Hearing from the Deaf Culture

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Abstract

This paper addresses two research questions: 1) What are the communication preferences of the deaf ? and 2) Do deaf communicators exhibit unique communication habits that are part of the Deaf culture? When interacting with a hearing person, the deaf communicator will most often rely on exchanging written notes and using nonverbal gestures. Deaf communicators experience a lot of frustration with hearing persons when they are forced into exchanging notes. Writing is slow, and it is not very "interactive" in a lively sense. Since American Sign Language is not widely understood within the hearing population, it is typically reserved for interactions with fellow deaf communicators. ASL is fast and efficient. Thus, it is the "method of choice."

The term 'Deaf culture" has been used to signify a unique group of people with a common condition. This culture has developed a set of attitudes and habits that appear to be universal within the deaf community. To wit, members of the focus group reaffirmed five Deaf culture communication patterns — passing behavior, bluntness, close interactional proximity, increased touching behavior during interactions, and unhurried communication exchanges.

For those of you with normal hearing, imagine what it would be like to be deaf. You do not hear clearly car traffic, nor the jingling of the dog tags on your beloved pooch, nor the cheer of a crowd at a football game unless it is particularly raucous. You have little need for a car radio, because you cannot make out the melody in most songs. For the deaf, "listening" in face-to-face conversations involves seeing mouth movements without being able to process the sounds. While deaf people can observe talk, laughter, sighing, and crying, they cannot determine pitch, frequency, nasality, etc. Furthermore, the deaf population hears no accents, no dialects, no

humorous mispronunciations, and other vocal stressors that drive humor, satire, commands, and requests. Most importantly, though, is that the congenitally deaf may never learn the primary spoken language of their language community, because they can't hear it or process it clearly. In fact, many deaf people develop only a third-grade level of reading.

Those who are deaf face many challenges as they attempt to communicate in a hearing world. To learn more about these challenges, this paper will report findings from a focus group of members of the Deaf culture. The issues discussed in the focus group will give the readers a clearer understanding of the Deaf culture. Before doing so, we need to explore the nature of the Deaf culture to create a meaningful context for interpreting the focus group data. To this end, the paper examines the nature of deafness, membership requirements of the Deaf culture, and some of their communication patterns and concerns.

Defining Deafness

Not all deaf communicators are "deaf." In fact, only 1 in 1,000 people with a hearing loss is profoundly deaf. Most have some level of hearing, but it is sufficiently poor in quality that they have to learn deaf strategies for communicating with others. Hearing loss is measured for all individuals as a difference from the normal ability to detect sounds relative to standards established by American National Standards Institute (1989). Normally hearing individuals can detect sounds falling below 20 dB HL (Bess & Humes, 1995; Boothroyd, 1982; ANSI, 1989). Accordingly, audiologists categorize hearing losses using the model given in ANSI (1989):

> 15-30 dB HL, mild hearing loss
> 31-60 dB HL, moderate hearing loss
> 61-90 dB HL, severe hearing loss
> >90 dB HL, profound hearing loss

For example, if a phone is ringing a person with mild hearing loss is likely to notice it after some time, a person with a moderate hearing loss may need assistive listening devices (hearing aids, amplifiers, FM systems) to hear it, a person with severe hearing loss can hear it only with the help of assistive listening devices, and a person with a profound hearing loss may not hear the phone even with assistive listening devices. While levels of deafness vary, this paper will consider any individual who is diagnosed as having a moderate to profound hearing loss as deaf. This accounts for most of the people who consider themselves as deaf.

Deaf culture members

The profoundness of being deaf and the realization that there are others with the same condition, creates a Deaf culture--that is, a group of people who seek out each other and develop a closeness which leads to shared attitudes and preferences for dealing with the hearing world. The Deaf culture impacts many communication issues such as message channel preferences, feelings about interacting with hearing people, and attitudes about time and space. Please note: culturally deaf people are not just deaf, they view their situation as unique rather than as a deficit. As one person said in our focus group "the only thing that doesn't work in me is my ears; otherwise I'm normal."

The term "Deaf culture" is used to identify a set of beliefs, practices, and a common language shared by a group of deaf people (Padden, 1993). Culturally Deaf people prefer to look at their deafness positively as a different culture instead of as impairment, which is at odds with the medical/professional community's view of deafness as an illness. For instance, people who accept the medical community's label "hearing impaired" are not typically regarded as culturally Deaf. Since most of the hearing community believes that deafness is a disability, there may be strong cultural clashes between a hearing person and a culturally Deaf person (Charrow & Wilbur, 1975; Erting, 1985; Jones & Pullen, 1992). For instance, if a hearing person asks the deaf person whether the deaf person's hearing can be "fixed" by technological advances in medicine, the hearing person is perceived as insulting the Deaf person's cultural pride.

Though not an officially chartered organization, the Deaf culture has worldwide membership. Most members meet at least two criteria: a sufficient degree of hearing loss, and proficiency in sign language. People lose their hearing in various ways. The most common causes of hearing loss are: childhood illness, pregnancy-related illness, injury, excessive or prolonged exposure to noise, heredity, and aging. Whether or not a person would be a Deaf culture member depends on the severity of the hearing loss and on the time of life in which the loss occurred. Thus, severe deafness at birth makes one an immediate candidate for membership. Those who lose their hearing later in life (aging) are the least likely to become members of the Deaf culture. Signing skill is also necessary, and if the person has never learned to sign, she or he will not become a member of the culture. Oddly enough, there are people who have full hearing who are members of the Deaf culture. But they know how to sign. They are accepted by the Deaf because the Deaf can readily communicate with them. Thus, the main ticket for admission is the ability to communicate in a language used by the members. In the USA, it is ASL (American Sign Language). ASL is a natural language that is the native language of many Deaf men and women, as well as some hearing children born into Deaf families. ASL shares no grammatical similarities to English (Padden & Humphries, 1988). In addition, ASL signs are not simply isomorphic representations of English words. In fact, as noted by Padden and Humphries

(1988) ASL shares more with spoken Japanese than it does with English. The Deaf are not without a language. ASL is a language.

The Deaf culture, like any other culture, provides important identities for its members. Locally, ASL links people together allowing then to reaffirm their deaf identities within the Deaf culture. There is also a social identity that comes from the fact that many Deaf people meet regularly and look forward to being together with people who "speak their language." (Kannapell, 1994).

Even though ASL is the language of the Deaf, it not the language of the world. Being deaf prevents a person from having full access to information which is readily available to hearing people and is taken for granted by hearing individuals. This deprivation of information has a significant impact on self-confidence and self-concept that comes from being more knowledgeable about self and others (Carver, R., 1993). According to Greenberg & Kusche (1993) this deprivation of information causes delays in educational, social, and psycho-social development. Research indicates that some of the developmental delays are impulsiveness (Harris, 1978), role taking ability (Kusche & Greenberg, 1983), the ability to interpret facial expressions (Odom, Blanton, & Laukhuf, 1973), social problem solving skills (Coady, 1984; Luckner & McNeil, 1994), social attributions (Kusche, Garfield, & Greenberg, 1983), and moral development (DeCaro & Emerton, 1978). However, it must be emphasized that the hearing loss itself does not cause the psycho-social problems explained above, it is the lack of free access to information which causes them (Desselle, 1994). Generally, deaf children of deaf parents do not experience this lack of information since most deaf parents use Sign Language for clear communication (Desselle, 1994).

This lack of information access is made more severe by the timing of deafness. For instance, one of the early educational impacts of being deaf is that the average child who becomes deaf before entering kindergarten enters school with a 25 to 30 word vocabulary and almost no grasp of English syntax. By contrast, the average hearing child typically has a 3,000 to 5,000 word vocabulary and a basic mastery of the English syntax (Montoya, 1994; Decker, Loeterrman, Shuckman, Wilbur, & Wilson, 1980). Deafness, thus, can really inhibit one's language learning, creating a significant barrier to effective communication with others.

Lipreading

What about lipreading as a means of communication with others? It is a common misconception among many hearing people that learning to lipread (also called speech reading) in English is a skill that can be developed easily with practice. In reality even with 12 to 15 years of speech therapy, lipreading is a difficult skill to master for people who become deaf early in life, i.e., before seven years of age, by which time they would have had a good knowledge of sounds and the spoken language (Farrugia, 1989; Pollard, 1992; Dolnick, 1993; Stedt &

Rosenberg, 1987). According to Montoya (1994), the milder the loss and the older the person is at the time of onset of deafness the more likely the person is to develop useful lipreading skills.

Learning to lipread a language which one cannot hear clearly and which one does not have previous knowledge of is almost impossible. According to Dolnick (1993) and Stedt & Rosenberg (1987) many factors such as age at the onset of deafness, individual differences in lipreading abilities and so on determine one's success at learning to lipread a language. To get a feeling for the difficulty involved, a hearing person should attempt to learn to speak Japanese from within a soundproof glass booth while outside someone speaks in Japanese (Dolnick, 1993).

Another thing that inhibits successful lipreading is the fact that only about 30 percent of the sounds of the English language are visible from a person's face/lips (Charrow & Wilbur, 1975; Harvey, 1984; Ludders, 1987; Roe & Roe, 1991). Of these visible words approximately half look similar (Dolnick, 1993; Ludders, 1987). According to Dolnick (1993), "Mama" is virtually indistinguishable from "Papa", "Cat" from "Fat", and "No new taxes" from "Go to Texas". The syllables "bi" and "mi" are almost identical and without sound which helps in distinguishing the nasality associated with "mi" from "bi"; it is very difficult to see the difference. In fact, a study found that the average deaf person with a decade of practice was not any better at lipreading than a hearing person picked at random off the streets (Dolnick, 1993). Research supporting lipreading shows that a deaf subject with good lipreading skills has extraordinary visual communication skills compared to both deaf and hearing groups, and this is not indicative of the general population (Ronnberg *et al.,* 1999).

Lipreaders also don't understand more than one-third of the words spoken even when in an optimal environment. Typically, they understand three to four words in a sentence of ten words and have to piece together the meaning of the whole sentence (Journal of Rehabilitation Research and Development, 1994). Regardless of hearing ability, there are large individual differences in speech reading proficiency (Bernstein, Demorest, & Tucker, 1996; Demorest, Bernstein, & DeHaven, 1996; Demorest, Bernstein, & Tucker, 1997). At the same time, Bernstien *et al.* (1997) argue that the high level of performance of some individuals proves that speech perception can be acquired in absence of audition. This conclusion does not consider the large individual differences in lipreading abilities found in their own research. According to Demorest *et al.* (1997), the ability to monitor and evaluate whether a message has been correctly understood is one component of effective communication. If deaf people have to guess at what the other person is saying based on visual and contextual clues, we cannot maintain that the message has been effectively communicated.

Also, many deaf individuals use a strategy of pretending to understand what the hearing person is saying e.g. smiling, nodding in agreement in synchrony with visual cues (Higgins, 1980; Farrugia, 1989; Stedt & Rosenberg, 1987). For instance, a hearing person may pause while narrating a story in order to obtain an encouraging response from the deaf individual and this presents a visual cue to the deaf person that a response such as "hmm" or "yes" is expected. This kind of behavior is described as "passing" behavior (Goffman, 1963, 1973; Lane, 1992). This behavior is used by the deaf person as a self-protection mechanism to hide the "stigma" of being deaf (Goffman, 1963; Lane, 1992). But, it can cause misunderstandings and also promotes the idea that the deaf person is a skilled lipreader. In short, lipreading is not the answer.

Other Communication Challenges

Members of the Deaf culture can exhibit specific behaviors which are different from the hearing world (Montoya, 1994). For instance, members of the Deaf culture may be more blunt in their communication style than would be hearing people. Or they may be unusually reticent around hearing people. When interacting with other Deaf, they may not hesitate to "speak up." In fact, Montoya observes that deaf communicators seem to take their time when communicating with each other. They enjoy interacting with other sign users. As she writes, "...punctuality and brevity are not highly valued. Lengthy greetings and farewells to each member of the group is customary " (p. 8).

The Deaf may even display nonverbal awkwardness. Since most children with hearing losses are born to hearing parents, communication between the parents and the child is almost always strained. As a result, a person with hearing loss growing up in these conditions may not learn the accepted forms of social behavior, especially the rules for turn-taking and managing conversational interaction. For example, a man with hearing loss may not realize that it is considered impolite to intrude into another person's space and thus may move too close to the other person causing interpersonal discomfort (Hazan, Fourcin, & Abberton, 1991; Jerger *et al.,* 1993).

In sum, being deaf creates dilemmas. You are isolated from the hearing world. Yet you have to live in a hearing world that doesn't know your language. Communicating with other sign users is easy, communicating with those who do not sign is difficult. Lipreading doesn't help much. And you may even be seen as clumsy because you violate conversational norms of the hearing world. What, then, does the deaf person do?

Research Questions

How does a Deaf person communicate with a hearing person, especially one who does not know sign language? If the hearing person is unfamiliar with ASL,

then communication may be limited to writing notes and making nonverbal gestures. The influence of the Deaf culture is another matter. If Deaf culture attitudes create skepticism in the deaf communicator, he/she may avoid communication altogether with members of the hearing world. On the other hand, if Deaf culture attitudes do not create such barriers, communication is possible. The communication choices, then, may come from a balancing of what is possible with what is preferred. In order to determine this, we need to query deaf communicators. To this end, a focus group of Deaf communicators was assembled to address two major issues:

1)   What are the communication preferences of the deaf ?
2)   Do deaf communicators exhibit unique communication habits that are part of the Deaf culture?

Focus Group Study[1]

The focus group consisted of five deaf people (3 males and 2 females) who ranged in age from 25 to 70 years of age. Two interpreters were also in the group to translate the spoken questions into signs, and the signed answers into spoken answers. Normally one would want more than five people in a focus group, but the deaf population is much smaller than the hearing population, making it more difficult to locate qualified subjects. Furthermore, this is an exploratory study, using a convenience sample, not a random sample. Consequently, no statistical inferences are reported.

The session lasted one hour. It was videotaped, audio-taped, and the discussion was professionally transcribed into 25 pages of text. The discussion focused on the following questions:

1.   What method of communication do you prefer to use with hearing people? (that is, whether ASL or English Sign Language or speaking or writing or pantomimes).
2.   What method of communication do you prefer to use with deaf people?
3.   How often do you use back channeling/passing behavior with hearing people?
4.   Do you feel that deaf people are more straight-forward than hearing people?
5.   Do you feel comfortable communicating casually with someone standing less than three feet from you?
6.   Do you feel comfortable in casually touching others and being casually touched while communicating with others?
7.   Do you feel that deaf people are punctual in both casual and professional situations?

Each of the above questions were followed by appropriate probes to insure broad-based participation and thoughtful answers from the group members.

Focus Group Results
Communicating with Hearing People:
    When asked the first question about communicating with the hearing world, the respondents agreed that writing notes was the best, though not always the most convenient form of communication. Writing is slow. To compensate, deaf communicators also use gestures such as pointing or facial expressions. In other words, deaf people take advantage of nonverbal communication as do hearing people. According to one of the respondents, he often uses "home signs" which is a cross between ASL type signs and mimicry. Speaking of a home sign, Mr. J. said: "Now a home sign is different from a regular ASL sign...like [if] you are talking about a dog and...it is barking (shows two handing flapping together horizontally to represent a dogs mouth barking.) Home signs can be understood by most people. Writing notes and using commonly known nonverbal gestures is sufficient for brief informal communication. For more formal, deeper situations, interpreters are needed.
    Interpreters serve as intermediaries between the deaf and the hearing communicators. But they are not always available. For important matters (workshops, classroom lectures, going to court, meeting with a physician, etc.) interpreters are a must because "sometimes people don't understand you, [or] your signing, [you] need an interpreter to assist, to make things clear."
    A particularly sad story was told by Robert when he recalled going to a police department and the police officers would not write notes back to him when he used notes to communicate with them. At that time, Robert could have used an interpreter (and the police personnel could use some additional training).
    As you can see, communicating with the hearing world means using either interpreters, written notes, and/or gestures that all can understand. The slowness of writing is particularly frustrating to deaf people, therefore they may not try to interact with others, if they don't need to.

Communicating with other Deaf People:
    When asked what methods of communication do deaf people use to communicate with other deaf people, the resounding answer was ASL (American Sign Language). Today, ASL is widespread among deaf communicators, thus it is used regularly. Years ago this was not true. How much a deaf person uses ASL is largely determined by her/his upbringing. One of the older group members indicated that his parents did not use ASL at home--they never bothered to learn it. Thus, he grew up in a home where English was spoken and his parents used "the

two handed alphabet, the old one that goes a, b, c, d, e, f, g [making the shapes of the letters with his hands and fingers] and that's what I used for many years." He learned to use ASL later, but did not use it with his family. Another participant mentioned that although she learned and used ASL mixed with home signs with her family, she prefers ASL. Because home signs are gestures without linguistic rules and features, home signs are not a language. Consequently, home signs are a compromise, used only as supplement. ASL, on the other hand, functions as a language, not just a sign system, thus it is clearly the most preferred system of communication.

Passing Behavior:

In audible conversations listeners say "yeah, uh-hum, right, etc." or nod their heads as the other person is talking. In the hearing world, this is known as back-channeling. It is used as a means of saying to the other person "yes, I am listening to you; continue talking." In the deaf world there is a similar act called *passing behavior*. Like back-channeling, passing behaviors are quick nonverbal responses to the other person. Unlike back-channeling, passing behaviors are not just for *lubricating* the conversation. Rather, passing behaviors are used as avoidance tactics when communicating with hearing people. There are at least two ways in which these function. The first is when the deaf communicator simply does not want to interact with the other person. When faced with an unwanted door-to-door solicitor, the deaf person might listen politely but emit only short passing behaviors. After a while, the solicitor would realize that the potential customer is deaf and will move on the next house. The tactic keeps the deaf customer safely out of the solicitor's control.

Another use of passing behavior by the deaf is to "fake" understanding. A deaf person may nod his head and even grunt occasionally giving the impression that he understands what the hearing person is saying, even when he doesn't. This tactic prevents potential embarrassment for the deaf person. Asking too many questions and appearing stupid are things that deaf people wish to avoid, especially in the presence of someone who might believe that deaf people are ignorant. Thus, if the deaf person does not feel that the topic is important, she may simply employ passing behaviors.

When asked "How often do you use passing behavior with hearing people?" each of the group members confessed to doing it regularly. One man said that he used head nods that way, especially when "you are talking with hearing people; this nod happens all the time, all the time." When such behavior is done to cover up questions that a deaf person may want to ask in a conversation, or to avoid embarrassment, it causes frustrations for deaf communicators. They may want to ask questions but feel that others will think they are stupid if they ask too many questions. If communication with the hearing person has been awkward, the deaf

person may not ask questions, engaging only in passing behaviors. Thus, passing behaviors can have dysfunctional effects on the social image of deaf communicators.

For some deaf people, passing behaviors are driven by stereotypic attitudes they have about hearing people. For instance, one of the women in the group said "a lot of hearing people think that deaf people are dumb and they don't want to get involved with them...hearing people think that deaf people don't understand anything at all...the only thing that is broken on me is my ears...everything else works fine." Her attitude was not widely supported by the group. In fact, many of the others thought that the contemporary hearing population is much more sophisticated than in the past, and thus realize that deaf people are as intelligent as hearing people. The key to cross-cultural communication between the deaf world and hearing world might be in more education on both sides.

Finally, when asked if passing behaviors are used among deaf communicators, the group responded with a resounding "no." Passing behaviors are used only with hearing people. With deaf people, there is no need to avoid communication. In fact, deaf people communicate bluntly with each other.

Straight-forwardness:
When asked about bluntness, one of the group members said that "you don't tend to pussy-foot around." In affirmation, another said "Right, you're more direct." To illustrate the straight-forward style, one participant asked the rest of the group "how many times does a deaf person say 'you've put on so much weight, what happened to you, you've gotten so fat!'" The others nodded in agreement, but one said that she didn't do so with hearing people. In her words, "I don't do it because it's misunderstood. They take it as an insult and that is not what I meant."

There are times, however, when deaf communicators do not want to be so open in their communication. This activates "talking under the table." That is, hiding your sign language under the table so that only one person can see you doing it. It is a form of whispering or sending a secret message. Another way to do this is to sign inside your coat or shirt as you hold it partially open. In fact, one man pointed out that "if you go to a meeting and the guys are standing around in a circle and they have their shirts out like this and they are signing, they're telling dirty jokes."

When asked if the bluntness is driven by efficiency or a value of getting to the point, the group said no. Bluntness just happens. It may be tied to one's upbringing and past experiences. One group member noted that deaf people spend a lot of time with family members (and other deaf people) whom they get to know very well. They spend less time with acquaintances in the hearing world. Familiarity, then, is much higher in the family. This is not unlike the experience of many hearing people who are most familiar with family members. The

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difference lies in the non-family communication world. Hearing people have more free and open access to communicating with others and do it more often, thereby developing politeness skills. Because of their limited hearing, the deaf have fewer encounters outside the family. In the process, "you tend to be very direct."

Even with other deaf people (who are not immediate family members) directness is expected. With those outside the family or the deaf world, bluntness is avoided, but then so can be communication. Interacting with the hearing world, then, becomes more guarded and sometimes less satisfying for the deaf person. Deaf people seek out each other. In a large gathering of people, deaf people congregate together, even if they have never met before. According to Mr. J. "Everywhere you go...the deaf people are over in a group, the hearing people are in another group. It's like there is a barrier in between the two groups. Hearing people don't fit in our world, we don't exactly fit in their world."

In sum, straight-forward talk is a habitual communication style reserved for interacting with other deaf communicators. It is not used with hearing people, because it might be misunderstood and seen as impolite. Directness in communication, then, is a marker of the Deaf culture. Physical proximity and touch are two more communication markers.

Proximity and Touch:

When asked "Do you feel comfortable communicating casually with someone standing less than three feet from you?" the group members generally agreed that deaf communicators are similar to hearing communicators in that they stand closer to those they know than to those they do not know. The group did, however, conclude that deaf people tend to stand closer to each other than do hearing people. In addition, they suggested that hearing people often stand a little further away from a deaf communicator than they would for another hearing communicator. Indeed, it can occur when a deaf person is writing a note to hand to a hearing person. "In my experience, in writing with hearing people, they see I'm getting paper...they move away...and they won't get close to me." No explanation was offered for this observation.

Touching behavior is another issue for deaf communicators. Since touching is usually done with the hands and since manual communication is a dominant method of communication among the deaf, touching someone while you are interacting seems natural. Touching is a way of "being in touch." It is expected that you will touch and be touched. On the practical side, touching someone's arm before taking your turn is a way of indicating that you are about to say something. It is a floor-gaining tactic. Touching is also used to interrupt someone. As one group member said "I think most deaf people can't help it since they can't hear. It's a lot easier to touch..." In short, touching behavior is acceptable and convenient in deaf interactions, especially when used to gain the floor.

Punctuality:

In the study of nonverbal communication, the term *chronemics* refers to the use of time. How communicators view time affects how they communicate, and how time is viewed varies from culture to culture. In the Deaf community, time is slowed down a bit when compared to the hearing culture. For reasons which no one in the group could provide, deaf interaction seems to take longer than interaction among the hearing. In fact, deaf communicators share what is called "Deaf standard time." When deaf communicators get together, they willingly spend time interacting with one another, and do so in an unhurried fashion. Indeed, at the end of our focus group meeting, the group members hung around in the recording room to interact some more with each other. They had to be encouraged to leave so that the technician could lock up the studio. While this may not be unique to the deaf world, spending additional time together is normative, almost expected. In the hearing world, some people may stick around after a meeting, but others would quickly scoot away.

The offshoot of taking extra time to interact with one another is that deaf people have problems with punctuality--that is being on time for events. One of the members reminded the others that "We went to the State Association for the Deaf banquet...it was supposed to start at 5, 6...what time did it start?...seven...was the food cold?...and the caterer brought the food on time, right?..so was the food cold?" When asked why punctuality is a problem, one of the older women said "that the deaf group is more close and they have more to share than the hearing people." Another person said that because there are fewer deaf people than hearing people, they do not have as many free flowing face-to-face interactions as do hearing people. Thus when they do get together, they "make the most of it" and do not hurry their interactions with each other.

It is important to note that "Deaf standard time" refers taking plenty of time to interact with others in the deaf community. The punctuality problem applies mostly when an event or appointment is preceded by Deaf culture interactions. In other words, deaf persons are not necessarily late for appointments or meetings (especially formal ones) but if they encounter other deaf persons on their way to an appointment or meeting, there may be punctuality problems.

Summary

This paper addressed two research questions: 1) What are the communication preferences of the deaf? and 2) Do deaf communicators exhibit unique communication habits that are part of the Deaf culture? In dealing with the first question, we learned that most deaf people are not totally deaf. Many of them can hear sounds. They just cannot hear language sounds clearly enough to make out the nuances of speech. Furthermore, we learned that deaf communicators develop

unique and oftentimes compensatory methods of communication. When interacting with a hearing person, the deaf communicator will most often rely on exchanging written notes and using nonverbal gestures. Deaf communicators experience a lot of frustration with hearing persons when they are forced into exchanging notes. Writing is slow, and it is not very "interactive" in a lively sense. Since American Sign Language is not widely understood within the hearing population, it is typically reserved for interactions with fellow deaf communicators. ASL is fast and efficient. Thus, it is the "method of choice." In the ideal world, the deaf would use ASL all the time with everyone, but that is not possible.

The term 'Deaf culture" has been used to signify a unique group of people with a common condition. This culture has developed a set of attitudes and habits that appear to be universal within the deaf community. To wit, members of the focus group reaffirmed five Deaf culture communication patterns — passing behavior, bluntness, close interactional proximity, increased touching behavior during interactions, and unhurried communication exchanges.

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