Deaf Culture

Exploring Deaf Communities in the United States

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Preface

Deaf culture has been around for centuries, definitely since the 1700s and perhaps even earlier. Deaf people have always been on this earth. When schools for the deaf were started, deaf people began coming together. The ways they communicated and interacted with each other planted the seeds of Deaf culture that have grown to what it is today: a vibrant culture with a diverse membership.

Many books have been written about Deaf culture. Our book takes a different approach. Yes, we explain what Deaf culture is all about. We describe the Deaf community, its history and contemporary perspectives, and what Deaf culture has to offer. Looking at the Table of Contents, you may wonder: What are some of those chapters doing in a book on Deaf culture? Auditory Innovations? Education? How Deaf People Think, Learn, and Read? Technology and Accessibility? Careers? As you continue to read this Preface, you will see why we address these issues.

These chapters are a testimony to how Deaf culture has been influenced by experiences related to each area and how culturally Deaf individuals have influenced new approaches in each area that have taken Deaf people's perspectives into account. We three authors, two Deaf and one hearing, teamed up and agreed that we needed to present the Deaf experience in areas that have profoundly influenced the lives of Deaf people. We have had close connections with each of these areas and want to share what we have learned with you, the readers.

Irene W. Leigh's parents found out their daughter was deaf on her second birthday. Her hearing mother told her again and again how she responded to the news, grieved, and then after 1 week pulled herself together and started to get information on how to give her daughter access to language. After emigrating from Great Britain to the United States when Irene was age 4, she eventually attended the Bell School in Chicago, Illinois, a Chicago public school that had a day school for the deaf as part of an elementary school with hearing pupils. So she was able to play with and learn with both Deaf and hearing peers. She witnessed firsthand how Deaf students struggled to master the educational curriculum without teachers who could use American Sign Language (ASL) and without ASL interpreters in the classroom. She herself had to prove to educators and supervisors that as a Deaf person, she was able to keep up with hearing students and surpass them or perform jobs at work as well as hearing peers. She saw Deaf people going to Deaf friends' houses, hoping they were at home because there was no way they could have phoned ahead of time. From talking to parents and from her own parents' experiences, she understood what hearing parents go through with their Deaf children. She herself has gone through the parenting experience, having raised two children, one Deaf and one hearing. She saw Deaf people explaining how they became deaf. She saw how difficult it was for Deaf people with mental health issues to get help from signing mental health clinicians who could provide culturally affirmative services. These formative experiences led her to become a psychologist. Frequently, she saw how Deaf people had to work extra hard to overcome the disbelief of

well-intentioned, unenlightened hearing people that Deaf people could be competent workers. And she saw how Deaf people went about solving life problems and living productive and happy lives. All of these experiences reinforced her desire to explain to you, the reader, Deaf lives and how Deaf people navigate the early years, the educational system, and the world of home and work. At Gallaudet University, the world's only liberal arts university for Deaf and hard-of-hearing people, she has prepared numerous future psychologists who now work with Deaf people in culturally affirmative ways. She has also written extensively on the subject of Deaf people, with particular focus on deaf identities, and has produced research in the areas of depression, attachment, cochlear implants, and deaf identities. She sees herself as a bicultural individual, comfortable in the Deaf community, and comfortable with hearing individuals, thanks to the positive upbringing she received from her hearing parents who supported her as a Deaf person.

Jean F. Andrews is a hearing educator who early on immersed herself in the Deaf community during her graduate studies when she learned about Deaf culture and ASL by socializing with Deaf classmates and working on class projects with Deaf/hearing collaborative teams. She continued her learning of ASL with Deaf faculty at the Maryland School for the Deaf in the teachers' workroom and during after school social activities. While in the classroom, she explored the best ways to teach her Deaf students English reading skills by observing how they used ASL to get meaning from print. Throughout her professional life, she devoted herself to connecting with the Deaf community. She has spent extensive time in researching how to best teach Deaf children using ASL/English bilingual methods; developing alternative frameworks to teach reading using ASL and fingerspelling; preparing teachers, administrators, and doctoral level educators to understand Deaf culture; welcoming Deaf teachers, administrators, and graduate students; and working to give Deaf students the best academic experience possible in culturally Deaf ways. Along the way, she attended educational conferences and saw how hearing researchers dominated the podium, lecturing about how they think Deaf people should be taught to read, write, and be educated. She often wondered why more culturally Deaf professionals, with their culturally affirming insights, were not invited to participate in federally funded research teams on language, literacy, and educationally related issues. She also has experienced firsthand many Deaf people who have had significant difficulty learning in school due to language deprivation, but they somehow made it through graduate school and got into professions when accommodations were provided. But she has also seen many other Deaf adults at the lower end of the achievement spectrum who have ended up in jails and prisons without being able to communicate with their attorneys or signing interpreters. She has been involved in working to improve their situation by educating judges, lawyers, and criminal justice officials about Deaf culture and the language and communication needs of Deaf inmates. Her philosophy has been to make sure that the education and forensic fields are culturally affirmative for Deaf people.

Raychelle L. Harris, culturally Deaf herself, grew up in a Deaf family. Her parents, her mother's parents, and some relatives are Deaf, making her third-generation Deaf. Her sisters, one Deaf and one hearing, all learned ASL as their

first language from their Deaf father, who graduated from the Florida School for the Deaf and Blind (FSDB), and their Deaf mother, who graduated from North Carolina School for the Deaf (NCSD). They met at Gallaudet College (before Gallaudet became an university in 1986) and married in 1972. Her Deaf sister met her future husband at a Deaf Awareness Day event at Six Flags in New Jersey. Her husband comes from a Deaf Lithuanian family, all of whom learned ASL and English as their third and fourth languages in addition to Lithuanian Sign Language and both written and spoken Lithuanian. All of us are connexin 26 recipients (see Chapter 2) and/or carriers, which led a geneticist at Gallaudet to inform my sister and her husband, both with the connexin 26 mutation, that they would only have Deaf children. They now have two Deaf children, who are fourth-generation Deaf.

Growing up, Raychelle never had an opportunity to study her language or culture until a historic Deaf Studies course was offered at her Deaf high school, taught by two Deaf teachers in 1989. The experience was mind-blowing for Raychelle. When she enrolled at Gallaudet University, she met many Deaf people who did not think ASL was a language. They did not think there was a Deaf culture either. This bothered Raychelle. Her mother was the principal of a Deaf school that was the first public Deaf school to adopt the bilingual-bicultural philosophy, teaching using ASL and written English from kindergarten through high school. This inspired Raychelle to establish the first bilingual-bicultural week with all-Deaf presenters explaining about ASL and Deaf culture at Gallaudet in 1992, which then led to the establishment of a Student Body Government position focused on ASL and Deaf culture.

For a long time, Raychelle has been passionately involved in teaching ASL as well as Deaf culture to her students both at the precollege and college levels. She has researched how ASL is used in the classroom in different school settings. She has worked to include ASL and Deaf Studies in school systems. Her research finds that kindergarteners with high ASL fluency are better able to participate in academic classes and discussions. She has found that teachers can promote higher order thinking skills to very young preschool children through the use of Academic ASL techniques and principles. Her work provides innovative approaches for birth to 5-year-old early intervention programs interested in setting up quality ASL/English bilingual preschools and kindergartens to lay the foundation for emergent literacy in ASL and English.

While we focus strongly on Deaf culture in this book, we also write about persons who do not identify with Deaf culture. Why do we write about these individuals? We contrast their experiences with the experiences of people who grow up either exposed to Deaf culture or who become part of the culturally Deaf community after their school years. We feel this will help you understand more fully how persons who are deaf experience their lives, whether culturally Deaf or not.

Exactly what do we cover in this book? In Part I, "Deaf Culture: Yesterday and Today," we have two chapters. Chapter 1 covers the past and present of the Deaf community. It consists of an introduction that reports on the Deaf community, who its members are, how large the community is, its history, and the different ways to explain the Deaf experience.

What is a chapter on "Causes of Being Deaf and Auditory Innovations"

doing in Part I? Deaf people themselves *are* interested in genetics. And, contrary to popular belief, many do not necessarily want to become hearing. They are proud of themselves as Deaf people. But they are interested in how genes that cause differences in hearing are transmitted from generation to generation. We assume you readers will be interested, too. Deaf people also talk about how they became deaf from nongenetic causes such as diseases, and we explain this. Everyone with hearing differences has been through hearing testing and different ways to get access to hearing through auditory aids. They all have experiences with audiologists. Culturally Deaf people, including those who want to use hearing aids and cochlear implants (devices to help people hear), have their own perspective on experiences in hearing and speech centers. It is part of their lives, and they have been working to make such experiences more culturally sensitive.

Moving on to Part II, we learn about "Signed Languages and Learning." This gets to the heart of Deaf culture. In Chapter 3, "American Sign Language," we explore the following: What is a signed language? How do culturally Deaf people, for whom ASL is their unique language and bond, use ASL to communicate? What is the difference between sign language and sign communication? Yes, there is a difference! Do Deaf people all over the world use the same sign language? Read this chapter to find out.

In Chapter 4, "Deaf Education and Deaf Culture," we learn how deaf people have been educated and what they have learned. There are laws about educating children with disabilities, including deaf children. Do you know how much input culturally Deaf people had into their own education? What was the education system like for them? What do we know from research about what works and does not work? Get the answers in this chapter! And in Chapter 5, "How Deaf People Think, Learn, and Read," we explain the thinking and learning processes deaf children go through. Deaf children rely much more on vision than hearing children do. How *does* that influence their language, their thinking, and their reading? Do culturally Deaf adults think and understand the world in the same ways hearing adults do?

Moving on to Part III, "Deaf Lives, Technology, Arts, and Career Opportunities," we get more into how Deaf people live their lives. Chapter 6, "Deaf Identities," covers different theories and ways that identity develops in Deaf people and how culturally Deaf people may see themselves. When scholars began to explore Deaf culture, they based their conclusions on White Deaf people. What about Deaf people of color? What about gays, lesbians, bisexual, transgender, and queer culturally Deaf people? What about Deaf people with other disabilities? The field of intersectionality, or how different identities interact with each other, is growing fast. Scholars are finally paying attention to these different Deaf groups and how their identities intersect.

What life issues do culturally Deaf people confront? How do they deal with these life issues? Do they feel equal to hearing people? When they face discrimination by hearing people, whether in school, on the playground, at work, or in the community, how do they stand up for themselves? That is the focus of Chapter 7, "Navigating Deaf and Hearing Worlds." Many Deaf people do just fine. But others struggle in the world of work. They may also face health and mental health issues and can get caught in the criminal

justice system. When they search for help, are the available services Deaf culturally affirmative?

Deaf people have made their mark in technology and access. In Chapter 8, "Technology and Accessibility," we provide a historical background to explain the access issues Deaf people had to struggle with. When technology finally caught up enough to enable Deaf people to have functional equivalence (this means they can access devices just like hearing people can), their lives were transformed in positive ways. In this chapter, you will learn how Deaf people use and benefit from captions, telephones, alarm systems, and other types of innovative technology. Deaf people have worked to invent much of the technology that they now benefit from.

Chapter 9, "Arts, Literature, and Media," provides a window to the arts and literature that is a vital part of Deaf culture. We show you how Deaf culture has contributed to the arts through visual means. There are plays, sculptures, paintings, and literary renderings among others that have been produced by culturally Deaf people. You will get a taste of sign language literature and written literature that shows how Deaf people express themselves. We also provide information on how Deaf people have been and are being portrayed in the arts, literature, and media. There are Deaf people in Hollywood, on Broadway, and in multiple television shows, including reality shows.

The last chapter, Chapter 10, "Advocating and Career Opportunities," was written with you, the reader, in mind. We present ways in which hearing people can work together with Deaf people and additionally provide information on different career opportunities that allow you to be involved with Deaf people. Hopefully, it will help you decide where you want to go with what you have learned from this book. There are many other possibilities beyond the careers we write about where you can be involved in working with and for Deaf people, if that interests you.

And finally, we present "Final Thoughts on Deaf Culture and Its Future." What impact will all the technology and genetic advances have on Deaf culture and ASL? Does the Deaf community have a future? What is the legacy of the Deaf community and Deaf culture? How can hearing parents benefit from knowledge about Deaf culture? Having a deaf child does not have to be anxiety ridden and problem filled; it can be a joyful experience to support a Deaf child, understand the world of this child, and provide ways to be bicultural as this child connects with both hearing and Deaf worlds.

We hope you, the reader, enjoy the book as much as we have enjoyed writing it for you. We hope you will get a sense of Deaf culture and the different ways Deaf people have worked to improve their quality of life and to show they are an important part of the diversity of the human race.

Acknowledgments

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We cannot leave the Acknowledgment section without thanking our partners at home, who patiently endured our long hours on the computer as we worked to meet deadlines. They understood the importance of getting this book out to you, the readers, so that you can learn what Deaf culture is all about. And finally, we express our appreciation to everyone who has shared or written about perspectives on Deaf culture, without which we could never have written this book.

—Irene W. Leigh
Jean F. Andrews
Raychelle L. Harris

About the Authors

Irene W. Leigh, PhD, is a Deaf psychologist whose experience includes high school teaching, psychological assessment, psychotherapy, and private practice. From 1985 to 1991 she was a psychologist and assistant director at the Lexington Center for Mental Health Services. She taught in the Gallaudet University Clinical Psychology Doctoral Program from 1992 to 2012, was Psychology Department Chair from 2008 to 2012, and attained professor emerita status in 2012. Dr. Leigh serves on review boards of professional journals and was associate editor of the *Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education* from 2005 to 2011. She has presented nationally and internationally on identity, depression, parenting, attachment, cochlear implants, and psychosocial adjustment, and has published more than fifty articles and book chapters in addition to authoring, coauthoring, and editing or coediting several books. As a Fellow of the American Psychological Association, she served on two task forces and the Board for the Advancement of Psychology in the Public Interest.

Jean F. Andrews, PhD, received a bachelor's degree in English language and literature from Catholic University, in Washington, DC, a master's in education in Deaf education from McDaniel College (formerly Western Maryland College) in Westminster, Maryland, and a doctorate in speech and hearing sciences from the University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana, Illinois. Dr. Andrews was a classroom teacher of reading at the Maryland School for the Deaf in Frederick, Maryland. From 1983 to 1988, she prepared educational interpreters and teachers of Deaf students at Eastern Kentucky University, Richmond, Kentucky. From 1988 to 2015, she taught classes, prepared teachers and doctoral level leaders, and conducted applied research at Lamar University in Beaumont, Texas. Dr. Andrews' research interests include language and literacy, Deaf Studies, ASL/English bilingualism, and forensic issues with deaf offenders. She has also served on the governing board of the Texas School for the Deaf. Currently, she is working on ASL/English science materials for struggling Deaf readers.

Raychelle L. Harris, PhD, a third generation Deaf and a native ASL signer, received her bachelor's degree in American Sign Language (ASL) from Gallaudet University in 1995 and master's degree in Deaf education from Western Maryland College in 2000. Dr. Harris has been teaching ASL as a first and second language since 1993. She returned to Gallaudet University for her doctoral studies in the areas of education and linguistics, with her dissertation topic focused on ASL discourse in academic settings. In 2008, Dr. Harris joined Gallaudet University's Department of Interpretation as a faculty member. Since 2009, she has been teaching with the Department of ASL and Deaf Studies, preparing future ASL teachers in the masters in sign language education program. She is also one of three editors of the *Journal of ASL and Literature*. Dr. Harris holds professional certification with the American Sign Language Teachers Association and is a Certified Deaf Interpreter.

PART I

Deaf Culture: Yesterday and Today

CHAPTER 1

Deaf Community: Past and Present

If you bump into a stranger and start talking, how do you react when that person says, "I am deaf" and points to his or her ears while shaking his or her head? Many will blurt out loud, "Oh, I'm so sorry." What does this mean? Are they sorry because they were not aware and are apologizing for their mistake? Or are they sorry because that person cannot hear, cannot easily understand spoken language, and has to struggle to communicate?

Many people have created a vision of "deaf" as meaning disabled, unable to communicate with other hearing people. They think deaf people are limited in what they can learn in school and in the kind of jobs they can do. They see deaf people as isolated and unable to connect with the world. This may be why many people look to medicine to "cure" hearing loss. They believe that surgery to insert a cochlear implant, a device that is surgically inserted behind the ear to override the nonfunctioning cochlea in the inner ear and help deaf people receive the sensations of sound (see Chapter 2 for details) or the use of hearing aids to amplify sounds, will "help" deaf people to "hear" and understand people who speak. People in general often want deaf people to learn how to speak and hear so that they are not isolated from their families and their environment.

We've also seen people using sign language on the street. All over the United States, American Sign Language (ASL) courses are very popular. On TV and in the movies, there are deaf actors and actresses using sign language. One example is that of Shoshannah Stern, pictured in Figure 1–1, who is well known especially for TV roles in programs such as *Threat Matrix, Providence,* and *ER*. Her parents and both of her siblings are Deaf. She attended schools for the deaf and grew up always connected to culturally Deaf people. Read on, and in a few paragraphs, you will see an explanation of the difference between deaf and Deaf.

In the music field, we have Sean Forbes, a popular deaf rapper who was selected as outstanding hip-hop artist of the year at the Detroit Music Awards (Stone, 2015). And there is Treshelle Edmonds, who was featured signing the

Figure 1–1. Shoshannah Stern, Deaf actress. Photo credit: Tate Tullier. Used with permission of Shoshannah Stern.

National Anthem along with actress Idina Menzel and "America the Beautiful" with singer John Legend at Super Bowl 2015 (http://nad.org/blogs/01/16/2015/treshelle-edmond-bring-asl-super-bowl-xlix). There are talented Deaf artists working in every possible media, as noted in Chapter 9. Every now and then, newspapers will include information about Gallaudet University, the world's only university for deaf and hard-of-hearing students. Deaf people's opinions are often included in media articles about the cochlear implant. Their opinions cover two contrasting perspectives. One perspective is that cochlear implants support access to the hearing world and help with hearing and speaking. The other perspective is that cochlear implants hurt the deaf community because the focus is on hearing and speaking and not on sign language, which is visual and accessible. These perspectives are elaborated further in Chapter 2.

You may even have a deaf medical doctor or a deaf lawyer! Deaf people have made inroads in many organizations. For example, we have Gregory Hlibok, pictured in Figure 1–2. He is a Deaf lawyer who serves as Chief of the Disability Rights Office at the Federal Communications Commission. His parents are Deaf, as are his three siblings, each of whom has made their mark professionally respectively as an actor, vice president at a large brokerage firm, and educator. He communicates with coworkers using email and uses sign language interpreters during scheduled meetings. When meetings are impromptu, he communicates by writing notes or verbally. Among his responsibilities is that of helping to implement the 21st Century Communications and Video Accessibility Act (http://law.hofstra.edu/pdf/alumni/greg_hlibok_nlj.pdf).

Google "Deaf" and you will find hundreds, even thousands, of references. Because of this explosion of information, many more people are aware of deaf people, the deaf community, and Deaf culture. But often the lay public is not aware of the many nuances or details of this unique population. They may not know that being deaf may have more meanings than just "cannot hear." They may need to understand that being deaf can also reflect a meaningful and productive way of life, even a gain. So our purpose in this book is to provide information to help you understand deaf people and their vibrant deaf community.

You may have noticed that we use the terms *deaf* and *Deaf.* What is this all about? The term *deaf* refers to individuals whose hearing loss makes it very hard

Figure 1–2. Gregory Hlibok, Chief, Disability Rights Office. Photo credit: Matthew Vita. Used with permission of Gregory Hlibok.

or impossible to understand spoken language through hearing alone, with or without the use of auditory devices (hearing aids, cochlear implants, FM systems, etc.). Many of those individuals who call themselves "deaf" tend to rely on auditory assistance devices, prefer to use spoken language, and tend to socialize more often with hearing people than with deaf people.

"Deaf" represents what we see as the culture of Deaf people. These people use sign language and share beliefs, values, customs, and experiences that create a very strong bond and group identity (Padden & Humphries, 1988). They often prefer to socialize with other culturally Deaf people and do not see themselves as tragically isolated from society, contrary to what many hearing people think. They see benefits to being deaf that many are unaware of.

Here you see the term *culture* used.

What is your definition of culture?

Culture is a term that has been debated for a long time and has multiple definitions (Tomlinson-Clarke, 1999). One way to define culture is that it includes the values, beliefs, social forms, and traits of a group of people. These values represent specific meanings, beliefs, and practices that guide the group in individual and social development. It is common to think of culture as representing the many observable characteristics of a group that can be seen, most obviously their behavior. We need to understand the reality that cultural behavior is only an external representation of the deeper and broader concepts of culture, specifically the complex ideas, attitudes, and values (Languageandculture.com). As seen in Figure 1–3, the image of a cultural iceberg helps us to understand what aspects reflect cultures. The observable part of the iceberg includes behaviors and practices that can be seen or observed, while the buried or hidden part of the iceberg incorporates how the core values (learned ideas of what is acceptable or desirable, including religion, family practices, and so on) are shown in specific situations such as working or socializing. Although different cultural groups may share similar core values, such as respect, such values may be interpreted differently in different situations and incorporated differently into specific attitudes for daily situations. These internal core values may become visible to the casual observer who sees the observable behaviors such as the words that are used, the ways people in the culture act, and so on.

Can you think of examples that show how respect is demonstrated in different cultures?

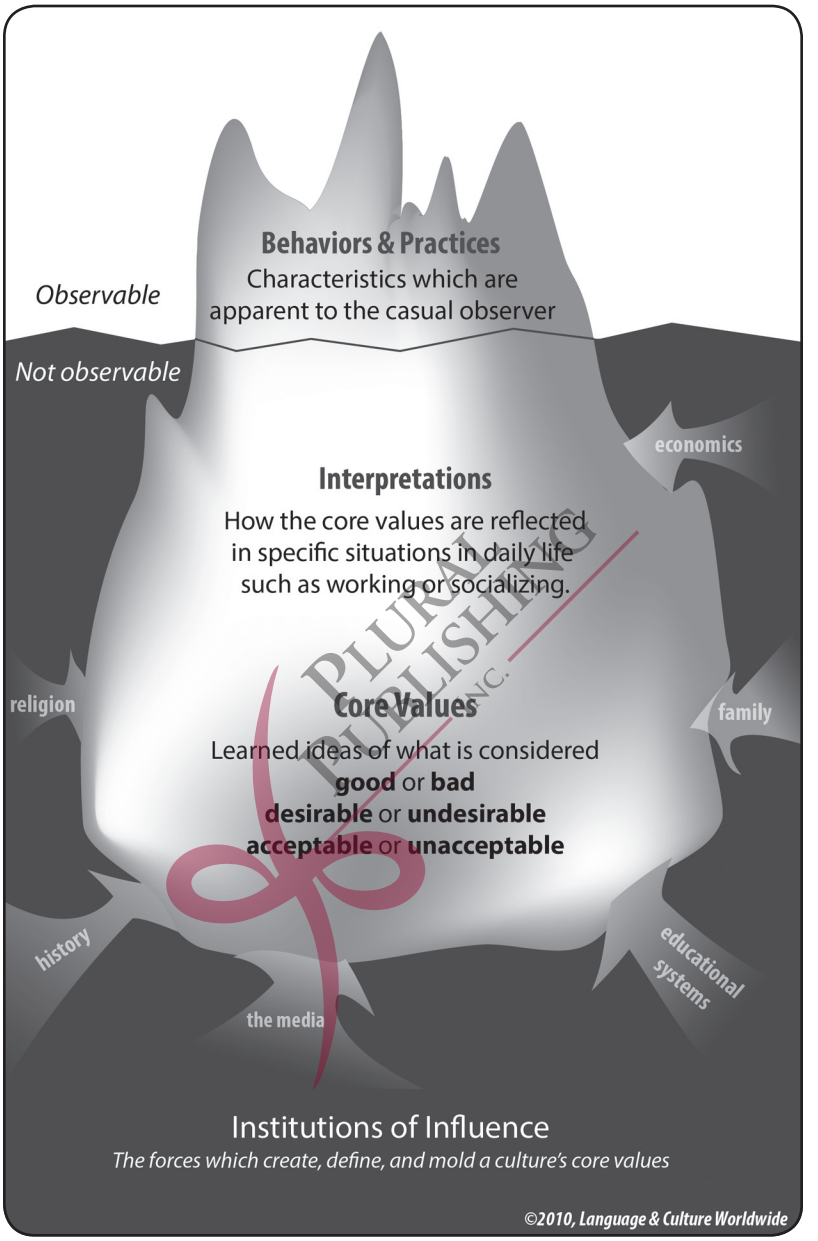

Figure 1–3. The Cultural Iceberg. Used with permission of Language & Culture Worldwide, LLC. http://www.languageandculture.com

Now consider this: What is your definition of Deaf culture?

When we write about Deaf culture, we are writing about the beliefs, mores, artistic expressions, behaviors, understanding, and language expressions that

Deaf people use (e.g., Holcomb, 2013; Padden & Humphries, 1988). It is a culture that people are either born into or join later after meeting culturally Deaf people. It can even mean participating in events that include Deaf people. Culturally Deaf people tend to view being Deaf as a positive attribute or as a gain, not as something negative or pathological that needs to be fixed. This is a perspective that promotes resiliency in the face of difficult experiences, using cultural capital (Yosso, 2005). Cultural capital involves the use of cultural knowledge, skills, abilities, and interactions to influence aspirations, socialization, language use, family patterns, and resistance to disadvantages. In the case of Deaf community cultural capital wealth, the use of visual language, visual learning, and the connections with Deaf people who are leading full lives lends support to a protective factor when Deaf people work to maximize their opportunities even while experiencing lower expectations on the part of hearing people.

When did deaf communities begin to exist? Many people do not realize that deaf communities in different countries have existed for centuries (e.g., Van Cleve & Crouch, 1989). However, the term *Deaf culture* became popular only in the 1980s, after the book *Deaf in America: Voices From a Culture* (Padden & Humphries, 1988) was published. Why talk about Deaf culture when Deaf people often use the very popular term *deaf community*?

Although the deaf community brings up a picture of how people interact within this community, Deaf culture is a different way of looking at deaf people (Holcomb, 2013; Padden & Humphries, 1988). It legitimizes how they look at life, how they function, and how they define themselves, not by how hearing people define them. This is a different "center" from how hearing people define being deaf. Culturally Deaf people often have little interest in knowing how well one can hear or speak. They see themselves as individuals who develop as others develop, who naturally learn their signed language and culture in a normal way that is different from the typical hearing way. They use their signed language to pass on social norms, values, language, and technology to new entrees and to the next generation. Simply put, using the term *Deaf culture* is a search for the Deaf self, the ways of being Deaf, through analyzing what it means to be a complete Deaf person, not a person who is incomplete because of the lack of hearing. This represents the value of living full, rewarding Deaf lives instead of struggling to compensate for being "incomplete." Most deaf people are not born into Deaf culture because they have hearing parents, but rather enter the culture later. This is analogous to individuals who affirm a gay or lesbian identity while growing up and then connect with the culture of gays and lesbians.

You may have heard different phrases used to describe deaf people, such as auditory handicap, hearing impaired, hearing handicapped, deaf mute, prelingually deaf, or deaf and dumb.

NEGATIVE LABELS

- Auditory Handicap
- Hearing Impaired
- Hearing Handicapped
- Deaf Mute
- Prelingually Deaf
- Deaf and Dumb