

What is culture?

The concept of culture is not easy to grasp quickly. Sometimes it is used to mean the highest creative productions of a society, such as its art, music and literature.

1) Here the word “culture” means complex whole includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and habits acquired by people in society. We take culture for granted and largely unaware of it. Culture is acquired over so long a period of time, we are largely unaware. Parts of culture are not to be judged “good” or “bad.” These traits cannot be easily exported to another culture. Culture is acquired socially, so language is an essential part of cultural development.

2) A culture is a set of learned behaviors of a group of people who have their own language, values, rules for behavior and traditions. A person may be born into a culture; he is brought up according to the values of the culture and his personality and behavior are shaped by his cultural values. Or, a person may grow up in one culture and later learn the language, values and practices of a different culture and become “enculturated” into that culture.

Deaf Culture

Deaf culture was defined as a distinct group, not by their pathological condition but as a cultural group for the first time in 1960.

Deaf people can be born into the culture, as in the case of children of deaf parents. The type of degree of hearing loss (hard of hearing or profound deaf) is not a criterion for being deaf. Rather, the criterion is whether a person identifies with other deaf people and behaves as a deaf person.

There are more obvious reasons for the existence of deaf culture. Deaf people can generally enjoy each other’s company because communication is not a problem and because of shared life experience. Sports events, clubs, performing arts, social services, education exist to meet a real need.

For many people who grow up as part of the culture of hearing people, they think of themselves as hearing people with a hearing loss.

The capitalized “Deaf” refers to the culture of Deaf people. The lower-case “deaf” refers to the disability on the basis of hearing loss.

What is a community?

A community, on the other hand, is a general social system in which a group of people live together, share common goals and carry out certain responsibilities to each other.

A deaf community is a group of people who live in a particular location, share the common goals of its members, and in various ways, work toward achieving these goals. A deaf community may include persons who are not themselves deaf, but who actively support the goals of the community and work with deaf people.

The culture of deaf people, however, is more closed than the deaf community. Members of the deaf culture behave as deaf people do, use the language of deaf people and share the beliefs of deaf people toward themselves and other people who are not deaf.

As a community, we share common goals. As a culture, we share language, norms and a way of life.

Ethnocentrism

Ethnocentrism refers to the tendency to place our own experiences, values and attitudes in a central position, viewing those of others as strange and inferior. If hearing persons regard the way deaf people communicate using hands and facial expression as inferior, they convey rejection.

Language and sense of self are intertwined. There have been many attempts to stamp out a culture through eliminating its language. This kind of approach almost never succeeds, and it tends to produce undesirable effects: resentment and even resistance to learning or to using “the language of the oppressors.” The language of deaf people has been largely an “underground” language until recently. Deaf adults who lived through these times tell us how they associated sign language with secrecy, inferiority and sometimes the smell of restroom (because a school restroom was the only safe place to sign).

The lack of understanding of other cultures has been a major source of trouble for mankind. Ethnocentrism is a common tendency that we all must struggle against if we are to achieve true tolerance and acceptance of human differences.

Sources:

American Deaf Culture: An Anthology by Carol Padden, Linstok Press.

Can't Your Child Hear: A Guide for Those Who Care about Deaf Children by Freeman, Carbin and Boese, Pro-Ed.