

The Crab Theory

The "crab theory" is used in the Deaf community as a metaphor to describe the tendency of some Deaf people to criticize or put down the successes or achievements of other Deaf people. It may take several different forms: malicious and negative gossip, grudges, social rejection, etc., and is directed against Deaf community leaders, successful Deaf business entrepreneurs or educational administrators, deaf individuals who go to college while their deaf peers never get beyond high school, deaf people who "don't act Deaf enough", even ordinary Deaf individuals who do such positive things as buying a new car or marrying a good person.

The analogy is to a bucket of live crabs: whenever one crab attempts to escape the bucket by climbing out of it, the others reach up and pull it back down. The result, of course, is that no crab succeeds in escaping the bucket. Other groups, especially other minority groups, also use the "crab theory" to describe similar negativity within their own communities, but the "crab theory" is probably more widely mentioned and discussed within the Deaf community than in any other group.

This brief paper cannot attempt an analysis of the sometimes-complex psychological reasons for the practice of the "crab theory". However, certain common elements that tend to contribute to this phenomenon can be identified in the Deaf community.

Jealousy is often involved, of course: one Deaf person sees another Deaf person become successful while s/he still is not, so the first Deaf person tries to minimize feelings of "inferiority" by putting down the other Deaf person's success. This likely arises out of the low self-esteem frequently seen among Deaf people, often brought on from low expectations set for them by hearing parents and hearing educators, as well as from oppression by those same hearing persons (see related Deaf FAQ on [Audism](#)). This attitude by hearing authorities and parents that "Deaf people can't" gets internalized by many Deaf persons during their formative years and carries into adulthood. Self-oppression and internecine strife is a common result of low self-esteem in the Deaf community.

In other situations, revenge or retaliation for real or perceived offenses may be another cause. To give just one example, in a contentious divorce, the two principals may bad-mouth each other to their families and friends. This happens among hearing persons, too, but since the Deaf community is so small and often insular, the negativity spreads more rapidly and insidiously. Deaf individuals have difficulty escaping the trail of gossip that follows them.

The Deaf "crab theory" is not limited only to Deaf individuals; it is also seen in the often contentious relationships among various Deaf organizations, which in theory should be working cooperatively for the good of the Deaf community, but which in practice often end up accomplishing little as a result of internecine bickering and inability among the organizations to agree on goals and methods.

Bibliography:

For all the talk about the crab theory in the Deaf community, there has been surprisingly little actually written and published about it. Known references are:

DeLora, Jennifer. "May the best---or the deafest---win?", *Deaf life*, vol. 8 no. 10, April 1996, p.27-29.

"For hearing people only: Can't deaf people appreciate successful achievers who benefit their community?", *Deaf life*, vol.1 no.11, May 1989, p.7. [Does not actually call it the "crab theory", but is definitely about that attitude and behavior. Also appears as a chapter in the book: Moore, Matthew S., *For hearing people only: answers to some of the most commonly asked questions about the Deaf community, its culture, and the "Deaf reality"*. Rochester, NY: Deaf Life Press, 1993, p.271-273.]

Murphy, Fred R. "Moiphy's column", *Silent worker*, vol.1 no.5, January 1949, p.5. [This also does not call it by that name, but the author is clearly discussing what we now call the "crab theory". This article shows that the concept and practice was in the Deaf community at least as long ago as the 1940s.]

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