

Is DEAF CULTURE REALLY A CULTURE?

DANIELLE SHARPS (British Sign Language and Deaf Studies)

Abstract

Whether or not the term 'Deaf Culture' can be used to define the unique interactions of Deaf individuals as a true 'culture' has been discussed numerous times over the years. The purpose of this article is to establish both the definition, and relevance, of the term in the UK's modern Deaf community. It also considers whether recent changes to the mode of community interaction, and technological advancements, have affected Deaf people, and if so, to what extent. Having considered numerous academic sources, there would appear to be some agreement as to the basis of Deaf culture, although there is no strict criterion for membership. It has been suggested that 'Deaf culture' is a term used exclusively by hearing people, since Deaf people themselves would view their interactions as the cultural norm. The research in this article suggests that not only is Deaf culture a true 'culture,' but it is in fact a thriving and ever-adapting force pulling the Deaf community together to protect their unique heritage and way of life. The culturally Deaf are similar to any other minority community living in the UK, and they are both proud to promote and quick to defend their culture.

IN ORDER TO consider whether Deaf culture is a true 'culture,' it is important to establish a definition of each term: 'Deaf' and 'Culture.' According to *Oxford Dictionaries*, 'culture' is defined as 'the ideas, customs and social behaviour of a particular people or society' (2018a). The term 'deaf' is defined as 'lacking the power of hearing, or having impaired hearing' (*Oxford Dictionaries* 2018b). As will be explored in this article, this solely auditory definition, and the inclusion of the word 'power,' is typical of the stereotypes Deaf people face daily. Even when considering deafness to be solely an auditory loss, the use of the word 'power' is not essential as the definition still makes sense without it. Therefore, in order to evaluate whether Deaf culture is a true 'culture,' it is important to first understand which particular deaf people are being discussed.

It was during the early 1970s that the Deaf cultural community started to differentiate themselves from others who were deaf or hard of hearing, by using the capital letter 'D' (Atherton, 2012). Since then, there have been several proposed guidelines for membership into Deaf culture, although none have agreed on strict criteria. Initially, Deaf culture was seen as an exclusive 'club' for radical thinking Deaf people, and membership was based entirely on the language of choice being British Sign Language (Harris, 1997). Since then, the term 'Deaf culture' has been used to highlight the everyday, functional differences between Deaf and hearing people. An example of this, offered by the BDA (2015), is how groups interact with one another at a restaurant. A Deaf group will continue to make eye contact in order to maintain their conversation during their meal, whereas a hearing group will frequently drop eye contact and concentrate on their meal while continuing their conversation.

The sentiment of Deaf culture being based around sign language is echoed by Gallaudet University (1993), who proposed that the Deaf community encompasses both culturally Deaf and auditory deaf individuals within an organised hierarchy. Those identifying as culturally Deaf with Deaf parents are at the top of the framework and culturally Deaf people with hearing parents are next, whereas those who are post-lingually deafened or hard of hearing are ranked towards the bottom. Hearing people are placed last. Using this hierarchy, there is at least some cohesion to the term 'culturally Deaf.' The requirements as set out in the hierarchy, detail that the individual must be a sign language user and a product (pupil) of a deaf school. Exactly where they rank on the hierarchy will depend on whether their parents are Deaf or hearing. Products of mainstream schools or those who learned sign language as a second language are not classed as culturally Deaf. Of course, there are always exceptions

to every rule. A case cited by Robinson (1996), of two young Deaf women who were raised in an otherwise hearing family is a good example. The women were raised in an oralist manner and only later in their childhood discovered sign language. It was through the use of sign language that they became fully able to express themselves and feel included in society. Although they only discovered sign language around age ten, it had such an impact on their lives that they have since identified as culturally Deaf.

Other minority cultures in the UK such as Asian Muslims, are often located in geographical 'zones' of their own choosing. One example of this is Blackburn, where some areas of the town are 95% Asian (Baldwin, 2016). The close proximity to others who share the same values and beliefs offers safety, security and acceptance which in turn allows for freedom to express the cultural norms for said group. The Deaf minority has no such geographical 'base' and are instead spread across society with only limited opportunities to convene with like-minded others (Harris, 1997). How then can there be a Deaf culture, if those involved are not frequently interacting? Would it perhaps be more accurate to refer to Deaf culture as simply the Deaf community instead? An interesting research project carried out by Harris (1995), introduced the concept of Deaf culture being a term created by hearing people, in order to 'label' the unique social interaction of Deaf people. Her research suggested that there was no clear definition of Deaf culture, as the term was not created by Deaf people themselves.

Harris (1995), instead offers the suggestion that the positive outlook on their Deafness, and the active engagement in constructing their own reality, means that Deaf people are in effect defining their own culture; creating a network that constantly evolves and adapts to best support its members. The research offers an explanation of Deaf culture to be the

barriers that differentiate between the Deaf and hearing worlds. There are three clear levels to these barriers; linguistic, attitudinal and symbolic. The linguistic and attitudinal barriers are straightforward in their explanation, and simply highlight the differences in methods of communication, and the attitudes of the hearing community towards their Deaf associates. The symbolic barrier is arguably more interesting, as it places the focus on the attitude of Deaf people (rather than hearing), and their desire to be identified as a linguistic minority rather than a disabled group. This is likely where the concept of Deaf culture is most evident. People who identify themselves as culturally Deaf, do so as a choice. To them, it is a socio-political experience, and they would reject any form of intervention to 'cure' their Deafness. Being Deaf is akin to belonging to any other minority group, and they both proudly promote and fiercely defend their culture.

Paddy Ladd (2003), goes further in suggesting that Deaf culture is a 'collective resistance' that is essential for the Deaf community to function according to their own values, in an otherwise hostile world (214). Others would agree, with the Canadian Cultural Society of the Deaf stating that it is only by being totally immersed in a signing environment at a prelinguistic age, that an individual would ever be culturally Deaf (Cripps, 2018). Cripps also considers a definition of culture that includes identity; having a true understanding of yourself and accepting and embracing your unique attributes. This would only be possible by being completely immersed in an environment where sign language is the mother tongue, with role models and peers who identify as Deaf in the same way. This is perhaps where cultural differences with many hearing communities differ most dramatically. It would be understandable for a hearing parent to feel that their Deaf child is being 'torn away' from them in order to attend a residential Deaf school. With the lack of understanding of the

workings of Deaf culture, this could be perceived as a cruel attempt to separate the child from their hearing family and create a 'them and us' situation. It is only by open discussions and education that these opinions can be challenged, which would in turn allow Deaf children a greater opportunity to learn about their culture and identity in a positive way.

The advancement of technology has undoubtedly provided numerous opportunities for Deaf people to communicate easily, without the need for a third party, and share their thoughts and experiences. One example of this is social media, where there are various blogs created and run by Deaf people, such as 'The Limping Chicken.' It is on this blog that Swinbourne (2013), opens one of his posts with the interesting observation that the term 'hearing people,' only really exists in the Deaf world, as hearing people generally see themselves as being simply 'people.' The suggestion that hearing people are simply 'people,' automatically makes anyone else some type of sub-standard or inferior person. It is this kind of every-day, subconscious labelling that can be detrimental to an individual's personal development, sense of self-worth and confidence. Therefore, it makes sense for a Deaf child to be enveloped in an environment where such negative associations with Deafness are not a consideration. In order to raise a healthy, strong and empowered child it is first important to give them a sense of identity and allow them to express themselves in a fair, equal and non-judgemental way. Based on the research reviewed in this essay, it appears that the only real way to achieve this is by making Deaf culture the heart of the child's world, even if this involves attending a residential school.

Unfortunately, at a cost of £40,000 per student, per year for a residential school, it is not surprising that since 1982 the number of Deaf schools has fallen from seventy-five to just

twenty-one (Weale, 2016). With a similar percentage of local Deaf clubs closing, where remains for Deaf people to come together and engage with each other freely? Although social media offers some form of networking to current and future generations, the cultural norm of older individuals who attend Deaf clubs is nearing crisis. It is also important to consider how social interaction in person benefits those involved greatly, from gaining interpersonal skills to boosting self-esteem. These are skills that require personal contact and are not easily transmitted via technology. With the use of a shared, signed language at the heart of Deaf culture, mainstream education cannot possibly afford Deaf pupils the same opportunities as their hearing peers regardless of whether that student has access to an interpreter. Playground jokes and stories can be lost in translation without similar peers to interact with, and this kind of isolation at a delicate age could be detrimental to the child's development. Without full access to either the Deaf or hearing worlds, how can a child possibly establish a sense of identity to ground them in the future? As previously suggested in this article, it appears absolutely essential that for a deaf child to have the opportunity to embrace their Deafness and have access to their Deaf culture, early immersion into a signed environment is vital.

Despite the numerous professional and organisational interpretations of Deaf culture, there is still no set definition. Each local group offers its own explanation, with emphasis shifting between parentage and onset of deafness to enable a person to 'qualify' as culturally Deaf. This general grey area when referring to culture in general was highlighted by Raymond Williams (1983), who argued that: 'Culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language' (87). This statement relates to the difficulty of offering a definitive answer to the question, 'what is culture?' The sociologist Margaret Archer (1996)

also suggests that trying to define culture is problematic at best and impossible at worst. Her rationale was two-fold; the concept of culture is too vague, with many unclear definitions meaning different things to different people; and secondly that concepts can be interpreted by people in different ways, either as a supreme power controlling all actions or as shared meanings that individuals can manipulate as they wish. Having reviewed the explanations offered by the Deaf communities detailed above, it appears on the surface that agreeing on an absolute definition of Deaf culture may be difficult.

Looking back at the definition as offered by *Oxford Dictionaries* (2018), the ideas, customs and social behaviour of Deaf people clearly differs from those identifying as audiotically deaf, or hearing people. Although the fine detailing of membership to this culture can vary slightly within each localised group, the clear basis of the culture is the use of a common language (BSL), and active participation in the Deaf community. This ethos also entirely fits within the definition offered by Kidd (2002), as culture being 'the way of life for a group of people [...] part and parcel of all that we do, all that we are, all that we can and might become' (5-6). An all-encompassing definition such as the one offered by Kidd, is possibly the one best suited to the Deaf community. His definition covers all aspects of being culturally Deaf, whilst also offering hope for a more understanding and tolerant future for Deaf people.

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