

Examination of muted group theory sociology essay



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Imagine for a moment that you find yourself in an exotic and far off land. You have been forced to live in a foreign country that speaks a completely different language than yours. You struggle day after day not just to articulate yourself in this strange, foreign tongue, but to simply be heard and have your opinions appreciated by your new peers. Instead you find your new neighbors disregard every word you say and write you off as inarticulate or just plain dumb; or even worse they ignore your unique existence and experiences altogether. This is exactly the sort of phenomenon that Muted Group Theory details and why it is so incredibly fascinating. This literature review will define exactly Muted Group Theory and its basic tenets are, delve into the theory's origins, and provide a few examples of its further use before moving on to several research studies illustrating the theory in practical, scientific application.

The Muted Group Theory of Communication seeks to explain and rationalize the faults inherent in language and the ways in which it fails many of its users. While most individuals would simply dismiss language merely as a tool of communication to be molded in order to fit their specific needs; in actuality, language acts as a dominant and controlling factor in establishing and shaping its users. Muted Group Theory asserts that because language was developed primarily by the dominant group of society; specifically white males of greater income and socio-economic status, that minority cultures and non-dominant groups such as women, individuals of lower economic means, and non-whites are thus 'muted' by their own lack of influence on the formation of their language (Wood, 2008, as cited in Turner & West, 2009). Because non-dominant groups have had little to no contribution

towards the creation of their language they are poorly served by it. Muted Group Theory emphasizes a minority group's inability to fully and properly articulate themselves or designate their unique experiences due to the necessity of translating their individual views and opinions into what is essentially a foreign language (Wood, 2008, as cited in Turner & West, 2009). The language of a particular group does not consistently support or function for all of its members with any sense of equality due to the disparity in their involvement in their language's development (Kramarae, 1981 as cited in Orbe, 1998). Muted Group Theory posits that language acts as a representation of a society's overall ideologies. The dominant sector of a group conceptualizes a means of communication which not only maintains, but perpetuates their specified worldview and establishes it as the correct and proper language for all of said group's remaining members (S. Ardener, 1975, as cited in Orbe, 1998). As it is defined as a "critical theory," the Muted Group Theory of Communication is both valuable and worth exploring because it strives to reexamine the established status quo of a society or culture, it highlights the imbalances and unfairness within said society for its possibly unsuspecting inhabitants, and lastly; and most importantly, it proposes potential solutions to these problems plaguing said culture (Turner & West, 2009). Muted Group Theory interestingly illuminates individuals to the unconscious methods through which a language and its creators dictate and manipulate interpersonal behaviors and relations as well as concepts of one's own self-identity.

Muted Group Theory finds its origins within the research of social anthropologists Edwin and Shirley Ardener and their work on social hierarchy

and structure. Muted Group Theory developed following the Ardener's examination of the, at the time, male dominated fields of ethnography and social anthropology (Turner & West, 2009). Individuals and groups which inhabit the highest tiers of a social hierarchy define the specific communication system within a culture and the non-dominant groups are thus relegated to working within the confines of whatever communication guidelines the ruling class has consciously or unconsciously imposed upon them. Subordinate groups are thus rendered mute as the mainstream structures of communication echo the dominate groups perceptions (E. Ardener, 1978, as cited in Orbe, 1998). A further implication of Muted Group Theory founded by the Ardeners is that the silencing of women as a muted group bears a direct correlation to deafness of their male counterparts. The notion put forth here is that even if a minority group has yet to be muted, on the whole or in a specified subject, the continued obliviousness committed by the dominant group as they ignore the assessments and opinions of their subordinates results in a lack of any further articulation on said subject by the non-dominant group as they thus become muted over time (S. Ardener, 1978, as cited in Turner & West, 2009). Put simply, a dominant group, by not understanding or completely ignoring the views of their subordinate counterparts, can in essence silence these views completely. The repercussions of this sort of passive thought suppression are staggering. The undesirable ideologies and wishes of a silent minority can be expunged over time simply by ignoring them. This idea is highly reminiscent in the old adage to ignore a bully into leaving one alone.

Though its genesis lies with the work of Edwin and Shirley Ardener, Chiris Kramarare is commonly regarded as the true founder of Muted Group Theory. Kramarare's work expanded on the ideas brought on by the Ardeners, and tailored it primarily to the study of communication. Kramarare focused Muted Group Theory into three paramount assumptions: women, and other minority groups, view the world far differently from men due to the division of labor, due to male-centric political superiority, men's views and communication systems are given priority, thus restricting the communication of women, and other subordinate cultures, and lastly, in order to effectively partake in a society, non-dominant groups are forced to shoehorn their own ideologies into the dominant groups established system of expression (Kramarare, 1981, as cited in Turner & West, 2008).

Kramarare's work expanded the bounds of Muted Group Theory and inspires further inquiry and analysis to questions and concepts raised by the Ardener's initial research.

Far more intriguing than the unfortunate in-articulation of minority groups brought on by Muted Group Theory are the stunning implications of the theory on the development of an individual's self-concept. From birth men and women are treated vastly different by society at large. From the color of the clothes they are put in to the way in which they are described, male and female infants are immediately indoctrinated by the societal views and expected gender roles of the dominant group they were born into. Muted Group Theory further invades into ideas of self-concept via the ways in which dominant groups perceive society. Female nurses, for instance, are limitedly defined by society's dominant group as either hardened " battle-axes" of

anti-femininity, or ultra-compassionate and sensitive “angels of mercy.”

These highly constricting labels, imposed by dominant groups, limit these women to identifying themselves as one of these two, polar descriptors (Callan, 1978, as cited in Turner & West, 2009). Because of the restricted definitions provided by dominant groups, these nurses can only potentially conceive themselves as aligning with one of these completely differing camps and are thus limited in the development of their own self-concept and individual identity.

The first of the research studies examined here focuses on the muting inherent in the culture of date rape found on many college campuses. A rape culture can be defined as an environment which supports attitudes conducive to rape and increase sexual violence risk factors (Buchwald, Fletcher & Roth, 1993, as cited in Burnett et al., 2009). The study in question, “Communicating/Muting Date Rape: A Co-Cultural Theoretical Analysis of Communication Factors Related to Rape Culture on a College Campus” was authored by Ann Burnett, Jody L. Mattern, Liliana L. Herakova, David H. Kahl, Jr., Cloy Tobola, and Susan Bornsen and was first published in the Journal of Applied Communication Research in November of 2009.

Burnett et al. (2009) sought to uncover how certain attitudes and outlooks regarding the act of rape, as expressed by social, individual, and cultural perspectives, stemmed from various behaviors preceding a possible rape, during a rape itself, and as a response to a rape occurring. These attitudes served to mute college students, primarily women, and possibly perpetuate the continued creation of a rape culture on college campuses. Their research primarily utilized Muted Group Theory in a co-cultural theoretical paradigm in

order to define campus rape culture through communication focused on rape and sex, the negotiating of sexual consent, the potentiality of a rape to occur, a rape itself, the aftermath and repercussions of a rape, and people's perceptions of, and reactions to, date rape (Burnett et al., 2009).

Burnett et al.'s (2009) study methodology chiefly utilized hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry. Hermeneutic phenomenological inquiry involves delving into the shared, lived experiences of individuals who have been involved in a specified phenomenon (Lanigan, 1979, as cited in Burnett et al., 2009). Researchers utilizing a phenomenological approach search for any central, underlying themes behind a given experience and attempt to develop general or universal implications from them (Creswell, 2007, as cited in Burnett et al., 2009). Phenomenological inquiry involves researchers gathering descriptions of lived experiences, reviewing the various capta found to uncover any essential themes of the experiences, and discovering any interrelatedness among the established themes (Nelson, 1989, as cited in Burnett et al., 2009). The capta for Burnett et al.'s (2009) study were gathered through nine separate focus groups at a Midwestern university. These focus groups contained five with just women, two of only men, and two groups were co-ed in composition. The university in question housed an approximate population of 12, 000 students, contained fifteen fraternities or sororities, and had a Division 1 athletics program on campus. The study did not specify a need for focus group members to have been rape victims to be involved. Focus group moderators utilized an open-ended conversational style in order to encourage member participation (Nelson, 1989, as cited in Burnett et al., 2009). Topics put to the focus groups included various

definitions of, and motivations for, rape, alcohol's role in rape, post-rape options, potential reasons why rape is not reported, how to avoid possible rape scenarios, and group members' perception of the prevalence of rape on their campus (Burnett et al., 2009). Following this, the gathered data were reduced by recognizing what given factors were essential to the experience and which were not, and then attaching meaning to the essential elements remaining by contrasting and comparing the different given experiences and how the identified themes contributed to them (Nelson, 1989, as cited in Burnett et al., 2009).

Burnett et al.'s (2009) results indicated an ambiguity surrounding date rape that silences potential, meaningful intercourse on the subject and mutes both possible and actual victims of date rape. Burnett et al. (2009) found that focus group members had great difficulty in pinpointing a firm definition of date rape as they felt situational factors affected any interpretation of the event. For instance, although sexual consent was suggested as an essential element, focus group members probed which non-verbal and verbal actions could be construed as consent. Because they had no firm way of defining what date rape was, both male and female participants were muted from recognizing the signs of date rape or when to report it. Students are thus forced to rationalize their notions of rape because their culture, the college campus, fails to do so (Burnett et al., 2009).

On an individual, psychological level, the focus group members, even the women, utilized primarily dominant, male-driven language to characterize known date rape victims as overtly promiscuous individuals whose state of dress could almost function as a form of consent. Participants also noted how

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males are often praised for extreme sexual prowess and a high number of partners whereas women are cast in a negative light for the same sort of behavior. These common views reiterate the dominant position of men in society and their influence on the language and ideologies concerning date rape (Burnett et al., 2009). From a post-rape perspective, female focus group members questioned the strength and validity of their ability to communicate a lack of consent. This sort of interrogation places the responsibility for the rape on the victim (Burnett et al., 2009). Both female and male focus group members agreed that the reporting of date rape is muted due to further ambiguity regarding the correct steps to take following a rape and a fear of other's reactions to said rape. This fear of victim blaming only serves to further isolate and mute anyone who has been the victim of date rape or knows a victim who is choosing to remain silent (Burnett et al., 2009). Additional dominant groups such as a college's administration and staff can silence victims and perpetuate a date rape culture through a lack of backing for anti-rape preventative education and post rape support services on campus. This lack of recognition of date rape in the dominant discourse leads individuals to mute themselves via various explaining-away tactics in order to not contradict the mainstream. Following their study, Burnett et al. (2009) concluded that both male and female students participate in the inherent muting of a date rape culture and that date rape victims are actively muted before, after, and even during a rape's occurrence.

The largest factor in the continued perpetuation of campus date rape culture is the failure of the student population to properly and affectively define

what constitutes date rape and sexual consent. Because there is no firm classification of either of these, date rape victims, and potentially the rapists as well, have no clue they are actually involved in a date rape. The scope of this study, while thorough on the campus it took place, is in actuality quite limited. Because Burnett et al. limited their focus to one specific college campus in one specific area of the country it cannot be considered an entirely accurate representation of possible rape cultures on college campuses across the board. Along with its scope, the study's testability is extremely limited because of their research methodology. While relying on interpersonal communication allowed for a more personal and in-depth examination of various individuals' experiences with date rape, these particular views are that of the individual in question and cannot be affectively measured with any sort of documentable accuracy. The parsimony and heurism of the study are both notable, however. At its core, the explanation for the continuance of date rape culture is exceedingly simple and direct and the new thinking initiated by the study is of paramount importance. Hopefully, colleges can use the data provided here to better arm their student bodies against possible date rape in the future.

The second research study being examined here involves the gender specific effects of muting on outdoor ropes challenge courses. The study, authored by Phillip A. Irish III, first appeared in the Journal of Experiential Education in 2006. Irish (2006) sought to discover the myriad of effects that verbal muting, a primary means for modifying a course's objectives, has on both genders and how successfully they can accomplish the tasks set forth by the moderators of these ropes courses when thusly limited. The ultimate goal of

the study was to better arm ropes course facilitators with documented research to supplement their own experience and intuition in an effort to further the communication enhancing nature inherent in these sorts of challenges. The ropes course study examine two primary hypotheses: on specifically masculine-attributed outdoor ropes courses, muted males will experience stronger goal engagement, specified by proximal distance to said objective, than their muted, female counterparts, and, conversely, the greater time spent on a particular task will result in greater disengagement of muted males, measured by increasing distance from goal, than muted females in the same given time span.

The methodology of Irish's (2006) study involved adult groups being given one of three possible outdoor ropes challenges: Doughnut, Thread the Needle, and Water Wheel. These challenges were selected specifically for because they involve the team members navigating a specific, centralized piece of equipment while simultaneously not limiting participants free movement about the challenge arena. These trials were also selected due to their generally male oriented objectives, such as lifting individual members up into the air. In differing groups, either all of the men or all of the women were verbally muted though gesturing and pantomime were allowed. The average group makeup consisted of five males to three females with individuals being lined up and divided my height in an effort to spread the height advantage out to each group. Distance measurements were taken every two minutes during the planning phase of the given challenge.

The results of Irish's (2006) study indicate varying shifts in involvement by both sexes in regards to factors of group composition and the handicap of <https://assignbuster.com/examination-of-muted-group-theory-sociology-essay/>

verbal muting. When looking at group makeup, there was no correlation on the involvement of males or females in the task based upon the increased number of females in the group, or male involvement based on the increased number of males in the group, however, when the number of males increased, regardless of other factors involved, female involvement dropped significantly. When the influence of verbal muting is examined, again, male involvement is curiously unaffected by muting or not, but female involvement dramatically lowered when they were muted.

Irish (2006) felt his research was successful in terms of providing future researchers a methodology for empirically measuring involvement and interest in a task with relation to muting and non-muting factors. While muting had little variant effect on the position and involvement of males, muted females were generally twice as far away from the specified goal as non-muted females (Irish 2006). Muted females seemed to disengage entirely from the task as they positioned themselves farther away from the goal than their male counterparts. Irish's (2006) research shows slight correlation to male disinterest and disengagement overtime, but not enough, he felt, to be entirely conclusive and supportive of his original hypothesis. Irish posits that greater effect of muting on women may be due to the verbally communicative style generally attached to women.

The implications of Irish's research on future Muted Group Theory are compelling. Even though Irish was not trying to illustrate the ways in which male dominant groups subjugate female non-dominant groups, the results of his research still support that central tenet of Muted Group Theory. As discussed previously, Muted Group Theory posits that male originated <https://assignbuster.com/examination-of-muted-group-theory-sociology-essay/>

language forces women to translate everything into what essentially amounts to a foreign tongue. Irish's examination demonstrates how the severity of the male language barrier places women in an ingrained mindset of near constant verbal translation in order to be heard and understood by their male counterparts. When this verbal element is removed from their repertoire, women are left with no further tools to successfully navigate the ropes course or contribute in any meaningful way; because of both an inability to fully articulate themselves in a now non-verbal, male-centric language and because their male counterparts will essentially ignore their female-oriented non-verbal communication tactics. The scope of this study is quite narrow as it only delves into a small aspect of muting; however, the study provides a high level of testability as the data provides an easily repeatable experiment in an effort to replicate the results and has great utility as it can be used to reinforce the basic notions of Muted Group Theory.

The third research study being explored delves into the realm of email communication and how the once gender neutral communication arena now exhibits gendered voices which are being muted. The study, authored by Heather Kissack and Jamie L. Callahan was first published in the Journal of European Industrial Training in 2010. Kissack and Callahan (2010) sought to critically assess the validity of newfound research indicating increased textual gender cues in regards to preferred language use in email based communications. Kissack and Callahan's goal was to illustrate how the muting of feminine voices occurs even in email communications.

The methodology of Kissack and Callahan's (2010) study is fairly

straightforward. The study utilizes a vast array of previously completed
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research into the foundations and implications of Muted Group Theory on subjugating the speech of women and draws logical correlations to previous research on male-female communication in a structured organization as well as studies on gender's impact on email conversing. The arguments posited are logically consistent and draw understandable conclusions between already researched topics.

Kissack and Callahan (2010) discovered that feminine voices are more than simply marginalized in the work place as was once believed, but are in fact muted as well. Despite lacking the visual and audio cues of verbal language, email communication has still developed unique male and female centric consistencies which allow them to be easily distinguishable to a given reader (Corney, de Vel, Anderson, & Mohay , 2002, as cited in Kissack & Callahan, 2010). Even if the names of sender and receiver are omitted, either sex can easily identify the gender of email senders as gender specific language cues aid in this accuracy (Savicki et al., as cited in Kissack & Callahan, 2010).

Kissack and Callahan (2010) successfully accomplish their study's goal of shedding light on the still prevalent issues of feminine voice muting, specifically in an arena that most thought to be gender neutral by default.

What is most intriguing about the work of Kissack and Callahan is that the majority of email users would claim the format to be primarily without gender bias. After all, the anonymity presented on the internet allows a user to appear as any gender they wish. This research study shows great logical consistency and scope through the great volume of research Kissack and Callahan have done to draw successful correlations between preexisting research topics. This study also shows potential to stand the test of time
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because it initiates a heuristic response to a fairly modern invention and the biases that have unfortunately come along with it. These growing trends could even be reexamined in the future to further track the validity of Kissack and Callahan's work and to measure if any improvements have been made in the field. Kissack and Callahan focus strongly on the critical aspects of Muted Group Theory in an effort to inform (re: warn) our modern, technology-dependent society; as forward thinking as we think we are, to the dangers of gender muteness now creeping its way into email communication. The suggestions of their work are frightening. If gender bias and muted groups can find new life thriving in technology can these relics of a bygone era ever truly be stamped out?

The fourth study observed focused on the application of two primarily feminism based theories, standpoint theory and Muted Group Theory, to emphasize the resilience and fortitude of individuals living in rural America and plan more effective methods of community-based healthcare promotion to better suit their needs. The study was authored by Deborah Ballard-Reisch and was first published in *Women & Language* in 2010. Ballard-Reisch (2010) sought to rectify the vast differences in her previous research on the lives of rural Americans with that of some of her statistician and epidemiologist peers whose own research painted a vastly different, and far less optimistic, picture of frontier life.

Ballard-Reisch's (2010) methodology, in a similar fashion to the previously explored work of Kissack and Callahan, utilized a veritable melting pot of formerly gathered research and theoretical ideologies in an effort to repurpose them into a grounded, community based approach to better serve

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the healthcare needs of diverse rural and frontier constituents. Ballard-Reisch (2010) combined aspects of Muted Group and Standpoint Theories together with engaged scholarship and a community-based participatory research approach to more effectively recognize the strengths, needs, health issues, and dynamics of these rural residents to create and exercise far more efficient health promotion interventions.

Ballard-Reisch's research showed that rural areas contain a higher percentage of older adults than anywhere else in America (U. S. Census Bureau, 2009, as cited in Ballard-Reisch, 2010) and that women constitute a far larger portion of this percentage than anywhere else in the country; representing 52% of individuals aged sixty to sixty-four, and representing 68% of individuals aged 85 or older (CDC, 2010; ERS/USDA, 2001, as cited in Ballard-Reisch, 2010). Ballard-Reisch also discovered that despite containing a far larger portion of elderly Americans, one of the largest groups of consumers of healthcare products and services in the country (Wright, Sparks, & O'Hare, 2008, as cited in Ballard-Reisch, 2010), rural areas hold a far lower concentration of able, effective healthcare professionals than their urban counterparts (ERS/USDA, 2007, as cited in Ballard-Reisch, 2010). The engaged scholarship approach suggested by Ballard-Reisch emphasizes "collaboration and cooperation between both researchers and collaborators in a learning community" to cultivate a "theoretical and practical knowledge" base (Van de Ven, 2007; Barge & Shockley-Zalaback, 2008, as cited in Ballard-Reisch, 2010) and the community based participatory approach she posits underlines the participation of community members along with scholars to more properly research and address various issues of mutual

interest (Israel et al., 2005, as cited in Ballard-Reisch, 2010). Ballard-Reisch (2010) theorizes that these two approaches in tandem can be utilized to unmute the healthcare issues of the disenfranchised elderly population of rural America and more successfully serve their needs. Ballard-Reisch believes the older individuals living in rural America must un-silence themselves and take an active role in shaping the future of their health.

Ballard-Reisch's research highlights the ways in which rural Americans, primarily older women, have their problems muted by a mainstream that instead chooses to focus its attention on the healthcare needs of urban individuals only, leaving the frontier population to fend for themselves. Because they are members of several non-dominant groups; elderly, female, and rural-based, these individuals are triply muted and to such an extent ignored by the urbanite healthcare professionals they so desperately need. Ballard-Reisch's proposed solution would seem to be the most effective approach as it plays to the community focused nature of these rural areas and allows them to forge their own path to health moving forward instead of relying on the otherwise preoccupied dominant, urban groups for a hand out that may never come. Ballard-Reisch's ideologies most notably show heuristicism as they seek to stimulate new kinds of thinking to solve old problems. The utility is less substantial as Ballard-Reisch's ideas require a lot of additional legwork and extensive knowledge and research of individuals who are often less educated, and less willing to educate, than their urban counterparts.

The ramifications of Muted Group Theory are astronomically important.

Something as simple and taken for granted as one's language has
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astounding implications towards one's ability to not only articulate their thoughts, but also generate said thoughts in the first place. By not having a specified word for something; whether it be an object, an idea, or a feeling, that notion cannot exist. It is fascinating to explore how; hopefully unconsciously, white, heterosexual, upper-class, males have strictly dictated for muted groups exactly how they can not only think, but perceive.