

## **Culture Reflection Essay - Payton Prince**

Prior to my studies of American Sign Language at Clemson University, I had little to no knowledge of the culture of Deaf communities, particularly the American Deaf community. As is the case with the majority of the hearing population, I was completely unaware of the cultural differences between hearing individuals and those who identify as Deaf. As of now, I can confidently say that my time at Clemson has led to a deeper, more comprehensive understanding of American Deaf culture.

To understand these cultural differences, it is first and foremost important to note the difference between “deaf”/“Deaf” and the labels that are acceptable to use versus the labels that are considered culturally offensive. Deaf with a lowercase “d” is a term with strictly auditory connotations. It refers to individuals with deaf auditory statuses who choose not to associate with Deaf culture and who often do not use ASL as their primary means of communication. Deaf with a capitalized “D,” however, is a cultural term that refers to individuals with deaf auditory statuses who have immersed themselves within Deaf culture and use ASL as their primary language.

Community members have determined the labels in which to use when describing d/Deaf and the labels to avoid. The most acceptable label to use when describing those within the Deaf community, as deemed by the majority of the community itself, is simply “Deaf.”

“Hard-of-hearing” is another example of an acceptable term but only when in reference to an individual who has some residual hearing. “Hearing-impaired,” however, is an example of a label that is considered greatly offensive to members of the Deaf community and should never be used, as the term suggests deafness as an “impairment.” Another example of terms to avoid is “Deaf-mute.” This particular label is rooted in ignorance as the vast majority of Deaf individuals have full capability of speech, rather they choose to communicate in visual languages that are

much more natural than spoken languages. Once the variations between appropriate labels and the cultural significance of each are understood, we can begin to dissect the differences within the cultures of the American Deaf community and mainstream hearing society.

Perhaps one of the largest cultural differences between the two is the expression with which each respective language is used (for the purposes of this essay I will examine English specifically in regards to the language of American hearing populations). The use of expression in English heavily relies on the choice of verbiage and its spoken inflection; the addition of words and/or the way in which the words are spoken change the emphasis of what is being said to various degrees. For example, stating in English that something is very large would typically include the use of expressive adjectives as well as lowering the voice and prolonging the syllables of the adjectives when spoken. In ASL, expression is completely dependent on the use of the face and body. Using the same example, to describe an item's large size in ASL would require facial movements such as raising the eyebrows and opening the mouth to form a "CHA" sound in addition to showcasing the size with the signer's hands.

Another example of prominent differences between Deaf culture and hearing cultures in the United States specifically is the level of openness in dialogues between users of ASL versus users of English. Those who identify as Deaf and use ASL as their primary language have adapted to a culture where virtually nothing is kept hidden. In a society run by hearing populations where proper access to visual communication is an intense, ongoing struggle, it is frowned upon not to communicate candidly with ASL in Deaf spaces. English, on the other hand, is a much more passive language, and true thoughts and feelings are often taught to be kept to oneself. An example of this is the way in which Deaf individuals describe themselves and each other using physical adjectives that would be considered "rude" if used the same way in English.

Understanding these cultural differences as well as learning the historic origins of Deaf culture and ASL in the United States have profoundly altered the way in which I view the world. I had never before examined my identity as a hearing individual, my role as a hearing person in society, and the preconceived notions I had been taught to understand about d/Deaf individuals. The world of Deaf culture and the ongoing experiences of oppression Deaf communities have faced for centuries was completely unbeknownst to me. Now, however, I recognize the misconceptions and stereotypes I previously possessed and am much more knowledgeable about Deaf culture and Deaf studies as a whole. I hope to use this knowledge to help spread awareness throughout hearing populations in order to further eradicate audism and harmful ignorance.