Deaf Culture: An Overview

Values and Beliefs

- Deaf culture tends to be collectivist rather than individualist; culturally Deaf people value the group.
- Culturally Deaf people value the use of sign language, such as American Sign Language, over secondary codes such as Signed Exact English

  People who are culturally Deaf tend to be very concerned about preserving their cherished sign languages and ways of life. As a result, they may oppose technological innovations like cochlear implants, if doctors insist that the implanted child not sign. This issue is evolving, though, as increasing numbers of Deaf signers have cochlear implants.

- A positive attitude toward being deaf is also typical in Deaf cultural groups. In Deaf culture, deafness is not considered a condition that needs to be fixed.

Behavioral Norms

- Culturally Deaf people have rules of etiquette for getting attention, walking through signed conversations, leave-taking, and otherwise politely negotiating a signing environment.
- Deaf people also keep each other informed of what is going on in one's environment. It is common to provide detailed information when leaving early or arriving late; withholding such information may be considered rude.
- Deaf people may be more direct or blunt than their hearing counterparts.
- When giving introductions, Deaf people typically try to find common ground; since the Deaf community is relatively small, Deaf people usually know some other Deaf people in common. "The search for connections is the search for connectedness."
- Deaf people may also consider time differently. Showing up early to large scale events, such as lectures, is typical. This may be motivated by the need to get a seat that provides the best visual clarity for the deaf person. Deaf people may also be late to social events. However, at Deaf social events such as parties, it is common for Deaf people to stay for elongated amounts of time, for the solidarity and conversations at social gatherings are valued by Deaf people.

Literary Traditions and Arts

A strong tradition of poetry and storytelling exists in American Sign Language and other signed languages. Some prominent performers in the U.S. include Clayton Valli,

Benjamin Bahan, Ella Mae Lentz, Manny Hernandez, C.J. Jones, Debbie Rennie, Patrick Graybill, Peter Cook, and many others. Their works are now increasingly available on video.

Culturally Deaf people have also represented themselves in the dominant written languages of their nations.

Deaf artists such as Betty G. Miller and Chuck Baird have produced visual artwork that conveys a Deaf worldview.

History

Deaf people who sign are intensely proud of their history. In the United States, they recount the story of Laurent Clerc, a Deaf educator, coming to the United States from France in 1816 to help found the first permanent school for deaf children in the country.

Another well-known event is the 1880 Second International Congress on Education of the Deaf in Milan, Italy, where hearing educators voted to embrace oral education and remove sign language from the classroom. This effort resulted in strong opposition within Deaf cultures today to the oralist method of teaching deaf children to speak and lip read with limited or no use of sign language in the classroom. The method is intended to make it easier for deaf children to integrate into hearing communities, but the benefits of learning in such an environment are disputed. The use of sign language is central to Deaf identity and attempts to limit its use are viewed as an attack.

Shared Institutions

Deaf culture revolves around such institutions as residential schools for deaf students, universities for deaf students (including Gallaudet University and the National Technical Institute for the Deaf), Deaf clubs, Deaf athletic leagues, Deaf social organizations (such as the Deaf Professional Happy Hour), Deaf religious groups, and an array of conferences and festivals, such as the Deaf Way II Conference and Festival and the World Federation of the Deaf conferences.