

**Deaf Culture Question of the Week - Jan. 25-29, 2010** Bill Newell, Principal,  
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What is the difference between the terms Deaf culture and Deaf community?

Think about these two concepts and then read below. How do you define Deaf culture and Deaf community?

Answer: When a capital “D” Deaf is used, it refers to the visually-based culture of people who form a linguistic minority group. Members of this culture use ASL as their primary language for interaction with other members of the culture. Deaf culture includes art forms, traditions, values, beliefs, behaviors, and cultural practices of Deaf people who primarily socialize with and marry other Deaf people. The culture forms and finds cohesiveness through sharing a common language, ASL, and common living experiences as a minority group within the larger mainstream culture. Members of Deaf culture don't define themselves by hearing loss. Persons who identify with Deaf culture may be hard of hearing or profoundly deaf and every shade in between. Hearing loss doesn't much matter at all. As stated above, Deaf culture is based in acceptance and use of the language of Deaf people, ASL, and sharing the common experiences of growing up, being educated and living and working as visual people in a world that is heavily sound-based.

When a lower-case "d" as in "deaf" is used, this refers to the condition of hearing loss. So the term "person who is deaf" would refer to a person with a severe to profound hearing loss. This is an audiological, medical perspective. A person who is deaf from an audiological perspective may or may not be a member of Deaf culture. It would depend on the person's use of ASL and acceptance of him/herself as belonging to the culture, interacting within the culture and sharing the common experiences with other members of the culture.

From the perspective of Deaf people (those persons who identify themselves with Deaf culture) all deaf and hard-of-hearing children are the future members of Deaf culture although it will take a process of enculturation through schooling, social activities, interactions with Deaf adults etc. before they may actually become members of the culture. This is because the majority of deaf and hard-of-hearing children are born to families with parents who are hearing. Depending on the orientation of the family, the deaf child may be kept separate and apart from Deaf people and not until later in life might the person who is deaf become socialized into Deaf culture. Deaf children who attend a residential school for the deaf will be introduced to Deaf culture earlier in their lives and have the opportunity to benefit from the rich heritage and language at an earlier age. Deaf children who have Deaf parents have the most natural access to Deaf culture and ASL and are usually regarded in Deaf culture as the core members of Deaf culture.

The Deaf community is somewhat harder to define. At its center is Deaf culture but the Deaf community also includes hearing people who are friends, allies, spouses, children, and some of the professionals who work with Deaf people and D/deaf children. To be considered a member of the Deaf community a person would necessarily learn and use American Sign Language, support the goals of Deaf people and have some natural association or reason for interacting with Deaf people. Interpreters of ASL/English, some teachers of the deaf, some other professionals who work with D/deaf children like audiologists, speech/language professionals, counselors etc. will be considered members of the Deaf community if they embrace a cultural view of Deaf people, use American Sign Language (not necessarily proficiently), celebrate Deaf culture and associate with members of the culture either socially or in some professional capacity. One way of visualizing the Deaf community is with concentric circles. The core/center circle comprises members of Deaf culture. Rings/circles moving outward from this core are comprised of people with ties to Deaf culture that grow successively weaker with each ring/circle moving outward. How close a person is to the center/core depends on factors such as proficiency in American Sign Language, amount of contact the person has with members of the culture, attitudes/beliefs about how d/Deaf people should be educated, the degree to which the person supports the perspectives of Deaf people etc.

Does the above match with your understanding of these terms?