

Deaf Subculture in the United States

by Thomas P. Horejes

The deaf subculture possesses its own language, norms, and social networks that are unique to the deaf. American Sign Language (ASL) has its own conversational rules and social norms, such as mandatory eye gaze and appropriate facial expressions. Like other subcultures, the deaf subculture celebrates its own arts and entertainment, including deaf poetry, deaf music, deaf theater, and deaf cinema. The arts of the deaf subculture are often expressed visually through perspectives, experiences, and/or metaphors only understood by those who are fluent in ASL and a part of the deaf subculture. There are social gatherings and events by associations within the deaf subculture that host annual conferences and tournaments ranging from the Deaf World Softball Championships to the Rainbow Alliance of the Deaf (an LGBT organization). As with other subcultures, there is a deaf history and heritage that is passed on from generation to generation.

Many of the 5% to 10% of deaf children born to deaf parents are immediately enculturated into their own deaf subculture. In contrast, a large majority (90%–95%) of deaf children (including myself, born to hearing parents) start with an identity from the larger world (hearing society). As we progress through life, however, our identities become negotiated as we become more aware of a subculture—a deaf subculture that each of us has embraced quite differently. Some reject the deaf subculture in favor of total immersion into hearing society, whereas others navigate in the deaf subculture but in different ways. In addition to those born deaf, there are many individuals who become deaf later in life due to age, illness, or even prolonged exposure to loud sounds.

Regardless of how one becomes deaf, some individuals rely on technology (hearing aids or cochlear implants), communicate with hearing individuals via

spoken or written English or through an ASL interpreter, and express willingness to work in the workplace dominated by members of the hearing society. Other deaf individuals become fully immersed into the deaf subculture, or what they call the deaf “world.” They may attempt to depart from the hearing culture by rejecting values and beliefs possessed by the hearing society, such as assistive-listening devices and speech therapy, and by not placing their deaf child in hearing schools. These people typically attend only deaf plays, read about deaf history, take on jobs where communication is through sign language, and forbid any voiced language in favor of equal “access” in all aspects of their daily activities. One common denominator in shaping deaf identity and deaf subculture is language: the incorporation of sign language in the deaf individual’s life.

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Engaging With Sociology

1. Why does Dr. Horejes see this culture of the deaf as a subculture rather than a microculture or a counterculture?
2. Why is language the critical element in being a part of this subculture?
3. Why can a subculture exist in your own community and seemingly be invisible to you?

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Thomas P. Horejes received his PhD at Arizona State University in justice studies and teaches sociology at Gallaudet University, the world’s only university with programs and services specifically designed to accommodate students who are deaf or hard of hearing. He is the author of Social Constructions of Deafness: Examining Deaf Languacultures in Education.