Deaf Culture: An Analysis of Cultural Legitimacy

What is it like to have your personal and cultural identity ignored and even rejected? How does it impact motivation, goal setting, self-esteem, and day-to-day life? Persisting beyond a history that portrays their accomplishments as unlikely and their uniqueness as a disability, people who are culturally Deaf strive to ensure the continuation of their language, American Sign Language (ASL), and to protect their identity as a unique culture. From the earliest moments of our nation’s infancy, speech has been highly regarded as an essential instrument of asserting independence. Speech and oratory skills were used to distinguish social ranks (Halttunen 51-52). Moreover, Theodore Roosevelt declared, “We have room for but one language here, that is the English language; for we intend to see that the crucible turns our people out as Americans, of American nationality, and not a dwellers in a polyglot boardinghouse” (Burch 11). As a community made up of individuals that do not emphasize speech and, instead, rely on a visual language unrelated to English, the Deaf have historically been perceived as a lower rung of American society and even deemed “un-American.”

Deaf history and Deaf achievements are largely ignored in American history textbooks. If addressed at all, it is to highlight a single Deaf individual’s ability to “overcome” their deafness. A common example is Helen Keller whose life is often described inaccurately and incompletely by textbooks that emphasize only her success in learning to communicate and fail to acknowledge her significance later in life. As a whole, the Deaf community is often inappropriately given brief mention in a short passage regarding Americans with disabilities. American Deaf culture was born as early as the 1700s. It began to thrive with the evolution of deaf schools, beginning with the American School for the Deaf in Hartford, Connecticut in 1817 (Burch 10). It would take over a century and a half before the term “Deaf culture” would be
recognized in America. Although finally legitimized as a culture in the 1980s, Deaf culture remains misunderstood and even controversial today (Holcomb 4).

The division of power in America is largely responsible for the struggle to legitimize Deaf culture in the eyes of all Americans. Due to the nation’s diversity, sociologists have difficulty identifying a common American culture (Stolley 49). White, upper and middle class culture is often used to describe American culture because, historically, this group has held most of the nation’s social, political, and economic power (Parasnis 12-13). Sociology, which is a field of study that “helps us identify what we have in common within, and between cultures and societies” (Stolley 3), refers to the group that holds a position of power as the social and cultural majority. Minority groups are groups that are physically and culturally distinguishable from the majority culture and have less social power than the majority. Deaf Americans are a social and cultural minority. Although they are still Americans and share some cultural elements with mainstream Americans, they are distinguishable from the majority culture and have less power, fewer resources and opportunities, and less legal and political representation.

Majority groups do not think of themselves as belonging to a hearing majority or a “hearing culture” but the distinction between Deaf and hearing culture is important to the Deaf community because it creates insider and outsider groups. This allows them to recognize and describe those outside their community and culture. It is a way for the Deaf community to protect themselves from the outside group and to live collectively, supporting one another. This need for protection stems from the dominant hearing culture’s view of Deaf people as being helpless, dependent, and unintelligent. Hearing culture has and continues to perceive Deafness as a negative medical condition that must be cured. They believe the only way out of the “Deaf Ghetto” is assimilation into the hearing world (Holcomb 73). Hearing people do not understand
the pride and richness of Deaf culture. As well intended as they may be, they impose their own values on a culture different than their own. They define deafness as an inability to hear, hearing loss, or hearing impairment. The Deaf community views themselves as having lost nothing and having gained a unique way of experiencing life through the bonds of their shared language and culture. Deaf culture distinguishes the physiological condition of being deaf by writing the word with a lowercase “d” and uses an uppercase “D” to represent Deaf culture. In the face of discrimination by the majority culture, Deaf communities developed and preserve their cultural community so that they can maintain greater control over their own lives and resist assimilation and acculturation (Burch 99).

Unable to understand Deafness as a culture, hearing people often impose their own values and understanding of the world on the Deaf community. They argue that the Deaf community cannot be a full, legitimate culture because geographic borders do not bind them. This requirement in defining a culture is antiquated and no longer valid. As globalization has increased and advancements continue to be made in technology, societies are no longer bound geographically (Stolley 43). Kathy S. Stolley defines society as “people who interact and share a common culture” (43). Deaf people are members of a translocal community. They reside among their family and their neighbors, but also in places where Deaf people congregate (Holcomb 286). The Deaf community has established many clubs, alliances, associations, and schools that provide numerous opportunities for social gathering (Holcomb 223). In recent years, with technological advances in communication like videophone, text messaging, email, social networking sites, increased availability of services like video relay, and the dissemination of news from online sources, the popularity of Deaf clubs and schools has declined (Burch 99). Although the gathering places have changed, the desire to congregate and the strong value of
community have not waned. Denying Deaf culture also denies their existence as an authentic society.

In the 1970s, Kathryn Meadow Orleans proposed that Deaf culture is best described as a subculture to American culture (Holcomb 87). This opinion is popularly held today by hearing people and by some Deaf people. However, the term subculture denies Deaf culture the status of an authentic culture and is inappropriately applied to Deaf culture. Deaf culture does not exist beneath American culture but with American culture. Stolley defines subculture as, “a smaller culture within a dominant culture that has a way of life distinguished in some important way from the dominant culture…yet shares most of the values of the dominant culture” (49). Stolley provides examples of subcultures, including those that are formed around hobbies like on-line gaming, shared interests like music, other behaviors and interests like Bible study participants or outlaw bikers, occupations, or racial and ethnic backgrounds. Although Deaf culture includes many subcultures, it is not a subculture itself. Members of Deaf culture may also be outlaw bikers, on-line gamers, etc. In fact, as Tomas K. Holcomb points out, “Deaf people are noted for their ability to interactions with one another regardless of their racial, educational, economic, or religious associations…” (27). Their shared, overarching Deaf culture unites the Deaf community and its subcultures through their own system of values and their “way of life” is distinguishable in many important ways from the dominant hearing American culture.

In the book *Cultural and Language Diversity and the Deaf Experience*, Ila Parasnis posits the idea that Deaf Americans are a linguistic minority with unique needs and interests. Since the Deaf community is a social minority, their visual language, American Sign Language (ASL) is a minority language. Proficiency in ASL does not award the same status and opportunities as that of spoken American English. However, focusing solely on linguistics does not permit the
evaluation of an entire culture, but a single element, albeit an important one. Referring to the Deaf community as a linguistic minority, although true, is too narrow of a description and does not honor the distinctive culture.

It stands to reason that this is why Parasnis also describes Deaf people as being bicultural, that is Deaf and American, using the hyphenated term “Deaf-American”, similar to other minority groups in America such as African-American or Mexican-American (10-11). The label of “bicultural” allows dual membership and integration of both Deaf culture and American mainstream culture. Deaf culture does not intrinsically conflict with mainstream culture. Instead, it recognizes points of common ground in order to improve the lives of Deaf-Americans, thus developing a more harmonious relationship with and among the dominant hearing culture. The concept of “bicultural” and its application to Deaf-Americans relies on the assumption that Deaf culture is an independent culture that can be integrated with another culture.

Through deduction it is clear that alternatives to the term “culture” as it applies to Deaf culture are inadequate descriptors. Therefore, it becomes necessary to look at the concept of culture and the controversy that exists around its usage in identifying Deaf culture. The word culture is used in many contexts: popular culture, high culture, company culture, culture shock, material culture, and cultural lag. It is no surprise that the word culture would amass so much confusion in its meaning. As Holcomb states, “culture has been defined in many different ways” (16). Often, the term is used as a way to distinguish a group from others, moreover, a way to identify “I am this, therefore, I am not that.” Instead of discussing the beauty and commonality of diverse cultures, it is frequently used as an element of divisiveness.

In order to clarify and define the concept of culture, Holcomb developed five hallmarks of culture. These hallmarks include language, heritage, customs, arts, and family or cultural
players” (17-18.) Deaf culture is built around the powerful unifying quality of American Sign Language (ASL), which allows members of the Deaf community to communicate fully and effectively. In the mid-20th century, ASL began to be recognized as a “full-fledged language, with its own unique phonology, morphology, syntax, and pragmatics” (Holcomb 113, 21). The use of ASL is a requirement for membership into Deaf culture. Holcomb emphasizes: “ASL, the language of Deaf people in America is the primary reason for the existence and perpetuation of the Deaf community” (18-19). Linguistic-relativity hypothesis, or Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, states: “language is central to the way we understand our world” (Stolley 48). Language and identity are intertwined; therefore, it is impossible to separate language from culture (Holcomb 117).

Sociological and linguistic research has shown that language also determines how we think about the world and how we behave (Stolley 48). ASL, a visual language, has provided Deaf culture with the ability to develop a rich history that includes heritage, customs, and solutions that have been passed down through generations of Deaf people.

Heritages are solutions, traditions, achievements, and beliefs that are inherited by future generations. Deaf culture is comprised of all of these elements. A key component to Deaf culture is an emphasis on the collective. Collectivist communities are made up of individuals who put the needs of their community ahead of their own. In terms of achievement, “members of the Deaf community take pride in the success of their fellow Deaf individuals” (Holcomb 27). A heritage of conformity, collective decision-making, interdependence, and projecting a positive image of the community to outsiders are characteristics that are shared with younger Deaf generations (Holcomb 27). The sharing of cultural heritage allows future members of the Deaf community to do more than merely survive; they provide solutions for effective living based on past experiences and perspectives (Holcomb 17).
Deaf cultural heritage specifies customs that guide rules of behavior (Holcomb 17). Typically these rules are not written down, but the Deaf community expects, understands, and accepts that they be followed. These customs are in place as solutions to problems that faced the Deaf community in the past. These customs include leave-taking, which are long good-byes to face to face gathering of Deaf friends, persistence in contact, information sharing, letting others know your destination, reporting back, detailed introductions, and the assigning of name signs (Holcomb 197-205).

More than 90% of Deaf children are born into hearing families. Their ability to communicate at home is often limited (Holcomb 38-39). Their hearing families “have no previous experience with the Deaf community, the common pattern of the transmission of culture through family members does not apply to them” (Holcomb 19). Feeling left out and separate from their hearing families, the tendency to desire meaningful, mutual conversations with other Deaf people encourages many Deaf people to adopt other members of the Deaf community as a “second family.” They are bonded by their Deafness, their use of ASL, and their shared culture. The strong connection Deaf people feel towards one another encourages and invigorates them to treasure every moment they spend together. Historically, these second families were united in Deaf schools and clubs. Deaf children that are not exposed to other Deaf people may seek out the Deaf community when they grow up and attend schools like Gallaudet University. Relationships with these important cultural players or “second families” are crucial to the development of a positive Deaf identity.

ASL has also paved the way for many unique artistic expressions. In addition to written literature, many of the solutions that are passed down through the generations are done so through the art of storytelling. Performance and literary art includes Deaf poetry which uses
elements such as “sign play” to develop creative artistic works. Clayton Valli used his linguistic knowledge of ASL to formalize Deaf poetry (Holcomb 157). Deaf humor is another form of performance art. It is made up of four categories including humor that depends heavily on intimate knowledge of ASL and humor that “takes advantage of the graphic visual properties of American Sign Language…” (Holcomb 165,166). Additionally, there is a long history of Deaf stage productions, an established professional Deaf theatre, music related performances, a Deaf presence on Broadway and Hollywood, and films in ASL (Holcomb 186-192). Deaf culture also has a rich heritage of multimedia art that often includes themes of resistance to oppression and “affirmative art” that celebrates the positive aspects of being Deaf.

For further clarity, an analysis will be done of the criteria stated by Stolley. The requirement of language appears on both author’s lists and has already been discussed as being met. Stolley lists the remaining three aspects of culture as values, norms, and symbols (45). “Values are culturally defined ideas about what is important” (Stolley 45). The core values of Deaf culture are full access to communication, information sharing, healthy identity formation, and self-determination (Holcomb 102-108). While mainstream America puts independence ahead of mutual dependence, Deaf culture values both as a way of survival (Holcomb 25). Both American and Deaf culture value egalitarianism, however, due to the small size of the Deaf community and the shared language of ASL, Deaf culture tends to achieve a higher degree of harmony among its diverse groups (Holcomb 26). The value of achievement is also shared by both cultures; however, American culture puts the success of the individual above the success of the community. Mainstream American culture is an individualistic culture. In contrast, Deaf culture is collectivistic. It emphasizes the success of the community and takes pride in the successes of other Deaf people (Holcomb 27.)
Norms are developed based on societal values. Norms are comprised of “shared rules or expectations specifying appropriate behaviors in various situations” (Stolley 46). Acceptable behaviors differ between Deaf and hearing culture. In hearing culture, people use their voices with little facial expression while communicating. In Deaf culture, the use of voice is socially unacceptable without permission. One of the largest taboos, a norm that is “so objectionable that it is strictly forbidden” (Stolley 47), in the Deaf community is “to intentionally exclude a Deaf person from a conversation” (Holcomb 212). Attention getting devices such as tapping on the body, waving your hand, flashing the lights are all acceptable behaviors in Deaf culture. Additionally, in Deaf culture, Deaf children are desirable. In hearing culture, parents are distraught to learn their child is deaf because they are unfamiliar with ASL and Deaf culture. Hearing parents perceive a deaf child as being disabled while Deaf parents perceive Deaf children as preferable (Holcomb 220).

Finally, Stolley requires that a legitimate culture have symbols. He defines a symbol as “something that stands for, represents, or signifies something else in a particular culture. It can represent… ideas, emotions, values, beliefs, attitudes, or events. A symbol… can be a gesture, word, object, or even an event” (47). The most obvious symbol in Deaf culture is American Sign Language. ASL represents liberation and the Deaf identity. The “ILY” sign, meaning “I Love You” in English is a sign that was originally created by Deaf school children to represent positive emotions and is now popular even in mainstream culture. In Deaf culture, the cochlear implant may symbolizes the medicalization of being deaf and the painful experiences Deaf people have endured as mainstream culture attempted to force them to become hearing (Jankowski 144). The assignment of a name sign can serve as a symbol of membership in the Deaf community as well as serve as a symbol of a particular individual. Deaf schools are
symbols of the preservation of language, culture and heritage (Holcomb 255). Gallaudet University incorporates many symbols in its traditions including the president’s medallion, which is worn on ceremonial occasions, and symbolizes the authority of that office. Additionally, the term “Deaf Gain” has been coined to symbolize the positive contributions of Deaf culture and replaces the term “hearing loss” as a way to shift focus from a perception of loss, negativity and disability towards a gain of positivity and ability. Finally, one of the most significant symbols in Deaf culture is the Deaf President Now protest at Gallaudet. This movement symbolizes a positive step for the Deaf community in “self governance…pride, and empowerment” Jankowski (132).

Deaf culture is a legitimate culture satisfying all of the criteria put forth by both Holcomb and Stolley. No other sociological or linguistic term accurately and completely explains the distinctness of Deaf culture. As Holcomb states, “Deaf culture is an outcome of authentic life experiences Deaf people share. It is the sum total of solutions that ensure full visual access to communication and information” (98). The shared heritage is “critical for Deaf youngsters to gain access to solutions that have already been devised by more experienced members of the Deaf community (Holcomb 280). Deaf culture is a powerful, proud, and distinct culture that will continue as long as American Sign Language remains in use.
Works Cited


Stolley, Kathy S. *The Basics of Sociology*. Westport, CT, Greenwood Press, 2005