Development of a powerful identity through language

How Women SociallyConstruct a ' Powerful' Identity Based on Language

As the world begins to move from an androcentric society, communication researchers have a responsibility to expand their areas of focus to include that of a changing viewpoint. Examining identity is no new task for communication researchers, but has begun to transform qualitative research, specifically in feminist studies. In modern society, feminist researchers continue to struggle with an accepted definition of feminism as they construct and deconstruct gender as a whole (Medved & Rawlins, 2011) as well as to study the language associated with gender (Gal, 1995). However, researchers can begin to look at how women are viewed as powerful and how their language shapes the identity with which they associate themselves (Baxter, 2015). When paired with an exploration of social construction and utilizing membership categorization analysis (Silverman, 1998), we can begin to look at how women are capable of constructing a morepowerful communicative identityto aid in the development of feminist research as well as communication and language advancements.

Literature Review

Social Constructionism

Social constructionismhas been given a great deal of attention by communication scholars. One maincharacteristic of those that believe in the social constructionist viewpoint holdsthe notion that various experiences are determined by human behaviors anddecisions (Mallon, 2007). Perceptions of the formation of reality are of greatdebate to social constructionists. The language and communicative strategiesindividuals require to interact

together are also altered by those perceptions. The construction of one's identity fosters how we communicate together andincorporate language in every day conversations (Ajtony, 2015). As Stewart(1995) explains, " language (speech communicating) is the human's way ofbeing-in-the-world (everyday coping)" (p. 29), which allows for the developmentof constructing one's reality and in turn their identity as well.

Language holds no meaningunless conducted interpersonally with another (Couper, 2011; Stewart, 1995). Throughthe social construction of language, communication begins to obtain meaning andvalue to the individuals involved. The philosophical perspective of socialconstructionism begins to touch on what individuals view as reality and howcommunication alters that sense of socially constructed reality. Communication describesthe process by which an object, or in this case, language, gives meaning and" exist[s] in a social context" (Keaton & Bodie, 2011, p. 192; Stewart, 1995). Through the establishment of meaning begins to develop with another, we areable to expand our own language, which in turn affects other contexts as well.

Social constructionismis largely affected by the situational contexts in which something is beingconstructed, particularly language. According toStewart (1995), one consideration of social constructionism holdsthat language exists as an event rather than a system. In his explanation, understanding is the primary dynamic of being human and aids in the developmentof socially constructing one's reality. This social occurrence is a processthat is exhibited through interaction with another. In this sense, language andcommunication are altered largely in various situational contexts, and aredetermined by those that participate in the collaboration.

Through individuals' perceptions, people are able to co-construct their personal view of reality, which in turn impactshow they interact and communicate with others (Stewart, 1995). Theseinteractions are not " representations of ' natural objects' formed independentof cultural processes and literary forms," (p. 31) but rather are contingentupon social and cultural contexts and are expressed interpersonally and givenmeaning. Social construction holds the standard that one's perceived reality shiftsconstantly and sustains subjectivity to each individual's beliefs (Archakis& Papazachariou, 2008).

Socially constructed reality. Through communication and thedevelopment of language, our perception of reality adjusts to meet the situational demands that are represented (Ajtony, 2015; Soukup, 2012; Stewart, 1995). We begin to question and alter how we fit into our perceived world that we co-construct during interactions. Although multiple views of social constructionism exist, one description claims to hold " a social process of creating the world," (Barnett Pearce, 1995, p. 98) which asserts the lack of an already known world. This notion conflicts with the more positivist research, which aims to discover the perceived reality. Barnett Pearce (1995) distinguished how individual interests and behaviors, as well as one's language take part in the process of construction through both the receiver and participant positions. This notion complements that of Richardson (2013) and her examination of identity. She claims the " understanding of reality and identity is constructed in the talk of the narrative" (p. 97). By conducting research through narratives and told accounts, we gain a glimpse of how others perceive the reality in which their lives are set. Through this

understanding of reality, we are able to shape our identities further, which additionally affects how we communicate with others.

Sociallyconstructed identity. Identity stands as a dynamic construction determined by multiple resources, such as language and culture (Ajtony, 2015; Baxter, 2015; Hall & Bucholtz, 1995). As previously described, identity largely links to communication andlinguistic interactions (Ajtony, 2015; Archakis & Papazachariou, 2008; Richardson, 2013). The social construction of identities occurs as being " indexical"(Archakis & Papazachariou, 2008, p. 627) where individuals develop andproduce such identities in " moment-to-moment interactions" (Archakis &Papazachariou, 2008, p. 628; Hall & Bucholtz, 1995). Various propertiescontribute to the construction of one's identity including communicativestrategies incorporated in interactions, as well as prosodic, or intonation, combinations. Each of these characteristics exists based on contextual cues and differs fromsituation to situation. Baxter (2015) reasons that identity exists as asocially constructed practice and maintains dependence upon the production ofour behavior and beliefs. In this sense, language is portrayed as a tool to beutilized in communication and the development of one's identity (Baxter, 2005; Stewart, 1995), which is additionally determined by " social factors such as [one's]gender, ethnicity, education, professional status, and so on" (Baxter, 2015, p. 428). This tool is a reference used to shape how we communicate with others, which aids in the development of one's identity rather than one's identityshaping how we communicate using language.

Communication canestablish stereotypes of one's identity based upon the dialogic representationsexhibited in interactions. These interactions also lead

to the understandingthat an individual's identity is largely relational. As Ajtony (2015) states, " theprimary marker of a person's identity is his/her speech" (p. 48). In thissense, stereotypes alter our beliefs and contribute to the construction of ourown identity, as well as those we interact with. Stereotyped identities are commonamong gender research. However, researchers are beginning to examine theeffects of reversing these stereotypes and how they affect our sociallyconstructed view of identity (Baxter, 2015; Medved & Rawlins, 2011).

Sociallyconstructed gender. Genderis intertwined with social construction and is consistently shaped due to thecommunicative strategies employed in discourse (Medved & Rawlins, 2011). Throughinterpersonal interactions with others, individuals are capable of constructinga gendered identity within a specific social context. As the topic of gendercontinues to transform, people begin to form and co-construct their individualidentities as well as their linked identities. However, gender is not asingular aspect of identity, but rather a complex branch that intersects withmany other social identities (Richardson & Taylor, 2009). Each identityplays a significant role in the construction of one's identity and how theirgendered identity is created.

Social constructions arerevealed and created in situational experiences and do not simply exist, waitingto be discovered (Medved & Rawlins, 2011). Through the process ofconstructing a gendered identity, it is important to acknowledge the process bywhich interaction occurs and the communicative approach that helps form one'sgender in a social environment. It is a constantly changing and evolvingconstruction, where each individual construction is dependent upon the actionsand reaction of the other person

(Medved & Rawlins, 2011; Soukup, 2012). Genderedconstruction is often categorized into various identities and affects how ourlanguage usage, as well as others' perceptions of us, are depicted.

Membership Categorization Analysis

When examining how womensocially construct powerful language, it is advantageous to look into utilizingmembership categorization analysis (MCA) and how it can expand our knowledge oflanguage use. MCA is an analytic approach in which we categorize behaviors, oractivities, exhibited in interactions (Butler & Weatherall, 2006; Housley& Fitzgerald, 2009). This correlates to identity in the same manner by " theway people both do and recognize descriptions of themselves and others" (Butler& Weatherall, 2006, p. 443). MCA begins to classify individuals in a seriesof categories that can be described as various identities, such as gender, race, familial membership, societal status, occupation, etc. (Butler &Weatherall, 2006; Silverman, 1998). Originally, MCA constructed relativelyfixed categorizations, but has since expanded further (Leudar, Marsland &Nekvapil, 2001). These categorizations can be misleading despite their frequentlyobvious nature. For example, Eglin (2002) examines how despite calling anindividual ' woman,' an array of possible classifications is still revealed. Theobvious answer is to make an assumption of classifying the individual as femaleover male, though the possibility stands of whether the classification isindicating an adult female, over a child, or girl. In this sense, like much ofcommunication and language, MCA is grounded in context and the situation of theindividuals involved.

Various facets of MCAcan help to establish how one's language and identity can be constructed in apowerful manner. MCA is one method, which can be utilized in interactions andlead to more knowledge on the development of language and identities(Fitzgerald, 2012). Another tool of MCA that can be incorporated in theestablishment of such identities is that of a membership categorization device(MCD). MCDs are classified as " collection(s) of categories" (Silverman, 1998, p. 79) for which an individual is part of. Collections, or sets of categories, include multiple identities of the same category, such as father and son beingmembers of a family. Through this categorization, we are able to examine andobserve a framework for the type of language expressed to identify ' powerful'women as well as how others help shape those identities.

People often constructtheir own identity through the use of MCDs and language without the attempt todo so. In one particular example, Stokoe (2010) began looking into how men'sidentities are formed based on actions and behaviors through violent assaults ofwomen. These men were likely to still lack blame for their activities, despitethe fact that the assault occurred. This was portrayed in classifying themselvesas not the type of men to hit women. On the opposite end, individuals lookinginto this issue from the outside are likely to incorporate MCDs and categorizethese men as abusers, criminals, etc. MCA is one way we can help shape ouridentities as well as others identities that we are apart of. Women, inparticular, are not often regarded as having powerful identities, but ourlanguage use can assist in this categorization, as well as having othersimproving their construction of what a powerful identity is.

Identity through Women's Language

A woman's identity isoften developed in comparison to men's identities. In one example, researchersfound that financially successful women, when compared to men, often lessentheir success when communicating about their lives and " refrain from exercisingthe traditional masculine link between money and power" (Medved & Rawlins, 2011, p. 11). As previously described in her research, Richardson (2013) beginsto describe how women are able to develop their individual identity throughtheir telling of personal stories. In this sense, language allows for thedevelopment and exploration of a woman's identity and constructs their own notionof reality, which leads to a more individual identity, as opposed to aconnected one. While it is important to acknowledge the comparison between eachgender, we must expand further. As gender begins to transform in today'ssociety, it would be beneficial to develop an understanding of each gender individually, which in turn will lead to a greater understanding of identity as a whole. Whileit is difficult to pinpoint specific linguistic features that lead to agendered identity, examining language can assist in the development of learninghow we construct our identity through our communicative acts (Burkette &Warhol, 2009).

One's gender has theability to influence how we communicate and the type of language we utilize ininteractions with others (Medved & Rawlins, 2011; Sidelinger, Frisby &McMullen, 2009). While gendered language is socially constructed based onsituational experiences, " gender style impacts communication in such a way thatan individual's interpersonal relationships

are affected" (Sidelinger, Frisby& McMullen, 2009, p. 166), which alters the way women are viewed by others.

Methods

Data Collection

The data collected withinthis study was obtained from interviews conducted and subsequently depicted onthe blog, Babes Who Hustle (http://babeswhohustle. com). Each interview producedoccurred prior to the formation of this study by the founder and writer of BabesWho Hustle (C. DuDeVoire, personal communication, April 10, 2017). The majorityof the women featured on the blog were nominated by other women and werecontacted to inquire about interest in being featured on the blog. Theinterview process was comprised of a moderately scheduled interview guide, which permitted open-ended responses from the interviewee. The interviewerdeveloped specific questions pertaining to each person, but did follow arelatively structured format for each interview. The questions were then subsequentlyemailed to each interviewee and the respondents elected to proceed with theinterview at their will. After responding to each question with personalinformation and answering the requested questions, the blog post was composed forthe website (C. DuDeVoire, personal communication, April 10, 2017). Each blogpost was collected as data and analyzed on behalf of language structure andresponse styles.

The aim of the researchwas to collect information from a female-only source to consider how womensocially construct a powerful identity. The sample chosen featured women fromdifferent backgrounds, who are considered to be successful in their personaland professional lives. In this sense, the

information was gathered to gaininsight into how powerful language is structured and the development of apowerful identity for women in particular.

Data Reduction and Coding

After the datacollection, a thematic analysis was utilized to determine commonly occurring patternsexhibited throughout the collected interviews. While the interviews weresignificantly reduced from the precise responses provided to suit the blogformat, the responses incorporated the chosen language from the intervieweesfor each entry and question. In analyzing the data, an open coding process wasfollowed to gain insight into the type of language used by each interviewee aswell as to examine and establish themes and patters revealed throughout the collecteddata.

Researcher's Role and Ethical Considerations

The role of theresearcher was strictly observational and analytical and relied on informationprovided by the writer. As the interviews were presented previously on theblog, Babes Who Hustle (http://babeswhohustle. com), the study did not requireaccess to the participants and therefore, incorporated an exclusively analyticapproach to gathering and coding data. Due to the public nature of theinterviews, the participants' true names were included in the data and referredto as such throughout the data analysis.

Data Analysis

Each blog entryhighlights the successes, both personally and professionally, of various womenfrom a multitude of career fields. Sixty-four interviews were collected, eachof which included four sections: how the writer met the

interviewee, TheBasics, The Interests, and The Hustle. The Basics included backgroundinformation, such as hometown, current city, degree and school, as well as whatis labeled as " Hustle," and refers to the main topic of what they will discuss. The Interests included a woman they admire, how the spend their free time, anda few individually chosen questions of their favorite things. The Hustle is themain section of the blog and incorporates the previously emailed questionresponses of each woman and their success stories. The tone of the blog isconversational and includes precise responses from the participants.

Multiple patterns were exposedthroughout the data including language that referenced positive self talk, fear, confidence, speaking up about one's thoughts and beliefs, surroundingyourself with strong people, specifically women, as well as the use of incorporatingthe pronoun we when discussing what their daily work day consists of. Thesepatterns were seen over multiple responses and can be attributed to assistingwith a ' powerful' identity perspective. Additionally, the majority of advicegiven by each woman was aimed at improving personality imperfections orinternal characteristics about oneself, such as confidence, honesty, andkindness, while few discussed specific tasks that would benefit your success, such as having more internships, being organized or practicing more at varioustasks.

One theme frequentlyfound throughout the data was that of employing positive self-talk as well asadvising others to do so to achieve success. Many women, when describing obstaclesthey had to overcome, used positive language to describe themselves or theirexperiences. For example, Tessa Dee Miller, when asked how her gender hasaffected her success, stated, " I

am strong. I am smart. And I am damn capableof running my own store and lifting heavy furniture, thank you very much"(DuDeVoire, 2016p). She even went so far as to advise others on maintainingpositive self-talk by saying, " Never let anyone else tell you what you can orcannot do – not even that deep, dark part of yourself." This type of positivelanguage was exhibited in the data often. Another example was provided by JenGurecki when she claimed, " I'm a visionary. I love big ideas that challenge thestatus quo, and I'm not afraid to execute them" (DuDeVoire, 2016y). Onerespondent additional offered blatant advise to women to be positive and toavoid a negative attitude. She stated, " I hope to be able tocontinue looking in the mirror, thinking, ' Hey! There you are: unique andshining. Keep doing your thing, girl!'"   (DuDeVoire, 2016e). In many instances, womenattributed parts of their success to improving their own self-talk as well asto tell themselves they are capable and to feel confident in their ability todo.

One recurring themediscovered throughout the data was that of confidence, either the lack ofhaving it and the desire for more or the claim to be confident and speak up toachieve greater success (DuDeVoire, 2016c; DuDeVoire, 2016d; DuDeVoire, 2016i; DuDeVoire, 2016k; DuDeVoire, 2016l; DuDeVoire, 2016m; DuDeVoire, 2016o; DuDeVoire, 2016q; DuDeVoire, 2016r; DuDeVoire, 2016s; DuDeVoire, 2016u; DuDeVoire, 2016x; DuDeVoire, 2016y). One respondent in particular, BrittanyNorris, advised women to, " Practice a strong handshake. Stand like a superhero. Be confident when you speak" (DuDeVoire, 2016b). Another respondent, RachaelTally, claimed that women should, " Stand up for yourself, even if you think itis a small issue. These moments of confidence will add up overtime and trulymake a

difference" (DuDeVoire, 2016i). Other women claimed the importance ofbeing proud of what you accomplish to have confidence when you speak(DuDeVoire, 2016d). Taking pride in what you do, or recommending others to doso, reoccurred by multiple women (DuDeVoire, 2016f; DuDeVoire, 2016g; DuDeVoire, 2016h; DuDeVoire, 2016w). Multiple women claimed being proud and confident, while some advised others to have these traits to achieve success.

Another theme revealed wasexpressions of overcoming fear and to avoid the fear of failure, as well asaccepting that fears exist. Various women offered advice or narratives aboutovercoming one's fear in order to succeed at their goals (DuDeVoire, 2016d; DuDeVoire, 2016j; DuDeVoire, 2016m; DuDeVoire, 2016n; DuDeVoire, 2016r). Onewoman, Donna Irene, discussed what not to fear by stating, " you don't need tohave it all together, and failure is not to be feared but embraced because itmakes you better!" (DuDeVoire, 2016a). Another respondent, Sarafina Persuad, discussedthe importance of how we should " be curious, be fearless, and be kind" (DuDeVoire, 2016d). When asked about offering career advice to others, Cassidy Routh, respondedwith " it's okay to feel how you feel! Use it to your advantage and pushyourself through the fear or the frustration or whatever it is that could beholding you back from getting what you want" (DuDeVoire, 2016j). Other womendiscussed fear in the women they admire most, such as Olivia Wilson, whostated, " I really love Chelsea Handler. One of my favorite things about her isthat she admits when she doesn't know something…she's also never afraid tospeak her mind, that's for sure!" (DuDeVoire, 2016t). In the same

manner, Brittany Mignanelli offered her response to a woman she admires by respondingwith the following:

Samantha Bee. I alwaysenjoyed her segments on The Daily Show, but this past year she has ignited a firein me...She's been hitting harder than many other late night shows on thesubjects that matter most and isn't afraid to ' go there'. (DuDeVoire, 2016v)

According to these interview responses, women believeovercoming and accepting fear is an integral part of being successful and canaid in one's identity management. By evolving from being afraid, we are able torealize our capabilities and put that fear towards greater accomplishments.

Conclusion

Throughout this study, the aim was to discover how women socially construct ' powerful' identitiesthrough language use. While there were many types of language depictedthroughout the data, the three areas discussed were the most prominent. Theresults supported the notion that women who express positive self-talk, maintain confidence, and accept various characteristics, such as fear withintheir lives leads to a more ' powerful' identity through the type of languageused when speaking about themselves. By integrating language of this type in one'smind as well as in daily conversations has the possibility to improve othersperceptions and the way we are categorized by others. This in turn has thecapability of constructing a more powerful identity. By incorporating socialconstruction ideas, as well as a membership categorization analysis approach toanalyzing identity, we can begin to analyze how women can construct these morepowerful identities.

Noticeably, these findings do not provide definitiveresults on socially constructing a powerful identity through language, but doaid in the discovery of new ways to examine how women do construct suchidentities through the language styles exhibited within this data set.

Limitations

Although the studyprovided a great deal of data to analyze, it must be remembered that allresearch was conducted on a singular blog site with multiple postings. Additionally, time constraints existed, which led to the restriction of looking into furtherdata that will be posted after this study was conducted. As the blog continuedto evolve since its creation, the data is fixed to include responses held priorto this study.

Technologicallimitations. Althoughan abundance of information was provided on the blog from which to pull data, thelimited landscape of an edited blog could have implications on the results ofthis study and the responses portrayed on each entry. Additionally, the abilityfor participants to conduct the interviews over email may have altered the typeof language generally exhibited from these women in face-to-face interactions.

Demographiclimitations. Despitehaving over sixty different women from which to choose, the demographic wasrelatively restricted to young, white females. Due to many of the blog entriesfocusing on women part of small-businesses rather than successful women oflarge corporations and businesses, one limitation could be depicted as lack of varyingsuccess levels of each woman's occupation.

Future Research

This study is capable ofproviding a benchmark from which to expand the research conversation on howwomen powerfully construct an identity through language. While there were oversixty interviews from which to pull data, it would benefit the field ofresearch to examine powerful language of solely women in additional landscapes, as well as additional blog websites. The blog utilized within this study hasprogressed since its creation in 2016 and there are potential opportunities fordeveloping a longitudinal study to examine how women's language depicted priorto completing the interview as well as after the blog post is created.

By having the ability toedit their own responses as well as extend the time for such responses, the womeninterviewed had the potential to appear more powerful than would potentially beseen in immediate face-to-face interview responses. In order to learn hownonverbal communication and immediate responses differ, a study couldincorporate live interviews and compare the responses to those depicted on theblog. The slight lack of diversity in participants allows for a greaterunderstanding of powerful identities by looking further into women from variousethnic and racial backgrounds. This has the potential to improve the field'sunderstanding of powerfully constructed identities and can be extended toobserving children and older women.

Additionally, the studywould support the examination of a comparison between an all-female blog and anall-male blog to further discover the differences between men and women'slanguage use in the same setting.

There are numerous avenues from which thisstudy could expand upon and

all lead to greater knowledge on an increasinglyimportant topic within the communication field.

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