

Attitudes to Emotions in Deaf Culture

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I. Introduction: Defining Terms and Scope

The use of generalizations is often an unavoidable reality if informative conclusions about inherently diverse cultures are to be formed. Unfortunately, this can mean that minorities and subcultures, no matter how significant, are left misrepresented by the conclusions made. This is true in discussions of Anglo-American culture, a significant subset of which is American Deaf culture, where the latter is not well accounted for in generalizations of the cultural practices of the former. “Deaf” refers specifically to those for whom American Sign Language (ASL) is a native language or primary means of communication. In some cases, this may include hearing individuals, those who communicate by voice, usually children of deaf adults (CODA). Whereas “deaf” refers to any individual with full or partial hearing loss, those who identify as Deaf adhere to an entirely different set of cultural values and norms for emotional expression (U.S. Office of Special 1).

In discussions of Anglo-American culture, norms of emotional expression are often described as suppressive. Therein, negative emotions are disguised with a bias toward appearing “happy,” yet even happy emotions must be regulated given the adverse perception of emotions, or being “emotional,” due to their association with a “loss of control” (Weirzbicka 17). While many researchers have agreed with this assessment, it is not representative of American Deaf culture, which largely follows its own guidelines for emotional expression; rather, it primarily accounts for American hearing culture. Due to the unavoidable way in which the two cultures coexist, many of the norms for emotional expression in Deaf culture can be viewed as byproducts of those found in hearing culture. The interactions between the two cultures will therefore be the primary focus of this investigation, as they provide the most insight into why certain norms for emotional expression may have developed as they did in Deaf culture. Additionally, perhaps because hearing people are the majority, there is far more extensive research available on the difficulties which arise during inter-cultural communication than there is on the realities of emotional expression in Deaf culture itself, which further guided this investigation in the direction of the clashes between the two cultures and the significances of those clashes.

II. Establishing Differences in Emotional Expression

In Deaf culture, the use of physical manifestations to convey emotions is extremely common given that ASL, its primary means of communication, is “spoken” through gestures, body language, and facial manipulations. For this reason, hearing individuals may mistake certain aspects of the language, especially the seemingly exaggerated facial expressions, as indicating the emotional state of the speaker, when they are merely a grammatical component

(*Hearing Students with Deaf*). For example, to ask a question, one must furrow the brows. According to work by the likes of Ekman on facial correlates of universal emotions, people may perceive this as anger, or surprise, emotions with which such an expression is often associated (qtd. in Weirzbicka 175), when in reality it is merely a grammatical marker in the language. That said, it would also be a mistake to assume the reverse: that Deaf culture does not have different level of emotional expression encouraged, or rather, that physical manifestations solely indicate the linguistic component. Many individuals bilingual in both ASL and English comment on the depth of emotion in the language, with one woman stating that speaking primarily in English, she “missed the depth and range of emotions and expressions that are so embedded in a Deaf home” (Lazorisak and Donohue 124). In fact, many Deaf individuals view hearing communication, which does not “freely” make use of the face or body to convey messages, as being “lifeless and lacking emotion” as compared to ASL and its usage for communication in Deaf culture (U.S. Office of Special 2).

It appears that as a whole, emotional expression is not just encouraged in Deaf culture, but integral to it, which results in a method of communication that is extremely direct, and representative of an individual’s thoughts (Mostyn-Thomas). It is a cultural value to put feelings “up front” during interactions as a means of demonstrating how much you care about the other person (*Hearing Students with Deaf*). This emphasis on the importance of emotional expression seems to exist irrespective of gender, where men and women alike seem encouraged to express emotions in Deaf culture within their Deaf circles; however, with any minority culture you must also recognize how the larger culture in which they are submerged also mediates their norms, and in this case, their expression of emotion. Hearing people may find Deaf people too abrasive, too direct, and therefore react negatively during interactions with them, which may lead Deaf individuals to act far more reserved when they are outside of their smaller culture. This is an even greater concern given that many Deaf individuals also feel uncomfortable using their voices, especially because they are so often misunderstood, and therefore may choose not to laugh or offer other audible reactions, in addition to not attempting to converse audibly, even around hearing people who would be able to perceive that laughter (Mostyn-Thomas). In fact, physical manifestations of what would be the audible correlates to their feelings are much more common. For example, Deaf people may fingerspell “haha,” and clap by sticking their hands up parallel to their heads and waving their fingers (Lazorisak and Donohue 133). This specialization of expression of emotion to the unique culture represents the tendency of Deaf culture to be both extremely inclusive to its members, and also extremely exclusive to those who are not a part of it, perhaps lending further explanation to why it can be difficult to find studies on Deaf culture.

Furthermore, given the nature of the Deaf community, the roles of emotional expression for children are not able to be closely examined here. Since not all deaf individuals are a part of the Deaf culture, and being a part of it largely stems from either integration through schooling or adult social activities, or through a Deaf parent passing on their heritage, there is too much variation as to when children are exposed to the culture and when they join it to form any concrete conclusions, especially given that many deaf children are born into hearing families (Lazorisak and Donohue 6).

III. **Explaining Differences in Emotional Expression**

The more open expression of emotions in Deaf culture may originate from a heightened desire to connect with others, stemming from the sense of an individual or cultural history of isolation. Since many in the Deaf culture grew up in homes with hearing families who did not speak ASL, their primary language, or were not taught ASL themselves in an attempt to emphasize English and integration with the hearing world, many were left feeling cut off. In 2002, the Gallaudet Research Institute found that 84% of 43,000 deaf children studied had hearing parents. Of that 84%, around 26,000 (72%) reported their family members did not sign to them regularly (Lazorisak and Donohue 6).

As Deaf culture is so collectivistic and tied to a common sense of identity, even those who have had more positive experiences may consider this “voicelessness” as part of their heritage, especially if able to find correlations between these experiences and the oppression they too have faced in the hearing world. The significance of this voicelessness which many young deaf people experience is two-fold. First, it birthed a more direct style of communication in order to be more efficient and spend less time talking, which can be seen as impolite by hearing individuals. Since deaf people may experience extreme difficulty expressing themselves to hearing people in general because of the language barrier, and even those who study and are able to speak English may not be easy to understand, this may be why this norm for expression emerged. Second, many Deaf people may be trying to compensate for that history of isolation and misunderstanding. ASL provides them a tool to do so, and given the support of a common background Deaf people feel in the Deaf community, they may be unlikely to restrict that ability to express themselves as they used to in the past, knowing they will be understood and having a language over which they can truly take ownership. As individuals who substitute one body part for another and hear with their eyes, so are they able to speak with their hands, a language they understand and perceive just as hearing individuals are able to perceive sound waves.

Another interesting perspective to consider, however, is that emotions may not be expressed to such truly different degrees as was initially considered, but that they merely

manifest differently. While hearing culture may value a more impassive face during interaction, emotions are still communicated through tone and volume of voice, rather than being limited to the physical realm (Waldron, Steer, and Bhargava 2). In ASL, the equivalent of this is accomplished with more powerful or vigorous signing, or through the manipulation of the facial expressions to a greater or lesser degree as an indication of intensity. For example, if the sign for happy is completed with an impassive face, it creates a sarcastic tone, whereas as the smile increases in size, so does the degree of happiness conveyed by the sign increase from glad to elated (Lazorisak and Donohue Page 45). Therefore, perhaps such indications of emotion may be more easily perceived when physically manifested than when verbalized, leading to a conception of Deaf culture as more emotionally expressive, when in reality it may not necessarily denote a cultural difference. In other words, the norms for amount of expression encouraged may not truly vary as much as initially anticipated, but rather the norms for methods of expressing them differ significantly, and this is an area where further study would be informative before conclusive judgments are made.

IV. Conclusions

The expression of emotion in Deaf culture is strongly rooted in physical demonstrations and manifestations of those emotions. Communication is accomplished not just through the use of gesturing in the formation of signs, but also with body language and facial expressions. These modes of communication seem to be biased to favor a more visual display as opposed to other manifestations, and are often uniquely tailored to the Deaf community, a fact which further nuances expression with the sense of unity and pride characteristic of Deaf culture. While many claim that Deaf culture, because of its use of ASL, is more emotionally expressive than Anglo-American culture, further investigation should be done into whether it is truly the amount of expression or the method of expression which varies. That said, it is still evident that Deaf culture highly values emotional expression, and that many of the norms which regulate it can be tied to a cultural history of isolation from the hearing community, which gave birth the sense of inclusion and unity that now characterizes the Deaf community and mediates their expressional norms.

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