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**Disa A. Sauter**



**Looking for Disgust in Yucatec Maya**

"What do you mean, the Maya don't have disgust?", I gasped. The anthropologist in front of me smiled confidently and offered to elaborate. "There is no word for that feeling in their language," he explained, "and it seems they do not really have the feeling either. Things that we would find gross they simply shrug at". Not only was I intrigued - my mind was already buzzing, wondering how I could persuade him to collaborate with me. But I didn't have to convince him. Before I had a chance, he offered me to come with him to Mexico to do a study of the people that he worked with, and their

lack of disgust. Of course I said yes.

A few months later I set out to Kopchen, a land-locked village of a few hundred people on the Yucatan peninsula in Mexico. The people of the village and the surrounding area are Yucatec Maya, modern-day descendants of the ancient, indigenous Maya. My collaborator and host was Olivier Le Guen, an anthropologist who has worked in this village for nearly a decade and who is a fluent speaker of Yucatec Maya.

In his anthropological work, Olivier had found that disgust seemed to be missing in the emotion repertoire of the Yucatec Maya language and culture (Le Guen & Pool Balam, 2008), and I had brought some tasks to try to examine the Yucatec Maya emotions more quantitatively. I was hoping to tap both the perceptual, linguistic, and conceptual aspects, by using different methods drawn from experimental psychology and cognitive anthropology.

Testing meant going from house to house and asking if people had time to talk with us. If they did, we would be invited in, offered a seat in the most comfortable hammocks in the house, and Olivier would explain that we wanted to show them pictures of faces and ask them some questions. The villagers were used to all the peculiar tasks Olivier had come up with over the years, and so they mostly found my questions fairly straight-forward. When using the classic Ekman and Friesen photos, I was a little surprised when some of the

women complained that the man that they had to look at was so old - they wondered if we couldn't maybe use a younger, better-looking person next time?

Just like Olivier had said, we found that the Yucatec Maya language has no word for disgust. When Yucatec Maya subjects were asked what they thought people were feeling from photographs of disgusted faces, they used words for anger and general unhappiness. The same was true for stories of people in nauseating situations. But their emotion perception was the same as a group of German speakers (who do have different words for disgust and anger), with both groups showing clear categorical perception of emotional facial expressions, including disgusted faces paired with angry faces (Sauter, Le Guen & Haun, in press). Since many Yucatec Maya speak some Spanish, we also tested whether they knew any Spanish terms for disgust. But although many of the participants were familiar with the words, the definitions that they gave made it clear that they did not interpret their meaning as disgust, but rather as anger or general unhappiness, just like the words that they had used to describe disgust in Yucatec Maya.

So does this mean that the Yucatec Maya don't have disgust? Using a set of sorting and free naming tasks, we found that Yucatec Maya emotion concepts do reveal a disgust category, distinct from anger and also from contempt. So this disgust concept was acquired and maintained without access to a word for this

state (Sauter, Le Guen, & Majid, 2010). I was intrigued by how the Yucatec Maya would learn about disgust expressions, since it was striking how even in response to the most disgusting scenarios, our subjects displayed no hint of revulsion. It seemed as though a cultural taboo prohibited any display of disgust.

Until one of the last few days at the "fiesta". Every year, there is a week-long party in the village, with religious ceremonies, a fair, and a local version of "corrida", bull-fighting (inebriated men being chased around by a cow). As well as a lot of fun, the fiesta was a fantastic opportunity to sample delicious local specialties - of course the irresistible churros, but also mouthwatering corn on the cob with lime and chili, and fresh fruits so sweet they melt in your mouth. People also came from further afield to sell their foods, some of which are not typically eaten in Kopchen - especially fish and seafood are not common there. As I was watching a conversation between two women, one of them offered the other a fish taco. And then I saw it - the elusive Yucatec Maya disgust face. The face of the woman being offered the exotic treat contorted and twisted: It was unmistakable - in fact, it looked just like any other facial expression of disgust anywhere else in the world. And the woman offering the fish taco wouldn't have had a word for it, but she certainly knew exactly what it meant, and she gave a big smile as she tucked in.

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