

WHAT NAME SIGNS CAN TELL US ABOUT DEAF CULTURE

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Abstract.

Twenty deaf people were interviewed about name signs and their use. Their responses point to underlying cultural values expressed in name signs and also provide practical information about the making and bestowing of name signs, changing one's name sign, and evolution in the name sign system.

Names in world cultures

Name signs in American Deaf Culture, like names in other cultures of the world are not only handy labels for individual persons but reflect cultural values and patterns of social interaction as well. From the copious literature on naming in general certain relevant themes emerge that can provide a framework in which to view name signs.

Great importance is often placed on choosing the right name for a person, although chance may enter. The Kandhs of Central India select names by throwing grains of rice on a bowl of water while reciting a list of ancestors' names; when a grain of rice floats, the name just pronounced is given to the baby (Masani 1966: 59).

Many cultures believe that names should be unique. Since every person is different, names should reflect individual identity and no two people should have the same name. The Iroquois have special "guardians," whose responsibility is to remember the entire repertoire of clan names and know which ones are available at any given time (Levi-Strauss 1966: 188).

Not all people die with the name they received at birth. In some cultures people may have a series of up to nine different names throughout their lifetimes depicting different phases of the life cycle. New names are given to denote a change in status; e.g. adolescence, marriage, completion of a successful exploit, induction into a special group (Charles 1951: 28). Another practice that leads to multiple names is the deliberate changing of one's own name. Many cultures subscribe

to the belief that changing the name of a person who is ill will fool the gods or demons and the "new" person will recover (Frazer 1959: 272).

Names are sometimes so closely linked to the person that they become an essential part of the person's identity. As a respondent to a recent British survey put it, "I'm not crazy about my names, but they are me now. I've got to live with them."

These glimpses at the literature of naming suggest that naming practices reveal cultural values (e.g. links to one's ancestors or the importance of the individual). The study of the name sign system in American Sign Language (ASL) should bring out equally interesting insights.

Studies of name signs in ASL

The only previously published study of ASL name signs is that by Kathryn Meadow (1977), which has a developmental perspective. Meadow discusses the parallel between receiving a name sign and being initiated into a culture. She finds that, "There are three periods in the life of a deaf individual that may mark his entrance into the deaf community," and concludes that people receive their name signs during one of the same three periods (1977: 240).

Meadow also mentions that "child to child socialization" has another effect on the character of many reported name signs. In her sample of 450 name signs, 86 were descriptive, reflecting some element of the person's appearance or behavior. Of these 45% seemed to have a negative connotation. She mentions briefly a few other points worthy of further investigation: first, that 16% of the signs she collected showed a family connection, often expressed by keeping the name signs for the children in the family in one location with the same movement, varying only the handshape (which represents the initial of the child's first name). Second, some deaf parents give their hearing children name signs but others object to this practice. Another notion was the possibility of having several different name signs as one moves through the stages of life (e.g., childhood, marriage, job promotion). She also describes deaf children's creation of name signs, which can range from teasing to insulting, for teachers or others in authority.

Meadow's study makes a good introduction to the name sign system and raises many interesting questions. Unfortunately, however,

there is no mention as to how many of her informants had deaf parents and how many hearing parents. Because deaf children of deaf parents acquire their culture and language at home, they may have different views and experiences from those of children of hearing parents. I believe this is an important distinction.

Meadow asked her informants for name signs of friends or acquaintances that seemed to them "to be particularly interesting or memorable." This filtering may have slanted the results of her study, making respondents likely to recall more descriptive name signs (either clever or grotesque) than signs with initials only and without inherent meaning. This distinction also proves to be important.

Sam Supalla, a deaf member of a deaf family, has investigated name signs. His study (to appear in *SLS* soon) is linguistic in focus and contains a detailed analysis of the phonological structure of name signs, especially handshapes and contact points used. He makes a major distinction between descriptive name signs, which denote some aspect of the individual's personal appearance, behavior, or personality, and arbitrary name signs, which consist only of the initial letter(s) of the first or last name, with movement and in a specific location. He sees descriptive name signs to be "outside the native sign system," because deaf parents always give their children arbitrary name signs. Thus his study focuses only on the arbitrary name sign system, which he finds to be "governed by a strict set of formation regularities with an extremely limited set of formation elements and restrictions on how they may combine."

Though Supalla admits that descriptive name signs are used by deaf people, not only for personal name signs, but often "developed for prominent people"—such as the sign for (President) Nixon—he hopes that "once an ASL signer either native or non-native becomes a parent, he/she may reject the descriptive name sign system and prefer to give an arbitrary name sign to his/her child instead."

Supalla's thorough analysis of the arbitrary name sign system is an excellent linguistic foundation. Yet his strong stance regarding descriptive name signs brings up some interesting questions: given that sign language is unique in that only 10% of its users acquire it from their parents, where does that leave the language used by the other 90%, who learn it from their peers later on? Does ASL consist only of the

language of the 10% who acquire it from parents? Judging from Meadow's work, if 43% of the name signs were given by peers and 67% are given before age 10, then a fair number of these child-bestowed name signs may be descriptive. Should we consider these descriptive name signs to be less valid or less ASL than arbitrary name signs?

The present study

For my master's thesis (1988) I collected examples, anecdotes, opinions, and feelings regarding name sign use, in order to have a rich base for describing the traditions and customs of the name sign system in ASL. Some of the most salient findings are presented here. I began with eleven broad research questions to give an overview of the areas to be covered:

1. What are the domains of descriptive and arbitrary name signs? What are people's attitudes toward them?
2. Are name signs used to express unity (in families, in the community)?
3. Is there a common set of internalized rules about name signs?
4. What are the traditions connected with making and giving name signs?
5. Are there constraints on changing one's name sign?
6. How does a series of different name signs reflect stages of life?
7. Do name signs reflect categories; e.g. for men/women, deaf/hearing?
8. Is there a name sign etiquette?
9. How has the name sign system changed over the years?
10. How are name signs used for teasing?
11. How are hearing people involved in the name sign system?

I used these eleven to devise a list of sixty questions to be used in interviews (Appendix). I then scheduled hour-long interviews with twenty deaf people, but after the first two it was obvious that I couldn't ask and get responses to all 60 questions in one hour. With the 18 remaining respondents I tried to have a more natural discussion on the topic of name signs, keeping the interview questions at hand to use if needed.

I quickly saw that the most valuable information came from stories, anecdotes, and the experiences my respondents shared with me.

Lacking a video camera, I took short notes during the interviews and later made more detailed records.

Of the ten men and ten women I interviewed, whose age ranged from 21 to 81 years, nine had deaf parents and eleven, hearing parents. Members of different racial, religious, and other sub-cultural groupings were represented as well as different geographical regions. The educational backgrounds ranged from "did not finish high school" to Ph.D. candidate. Ten had attended state residential school exclusively; five had transferred to residential schools after public or oral schooling or both. The other five had attended only public or oral programs or both. Of the seventeen who had attended college, thirteen had gone to Gallaudet, though not all had graduated. Occupations included sign language teacher, teacher at a residential school, computer programmer, shipping clerk, and postal worker.

Particulars

The responses to a few questions were quantifiable. "How many name signs have you had?" resulted in this distribution:

1	55%
2	15%
3	10%
4	10%
0	10% (These fingerspelled their first name)

"Who gave you your name sign?", produced this response pattern:

Peers	48%
Parents	22%
Siblings	6%
Selves	6%
Other	18%

The 29% of name signs given in infancy were given by parents or siblings. The 35% given between ages 6 and 16 were given by peers at school. The 12% given between ages 17 and 20 were given at college. And 21% of the name signs were given when the recipient was between 21 to 60 years of age; these included name signs self bestowed or changed when moving to a new city or new job.

Family connections

Of the nine people from deaf families, eight had name signs that shared the sign location of at least one other family member's name sign. Six had name signs that matched the location of a sibling's name sign. An only child matched a parent's sign in location, and in one family all the children's and both the parents' name signs used the same location.

Descriptive or arbitrary?

Of the seventeen currently used name signs, fifteen were arbitrary (including all those of the children of deaf parents), and only two were descriptive. One of the latter was a recently coined "artistic" name sign. The possessor of the other grew up in oral school and later attended a mainstreamed high school. Of the fourteen name signs people in the group had used previously, nine were arbitrary and five descriptive. It is interesting to note that all of the people whose earlier name signs were descriptive currently used arbitrary name signs. Among the respondents' parents' name signs, ten were arbitrary, four descriptive; but the four with descriptive name signs all gave their children arbitrary name signs. Supalla's observation is supported by this group.

Values in the Deaf community: identity & solidarity

One of the values that was made explicit during the interviews was that of the tradition itself. I was told that both deaf and hearing members of the community should be aware of the rules and traditions of name signs. Another person said that it is right to pass on the same traditional names again and again, but the two values I saw expressed most often were name signs as identity symbols and name signs as symbols of group membership.

I was told by many people that name signs are a symbol of the self, the individual. They unanimously agreed that no two people in the same group can have the same name sign and referred to various methods of remedying this conflict if it does occur. Several felt that "name signs as identity" was justification for keeping the same name sign for life. Others interpreted this to explain why a person should be able to change his or her name sign to match the new identity as life

circumstances changed. Thus, if a child had a negative name (e.g. "nose-picker"), when he "grew out of it" or "changed from low to high esteem," a name sign change would be in order. Another example given was that sometimes when a woman marries (but by no means regularly), she will change her name sign to match her husband's (e.g. by adding a second letter handshape to represent her last name).

That deaf people feel strongly the connection of their name signs to their identities is illustrated by one man's report. Even though the name sign given to him in school by the other kids when he was ten years old focused on a physical aspect in a negative way, he felt good that he was thus noticed by the others and given a name sign; it would have been much worse not to have been given any name sign at all.

Sometimes the name sign as identity symbol overrides the visible reference. I was told that a deaf man with a name sign referring to his beard should keep the same name sign even after he shaves it off. People also told me that "hair name signs are dangerous," because hair style, length, and presence or absence are not permanent features.

One respondent, thinking back to name signs of friends in his residential school, realized that one boy had a name sign that made reference to the shape of his nose. But, he told me, he had never thought of that while he was using the name sign; it was the boy's sign name, it stood for the boy himself and not his nose.

The strongest value, which I heard expressed in many different ways, was that name signs serve as connections to the group. The smallest group is, of course, the family. Hence the common practice for deaf parents to express family unity in the name signs for their children. Many parents would pick one location (e.g. on the back of the passive hand, on the forehead, or in neutral space) for all their children's name signs, changing only the handshape, which often was the manual alphabet hand for the child's English name's first initial. If the family picks for the children English names that all start with the same letter, then the handshape is held constant and the location changes. I was also told of a child being given the name sign of a deceased relative or old friend of one parent, in order to honor that person's memory. Another expression of family solidarity was the giving a name sign matching the location of the mother's name sign to one child and one matching the location of the father's name sign to a sibling.

After the family one of the strongest communities is that encountered at Gallaudet College (now University). For many children from different backgrounds it was and is there that they interact with large numbers of deaf people who share the same experiences. It seems that every so often there is a generation of Gallaudet students who all take on "nose name signs." The nose is not generally used for arbitrary name signs, and using it as a location for initial-letter name signs seems to be a small act of defiance (like thumbing one's nose at authority), but it thus makes an even stronger mark of unity for a special group of friends. As they disperse to different parts of the nation, they take with them a permanent badge of their happy college days. [In my early years at Gallaudet College, nose-located initial-letter handshape name signs for unpopular teachers recalled the nose-located sign for urination by incorporating the appropriate facial action, nose wrinkling. Ed.]

Often the group, not one person, decides on a name sign for a member. "The group must be comfortable using the name sign," I was told repeatedly. After all, a name sign is seldom used by the person named; its use is by friends and acquaintances, and thus, in a way, it belongs to the group. One woman did not like her name sign when she was first given it, but she said, "There is not much you can do about it if your name sign is taken up and used by the group." I was told of several people who prefer that their friends use only the initial of their first name as their name sign, but the group did not tolerate too many very similar name signs and insisted on using both first and last initials despite the objectors' protests. If the group does not like a member's name sign they may sometimes use another name sign for that person in his or her absence. I was told of one deaf man, who was not liked by many and whose two-initial name sign was turned into an obscene gesture. When the man found out about this, he changed his name sign to use two other initials; the group still found a way to turn his new name sign into the same obscene gesture.

On the positive side, a person who joined the deaf community in her teens was given a name sign by the group and referred to it as her "baptism" into the deaf community. Another person described the group's naming someone as that person's "initiation" into the group and a symbol of acceptance.

Changing name signs

Changing one's name sign seems to involve both its functions as identity symbol and as a connection to the group; it also demonstrates how these two may be at odds with each other.

When I asked respondents if it was all right for a person to change name signs, I got mostly qualified affirmatives. A person can change a name sign that causes strong negative feeling, but doing so will often be confusing to friends; therefore it is best done when a person moves from one part of the country to another and takes up with a new group of people. Many said that one could change if he "had a good reason." Good reasons may include: someone else in the group already has the same name sign; a woman marries; a person gets new employment. This last applies especially if one becomes a teacher, for respondents assert that it is not proper for children to call a teacher by a name sign that represents by initial handshape the teacher's first name. That would be like calling Joe Smith "Mr. Joe;" more appropriate would be changing the handshape to 'S' or to use both 'J' and 'S'.

But everyone agreed that it is much harder to change one's name sign if one stays in the same city. On the negative side, apart from the value in keeping a name sign for one's whole life, deterrents to change mentioned included: "Old friends will be puzzled; It's sad/strange to lose your identity; People will get suspicious; People will forget who is who." Changing one's name sign out of the blue, or because one is tired of it, is definitely not acceptable. It is interesting to compare this qualified freedom to change one's name sign in America with the situation in the school for the deaf in Canton, China (Yau & He 1989, SLS 65, 305-322).

Etiquette & rules

The most common response to my question, "Are there any rules about name signs?" was that name signs must be made only in certain places on the body or face or in neutral space. The three respondents who had either read Supalla's paper or heard about it, cited his work on arbitrary name signs as the definitive description. One man said that before he had heard about Supalla's work he had thought that anything was acceptable, but now he knows better and has changed his name sign.

The other two had felt that some name signs were right and others wrong but reading Supalla's paper had crystallized their thinking and given them reasons for their feelings. Eight other respondents mentioned that name signs' locations should be in "certain places" and pointed to some or to all of the locations Supalla cites, although they had not read his paper. One person said, "The only rule is that the name sign must identify the person;" and others agreed that the sign must be simple and comfortable to use. I also received two responses: "no rules; anything is ok;" and two: "I don't know; I've never thought about that before."

It seemed somewhat easier for my respondents to express the taboos: what cannot be used as a sign name. There should be no duplication; no two people in a group should have the same name sign. Name signs should not resemble a sign for some common object, as that would be too confusing. Signs that look like swear words or signs with a sexual connotation are specially tabooed. (Name signs that are actually ASL signs for 'bitch,' 'bastard,' and 'lesbian' are examples of what happens when signers of limited competence try to coin name signs on the face.)

I was told that name signs should not be "too big, too long, should not make the hands move too much, should not be put in places that are hard to see" (back of head, knee, or thigh), and in general, "should not bring too much attention to the sign itself."

What to do about duplication

Of all the questions discussed in the interviews, the only one that received a unanimous response was, "What happens when two people in a group have the same name sign?" At least one person will have to change or have changed his or her name sign. This makes perfect sense when it is understood that one of the chief functions of name signs is identification.

Many and various solutions were offered on how exactly to remedy the situation. One is that one person keeps the name sign and the other changes, but which one should change? The newcomer to the group or the younger person were the common answers. Another way to put this is that "the one who has had the name sign longer" gets to keep the sign. If one is deaf and the other hearing, of course, the former

keeps, the latter changes. And if between two deaf people, the one who is better known.

Another option, exercised most often in a group with enforced intimacy, as in a school setting, is that both keep their name signs but a second element is added for clarification. One or both could have a second initial-letter handshape or a number added (e.g. S1, S2), though some respondents had reservations about the effect of this on S2's self esteem. A solution that works well for an adult and a child is S-BIG and S-LITTLE; or if one has a distinguishing physical feature, a sign referring to that could be the added element. But two people from one family might have the same name sign if they lived in different parts of the country, and there would be no need for change unless one happened to move to the same city where the other lived.

One respondent told of an instance of this last. Two very well known people in their respective deaf communities happened to have the same name sign. This caused no problem until one of them moved to the other's city. They were both so prominent in their respective fields (education and theater) and so identified with their name signs that it would not have been right to make either of them change. However, the circumstance that one is a man and the other a woman made it possible for the community refer to them unambiguously as S-MAN and S-WOMAN.

Short names

Not everyone in the deaf community has a name sign. Often people with short first names are said not to need name signs because their names can be fingerspelled quickly and easily, though it is not unusual for people with three-letter first names to have name signs anyway. Though my respondents mentioned 2, 3, 4, or at most 5 letters for the limit for keeping a finger-spelled name, the decision seems not directly dependent on the number of letters needed. The ease and flow of fingerspelling seems to be the deciding factor. I was often given the example of L-A-R-R-Y as a name easy to spell because the handshapes flowed smoothly from one to the other.

One feature of fingerspelled short names that would warrant further research. I noticed that such names (e.g. J-O-E, A-L) were produced in a stylized way: the palm was not kept facing forward

(standard fingerspelling practice) for J-O-E but was twisted back to face the signer; and A-L was really an 'L' handshape with the index finger flicking up and down. These resemble fingerspelled loan signs (Battison 1978) more than standard fingerspelling.

Naming one's self

My respondents were divided almost evenly on the question whether one could make up one's own name sign, and those on both sides expressed strong reasons for their opinions. I first asked the question about deaf persons. This drew 10 yes's and 8 no's, while two said they should discuss it with the group. Reasons included: "No; because babies don't get to choose their names;" "Yes; it's their language; they know the rules." When asked if hearing people connected with the community could make up their own name signs, the answers were: Yes, 9; No, 9, and again 2 for discussing it with the group. Reasons here: "No; because they don't know the community and they might pick one someone else already has;" and "Yes; but with the guidance of a deaf teacher."

Inappropriate name signs

When I asked for examples of name signs that my respondents had seen which felt wrong to them, the answers often were negative descriptive signs. Several described a name sign calling attention to a man's large protruding belly. The name signs CROSS-EYE and BIG-NOSE were also called inappropriate. One inappropriate name sign was made in the ear in reference to the hearing aid the person wore [See definitions of "deaf" and "hard of hearing" in Padden & Humphries 1988]; others designated hair, chewing gum, a diamond ring, and pointy glasses, with the explanation that these were not permanent features. Another category was name signs that were physically uncomfortable to produce; e.g. right hand on right shoulder—this kind of sign often shows changes over time in location or movement to make signing it easier.

Giving name signs

Not everyone I interviewed had given a name sign to someone else. Six said they never made up name signs; their reasons included: "I don't feel qualified because I joined the deaf community late; there must be

respect for native signers;" and "I don't feel comfortable describing other people's identity." A sign language teacher referring to his hearing students said: "Even though they ask me, I don't give them name signs; let the community give them later if they stay involved."

When I asked those who had given name signs if they could do so immediately upon meeting a new person, they replied, "No; it is better to wait until you get to know the person somewhat before giving the person a name sign." Asking how long to wait, I got answers ranging from two hours to three weeks.

I asked whether they discuss a name sign with its potential recipient first, to see if it is acceptable, or just bestow it without asking. Eight said that they would check it out with the person first; two said no; they would just give it regardless; and one said it would depend on whether he liked the person or not.

Questions about how one decides what name sign to give another person drew interesting answers. Two respondents replied that they give only name signs that are never connected to the person's personality; but everyone else mentioned some combination of the recipient's name, personality, character, behavior, philosophy, attitude, quirks, physical features, and occupation as influencing their decision. It is interesting that not all of the name signs created by the people who gave answers reflected in the preceding list were descriptive; so it seems that even arbitrary name signs have to "feel right." Several respondents demonstrated the process of forming the handshape of the recipient's first initial and trying it out on different locations on the body until one "felt right."

The evolving tradition of name signs

The stories that some of my older respondents told me seemed to suggest that the name sign system has changed over the last fifty years. Many of the comments were about hearing people, who formerly did not have name signs at all. "They had no reason to," was the explanation, as the two cultures had much less contact than they do today. In fact, formerly, deaf parents did not even give name signs to their hearing children, though many of these children were native signers and grew up interacting with their parents and their deaf friends. The only time hearing people needed name signs was when they

became teachers of the deaf, and then their students usually invented name signs for them or asked an authority figure in the deaf community to help devise names. Nowadays, respondents told me, hearing people in contact with the deaf community want name signs, and these people make up more descriptive name signs than arbitrary ones. Some expressed the feeling that "hearing people are taking over more now."

I was told by several respondents comparing name signs of today with those of thirty to fifty years ago, that more last name initials figured in the older signs, that sometimes the handshape did not match any of the English name's initials, and that name signs were made up using only one of the initials, never two. Another recent development is the use of name signs that refer to occupations. Some respondents feel that the limits of appropriateness have changed, that formerly strict rules had become more flexible. While a few thought that this was a change for the better and that the newer signs are more creative, other disagreed and called the new names "funny" or "odd."

Two types of descriptive name signs

In his work on the arbitrary name sign system, Supalla has excluded descriptive name signs from his discussion. My research has led me to divide this category in two: one is the class of newer name signs that refer to the person's hobbies, hair style, or behavior and are made with a handshape for the initial of the word describing the feature; the other, older, traditional class used non-initialized signs descriptive of the physical feature.

My older respondents described the way the name sign system worked when they were children. If a child entered residential school without a name sign, one was given, using either the initial of the first or last name or a non-initial reference to a striking physical feature. Such names referred to 'a scar', 'flat nose', 'big eyes', 'pointed head'. Although these physically descriptive name signs seem cruel, it is common for children everywhere to nickname their companions with reference to salient physical features (Morgan 1970, Yau & He 1989).

I was told that sometimes people like their descriptive name signs (e.g. "they are proud of their beautiful nose"), or accepted them because to an outsider it is not always immediately apparent what physical feature prompted the descriptive name sign.

One recent development that bothered many of my respondents was the combination of the two systems, arbitrary and descriptive, to come up with a sign that described something and used an initial handshape; e.g. S-LONG-WAVY-HAIR, P-LIKES-MUSIC, F-ALWAYS-LATE. Though many respondents termed these "hearing name signs," and it is true that they are often found as name signs for hearing students in sign language classes, it is not possible to determine their origin exactly. Two theories were offered by my respondents. One is that deaf people invented name signs of this kind for hearing people to show that they were outsiders in the community's regard. The other is related to the "reasons" sign language teachers often give their students why signs are made the way they are, perhaps hoping that the (often imagined) etymology will help the memory. Students in the spirit of "every sign must have a reason" may have devised or been encouraged to devise initialized-descriptive name signs.

My own explanation is that new students of sign language, having an incomplete knowledge of the name sign system as well as imperfect understanding of Deaf culture, simply confuse the arbitrary and descriptive systems and come up with a blend.

It should be noted that this newer, mixed type of name sign is not limited solely to hearing people. Two of my respondents had attended a succession of oral and public schools and bore name signs of this kind. It was traditionally in the state residential school for the deaf that deaf children of hearing parents first learned sign language and assimilated cultural values in their interaction with deaf teachers and with "native signer" peers. Sadly, these centers of cultural transmission are losing public support, which is going to mainstreaming deaf children in public schools. [It is interesting to note that in Scotland the same trend continued only a few years until parents of deaf children discovered how poorly this indiscriminately mixed education was accomplishing and demanded that the local authorities return their deaf children to educational programs designed for deaf children's, not general, needs. Ed.] This trend, combined with the enrollment of thousands of hearing people (Cokely 1986) in sign classes—one of my respondents called it "a fad"—lead one to expect that the traditional name sign system may undergo further change in the future.

Other traditions

Many traditions involving name signs started in the residential schools. This can account for arbitrary name signs that do not match any of the person's initials: suppose Mark was given the name sign "M-on the back of the hand" and after he graduates Peter, who reminds everyone of Mark when he was little, enters the school; they give Peter the same sign.

Another tradition in the residential school is the children's coining of (often derogatory) name signs for teachers. These may be descriptive and initialized, combining the teacher's initial with the action and location of signs like LOUSY or BORING, or they may make a sign play on the teacher's last name or mimic a scowling expression or the manner of a sneeze. These signs are used secretly, although the teachers are usually hearing and might not understand the sign even if it was used in front of them. A poignant story was told to me of a teacher, who although deaf herself, did not identify with the deaf children in the class and looked down on them; the children referred to her with an obscene gesture on the chin.

The tradition of teasing name signs for teachers continued into college level at Gallaudet and elsewhere. There was also student to student teasing. I was told that a ritual among friends at Gallaudet was sitting around with friends, eating and drinking and making up teasing name signs for each other. "These could be mean, and if a person was not assertive enough they could be stuck with a negative name sign. It was like a power struggle." Many name signs made up in this period of life played on sexual themes, as would be expected in this age group.

The constraints on the earlier, traditional, descriptive name signs may differ from those on arbitrary name signs. I found an interesting comparison in Iranian name signs shown to me by a deaf man who recently moved here from Iran. He said that most name signs in Iran are physically descriptive; e.g. 'big teeth', 'curly hair', 'thick eyebrows', or 'squinting eyes'. Yet when he demonstrated the signs themselves it was obvious to the native signer of ASL, who had introduced us, and to me that these would never be used in ASL because of the difference in phonology. E.g. the sign for big teeth was made at the chin and the sign for curly hair was made at the forehead as might be expected, but the handshape for both was an 'E' and the action its opening and closing—

something that is foreign to ASL phonology, and so the signs were "wrong" in ASL.

Male and female name signs

Supalla mentions that some locations and movements are associated more with persons of one sex or the other. I found that though many of my respondents agreed with this, they could not agree on what specifically made the distinction. Some ideas offered were: (1) male signs on upper face and head, female below (cf. FATHER/MOTHER, BOY/GIRL), (2) male signs on the body, female signs on the face; (3) female signs on the body, male signs on the head (!), and (4) female signs with a brushing or wiggling movement, male signs with a firmer movement. Although some of the above "rules" contradict each other and it was easy for us to think of exceptions to all of them, the variety of responses showed at the very least that people *feel* that there should be a difference.

I thought that by looking at signs collected from respondents for themselves and family members I might get a clear picture, but the signs seemed to divide fairly evenly among the major classes of locations. Out of a total of 54 signs there were equal numbers of male signs on upper and lower face. Men and women had about the same number of signs on the body and arm and in neutral space. Women's signs on the cheek and chin did outnumber their signs on the forehead about 2 to 1. More work needs to be done on more signs before gender marking for name signs can be stated with confidence.

Teacher, boss, administrator

Of all questions about different kinds of signs for different classes of people, the one about status garnered the most consistent replies. My respondents felt that teachers, bosses, and administrators needed to have name signs that were arbitrary but carried a feeling of respect. I was told often that deaf people who become teachers have to change their name sign if it uses the initial of the first name (see above, p. 9). Some respondents thought that using both first and last initials was especially appropriate for authority figures. A location that many preferred was

the contra-lateral shoulder (left shoulder for right handed signers). [Cf locations for 'cop', 'captain'. Ed]

Name signs in neutral space

One location used for name signs is that in front of the signer's torso, called "neutral space" or "zero-tab." This seemed to have a special meaning for many respondents, but it might be either positive or negative. Some reported liking name signs made in neutral space because they were "more formal" or because made here they would be easier to change later on. Others, however, called this location "cold, detached," or "too disconnected." A few mentioned that this was the appropriate area for name signs for hearing children of deaf parents, although it was easy to think of many examples of acquaintances whose name signs did not follow this "rule."

It is appropriate in the context of believing some name signs "too cold" to consider a name sign tradition of the past reported for England and France as well as the United States. When a child entered the school for the deaf he or she received a registration or locker number to be used as identification, and so became known as "153" for example. Most of my respondents reacted strongly against this idea, seeing it as cold and depersonalizing. Yet I once saw a British man eloquently defend this system, explaining that it was far better to have a neutral number than to be stuck with a negative descriptive name sign.

Descriptive vs. arbitrary

Although my respondents described arbitrary name signs as "more ASL," "more formal," and "boring," and descriptive name signs as "more creative," "more interesting," "more recent," "different," and "more personal," fifteen out of twenty of them had arbitrary name signs now. And of the 35 name signs they showed me as examples of name signs they had given others, they gave hearing people 14 descriptive signs, compared to 2 descriptive signs for deaf people, and 10 arbitrary signs to hearing people and 9 arbitrary signs to deaf people. Clearly, they tend to give hearing people the "different" type of signs.

Complaints about name signs

My respondents generally supported the name sign system, but several had some complaints regarding its use: Sometimes people use their friends' name signs exclusively and forget how to spell their legal names; this can be embarrassing, and it is awkward to type on the TDD, "Hey, you know who I saw last night - - - uh - - - C-on-the-shoulder-and-wrist." One woman with an arbitrary name sign told me it bothered her when people asked what her name sign means. The question is equivalent to asking a hearing Mary what Mary means. It bothered other respondents that sometimes a name signs gets associated with an English name; e.g. one respondent knew of three Robins, all of whom had the same name sign pun, 'R' handshape with the location and action of BIRD.

The largest number of complaints were about the newer kind of descriptive-cum-initial name signs. Half my respondents said that these name signs, often made up by hearing people for themselves, bothered them. One said, "They make my eyes hurt." Another added that "they tarnish the language." Others described them as "too creative," "too personal," too soft," or just as "ugly." I should add that several said that these name signs did not bother them or that they did not care.

There were those who objected to hearing people making up name signs at all: "They have no right to invite themselves into our group;" "They play with our language and think it's so simple; that is degrading." Often my informants thought it was a fine idea to let hearing people make up the "wrong" kind of name sign, because such names were warning signs that the possessor did not know anything about Deaf culture.

I asked respondents about a particular name sign they did not like whether they would fingerspell the name or use the sign anyway. Some replied that they would use the sign out of convenience, but the majority said they would fingerspell the person's name instead. A few said that if a deaf person's name sign was demeaning they would help them think up a new one, but that they would inform a hearing person that a name sign is "funny" and let her or she decide whether to change it.

Conclusions

Name sign practices in the American Deaf community illuminate certain important cultural values, especially personal identity and connection with the group. Although each is strongly expressed in many ways, the two are sometimes found in conflict. The deaf community has, as in any other cultural group, basic values and customs that most members follow, but that leave room for diversity. The diversity of opinion about certain name sign customs accurately reflects this aspect of Deaf culture.

Although the name sign system has a long tradition, it now faces certain influences that may work to change it. It will be very interesting to see what happens to the name sign system of ASL in the future and how people's attitudes will adapt.

Unresolved questions include: formal differences in name signs for men and for women; regional traditions (Some respondents said there are regional differences, others disagreed); changing generational patterns; and differences in name signs deaf parents give deaf and hearing children.

It is also clear from the present study that the name sign system in ASL shares many features with naming systems in other cultures: picking the right name, uniqueness of names, names as identity, changing one's name, a series of names reflecting life's circumstances.

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APPENDIX: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Biographical:

Age? Sex? Parents' hearing/deaf?
Ethnic Group? Birthplace? Place
of growing up? Type of school(s)?
Education? Occupation.

Your name sign (ns):

What is your ns? Meaning? Who
bestowed it? At what age? Do you
like it? Why/why not? Do you like
your English name? Why/why not?
Is your ns like any others in your
family? Like a friend's or a
schoolmate's? Does anyone use a
different ns for you? at work? at
home? friends? old friends? Do
you feel differently about your
English name & your ns? Explain.

Family nss:

Do your parents have nss?
Why/why not? What are they? Nss
of brothers & sisters? Any other
family members w/ nss?

You as ns giver:

Have you ever made up a ns for
someone else? Why/why not? or
What was it? How did you choose
it? How did you give it? For
Parents: Children's nss? Who
chose? How chosen? How old the
child? Any ceremony in giving the

ns? Was same process used to
pick child's English name? Do you
know anyone specially talented at
making up nss? Why? If you made
up a ns for someone would you
check it out to see if they liked it
before giving it? If you gave
someone a ns and they changed it
because they did not like it, would
you feel insulted?

Changing nss:

Did you ever change your ns?
Why? How? Do you know others
who've changed nss? Why? How?
Acceptable and unacceptable
reasons for changing a ns?
Explain. Is there a limit on number
of changes? Have you noticed any
nss that changed slowly over
time?

Rules & customs of ns use:

Is it proper to make up your own
ns? Wh/Why not? Same rule for
deaf & hearing? Do you feel there
are any rules about nss? What
are they? Does a person w/ a short
English name need a ns? How
many letters = short, 2, 3, 4? Can
there be a ns anyway? Must a
person w/ longer name have a ns?

Any exceptions? In a group what if two have same ns? If two kids in class had same English name, could they have the same ns? How are kids referred to at school before they have nss? How are ns used in introductions? Between deaf people? D & H people? Do you think nss have changed since you were a child? Does one belong more to other deaf people if he has a ns? Can you think of a person w/o a ns who is still in the community? When a person dies, do you still use his ns as before? Could the ns be given to someone else? When? If someone gave you a ns you didn't like, could you change it? Would that insult the giver? Did you make up nss for teachers behind their backs? How? Examples? Did the teachers know about these? Can you use ns for teasing? Have you made these up for others? Have others made up teasing nss for you?

Appropriate & inappropriate:

Have you ever seen a ns that did not seem right? Explain. If you knew someone w/ a name sign you didn't like, would you use it or spell the English name? Does it bother you when hearing people make up nss that do not follow the rules? Do you think some kinds of nss are more appropriate for different groups; e.g. men/women, deaf/hearing, children/ adults? Teacher, administrator, boss? Have you noticed that there are two kinds of nss, those that use initials (arbitrary) and those that have some meaning (descriptive)? Do you feel that one kind is better, more ASL. Anything else about nss?