ASC ON THE COUCH

What’s up with the Big-D in Deaf?

November 7, 2006

The Capitalization Question: Not long ago, a reader asked us why we use the capitalized version of Deaf in our blog and website. This question brought us back to our thoughts last year, when we were in the middle of writing the text for the ASC website and debating the D/d issue. Opting to capitalize "Deaf" was not something we decided on a whim, nor was it a separatist type of move. We did it consciously, out of inclusion, out of practicality, and out of pride.

Deaf as an Inclusive Term: Far from viewing "Deaf" as a way of excluding people, we see the term as an inclusive one. To us, "Deaf" refers to any people who happen to be Deaf. It has nothing to do with having Deaf or hearing parents, or using ASL, SEE, spoken English, cued speech, or any other communication modality. Neither does it matter if one was mainstreamed, educated at a Deaf school, or homeschooled. Degree of hearing loss, being Deaf from birth or being late-deafened, using a hearing aid or a cochlear implant - none of these, in our minds, precludes anyone from being Deaf.

Capitalizing Deaf parallels capitalizing African American, Jewish, Hispanic, and so on, with each of these capitalized designations referring to a group of people with their own culture and physical characteristics (i.e., skin color, bloodline, hearing status). All of these terms are inclusive. Some Jewish people may be observant Orthodox Jews, centering their lives around their religion, while others may simply identify as Jewish through their family lineage and never set foot in a temple. Some Jewish people speak Hebrew, while others don’t. Similarly, some Hispanic Americans may be fluent Spanish speakers, while others, perhaps third- or fourth-generation Hispanic Americans, may not be conversant in Spanish at all. Some may have dark brown skin, while others may have light brown skin, and still others might "pass" as Caucasian.

None of these differences function as exclusionary criteria. Jewish people are Jewish, African Americans are African American, and Deaf people are Deaf, no matter what individual differences might exist within these groups.

Deaf as a Practical Term: By using Deaf as an inclusive term, we are able to avoid the cumbersome use of a string of words describing different kinds of Deaf people. Which is easier reading?:

A) It’s important to know that being Deaf, deaf, hard of hearing, hearing impaired, Deaf-blind, or late-deafened itself is not a cause of depression.

Or

B) It’s important to know that being Deaf itself is not a cause of depression.

The practice of switching back and forth between Deaf and deaf, depending on the situation, is awkward and unnecessarily complicated. We don’t see Jewish, African American, or Latina being used to differentiate less-observant Jews, lighter-skinned African Americans, or non-Spanish speaking Latina people. It is simpler to reserve the use of "deaf" for when it is not referring specifically to people. For example: "She was deaf to his pleas".

Of course, when distinctions need to be made between Deaf people (i.e., for research or assessment purposes), we understand the usefulness of terms like those mentioned above (i.e., hard of hearing, late-deafened, etc.). We also respect people’s choices in how they decide to describe themselves.

Deaf Pride: Why not just get rid of the big D and use "deaf" to refer to all people who are Deaf? We did consider doing this, but in the end, we felt it important to acknowledge that Deaf people are a unique group of people. In the same way that the J in Jewish is capitalized, the B in Black, and the L in Latina, we choose to capitalize the D in Deaf to reflect our pride in our community and culture.

Posted by ASCOFAE under Assessment, Deaf issues, Language, Research on |
Ella

More Deaf people will agree with you, ASC.

Written authorization from

In the same way that any

We don’t want to identify the differences? What would you suggest in its place?

I’m 100% Woman, down to my painted toenails. But I also don’t want bank loaners to know I’m learning disabled in math or they’ll think I can’t balance my bank account - which I darned sure can, better than Einstein himself.

Ah, I’m rambling here. Bottom line, I think the D/d distinction is here to stay - unless a better replacement comes by. ASL community as opposed to deaf people? Clear? Hmm. I’ll keep thinking about this 😊Adios...

Jean Boucher

Practically everyone in the deaf community has been asking around as to why there is no deaf/Deaf in dictionaries for about a decade. Eureka! Never have I noticed under my nose for fifteen (15) years until now there does exist a dictionary that contains two separate definitions for d/D. It is in The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Third Edition, 1992. In the dictionary, “Deaf” is defined as “the lack of hearing sense” whereas “Deaf” is defined as “Of relating to the Deaf or their culture.” We should tell other dictionary makers to add this entry in theirs. 😃

Moggy

At some point a couple of years ago, I think it was, I started capitalizing the term Autistic. I’ve never fully been able to explain why, and at the moment I don’t really have time to try yet again.
I was following links from one blog or entry to the next, though, wandered to ASC On The Couch, and found this excellent post with far more points that I’d even thought of: “What’s up with the Big-D in Deaf?”

I highly recommend it, even if you don’t personally opt to capitalize whatever your disability is. I also noticed that the left sidebar has topic posts that would be good to explore as well, hinting there’d plenty more on the site to check out!

7. **Tom Willard** says:
   October 17th, 2007 at 4:34 pm

   When I see this sentence:

   B) It’s important to know that being Deaf itself is not a cause of depression.

   I instinctively think: “It’s important to know that being culturally Deaf itself is not a cause of depression.”

   Since the D is capitalized, I don’t even think of those other groups you mentioned. I only think of the deafies who went to deaf schools, used ASL all their lives, consort mostly with one another, etc. You know, the Deaf culture.

   You’re facing an uphill battle with this one. I’m just telling you how I honestly react seeing the ‘deaf’ capitalized. I came of age in the 80s when the militants were insisting it be capitalized; I didn’t agree then and don’t agree now.

   Feel free to see my blog for further thoughts on this subject.

8. **Position Statement on Autistic Culture « Subtext :::: Deconstructing Neureilism!!! The Praxis of an Autistic Self among Selves** says:
   April 20th, 2009 at 3:33 am

   [...] This approach to capitalization, which is already being practiced by some Autists, has long been in use within the Deaf community. As explained on the Alternative Solutions Center blog: [...]  

9. **susan** says:
   May 12th, 2009 at 8:16 am

   marlee matlin uses capital D in her new book, “I will Scream Later.” i was surprise, but i am glad marlee did it. More Deaf people will agree with you, ASC.
More Deaf people will agree with you, ASC. We don’t agree now.

Big D and d differences

We did it consciously, out of inclusion. What would you suggest in its place?

Some may have dark brown skin, while others may have light brown skin, and still others might have a lighter color. We see the term as an inclusive one.

It's important to know that being culturally Deaf itself is not a cause of depression. The practice of switching back and forth between Deaf and deaf, depending on the context, may be divisive. It's important to recognize this and work towards a more inclusive language.

Labels are what they are. It's important to use the language that feels most comfortable to the individuals involved, while also respecting the history and context of the terms.

Let's work towards a language that is more inclusive and less divisive.