Cultural Interview Paper

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Merriam-Webster’s dictionary defines culture as “the customary beliefs, social forms, and material traits of a racial, religious, or social group.” The way each individual person characterizes culture can greatly vary. For some, culture may just be another fact about themselves. For others, their whole lives revolve around different aspects of their culture. For some members of the Deaf community, Deaf culture can be an essential part of their existence. In Deaf culture, there is a difference of whether or not you consider yourself culturally Deaf or if you only consider yourself deaf in medical terms. Members who associate themselves with and have a strong identity to Deaf culture are Deaf individuals with a capital “D”, and those who do not are considered deaf individuals with a lowercase “d”. Deaf culture values language, its history, a sense of community, and education, but is greatly misinterpreted and ignored in dominant cultures.

When I asked Kari Sween, a Sign Language professor at MNSU, how she would define Deaf culture, she stated, “A culture that is fully immersed in a language that we all can communicate with one another. That is ASL for us.” It was very interesting to hear how she described her culture, because it is very different from how I would describe my culture. Before, I had always thought of language as just a portion of culture. Sween instead had defined her culture in a way that revolved around language because it is of the upmost importance. “We just use our hands to speak our minds,” Sween told me. How we see the world is often shaped by the language we use. Deaf individuals may view the world differently than other cultures because their language provides them with a different lens. One of the main concepts I’ve picked up from taking Sign Language classes is that it is a very expressive language. When they communicate, they communicate with emotion and detail. Before, I had never viewed my language as being unexpressive. After taking Sign Language and beginning to understand why language is so important to Deaf culture, I can see how my language may seem more monotone.

Deaf culture’s long history proves the resilience of its members defending their right to not be ignored in society. “We share a rich history with so many obstacles and we have come through so much,” stated Sween. There was a time in history when their language was not allowed because society thought they should assimilate into dominant culture and be made to communicate by speaking. Even after American Sign Language (ASL) was created, institutions punished deaf and hard of hearing students when they were caught using ASL. Sween described that era of history part of the dark ages of ASL. Thankfully, ASL is now an accepted language. “We are still/currently in the golden ages of ASL because we are spreading ASL awareness and educating people about deafness,” Sween mentioned in our interview. Sign language is very important to Deaf culture because it helps to define many aspects of their livelihood and is a reminder of Deaf culture’s long history.

The community that Deaf culture creates is very welcoming and inclusive. When I first started taking Sign Language, I did not understand that there was such a deep and united culture that associated with ASL. In my interview with Sween, she stated that, “We are a deep knit “collectivist” community who will support one another.” From my own observations, I have found that Deaf individuals are always eager to learn about other people’s lives and how individuals are doing. All of my Sign Language professors have asked every student how they are doing before starting class. Also, most Deaf individuals value conversations so much that it often takes a long time before leaving a conversation or saying goodbye. I personally value conversations, but I feel that my culture does not value conversations to the extent that Deaf individuals do.

One of the main concepts I gathered from our interview was that her culture greatly values education. While I believe that my culture values education, I think our cultures value education in different ways. In my opinion, I think my culture may view education as a means of earning more money or making it farther in life. Sween seemed to view education as an opportunity for individuals to make a better life for themselves and to help members of their culture break through barriers. When I asked how her culture views success, she mentioned that people who go to college, work in chapters to fight for Deaf or hard of hearing rights, or educate others about ASL are “paving the way for future generations.” Education is also a way for the Deaf community to debunk misconceptions. Sween recognized that people who do not know much about Deaf individuals and may think that they are not as capable or qualified. When members of the Deaf community are willing to educate others about ASL or their culture, misconceptions can be cleared up. Instead of education being viewed as a way to earn more money, education is viewed as a tool that earns their culture more rights and respect.

Audism is a way of discriminating against people who are deaf or hard of hearing. Audism can take many forms, including being unwilling to attempt to communicate, assuming Deaf or hard of hearing people cannot do things, thinking deafness is a tragedy, patronizing, and discriminating in the workforce. Deaf culture is not unlike other, nondominant cultures where they face microaggressions. Sween has experienced audism more times that she can count. What surprised me the most about our interview was that when I first asked her about her experiences with Audism, her first example was with her family at holiday gatherings. I have never felt discriminated against by my own family members. Her second example of Audism was at hospitals and clinics when she had requested an interpreter, and they refused her one. I cannot imagine how difficult it would be to try to effectively conversate with someone who does not speak the same language, especially when dealing with medical information. This information helped me to recognize and be more aware of the privileges I have.

Learning about the language, history, sense of community, value of education, and discrimination of Deaf culture has helped me gain a greater respect and understanding of other cultures. Communicating with people of different cultural backgrounds is an eye-opening experience. Finding similarities and differences and being able to make connections between two different cultures helps to increase understanding and respect for both parties involved. Showing a willingness to learn more about someone else and the culture they belong to helps to break cultural barriers and also allows yourself to learn more about your own culture and beliefs.