

Deaf

Deaf or *deafness* is conventionally a term referring to the absence of the ability to hear and is also used as a noun to refer to individuals who do not hear. The term has filtered into popular language as a term for inattention or neglect ("to turn a deaf ear to the pleas of the needy"), reflecting a long history of pathological connotations for this term. In this way, *deaf* is used along with words like *blind* and *blindness* to refer to individuals who cannot access the world directly and instead require adaptive means. The last thirty or forty years, however, have seen use of the term to refer to a cultural community of individuals who do not hear. Deafness, as well as its lesser impairments of moderate to mild hearing loss, is a condition that in varying degrees is said to be shared by approximately 8.6% of the population, or approximately 20 million individuals in the United States. Of this large category, which includes individuals with noise-induced deafness or decline in hearing due to age, there is a durable subset estimated at somewhere between 200,000 to 300,000 deaf individuals who use the term *deaf* to mark an identification with a cultural group that shares a common sign language. The broader population of individuals with hearing loss view deafness as a chronic condition with few surgical options, requiring prostheses such as hearing aids or sound-enhancing technology. The deaf community, on the other hand, is made up of individuals who have usually acquired deafness at birth or shortly after, and have for the most part spent most of their lives with the condition. For this group, deafness is not only a sensory condition, but also a way of life characterized by membership in a signing community, participation in educational programs for the deaf (such as one of many residential boarding schools that educated many deaf adults), and a network of social organizations, clubs, and affiliations where sign language is used.

The signing deaf community in the United States is linked with other signing deaf communities throughout the world, not by use of a common language, but through participation in common kinds of educational and

social associations. American Sign Language is used in the United States and English-speaking parts of Canada, and is increasingly used as the international language at deaf professional conferences. There are numerous other national sign languages as well, possibly as many as there are spoken languages, though their geographies are not identical. The geography of sign languages largely follows the distribution of deaf education throughout the world in large part because deaf graduates of schools often settle nearby in order to form a community with each other, and sometimes to take employment at the schools. Because England and the United States have not shared deaf education systems, the two nations have very different sign languages. France, on the other hand, exported a member from one of its school for deaf children to help found the first deaf school in the United States in 1814. As a result, French Sign Language became a language of instruction at the American school. The blending of French Sign Language with the several local sign languages in existence in colonial America yielded a modern American Sign Language that shares some common vocabulary with French Sign Language, but the two languages have become separate and not mutually intelligible. As deaf education spread throughout the world between 1750 and 1850, new schools were founded in colonial countries: Episcopalian ministers from England founded schools in Ireland, Australia, and New Zealand. Nuns, on the other hand, founded deaf girls' schools in Ireland, resulting in a parallel existence of two different sign languages: the boys used signs from English Sign Language and the girls used French Sign Language. Marriages of deaf Irish men and women after leaving schools often resulted in partners with different sign vocabularies. With the relaxing of gender segregation in Ireland there came a unification project blending the vocabulary of the two sign languages to become the new sign language of Ireland. The pattern of spreading of deaf education across the globe, following philanthropic and missionary efforts, has resulted in a geography of sign languages sometimes matching national boundaries, though not always, as in the case of Ireland and in Switzerland, where there is a co-existence of two sign languages: French Swiss Sign Language and German Swiss Sign Language.

This global geography of sign languages is linked by national and international associations of deaf people who share ways of talking about themselves, their languages, and their condition. Deafness is seen less as a debilitating condition and more as an expression of community with other deaf people. Because the condition of deafness is relatively rare, deaf people have always coexisted with hearing people, either as parents, as siblings, or as children. There are an estimated 200 different inherited conditions that may result in deafness at birth or a decline in hearing through childhood. The possibility that these conditions may be transmitted is slightly higher between two individuals who are deaf, but the overall incidence of deaf children with deaf parents is very low (slightly under 10%). Most deaf people are born to hearing parents and have hearing siblings and hearing children. The fragility of transmission and the limited likelihood that deafness will be transmitted to future generations is built into the community in a number of ways: the community frequently has newcomers, or individuals

who learn a sign language later in life, either because the condition came on later in life or because of a delay in meeting deaf people and sign language due to educational choice. Because of the permeability of the deaf community by hearing individuals who may or may not sign (e.g., hearing parents who communicate orally with deaf children), the community incorporates its dealings with the dominant society as part of its core set of beliefs: ways of talking about self and other, about sign and spoken language, about signing and speaking, about having deaf or hearing children. In its very fabric, deaf communities incorporate the presence of hearing people in their lives as part of its rhetoric and common beliefs.

The incidence of deafness is frequent enough to sustain sign languages and social networks, but not frequent enough to allow institution-building. Few deaf people have built their own schools; most are built for them by philanthropists or missionaries. Nor do they form neighborhoods or towns. Instead, deaf communities exist as durable social connections around the social institutions of the community: the deaf schools, the deaf clubs which are increasingly being replaced by deaf professional associations of varying kinds, reflecting the pattern of labor in the community, and the rising deaf professional middle class resulting from civil rights and disability movements allowing deaf people to hold professional jobs. Because of the dominant presence of hearing people in deaf people's lives, deaf people often talk about themselves in relativist terms. The dominant mode of self-explanation from about the middle of the nineteenth century to the middle of this century is one of lack of hearing and the illnesses that contribute to the condition. It was frequent in short biographies for deaf people to describe themselves to each other and to hearing people in terms of how they acquired the condition. Common causes of deafness through this period were childhood diseases of measles, mumps (which causes high fevers and damage to auditory nerves), and spinal meningitis. An estimated 50% of all unknown causes of deafness are believed to be genetically related, resulting in a smaller presence of individuals who have inherited the condition and are more likely to have deaf parents. The deaf education literature of this time also distinguished between "pre-lingual" and "post-lingual" deafness, or those who acquired deafness before the age of 2, or before spoken language could be acquired, and those who acquired deafness later in life, when spoken language was already a first language. Deaf people were categorized in terms of whether they had acquired a spoken first language. The distinction was mirrored in self-descriptions that deaf people gave of themselves.

More recent self-descriptions have dropped the reference to illnesses or afflictions that gave rise to deafness and have focused more on familial connections to deafness, including whether or not the individual has deaf parents. The focus shifted away from when spoken language was acquired to when sign language was, either at birth or shortly after, marking the individual as a native signer, or later in life, as a newcomer to the culture and community. New definitions of deafness focus more on knowledge of cultural norms, cultural behaviors, and cultural practices. As a result, *deaf*

has come to take on a distinctly cultural tone that seeks to make less privileged the pathological definition of the condition.

(See also *acquisition, identity, ideology, individual, orality, signing*)

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