Deaf Culture

Culture is a set of social behaviors and beliefs, a history, and a language that is unique to a group of people. A culture may also share art, humor, and common stories. Sharing these characteristics and beliefs and behaving in common ways identifies individuals or members as belonging to the culture. The Deaf culture contains all of these elements.

Although the idea that Deaf people have a culture and community is new to many hearing people, it has existed for a long time. The Deaf culture has characteristics identifiable to that of other ethnic groups or subcultures. It is born out of shared experiences. The Deaf community has its own organizations, events, and arts. Deaf intra-marriage is common and there are also Deaf religious congregations. Perhaps the most essential link to Deaf culture among the American deaf community is its language—American Sign Language.

Because the majority of deaf children are born to hearing parents, the passing on or transmission of Deaf culture does not usually come from family members, but from contact with other Deaf people.

Not every deaf person is part of the Deaf community and Deaf culture, however. The deaf and hard of hearing community is very diverse, differing greatly on the cause, degree, and age of onset of hearing loss, educational background, communication methods, and feelings about hearing loss. How people define themselves in terms of their hearing loss is personal and may reflect identification with the Deaf culture and the deaf community. When writing about deafness, many writers will use a capital “D” when referring to aspects of deaf culture and a lower case “d” when speaking only about the hearing loss or about a group of deaf people who do not identify with Deaf culture. Therefore, individuals may see themselves as either deaf, Deaf, or hard of hearing.

The “small d” deaf tend to have few associations with the Deaf community and may never have experienced schooling or community activities with others who are Deaf. This view, sometimes called the medical or clinical view, essentially accepts the behaviors and values of people who can hear as the norm. Those who hold this view might define the Deaf community as a group of people whose hearing loss *interferes with* the normal reception of speech and who have a range of learning and social *problems* due to their hearing loss.

Conversely, “big D” Deaf people identify themselves as culturally deaf and have a strong deaf identity. The “big D” Deaf tend to have attended programs for Deaf people and feel connected to the social life, politics, arts, humor, and values of Deaf culture. This view of deafness, sometimes called the cultural view, recognizes that Deaf people often reject the idea that they need to be “fixed” or cured, are proud of their differences, and enjoy the uniqueness of their community.

SOURCES

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