaf in Delhi, A Memoir</i> ; <i>Deaf in D.C., A Memoir</i> Superintendent, New Mexico School for the Deaf Professor, Gallaudet University
Sharon Wood	8	Co-Author, <i>Step into Circle</i> Co-Author, <i>Deaf Women: A Parade Through the Decades</i>
Mary Wright	8	Author, <i>Sounds Like Home: Growing Up Black and Deaf in the South</i>
Larry Yanez	9	Artist

CONCLUSION

As discussed in the beginning of the chapter and elaborated on in [Chapter 11](#) (The Vibrant Deaf Community), the uniqueness of each Deaf community combines to shape the image of the greater American Deaf community. As the role of traditional deaf schools becomes less important in the lives of deaf children, and Deaf clubs disappear from the landscape, the experiences of Deaf people today will be radically different from those of past generations. Furthermore, as Americans as a whole become increasingly diverse, urban, mobile, and technologically savvy, the lives of Deaf people are transformed as well.

Despite these changes, however, on the whole, Deaf people in America today still share the same experiences of countless Deaf forebears: growing up in linguistically impoverished households without full access to communication; being educated in pedagogically inappropriate programs that emphasize oral/aural development at the expense of natural, accessible language development through visual means; and being perceived and misunderstood by the general public as being extremely disabled. So, in this sense, the status of Deaf people has remained static for many 21st-century Americans. Therefore, the Deaf community still possesses relevance and provides critical support for great numbers of Deaf people pursuing an effective lifestyle, in which communication and attitudinal barriers are minimized.

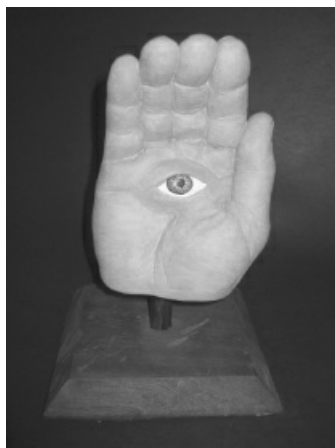
Instead of simply a bicultural existence in the Deaf and hearing worlds, we have seen that many Deaf people hold multiple identities, which they need to manage effectively. To achieve this delicate balance among the multiple cultures to which they belong, it is critical for deaf youngsters to gain access to solutions that have already been devised by more experienced members of the Deaf community.

Black Turtle Lady

By Melanie Bond (2011)

Because I like black turtles, I am the black turtle lady
They are slow like me, traveling in the slowest lane
Given burdens heavier than most, we remain steady
The turtle carries its home and I walk with my cane.
Like the tortoise who slips inside his shell for safety
I retreat into my own comfort zone where it is safe
With hearing and vision loss, it is hard to travel safely
When exposed to danger, the turtle and I feel chafed.
There was a time when I could see and hear more clearly
A close friend taught me how to bead a pendant and a belt
I chose to make a black turtle on white which I love dearly
The hours spent sewing each bead sunwise were heartfelt.
In Tucson, I attended a mineral-gem show most fertile
Many were the radiant blossoms of crystals and gems
But when I laid my eyes on a shiny black obsidian turtle
That was more precious to me than any jeweled diadem.
I reached out for the turtle and held it up to the light
Its iridescent colors and satiny sheen melted my heart
My fingers ran over its smooth edges in total delight
Whoever had taken pains to craft this knew his art.
I lovingly cradled the tortoise's proud head and sturdy feet
The black turtle and I, how well we understood each other
Our hearing is not as sharp, our sense of smell is bittersweet
We feel earth's vibrations and call out to our big brother.
I gave all I had and borrowed the rest but it wasn't enough
The dealer shook his head for the sale wasn't going as planned
The long and blinding slivers of the setting sun called his bluff
Desperate for a sale as darkness fell, he took my offer at hand.
The black obsidian turtle became my special icon and treasure
We were meant for each other, not to compete but to uplift
The turtles came long ago to teach us to endure, to measure
We are slow and steady, for our race is not to be swift.

14 The Universality of the Deaf Experience



“The Awakening” by David Call. Used with permission.

One of the misconceptions that many people hold about sign language is that it is a universal language. Disappointment is the typical response to finding out that each country has its own grammatically distinct sign language. But this is only half the story. Even more fascinating is the fact that, despite separate languages, when Deaf people from different countries meet, they are able to communicate to a much greater degree compared to hearing people with a mix of spoken languages. This is due, in large part, to the underlying similarities in deaf people’s upbringing, worldviews, and daily life experiences, no matter where they live. So far, this book has focused on the lives of Deaf people who reside in the United States. There are many characteristics, however, that are shared among fellow Deaf people throughout the world. In this chapter, we first examine these commonalities and then discuss specific circumstances that have shaped the unique Deaf American perspective.

Across the globe, the vast majority of deaf children are born into hearing families who are not familiar with sign language or Deaf culture, and their stories have much in common. In many societies, an inability to hear is considered one of the most debilitating disabilities and is accompanied by a sense of shame (Senghas & Monaghan, 2002). Consequently, parents’ first reactions are often to grieve over their deaf infant and then seek expert advice from professionals about how best to help their child. Around the world, the advice they are routinely given focuses on amplification and speech therapy, with no mention of sign language and the visual orientation encouraged by Deaf culture. Lacking such input about the natural way that Deaf people communicate and interact, deaf children in numerous countries grow up isolated within their own homes due to limited early access to language and awkward and insufficient communication with their parents. The situation at school is often no better, as most educational systems for deaf children, worldwide, are designed by hearing people who have not experienced being deaf themselves. Sadly, the techniques and goals imposed by even well-meaning hearing educators all too often fail to take advantage of the successful solutions to living

that Deaf people have devised for themselves throughout history. Unfortunately common around the world, the outcome of many school programs for the deaf is poor academic achievement and limited career potential, matched by deaf students' low personal aspirations (Andrews, Leigh, & Weiner, 2004; Corker, 1998; Kauppinen, 2006; Nikolarazi & Hadjoku, 2006).

UNIVERSAL SOLUTIONS

With impoverished linguistic backgrounds at home and school, deaf people's search for a less-isolating life naturally leads them to others who are visually oriented. It should be no surprise that solutions offered by the experienced members of the Deaf community are much the same throughout the world, because they are based on the four basic human values discussed in Chapter 3: full and effortless communication, access to information, healthy identity formation, and self-determination (see Erting, Johnson, Smith, & Snider, 1994; Goodstein, 2006; Monaghan, Schmaling, Nakamura, & Turner, 2003, for a review on Deaf communities throughout the world). These universal solutions include adopting the Deaf community as a second family, creating opportunities for gatherings, keeping each other informed, being ingenious, and use of a signed language.

Solution 1: Belonging to a Translocal and Transnational Community

A score of authors have been fascinated by the universality of the Deaf experience. In the preface to their book, *Many Ways to Be Deaf: International Variation in Deaf communities*, Monaghan and Schmaling (2003, p. ix) write that Deaf people "live in worlds of sight and gesture with specific national, social, political, and economic systems and, yet, also part of an international world of Deaf people." Breivik (2005, p. 14) remarks on the "striking similarities in deaf lives around the globe, in particular those connected to the experiences of being translocal signers and of being subjected to phonocentric oppression." Murray (2008) discusses how Deaf people throughout the world share common experiences in living as visual people in a primarily auditory world. Their experiences are supported by "a shared rejection of larger social misconceptions and professional ideologies that homogenized them as their deficit countrymen, ignoring the realities of their lives as members of a cultural community" (p. 100). Hauland (2008) explains that, "Languages contribute to a sense of belonging to other human beings and to the world, whether through speech or signed language. Communities create languages and languages create images of community" (p. 111). In this sense, sign language communities are formed not only for ease of communication, but to provide their members with opportunities to be with like-minded fellows. Bahan (2008) described Deaf people as "people of the eye" (p. 83) and observed that a visual communication system would develop whenever and wherever there were deaf people. These universal values were discussed at two international conferences on Deaf culture in 1989 and 2002, and documented in their proceedings (Erting et al., 1994; Goodstein, 2006).

Clearly, it is human nature for human beings, regardless of their hearing status, to seek others with whom they can relate and easily communicate. Deaf people's search leads them to find settings where other Deaf people gather. Hauland (2008) proposes that Deaf people are members of a *translocal community*, one in which they reside among their family members and neighbors and also in a place where deaf people congregate. Indeed, Breivik observes that Deaf people are not only members of a translocal community but also part of a *transnational community* because "international deaf events are highly valued in the deaf world"

(p. 15). [Haualand \(2008\)](#) identified five universal cultural traits of the transnational Deaf community:

- The dual relationship with their family and the Deaf community
- The need to congregate with like-minded people
- The struggle to achieve independence and to overcome misunderstanding and oppression by their own parents and the society at large
- The determination to make a living in spite of oppression
- The magnetic attraction to socialize with other Deaf individuals

To expand upon these traits, it is not unusual for Deaf people to consider themselves as belonging to two different families, their biological family and the surrogate family of the Deaf community ([Kusters, 2010](#); [Lee, 2006](#)). As depicted in Dupor's drawing in [Chapter 8](#), "Family Dog," the typical home life of many deaf individuals leaves them feeling like a family pet—well-fed, much loved, but with very little verbal exchange. The "coming-out experience" is shared by Deaf people worldwide, as it usually marks a turning point in their lives ([Breivik, 2005](#); [DeClerk, 2007](#)). Through their involvement in the Deaf community, Deaf people receive world knowledge, have in-depth conversations, exchange critical information, form deep and lasting relationships, and become fully accepted and respected as capable individuals. For this reason, participation at transnational Deaf gatherings and translocal Deaf clubs is often described as "being at home" ([Breivik, 2005](#)). [DeClerk \(2007\)](#) highlights the significance of such gatherings: "studies of deaf people worldwide suggest that increased international contact with politically empowered deaf people and the rapidly changing consciousness in deaf communities is largely responsible for the empowerment of deaf people" (p. 5).

Solution 2: Creating Opportunities for Congregation

Centrally located meeting places, including Deaf clubs and preidentified public locations, can be found in almost every region of the world. In more developed countries, Deaf-owned clubhouses are a natural venue. Many Deaf communities, however, do not possess the financial resources to own a building; so rented halls serve as another typical spot for Deaf gatherings. An even more affordable way of providing opportunities for Deaf people to congregate is setting up a prescheduled date and time at public locations such as fast-food restaurants, coffee shops, subway stations, or public squares. The news of place and time is spread to the local Deaf community by newsletter, e-mail, text message, or, more commonly, by word of mouth/hand. Such gatherings provide a sense of belonging and camaraderie, even if for a short period of time. For example, every Friday night in central San Jose, Costa Rica, over 100 people flock to a specific McDonald's restaurant to socialize, thus creating a temporary home for the Deaf community. Deaf visitors to Costa Rica from other countries routinely make this stop part of their visit to San Jose, transforming it into an international place of congregation.

This Costa Rican phenomenon is repeated all over the world. The congregation itself is a solution created by, of, and for Deaf people, and highlights the significance of Deaf-centered events for Deaf lives. As such, these gatherings allow Deaf people to share solutions for effective living, making it possible for deaf people to progress along their Deafhood journey and become self-actualized ([Murray, 2008](#)). Besides informal gatherings like the one in Costa Rica, Deaf communities also organize formal assemblies on a regular basis.

Examples of large-scale international gatherings include the Deaflympics and the World Congress of the

World Federation of the Deaf, both of which are convened every 4 years and attract scores of Deaf people from across the globe. Special cultural events, such as Deaf Way I in 1989 and Deaf Way II in 2002, in Washington, D.C., also attracted thousands of international visitors. On a smaller scale, regional athletic tournaments, cultural celebrations, and professional conferences also bring together like-minded Deaf people from all over the world, while serving as conduits for the transmission and exchange of Deaf cultural belief systems and behaviors.

At these gatherings, the cultural values of information-sharing and direct communication are made tangible. When newcomers to the Deaf community encounter more experienced Deaf people, they can share ingenious methods of dealing with the largely ignorant hearing public through culturally appropriate solutions to their particular situation. Lessons learned may include creative solutions for handling insensitive neighbors, overprotective parents, rebellious hearing children, and patronizing co-workers and supervisors, as well as hearing-centric bureaucratic government systems.

Solution 3: Participating in Straight Talk

In these exchanges of information, it is not uncommon for Deaf people to communicate in a frank and straightforward manner. Although “straight talk” is a characteristic that has been repeatedly associated with Deaf culture, the degree of directness varies among countries, depending on the cultural context of the larger mainstream society. For instance, citizens of many Asian countries are known for their indirect approach to expressing criticism. Deaf members of these Asian cultures, however, are noted for being more direct than their hearing counterparts. In countries such as Germany and Israel, known to favor a more direct communication style, Deaf Germans and Israelis have been found to be even more candid than their hearing peers ([Mindess, Holcomb, Langholtz, & Moyer, 2006](#)). This characteristic of information sharing through a direct communication style seems to be a worldwide solution for Deaf people’s daily frustration with ambiguity and misunderstanding due to the difficulty of communicating with nonsigners ([Mindess et al., 2006](#)).

Solution 4: Adopting a Can-Do Attitude

Another unmistakable trait of Deaf people the world over is their “can-do” attitude ([Breivik, 2005](#); [DeClerk, 2007](#)). Deaf people find creative ways of demonstrating their worth, ingenious methods of communicating, and imaginative strategies for developing and maintaining relationships with the people around them. They are enterprising in devising the means to make a living, and resourceful when it comes to soliciting information. Deaf people regularly share stories that offer advice for overcoming hearing people’s ignorance, oppression, and skepticism regarding the Deaf person’s potential to make contributions to society. These true-to-life tales assist fellow Deaf people in building a feeling of self-worth.

Solution 5: Preserving the Right to Use a Signed Language

All the solutions listed above are grounded in the issue of access to a signed language. [Erting et al. \(1994\)](#) noted that one commonality among Deaf leaders worldwide is their insistence that deaf people have the right to use a signed language and to be taught in schools via sign language. They explained that this commonality among the goals of Deaf leaders throughout the world is due to the fact that “deaf people must take responsibility for educating each other about their language and culture, and they must organize in their

struggle to gain recognition of their sign language, their rights, and their abilities, including their ability to teach in schools using their own language” (p. 4). In fact, deaf schools, clubs, and associations have long battled against the hearing establishment to eradicate misconceptions regarding the value of sign language in the lives of deaf people and in the education of deaf children.

BARRIERS TO SOLUTIONS

Unfortunately, the process of developing a positive identity as a Deaf person may be exceedingly difficult in both developing and developed countries. In a developed country, the focus is often on normalizing the child and denying or minimizing the presence of deafness through technology, such as hearing aids or cochlear implant surgery. A number of countries have enacted legal mandates that provide for integration with appropriate support services. In many less developed countries with limited financial resources, however, deaf citizens are often relegated to the bottom rung of society and allotted meager resources for obtaining a solid education or employment. In such cases, the focus is on basic survival rather than positive identity formation (Andersson & Burch, 2010; Friedner, 2010; see Goodstein, 2006, for review; Rashid, 2010).

Regardless of geography, deaf children from families with financial means are more likely to be placed in oral programs, be provided with intensive speech therapy, receive specialized tutorial assistance, have cochlear implant surgery, and undergo other treatments designed to “overcome their deafness” (see Monaoghan, Schmalting, Nakamura, & Turner, 2003, for further reading). In both wealthier and poorer countries, therefore, the Deaf community plays a vital role in the lives of many Deaf citizens, by providing an accessible and tolerant community of like-minded individuals, which can serve as a much-needed respite for those who feel pressured to fit into the hearing majority as they grow up. And, in fact, poignant stories about discovering the signing Deaf community and being welcomed into its fold are told and retold, in the manner of finding “the promised land.” This community of converts, as discussed by Bechter (2008), includes those with strong oral skills and/or those implanted with cochlear implants. Such individuals who grew up in strong antisigning environments are often the most active in the Deaf community in promoting the Deaf agenda—with the goal of preventing the kind of identity crisis they experienced in future generations of deaf children.

UNITED IN OVERCOMING BARRIERS

For Deaf people to control their own destiny, they must be educated and empowered. For this reason, the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) was founded in 1951. Its goal was to unite national organizations of the Deaf all over the world in promoting self-determination of Deaf people in each country and to help establish Deaf-run national organizations in countries where there were none. Today, more than 130 countries’ national organizations of the Deaf are affiliated with WFD. According to their website,

The World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) is an international non-governmental organization representing approximately 70 million Deaf people worldwide. It is estimated that more than 80 percent of these 70 million live in developing countries, where authorities are rarely familiar with their needs or desires. Recognized by the United Nations (UN) as their spokes-organization, WFD works closely with the UN and its various agencies in promoting the human rights of Deaf people in accordance with the principles and objectives of the UN Charter, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other general acts and recommendations of the UN and its specialized agencies. When necessary, WFD uses special, legal or administrative measures to ensure that Deaf people in every nation have the right to preserve their own sign languages, organizations, and cultural and other activities. The WFD places high priority on the rights of Deaf people in developing countries, including “the right to sign language; and equal opportunity in all spheres of life, including access to education and information. (Retrieved on April 25, 2010, from www.wfdeaf.org)

At the conclusion of every World Congress of the Deaf, a moving, candle-lit, blue-ribbon ceremony is held to show solidarity among world Deaf leaders to advocate for social justice for deaf people, especially in developing countries. At the 1999 World Congress, Lisa Kauppinen explained the symbol behind the blue ribbon, “The ribbon itself represents remembrance of those who have suffered oppression. And blue was the colour given to Deaf people by the Nazis To wear the Blue Ribbon is to pledge yourself not only to the memory of those who have suffered, but to those who are still suffering today. And it is to pledge yourselves to fight to end that oppression now, for all the world’s Deaf children and the others still to come” (as cited in [Ladd, 2003](#), pp. 470–471).

Aside from the WFD’s international political activism, the global Deaf community clearly demonstrates self-determination in the world of sports. In 2009, for example, more than 4,000 Deaf athletes and officials from 77 nations participated in the 21st Summer Deaflympics in Taipei. The event was organized by the International Committee of Sports for the Deaf (ICSD), which consists of 104 national Deaf sports federations from all over the world. In order to qualify for full membership, each national Deaf sports federation must confirm that it has a Deaf president and a majority of Deaf members in its organization’s executive positions.

Fiercely protective of its independence, and with a strong desire to remain separate from the larger Paralympics organization, the ICSD has enjoyed the full endorsement of the International Olympics Committee (IOC) since 1955, and has been able to fly the Olympic flag at its Deaflympics events. Recently, however, there has been increasing pressure for Deaflympics to merge with the Paralympics organization within the IOC, in order to provide a united experience for all disabled elite athletes. Nevertheless, the ICSD has been steadfast in its insistence that Deaf athletes are best served by maintaining a distinct organization. In its mission statement, the Deaf leaders make this claim, “The need for separate games for deaf athletes is not just evident in the numbers of participants. Deaf athletes are distinguished from all others in their special communication needs on the sports field, as well as in the social interaction that is an equally vital part of the games.” They also explain, “To celebrate the spirit of Deaf Sports where Deaf athletes come together as members of a cultural and linguistic minority to strive to reach the pinnacle of competition, the ICSD adopted a motto: PER LUDOS AEQUALITAS (Equality through sport)” (Retrieved from www.deaflympics.com on April 25, 2010).

OUTSTANDING DEAF COMMUNITIES THROUGHOUT THE HISTORY

Even though Deaf people throughout the world have fought the same battles against ignorance and misunderstanding, linguistic deprivation, and discrimination, there have been several times in history when certain groups of Deaf people have been able to benefit from a progressive perspective on what it means to be deaf. These include communities such as the Parisian Deaf community in the 1800s, the Soviet Union’s Deaf community during the Communist era, and the Swedish Deaf Community during the late 1990s and early 2000s.

Deaf Parisians During the 1800s

Through the establishment of the *Institut National de Jeunes Sourds* in 1760, by the Abbe de L’Eppe in Paris, France, and the use of sign language at that school, Deaf Parisians were able to benefit from superior

educational and social opportunities compared to their fellow Europeans. As a result, there is record of brilliant and capable Deaf individuals residing in and around Paris, including scholars, teachers, leaders, painters, engravers, civil servants, printers, and laborers (Ladd, 2003; Van Cleve, 1993).

It is no surprise that Thomas Gallaudet was impressed with what he saw when he visited Paris in 1816. It is also no surprise that he found it necessary to recruit Laurent Clerc, an upstanding Deaf leader, to accompany him to the United States to initiate similar opportunities for deaf Americans.

A hallmark of the vibrant Parisian Deaf Community was their elaborate annual “deaf-mute” banquets, which began in 1834. There, elite Deaf Parisians and visitors from foreign countries would congregate to celebrate their Deaf way of life. The first such banquet has been “interpreted, in fact, as the birthdate of the deaf-mute nation. It was the year when deaf-mutes established a kind of government for themselves, which has lasted to this day” (Mottez, 1993, p. 30).

Banquets were “places to celebrate deafness, for deaf men to congratulate each other on what they had achieved, and to have a good time in a setting where they, rather than hearing people, controlled the mode of communication and the agenda. The banquets also served both to link deaf leaders together and to advance the deaf community’s agenda. For that reason, hearing journalists, civil servants with a deaf clientele, and politicians were invited” (Van Cleve, 1993, p. 28).

Deaf Citizens of the Soviet Union During the Communist Era

During the communist era, Deaf citizens enjoyed a standard of living that was more comfortable than most deaf people in the world. Following the communist philosophy, every citizen was provided a job and housing, plus opportunities for educational and cultural enrichment. In the case of deaf people, schools for the deaf were readily available for deaf children to receive an education. Numerous factories were established where the majority of the workforce was Deaf, allowing a pleasant work environment for them. Similarly, apartment complexes were provided for Deaf families to create a Deaf-friendly living environment for themselves. Social clubs and cultural events abounded for Deaf citizens. All of which allowed for a distinct and comfortable lifestyle among Deaf citizenry in the Soviet Union of that era (Silianova, 2006).

Deaf Swedes During the Late 20th and Early 21st Century

More recently, with a progressive, socialist government committed to a quality lifestyle for all its citizens, Deaf Swedes were able to enjoy a superior lifestyle (Wallin, 1994, 1996). Schools for the deaf were noted for their exceptional success in the instruction of deaf children. These positive outcomes could be attributed to the bilingual philosophy that had been adopted by the Swedish deaf educational system. A key part of this program involved members of the Deaf community, who taught Swedish sign language to families with deaf children (Andersson, 1994; Mahsie, 1995). As soon as families with a deaf child were identified, they were referred to local Deaf-run organizations for support and were paired with Deaf adults who introduced them to Deaf culture’s ready-made solutions for effective living. In this sense, Deaf adults served as linguistic and cultural role models by providing sign language and cultural lessons. By being exposed to successful Deaf adults and the readily available solutions to problems of daily living from the Deaf community, the period of grief and frustrations associated with having a deaf baby was remarkably brief for these Swedish parents. For example, with an early start in learning sign language for both parents and deaf children, communication

difficulties were minimized, paving the way for a healthy family relationship right from the beginning. For Deaf adults in Sweden, government-supported interpreting services were readily available, making it possible for them to participate fully in all aspects of society, including the workforce, social and cultural arenas, and social service (Wallin, 1994).

Along with these three historically outstanding Deaf communities, there have been instances of what Kisch (2008) called “shared signing communities” similar to that on Martha’s Vineyard, where it was reported that deaf and hearing people coexisted in such a way that their hearing status didn’t matter (Groce, 1985). In such communities, there is a large enough Deaf presence to make sign language usage common among the residents, regardless of their hearing status. Based on her study of Deaf utopias, Kusters (2010) summarized the work of several authors by stating, “in shared signing communities the relatively high rate of deafness and the wide-spread presence and acceptance of signing have facilitated deaf people’s integration” (p. 5). Consequently, there is no need for a separate Deaf community. Based on her study on Adamorobe, a shared signing community in Ghana, Nyst (2007) explained “Deaf and hearing people have more shared experiences than non-shared experiences. There are too few non-shared experiences for a separate Deaf community to arise” (p. 10). Kusters (2010) identified at least 12 shared signing communities, including several small communities existing today in places such as Mexico, Bali, Israel, and Ghana. More research needs to be done on these recently discovered communities to determine whether deaf people are/were fully integrated. Nevertheless, it is clear that deaf people in these communities enjoy a much more inclusive lifestyle than their peers elsewhere.

DEAF AMERICANS

Although Deaf people in the United States are also members of the global Deaf community, they share several significant characteristics with their hearing American counterparts. Perhaps because of its sizable land mass, the distance between the United States and Europe and Asia, and the ethnocentric thread that runs through American culture, Deaf people in the United States are less likely to travel abroad, less likely to learn international sign language, less likely to study a foreign sign language, less likely to come into contact with Deaf people from other countries, and less likely to participate in international Deaf events than are some of their fellow deaf residents in Europe and Asia. Nevertheless, it is safe to say that deaf Americans currently enjoy one of the highest standards of living in the world due to the freedom of choice, plethora of opportunities, legally mandated civil rights, and individual liberties practiced in the United States.

Solutions Unique to the United States

Although the experiences of growing up deaf in a predominately nonsigning society are similar across the globe, Deaf Americans benefit from many unique privileges, including civil rights laws, the wide availability of trained interpreters, vast educational opportunities, a high number of highly educated Deaf people and Deaf academic leaders, the popularity and prevalence of American Sign Language (ASL) classes, and America’s rich diversity. These benefits are discussed in greater detail below.

Civil Rights Laws

The United States has the distinction of being the first country in the world to enact legislation that specifically prohibits discrimination against all disabled people, including deaf and hard-of-hearing people. As

discussed in [Chapter 12](#), laws such as the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act have allowed deaf and hard-of-hearing people equal access to almost any area of life, whether it be educational, medical, occupational, social, or cultural, with a guarantee of appropriate support services that enable them to participate in these events at no extra cost. In addition, federal regulations that mandate public services be accessible to deaf and hard-of-hearing people have resulted in telephone relay services that are available 24 hours a day, allowing deaf people to make business and personal phone calls (through interpreters) anytime of the day or night. Television shows are fully captioned. Interpreters are hired to facilitate communication at medical and educational facilities, places of business, and entertainment venues. Clearly, American deaf people enjoy the protection of wide-reaching civil rights laws.

Availability of Interpreters

Thanks to legal mandates such as the ADA, interpreters are routinely available to support deaf people's participation in almost every aspect of modern life. Interpreters are commonly provided in educational institutions, medical settings, courtrooms, places of employment, and for cultural events. As mentioned, video relay service is available 24/7, allowing deaf people to make personal and professional phone calls using trained interpreters to facilitate communication. Interpreter preparation programs abound across the country to fill the growing demand for qualified interpreters. The national professional organization of interpreters, the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID), is the world's largest such organization, boasting over 15,000 members. The RID is responsible for certifying interpreters to assure their professionalism and competency. The availability of interpreters in the United States affords Deaf people the ability to participate in every aspect of community life.

Educational Opportunities

Although the United States was not the pioneer in establishing educational programs for deaf children, this country has long been recognized for its wide range of opportunities for deaf people to receive education and training. Many schools for the deaf were created in the early 1800s, almost a century after those established in several European countries in the 1700s. As a result, American deaf schools were able to capitalize on the success of the first such school established, the *Institut National de Jeunes Sourds de Paris*, where Deaf people themselves played significant roles in educating deaf children. Starting with the Clerc-Gallaudet team, this model of a strong Deaf-hearing partnership administering the educational affairs of deaf children has continued to the present day in America. The American School for the Deaf in Hartford, Connecticut, was the first of at least 24 schools for the deaf founded by Deaf people and hearing benefactors. More recently, several charter schools were established through the collaborative efforts of Deaf community leaders and hearing parents to better respond to the educational needs of deaf children in areas where educational programs and policies failed to include the Deaf perspective and experience. The passage of Public Law 94–142 (Education of All Handicapped Children Act) in 1975, which was updated in 1990 through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, mandated that public schools be made accessible to deaf children. Depending on the child's Individual Education Plan, the deaf student may be fully mainstreamed in regular classes with appropriate support services; attend a regional program with other deaf students, which is usually located within a public school; or be enrolled at a state school for the deaf.

In addition to options available for K–12 education, deaf citizens of the United States enjoy a wide array

of postsecondary opportunities, including a federally sponsored university geared specifically for deaf students, Gallaudet University in Washington, D.C. Several large college and university programs, including the National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID) at Rochester Institute of Technology; California State University at Northridge; Southwest Collegiate Institute for the Deaf in Big Spring, Texas; and Ohlone College in Fremont, California offer classes taught in ASL, coupled with support services for deaf students in mainstreamed classes. However, deaf students are not limited to attending only these schools. Deaf people are eligible to apply to any college or university on a competitive basis and must be provided with support services should they be admitted.

High Number of Skilled, Highly Educated Deaf People

Globally, the United States holds the record by far for the largest number of deaf college graduates. Gallaudet University counts more than 17,000 students who have studied there since its inception in 1864. The NTID boasts over 4,000 alumni. Furthermore, the number of Deaf professionals who have completed training in medical, legal, and other specialized fields is impressively high in America, with at least 200 deaf lawyers, physicians, and dentists. In fact, there are enough deaf lawyers and physicians to establish their own organizations and websites, such as Association of Medical Professionals with Hearing Loss (www.amphl.org) and www.deafattorneys.com.

High Number of Deaf Academic Leaders

The number of Deaf people in leadership positions at educational institution is comparably high. At the time of this writing, there are more than 20 Deaf superintendents directing schools for the deaf. At the postsecondary level, Deaf administrators hold the top post at Gallaudet University, the NTID at Rochester Institute of Technology, the National Center on Deafness at California State University at Northridge, and Southwest Collegiate Institute for the Deaf. Furthermore, Deaf individuals have been elected to preside over professional organizations such as the Conference of Educational Administrators of Schools and Programs for the Deaf (CEASD), a group of administrators who oversee deaf schools and mainstreamed programs in the United States, and the Council of the American Instructors of the Deaf (CAID), a national organization of teachers who work with deaf children. In addition, the national organization of parents who have Deaf children, American Society for Deaf Children (ASDC) has had Deaf presidents in the past. Deaf people are also directors of service agencies in many states, such as the Deaf Counseling Advocacy and Referral Agency (DCARA) in the San Francisco Bay Area and the Greater Los Angeles Agency on Deafness (GLAD). Having Deaf leaders assume the top administrative positions of these agencies allows for the core cultural value of self-determination to flourish within the Deaf community, as well as in professional settings. All of this contributes to the impression that Deaf people are capable, determined, and committed to improving the quality of lives for their fellow deaf citizens.

Prevalence of ASL Classes

Along with a growing awareness of ASL as a full-fledged language comes increasing numbers of high schools, colleges, and universities that approve ASL as meeting their foreign language requirement. One argument that has helped win over critics is the fact that indigenous languages, such as Navajo, are also accepted to satisfy the foreign language requirement even though they are not used in a foreign country. Additionally,

culture and literature assume a major role in Deaf studies, making it a complete field of study. As early as 1988, more than 160 colleges and universities accepted ASL to fulfill their foreign language requirement, and many states formally recognized ASL as a foreign language (Wilcox, 1988).

Diversity in America

As America's demographics become increasingly diverse, multicultural approaches in education and the business world have become standard, prompting wider acceptance, respect, and the celebration of differences. In light of this movement, Deaf people have been embraced under the umbrella of diversity, and ASL is recognized as one of many languages used in America. This makes it possible for academicians to approach the Deaf experience in terms of Deaf culture and ASL, an indigenous language worthy of academic study and even college degrees.

What has made possible these many areas of advancement for Deaf people? The answer is a combination of several historical events, along with America's legal commitment to eliminate discrimination. The struggle for civil rights was a hard-fought battle waged by many disenfranchised groups such as women, people of color, and disabled individuals. Every victory by the Black community has also brought Deaf Americans closer to the American dream, as articulated by Martin Luther King, Jr., in which every American is judged not by the color of his or her skin (or religion or gender or disability or hearing status) but by his or her character. Every victory by feminists has forced people to reevaluate their preconceived notions of what women (and people of color and disabled and Deaf people) are capable of. Every victory by disabled rights advocates paves the way for a barrier-free society for all, including deaf people.

Besides riding on the coat-tails of these victories, Deaf people have been well equipped to do battle for the advancement of their own rights. Starting with an inspiring model of Deaf-hearing partnership in the establishment of the first school for the deaf by Clerc and Gallaudet, Deaf people have learned to advocate for the betterment of fellow deaf people's lives. Armed with well-rounded education and solid vocational training, Deaf citizens have been able to compete in the work force and make significant contributions to American society.

With the passage of antidiscrimination laws, the playing field is becoming increasingly level for deaf people as they can now compete on an equal basis for jobs and education, and partake in other civic benefits and responsibilities (such as jury service). Successful Deaf individuals are available as role models in practically every line of work, making it possible to inspire younger generations of deaf people to consider a wide range of employment opportunities relating to their personal interests. Deaf Americans are the envy of deaf people worldwide for their unparalleled opportunities.

In spite of the progress enjoyed by Deaf Americans, however, they continue to be extremely misunderstood by their hearing countrymen, as are most deaf people in the world. Contrived solutions, such as the full inclusion movement, genetic engineering, and surgeries continue to be imposed on them by the well-meaning hearing public. In the areas of education, communication, and rehabilitation, major decisions in the lives of deaf people are routinely made by government officials, school administrators, social agencies, and families without input from the Deaf community. Consequently, too many deaf children in America continue to suffer from these ill-informed and misguided policies (Gertz, 2008; Jankowski, 1997).

As members of a global Deaf community, Deaf Americans have and will continue to benefit from

solutions shared by Deaf communities in other parts of the world, just as they continue to inspire and support other deaf people. The goal is always to improve the quality of life for all deaf people and to prevent another generation of deaf children from suffering substandard, disabling lives no matter where in the world they live.

CONCLUSION

With their many shared perspectives and experiences, deaf people throughout the world can, indeed, be considered global citizens. Deaf people the world over have adopted a similar set of solutions for effective living, including the use of signed language, the congregation of like-minded people, and the sharing of information. In addition, because of local customs and traditions, there are unique solutions in certain countries.

We Can Save the Deaf!

by Christopher Jon Heuer (2009)

Their voices are a screech on a broken treble clef!
Assign some signing therapy to close up all the rifts!
Raising up my hand; piano to my left!
Tap my tongue, click my teeth,
and we can save the Deaf! (Clap!)
It's almost sexual, rub their little throats!
Add some clouds and shrubbery;
they bleat like mountain goats!
Touching their forming mandibles! Chins a tiny cleft!
Teach them signs for "ball" and "tree"
and we can save the deaf! (Clap!)
Put on plays! Work the script for days!
Let them run the printing press
and see how much it pays!
Brush their hair with hearing aids! We're daring
and we're deft!
Teach them to communicate
and we can save the Deaf! (Clap!)
Build them institutions! Sweeping dedications!
Teach them yes to nouns and verbs
and no to masturbation!
A tiny tummy tickle gives their lips a little lift!
Cochlear implant surgery-
and we can save the Deaf! (Clap!)
Their voices are a warble when they aren't at their best!
But strap them on a table, and we'll install the rest!
A few more statistics, and studies with a twist!
The more we know, the more we go
And we can save the Deaf! (Clap!)

15 The Future of the Deaf Community



“Utopia” by Scott Upton. Used with permission.

After having discovered the rich, vibrant culture of Deaf people in the course of reading this book, you may find this last chapter poignant and even unsettling because the future of the Deaf community is unclear. On the one hand, tremendous progress has been made in the quality of life for deaf people in the past few decades. At the same time, billions of dollars are being spent to find a cure for being deaf. At this point, for many people, the question of whether deaf people and their associated culture will disappear from the face of the earth has become a question of “when” rather than “if.”

On one hand, there has never been a better time to be Deaf. Educational and professional opportunities for deaf people offer more choices than ever before. American Sign Language (ASL) is recognized and respected on a par with foreign spoken languages. Interpreters are routinely provided for everything from jury duty to Broadway musicals. Sign classes proliferate across the country. Hearing parents of deaf infants have increased opportunities to learn ASL while their children are still babies.

At the same time, billions of dollars are being spent to find a cure for being deaf. Advancements have been made in the area of amplification, allowing deaf people to hear better than ever before. New scientific discoveries are increasing the likelihood of identifying deaf-linked genes through DNA. In addition, stem-cell research has the potential of reestablishing the hearing capabilities of deaf people through nerve regeneration.

Although we cannot paint an accurate picture of what the future will look like for deaf people, hints of what lies ahead for the Deaf community already exist. This chapter will provide glimpses of three possible outcomes but cannot predict precisely what the future will actually bring.

THREE POSSIBLE SCENARIOS

One possible scenario portrays a Deaf community thriving thanks to the legal protection afforded to deaf and disabled people, the increasing cultural diversity that exists in America, and the proliferation of technology that allows communication obstacles to be minimized. Another scenario presents the possibility of a near eradication of deaf people through medical intervention based on the billions of dollars being spent today to seek a cure for deafness. Yet another possibility could be the prevalence of multihandicapped deaf people,

changing the face of the Deaf community from a cultural entity to a disability-based group. Since the foundations of all three scenarios are already in place, we can examine the clues to get a better idea of what the future may have in store for the Deaf community. Each scenario is discussed in greater detail below.

SCENARIO 1: THRIVING DEAF COMMUNITY

It can be said with certainty that there has never been a better time in history to be Deaf. American Deaf people are enjoying a quality of life today that is unparalleled anywhere or at anytime in history, as they benefit from antidiscrimination laws, cultural pluralism, and technological advancements.

The passage of federal laws such as the Americans with Disabilities Act, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, and the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 have afforded deaf and disabled people equal rights, increased access, and abundant opportunities. In principle, discrimination against deaf and disabled people is prohibited. On the whole, society is becoming accustomed to the concept of full inclusion of deaf and disabled people and the idea that appropriate accommodations should be routinely provided.

With such laws in place, deaf people have become increasingly visible in public as they participate in almost every aspect of community life. No longer do people gawk at the sight of signing. No longer do people find it surprising to see a deaf person drive a car, earn a college degree, or work in a high-level position. American Sign Language has become one of the most widely used languages in the United States. In fact, with the proliferation of ASL and Deaf culture classes for students seeking foreign language credits, Deaf people are beginning to be seen as one of the various cultural-linguistic groups that exist in the United States. Riding on the coat-tails of the America's cultural pluralism has made it possible for Deaf people to command respect as a cultural-linguistic group instead of being pitied as a group of disabled individuals.

Innovations in technology have also minimized communication obstacles, allowing deaf and hearing people to communicate more effectively with each other. Text pagers—better known as cell phones to most hearing people—have made it possible for deaf people to have instant communication with each other, as well as with those who do not know sign language. Computer features such as e-mail, instant messaging (IM), and chat rooms make it possible for deaf people to interact with hearing people without disclosing their hearing status. This development has leveled the playing field as it reduces the likelihood that deaf people will be subjected to prejudice. To give one example, electronic communication has made it possible for deaf people to establish initial contact with potential employers without disclosing their hearing status, thereby reducing the possibility of being eliminated from consideration solely on the basis of that status.

Since these devices require a reasonable level of English fluency, videophones have had a huge impact on Deaf people's lives, allowing them to bypass the constraints of English and communicate visually in sign language over the phone. Video relay services (VRS) allow Deaf people to call hearing people on their videophones and see interpreters on their screens as they relay the messages from spoken English to ASL and voice the signed messages to the hearing caller. As a bonus, VRS is provided at no cost to either deaf or hearing users, thanks to a surcharge on telephone bills, as mandated by the ADA. Another service, video remote interpreting (VRI), is becoming increasingly available to provide 24/7 interpreting coverage anywhere in the country. In this paid service, a pool of highly qualified interpreters can be accessed online, using webcams, to provide interpreting support for business meetings, medical appointments, classes, and other situations. These two innovations allow Deaf people to compete more effectively in the job market. Whereas

in the past deaf people were denied job opportunities that required phone usage, they can now perform these job duties thanks to technological advancements. In addition, communicating with supervisors and co-workers over the phone is now easily accomplished through VRS, eliminating yet another obstacle for the employment for Deaf people. And even when local interpreters are not available, Deaf people can participate in meetings more effectively thanks to VRI.

Another enhancement that has contributed tremendously to the quality of life for deaf people is ADA-mandated captioning of television shows and the requirement that all television sets have built-in decoding chips to make this possible. At present, almost all television shows are captioned so that deaf people can be informed and entertained as much as their hearing peers.

Although voice recognition technology (spoken words transliterated into print) is still in its early stages, the potential is promising. This will make it possible for deaf people to participate in events where interpreters are not available by reading what is being said. Conversely, it is possible for deaf people to type messages into a computer and have it speak the message for them. Although not yet widespread and far from perfect, the potential of this type of technology gives hope for an even more level playing field for deaf Americans.

As these technological advancements promise to provide more equal access in a cost-effective manner, it is quite possible that the current challenges associated with requesting and receiving “reasonable accommodations” will be simply resolved. The fact that video relay services are provided at no cost to users thanks to support from a phone surcharge is paving the way for similar models from other service providers. For example, the medical and legal communities may adopt an analogous mechanism to deal with the escalating cost of hiring interpreters to communicate with deaf patients and clients. By having each professional annually pay a nominal amount of money to a central pool that covers the cost of all interpreting services, the price of interpreting services would no longer be a burden on specific service providers who happen to have deaf patients or clients. This kind of arrangement would result in an even more inclusive society for deaf people.

Building on the legal protection, cultural pluralism, and technological advancements in place today, the future can indeed be even brighter for deaf people. Deaf people look forward to the day when access won’t be an issue; when Deaf culture will be embraced as one of the many valued cultures celebrated in America. When that happens, the grief that parents often experience when they find they have a deaf baby will be a thing of the past. This, in turn, would allow deaf children to grow up in a positive, healthy, environment, instead in one of grief, pity, and frustration. As Deaf adults, they will lead ordinary lives with full access to society, in employment, civic, and social arenas. Thanks to widespread ASL classes, there will be a plenitude of people who can sign for themselves, in addition to a large number of well-trained interpreters, plus the availability of captions for all visual media. At the same time, they will have the benefit of the Deaf community for their cultural and intellectual stimulation in the language that is most accessible to them, ASL.

Going beyond the ides of an increasingly accommodating society, a new concept has emerged to illuminate the potential of the Deafhood experience and Deaf people’s contributions to the world at large. [Bauman and Murray \(2010\)](#) explain the rationale behind *Deaf gain* as “explorations of Deaf ways of being in the world as ways that contribute to the cognitive, creative, and cultural diversity of the human experience” (p. 212).

In essence, the concept of Deaf gain, counters the emphasis on the “loss” of hearing and instead

accentuates the benefits of being deaf. In one person's typical experience of becoming deaf (as quoted in [Bauman & Murray, 2010](#), p. 222), he laments over how everyone was so focused on his pending loss that no one mentioned anything to be gained from being Deaf. Today, he enjoys the intimacy of the Deaf community, the beauty of ASL, and the richness of Deaf culture. To lend support to a more positive view, some hearing children of Deaf parents remain involved in the Deaf community even into their adulthood because of their love of the Deaf culture. Similarly, many ASL students become enthralled by their introduction to the language and culture of Deaf people during their course of studies and choose to remain intimately involved in the Deaf community. Going beyond the benefits for Deaf individuals and ASL students, it has been proposed that everyone, regardless of his or her hearing status, could benefit from becoming more Deaf. [Bauman and Murray \(2010\)](#) explain this assertion, "By that we mean society would do well to become more acutely aware of the nuances of communication, more engaged with eye contact and tactile relations, more fluent in a language rich in embodied metaphor, more aware of the role of being a member of close-knit communities, and if nothing else, more appreciative of human diversity, so that we are constantly reminded that the bedrock of reality may be just as diaphanous as any other social construction" (p. 222).

Deaf children who have Deaf parents might best exemplify the Deaf gain concept. These children often feel extremely privileged to be Deaf, grateful to have a Deaf family, and look forward to carrying on the traditions of the Deaf culture. They cannot imagine not being Deaf and hope for Deaf children of their own.

Certainly, this ethnocentric pride is not unique to Deaf children of Deaf parents. The feeling can be found in almost all cultural groups, in which children are taught to embrace their heritage and celebrate their essence. Obviously, every culture is special and unique, and Deaf culture certainly is no exception.

SCENARIO 2: VANISHING DEAF COMMUNITY

An alternative scenario deals with the eradication of the Deaf community. Although advancements in technology can be beneficial, they can also serve as an avenue to "fixing" or "curing" deafness. At present, billions of dollars are being spent on this quest. To mention only one example, the National Institute on Deafness and Other Communicative Disorders' budgeted \$400,000,000 in 2009 for their goal to eradicate deafness and all forms of communicative disorder (Retrieved June 17, 2010, from <http://www.nidcd.nih.gov/about/plans/congressional/CJ10.htm>).

In addition to the federal government's multibillion dollar investment to eliminate deafness, private, for-profit businesses such as Cochlear Limited and Oticon have also invested millions of dollars to develop and market the latest generations of hearing devices, such as cochlear implants and digital hearing aids, along with promises of improved hearing abilities for deaf babies and a large financial gain for their investors. Coupled with these hearing devices, speech and listening therapy techniques have become so advanced that more and more deaf people are able to take advantage of their residual hearing and the potential to develop intelligible speech. With such skills, it is perceived by many parents and supported by professionals, that deaf children are not really deaf, do not need Deaf culture, and will never be members of the Deaf community ([Bauman & Murray, 2010](#)).

Furthermore, advancements in genetics have made it possible for scientists to identify an increasing number of genes associated with deafness ([Arnos, 2002](#); [Bauman & Murray, 2010](#); [Burke, 2008](#); [Leigh,](#)

2009). Genetic counseling is now becoming common to help prospective parents determine their “risk” of producing deaf babies and assist them in “making plans” accordingly (Murray, 2006).

In addition, the trends of mainstreaming and universal design are leading the way to creating a society that is fully inclusive, thereby rendering the Deaf community superfluous in the eyes of advocates of the full inclusion movement. Their goal is to completely eliminate all obstacles for every group of disabled people so that they can participate in and benefit from all aspects of society on equal terms. Any form of segregation is unacceptable. The premise is that if everything is captioned—as part of the universal design practice—then every deaf person will have the same access as their hearing peers to every aspect of life, from the minute they are born until they die.

Clearly, the agenda is to eliminate deaf people from the face of earth, and recent advancements in technology have made this idea more possible than ever before. For the time being, though, deaf children are being steered away from the Deaf community in hope of making them more “hearing-like” through technology, therapy, and mainstreaming. Once a cure is discovered or technology makes it possible to completely restore hearing for all deaf people, there will no longer be a need for Deaf culture, and the Deaf community will become extinct.

SCENARIO 3: A GROWING MULTIHANDICAPPED COMMUNITY

With the majority of deaf children receiving their education in mainstreamed settings, many deaf schools have shifted their focus to serve an increasing number of deaf children with significant handicapping conditions such as autism, emotional or behavior disorders, attention deficit disorders, intellectual disabilities, learning disabilities, and low vision or blindness.

In the literature, it has been reported that as many as 33% of all deaf children have at least one or more of these conditions (Bruce, DiNatale, & Ford, 2008; Guardino, 2008; Holden & Diaz, 1998). This number is expected to continue to grow as more children are being born deaf due to difficult circumstances such as prematurity, mothers who use drugs while pregnant, and sexually transmitted diseases (e.g., cytomegalovirus or CMV). Children who are deaf for reasons other than heredity are more than twice as likely to have concurring disabilities. For many of these children and their families, it is difficult to celebrate or embrace Deaf culture because of the severity of their disabilities. In these cases, the cultural model does not work because of the needed focus on rehabilitative measures to deal with these disabilities. Consequently, solutions available through Deaf culture may not always be the most appropriate for these children.

Today, many deaf schools find themselves serving more multihandicapped deaf students, and fewer who can handle the regular curriculum. If this trend continues, as advocated by the full inclusion proponents, all deaf students without special needs will be forced to be mainstreamed, and the resources at deaf schools will be devoted to support deaf children with disabilities. In fact, there may not be any deaf students without special needs due to genetic engineering weeding out deaf genes and advancements in technology restoring deaf people’s hearing fully and permanently. The only remaining deaf children will be those who suffer from difficult prenatal or perinatal circumstances resulting in life-threatening or life-altering disabilities.

Eugenics or Not?

What the future holds for deaf people and their community remains unclear, even though the three scenarios

presented in this chapter are currently unfolding right before our eyes. In spite of a strong association with the “disability” label by the general public and the government, Deaf people have long insisted that they are a linguistic-cultural minority with effective solutions for living that render a cure unnecessary. In fact, Deaf people are so fiercely proud of their culture that they angrily denounce the billions of dollars spent by the government to find a cure as just another form of *eugenics* (the science of improving the human population by controlled breeding to increase the occurrence of desirable heritable characteristics; this practice fell into disfavor after its perversion by the Nazis). Another source of anger for many Deaf people is the huge profits made by corporations who are in the \$5.7 billion business of “fixing” deaf people (retrieved August 1, 2012, from www.idataresearch.net). For example, a leading cochlear implant company, Cochlear Limited, reported a jump of net profit after tax of \$100 million in 2007 to \$180 million in 2011 (retrieved August 1, 2012, from www.cochlear.com/files/assets/corporate/pdf/COH_AR_2011_ED_110931.pdf). Similarly, the parent company of a hearing aid manufacturer, Octicon, reported an operating profit of more than a million dollars in 2011 (retrieved August 1, 2012, from <http://www.demant.com/releasedetail.cfm?ReleaseID=652532>).

Indeed, fixing deaf people has become big business, with huge profits for companies that produce listening devices, and for private oral schools that provide therapy to deaf children. With surgeries costing approximately \$50,000 per cochlear implant, hearing aids costing up to \$5,000 apiece, and an average salary of \$66,000 for audiologists and \$98,000 for speech pathologists, and over \$30,000 per year tuition for private oral school education, there is a huge financial incentive to maintain a large and consistent pool of parents who seek to treatment for their deaf children.

To achieve this, these professionals often exchange stories and ideas on the web and in their professional journals on how to maximize profits out of their work with deaf people and their families. As an example, Dr. Green explained, in an article entitled “Managed Correctly, Hearing Aid Dispensing Augments the Bottom Line,” how “patients trust their physicians to make appropriate treatment recommendations, so this lends credibility to the audiologist and/or dispensing technician employed in the otolaryngologist’s practice,” which necessitates the use of “a medical approach (emphasizing hearing loss as a medical disease), and then leveraging one’s professional expertise to bring patients in can confer a definite marketing advantage” (retrieved on August 6, 2012, from http://www.enttoday.org/details/article/496241/Managed_Correctly_Hearing_Aid_Dispensing_Augments_th “Think Beyond Hearing Aids to Create Multiple Profit Centers in Your Clinic” is another document written specifically to increase the profit margin among the hearing professionals. In this article, [Kenneth Smith \(2004\)](#) encouraged his colleagues to utilize the “super bill” concept in working with their patients, giving specific steps to follow to increase the earning potential. The steps include:

1. Use a “super bill” that lists and values virtually all of the clinical services you provide. Some of the services are covered under the service plan associated with the hearing aid (e.g., tube changes), while others (cerumen management, evaluations, etc.) are not.
2. Fill out the “super bill” in front of the patient at every visit.
3. For services that are provided during the warranty period, write “no charge” on the bill in front of the patient at the end of the session.
4. Always give the “super bill” to the patient for delivery at the clinic check out.

On his webpage, a hearing aid vendor, Joseph Ficarra, implores deaf and hard of hearing people to become better-educated consumers (retrieved on August 6, 2012, from <http://www.valuehearingcare.com/aboutus.html>). He commented on how the hearing aid business

is populated by people regardless of their academic and/or professional credentials who have a profit motive in swaying you one way or another. Some hearing aid manufacturers actively try to price fix the retail selling price of their hearing aids by not supplying some, or all of their products to dispensers who discount. These companies have a vested interest in maintaining an unrealistic retail pricing structure to the hearing impaired consumer because they feel that if their products are discounted to the consumer then they will have to lower the selling price to the dispenser and therefore cutting the profit margins they are making.

With profit as a motivation, the people involved in these companies, schools, and organizations have little need to work with the Deaf community. A case in point is a battle over a 2010 assembly bill (AB2072) in California that demonstrates how deaf people may continue to be victimized by those who stand to profit from “fixing” them.

In this case, a coalition of six private oral schools, several professional organizations of audiologists and hearing and speech professionals, along with companies that produce hearing devices chose to ignore input from the Deaf community and existing parent and teacher associations to push this bill through the California legislature. Bill AB2072, as originally proposed, would have resulted in parents of deaf newborn infants receiving skewed information regarding communication options in favor of cochlear implant surgeries.

Fortunately, the Deaf community, parents and teacher associations, and scores of frustrated parents of deaf children who had been misled by service providers successfully fought these tactics to ensure that parents of newborn deaf infants receive appropriate information on the best way to raise deaf children based on feedback from Deaf adults and their families, rather than from slick marketing gimmicks from the corporations and organizations that cater to them.

Joining the fight against AB 2072, Edwin Black, an outspoken critic of the eugenics movement and author of the best-selling, award-winning book on American eugenics, *War Against the Weak*, was able to provide his perspective on the attempted dominance of deaf people by service providers and the hearing industry. An excerpt of his article is presented here:

Many thought eugenics was a buried part of California’s past. Now it seems that new legislation, AB2072, may nudge the state back to the slippery eugenic slope. The target of opportunity is the state’s deaf community. They are an easy target and find it hard to stand up to the powerful medical economic interest of the audiology profession and the cochlear ear implant industry who are lobbying hard for AB2072, a law that will create a climate that can quickly subhumanize, marginalize, and medically modernize an entire cultural group out of existence. This porous ill-defined legislation, sponsored by Assemblymember Tony Mendoza (56th District)—probably without thinking through the impact—has for all intents and purposes identified the deaf as social misfits that require state intervention.

Families with a deaf infant are to receive an “informative” brochure—devoid of oversight and detached from the wishes of the deaf community—that will in realistic terms be under the control of the audiology industry. This brochure will in essence sell cochlear implants as a medical marvel that will obsolete the deaf and their well-developed culture of community. This has been a goal of the eugenics world and its tax-exempt foundations since eugenics pioneer Alexander Graham Bell—a

leader of the early eugenic societies—spotlighted the deaf for elimination.

But there's a problem. The deaf only look like an easy target. They only seem like freaks to be eliminated. In fact, they have a well-developed and distinct culture of communication using sign language and they do not wish to be exiled from their own unborn children and grandchildren. They respond to email in moments and faster than any newsman. They command a lyrical sense of the English language that is at once poetic and fiercely precise. They are wonderful artists. Their technologic world of video phones and other adaptive equipment became commonplace when Skype and Instant Messaging were still being invented. They may be deaf, but they correctly hear the hymn of eugenics in AB2072, and they heard it sooner than Assemblyman Mendoza.

(Retrieved June 18, 2010, from <http://www.speroforum.com/a/34784/California-legislation-harks-back-to-dark-days-of-Eugenics-movement2010>)

Whether or not the work of the government entities such as National Institute on Deafness and Communicative Disorders or private corporations such as Cochlear Limited is appropriately characterized as eugenics, their agenda clearly diverges from that of the Deaf community. This disparagement of the Deaf community's agenda is similar to the paternalistic and patronizing attitudes that society has toward various disenfranchised groups including those of color, those who practice religions other than Christianity, those who have alternative sexual orientation, and those with disabilities. It is fitting that outspoken disability rights advocate [James Charlton \(1998\)](#) penned his book *Nothing About Us Without Us* in an effort to rein in the ongoing practice of society making decisions affecting the lives of disabled people without including them or making an effort to understand their perspectives. The leaders of the Deaf community have long argued for the same acknowledgment and to be viewed as experts in those matters related to the lives of deaf people, and especially deaf children (see [Goodstein, 2006](#), for review).

HOPE AND DREAMS OF THE DEAF COMMUNITY

Because the solutions of Deaf culture exist to allow Deaf people to lead productive lives, many of them feel that their own childhood was made unnecessarily difficult by parents who were misled by professionals and industry into believing that these solutions were undesirable. For this reason, it is the hope of many Deaf people that future generations of deaf children will not suffer in the same way. Ensuring that deaf children grow up filled with wonderful memories, accessible language, and full communication, rather than undergoing painful surgery and spending years in therapy makes sense to most Deaf people, especially since there is nothing on the market that fully restores hearing to deaf people. Nor is there a guarantee of success, since implants do not correct hearing the way eyeglasses do vision problems. Consequently, dealing with less than full communication through oral means or being limited to auditory rehabilitation is not seen as an effective solution. Rather, 100% access via visual means such as sign language makes much more sense to Deaf people.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, there has never been a better time to be Deaf, and, with the right safeguards, it can only get better. For this reason, there is no need for another generation of deaf infants and children to be subjected to a difficult childhood. One only need to look at Deaf children in Fremont, California; Indianapolis, Indiana; Frederick, Maryland; and other places where there are strong bilingual programs to see the kind of life they can achieve. In these programs, many parents are motivated to learn sign

language so that their Deaf children are fully included in their family lives. Students take courses in accordance to state standards, which is made fully accessible because teachers are fluent in sign language. Through the bilingual approach, students learn to read and write English fluently. With this fluency, they pass state-mandated high school exit examinations. Communication skills classes help students learn to maximize their communication approaches with both Deaf and hearing people, utilizing whatever skills they have in signing, writing, speaking, and hearing.

Going one step further, under the Deaf gain concept, Deaf children learn to embrace their Deaf being and appreciate their uniqueness in this fascinating world of diverse cultures. This is the kind of life Deaf children have today in some parts of the country. This is the kind of life Deaf people hope for future generations of deaf children.

Deaf Awareness

by Karen Christie (2011)

In a small operating theatre that doubles as a classroom,
I am seated for a panel discussion.
The student doctors in their lab coats practice observation.
As living clothed bodies, we are
wholes instead of parts but
the first interpreted question is:
Don't you wish a cure?
If I could I would
wish for healing hands,
my own. One touch
on each of your closed eyelids—
Ephphatha, "be opened"—
now you see us.
A miracle.

Artist Biographies

IRIS ARANDA—Iris, a native of Panama, immigrated to the United States in 2001, to build upon her career as a professional artist. Currently, she resides in Kenosha, Wisconsin, where she also maintains her studio. She has also done commissioned works for major companies such as Coca-Cola and Colgate. She holds a master's degree in applied arts design from the University of Panama. Her work can be accessed at www.irisne.com.

CHUCK BAIRD—Chuck, a graduate of the Kansas School for the Deaf, received his training at the Rochester Institute of Technology, where he earned a bachelor's of fine arts (BFA) in painting in 1974. His first major exhibition was at the World Federation of the Deaf conference in Washington, D.C., in 1975, and, since then, he has exhibited around the world. He lived in Austin, Texas, where he founded a visual art foundation to help promote emerging Deaf artists. His work can be accessed at www.chuckbaird.com.

DAVID CALL—David graduated from the California School for the Deaf, Riverside, in 1980, and he attended Gallaudet University, where he earned his bachelor's degree in art. A holder of a master's degree in special education from California State University, Northridge, he is an art teacher at the California School for the Deaf in Fremont, where he helps his students incorporate De'VIA images in their artwork. His work can be accessed at www.eyehandstudio.com.

MATT DAIGLE—Matt graduated from Northern State University in South Dakota, where he received his bachelor's degree in advertising and graphic design. He has worked in the field of graphic design for more than 15 years, both as a freelance and full-time designer. His most notable achievement is the creation of the International Breastfeeding Symbol. Currently, as a professional cartoonist, he draws single-panel cartoons for the series "In Deaf Culture ..." and "Deaf Reel," as well as for the web-comic strip "That Deaf Guy," with his wife, Kay. He has also published two humor books, *Adventures in Deaf Culture* and *Extreme Interpreting*. His work can be accessed at www.mdaigletoons.com and www.thatdeafguy.com.

SUSAN DUPOR—Susan earned a BFA from the School of the Art Institute in Chicago and a master's degree in deaf education and art education from the National Technical Institute for the deaf and the University of Rochester. Her powerful artwork generates much interest from members of the Deaf community and has been included in many group exhibitions throughout the nation. She is currently working as an art teacher at the Wisconsin School for the Deaf in Delavan. Her work can be accessed at www.duporart.com.

MAUREEN KLUSZA—Maureen attended the Marie Katzenbach School for the Deaf in Trenton, New Jersey, and graduated from the Rochester Institute of Technology with a BFA in illustration. She is one of the graphic arts teachers at the California School for the Deaf in Fremont, and she does freelance work on the side for the Deaf community. Her website is www.moeart.com.

LEON LIM—Born in Malaysia, Leon moved to the United States as a young adult to pursue higher education at the Rochester Institute of Technology, with several academic scholarships. His artwork covers a wide range of media: paintings, photography, installations, multimedia, and performance objects. His works have been exhibited in galleries, museums, and major festivals, including the Total Museum of Contemporary Art in Seoul, the CAFA Art Museum in Beijing, and the John F. Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C. In addition, Lim's work has been featured in major magazines and newspapers and on reality television shows. His most notable accomplishment is having his transformative portrait of Julian Assange selected for *TIME Magazine's* Person of the Year 2010 (published in January 2011). His work can be accessed at www.leonlim.com.

TONY "Mac" MCGREGOR—Well known for his artistic work with gourds, Tony also is recognized for his illustrations in children's books. After working as a senior technical illustrator and senior computer graphics designer for several major corporations, such as Bausch & Lomb and Dee Howard Company, he returned to the University of Texas in Austin to earn a doctorate. He is currently a teacher of the deaf in a public school in Texas.

BETTY MILLER—Betty is considered the "mother" of the De'VIA movement, as a pioneer and trail-blazer in using art to portray the oppressive learning environments experienced by so many deaf children in oral programs. After graduating from Gallaudet in 1957 with a bachelor's degree in fine arts, she worked as an ad illustrator with a major advertising firm in Washington, D.C. and with the Yellow Pages for several years. She eventually returned to Gallaudet as a faculty member and earned additional degrees, including a doctorate in art education from Pennsylvania State University. She was also a co-founder of Spectrum: Focus on Deaf Artists, in Austin, Texas, in the late 1970s. Her website is <http://bettigee.purple-swirl.com>.

WARREN MILLER—After studying graphic design at Rochester Institute of Technology, Warren was able to secure employment as a graphic designer at several different institutions, including the Indianapolis Museum of Art, the University of Nevada at Reno, and Marian College. He eventually became Art Director for Wood-Mizer in Indianapolis. Currently, he is pursuing a career as a full-time artist. His

work can be accessed at www.warrenmillerart.com.

MARY A. RAPPAZZO—Mary is a Los Angeles native, a fine arts painter, digital artist, and graphic designer. Mary's paintings have been shown at galleries in California, Maryland, New York, and Japan. Her work has garnered national awards and has been featured in several publications. Recently, she was selected as an honorary member in the "Artists" category of The Pearls Collection: 20 Deaf women across the U.S. whose work has transcended and shaped their fields. She has a bachelor's degree in graphic design with a minor in painting from California State University at Northridge. Her website is www.mar1eye.com.

ROY RICCI—Roy is originally from the Netherlands and came to the United States to earn a bachelor's degree in studio art at Gallaudet. Currently, he is a self-employed artist, based both in Washington, D.C. and the Netherlands. His website is www.artseepah.com.

SHAWN RICHARDSON—After graduating from the Maryland School for the Deaf, Shawn attended the National Technical Institute for the Deaf at Rochester Institute of Technology and received an associate's degree in applied arts. He is employed as a production associate for the bimonthly magazines published by the National Trust for Historical Preservation in Washington, D.C. His work can be accessed at www.srid4fun.blogspot.com.

NANCY ROURKE—Noted for her Fauvist-Expressionist style, Nancy started painting when she was seven. Her passion for painting developed as a way to communicate with hearing people while growing up. She graduated from Rochester Institute of Technology with a master's degree in computer graphic design and painting. After working as a graphic designer and palette designer for major companies such as Xerox, 20th Century Fox, and Microsoft, she became a full-time artist. She now lives in Colorado and her work can be accessed at www.nancyrourke.com.

ANN SILVER—Ann was one of the pioneers in promoting the Deaf Art Movement in the 1960s and 1970s. Her ground-breaking art depicted the Deaf perspective on the oppressive educational and welfare system for Deaf children and adults. She graduated from Gallaudet with a bachelor's degree in commercial art and earned a master's degree from New York University in Deafness Rehabilitation. After retiring from working as a designer/art director for major book publishing companies in Manhattan, she has returned home to Seattle to continue her artwork.

SCOTT UPTON—Scott graduated from Sir James Whitney School for the Deaf in Belleville, Ontario, and currently is a resident of Kingston, Ontario. He has worked as a pressman for over 29 years at several companies. He also is a desktop publisher, graphic designer, and digital artist. To make his work available for public view and purchase, he established his own business, Hand Nation: Digital Art of Sign Language. His website is www.handnation.com.

MAR VALDEZ—Mar is a student at the California School for the Deaf at Fremont, where she receives instruction from David Call on incorporating De'VIA images in her work.

LARRY YANEZ—Larry, a Texas native, became active in the artistic world after retiring from Motorola, Inc. He is the founder of the Annual Arts and Crafts Festival for Deaf and hard-of-hearing artists and craftsmen in Texas. He received an associate's degree in commercial art from Austin Community College after graduating from the Texas School for the Deaf. His work can be access at lyanezstudio.com.

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