PERCEIVED MUTED VOICE AND ITS IMPACT ON FEMALE COMMUNICATION TECHNIQUES IN THE WORKPLACE

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This thesis focuses on the techniques women may use in workplace situations where they perceive themselves as muted. This study considers how perceived mutedness impacts relational communication techniques in face-to-face and email communications in the workplace.

Research is grounded in muted group theory and investigates what creates a perceived level of mutedness, including perceptions, relationships, and situational context. Prior research suggests females use more affiliative or relational communication in comparison to men. However, little research examines differences among women's communication techniques in the workplace.

The present research focuses on how perceived muted voice impacts affiliative language use among females and explores how women alter their communication practices. Relational practices may exist in face-to-face and email communication, so this study considers both forms of communication. Thirteen women were selected to participate in interview and focus group sessions discussing their place in the organization and how they communicate. Critical discourse analysis of the transcript texts reveal that relationships and perceived backlash contribute to mutedness. Findings also indicate when perceived mutedness increases, relational communication efforts decrease. Women who feel the highest level of mutedness no longer try to adapt to the dominant discourse; they choose to silence themselves. This finding suggests a new perspective on one aspect of muted group theory, which holds that subordinate groups assimilate to the dominant group’s communication norms.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

The Problem

Gender differences in communication is a well studied topic dating back to at least the 1860’s when women challenged the wide use of masculine language in social and organizational settings (Kramarae, 2005; Leaper & Ayres, 2007b). Perhaps these women were blazing the trail for what researchers would later define as muted group theory and gendered discourse. Over a century later, many women still struggle to have their voice heard in some organizations. Women’s presence in the workplace has increased over the last century; however there still exists a wide gap in leadership between the genders. Less than four percent of working females are employed at the highest levels of Fortune 500 companies and many of the women in organizational leadership positions are stuck in mid-management (Allen, 2011). The struggle to be recognized in the workplace will persist. In 2014, 61 percent of females over age sixteen will be in the workplace (Allen, 2011). The workplace was created and maintained by men long before women arrived and therefore causes muted voice among women (Kissack, 2010). “Women perceive the world differently from men because of women’s and men’s different experience and activities rooted in the division of labor” (Kramarae, 1981, p. 3). The question of whether the female voice is muted in the workplace is still viable, specifically how muted voice impacts a female’s communication patterns. The problem this research focuses on is how females perceives their mutedness and the communication techniques they employ as a result. Communication techniques focus on relational forms of communication in both face-to-face and email forms. Including email in this study was of importance due to its wide use in the workplace and it is an understudied area.

Definitions of Terms Used
This study focuses on a select group of females who perceive their voice as silenced in the organization. This group is referred to as the intra-group and research will address how their perceptions of muted voice impact their communication techniques. This study considers both email and face-to-face communication techniques. *Face-to-face* is considered any communication in which all parties are physically present. This will also be referred to as FTF. *Computer-mediated communication* is discussed in both the literature and study and is also called CMC. Emoticon use is investigated and is any form of symbol used to represent a feeling in an attempt to add richness to CMC. This is commonly seen as a smiley face or sad face—:-), :-(. *Mutedness* describes a level or degree of muted voice and is supplemented with *silenced*. In some cases women self-silence and this is intentionally done to suppress their own voice.

**Organization of Remaining Chapters**

This study begins with discussion of muted group theory and how it is applicable to the workplace. Following this groundwork, connections will be made between mutedness and patterns of communication common among females. Many of these techniques seem to overlap between email and face-to-face communication. Chapter two includes the literature review. It argues the importance and need for the questions posed in this study. The scope of the study and qualitative methodology will be outlined in chapter three before introducing the research results. Chapter four summarizes the results of interview transcripts and discuss themes that emerged during data collection and analysis. Analysis considers a new level of muted voice based on previous literature. Concluding thoughts in chapter five address limitations to this study, future research possibilities and consider a new element to muted group theory.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

This literature review discusses muted group theory and how the theory can be applied to understand the communication techniques women use in workplace situations where they could be lacking power. It then discusses patterns seen in email and face-to-face communications. Unlike many studies reviewed, this work is interested in communication patterns not in relation to gender differences but rather the female’s level of perceived muted voice. Increased verbal communication has a positive relationship with being perceived as more powerful (Brescoll, 2011). If women are muted in the workplace, are they in a perpetual powerless position? Kramarae (2005) advises researchers to ask difficult questions to make gender issues more visible in society. Research focuses on the experience of subordinate groups, which in many organizational settings continues to be females (Kissack, 2010). This review first addresses the philosophical and theoretical foundations for the study. Examination of research on female communication reveal a wide array of comparative studies of male-female communication, but concludes it lacks an understanding of the root cause of such differences in workplace communication and a way to navigate them better if aware.

Philosophical Assumptions

Women’s moral decisions are based on levels of responsibility and care in relationships while men focus on justice as the foundation for issues of morality (Gilligan, 1982). These two contrasting views illustrate differing voices between men and women. Gilligan discusses the differences to highlight “a problem of interpretation rather than to represent a generalization about either sex” (p. xxxv). Women see the world through a lens of relationship and connection rather than rules and justice (Gilligan, 1982). Male experience dominates arenas of public discourse, like the workplace, stifling the female worldview (Gilligan, 1995). The stifling of the
female experience and the female voice renders the group muted. “When women feel excluded from direct participation in society, they see themselves as subject to a consensus or judgment made and enforced by the men on whose protection and support they depend” (Gilligan, 1982, p. 63). The above discussion from Gilligan is also expressed as part of muted group theory.

Women’s perspectives have historically been absent from past research (Gilligan, 1993) and this thesis represents an effort toward inclusion. A lack of female representation in past research resulted in an unfair perception that women’s psychological development is flawed (Gilligan, 1993). This work aligns with Gilligan’s to focus on the female perspective and give voice to their muted perceptions. According to Gilligan, voice can be defined as:

What people mean when they speak of the core of the self. Voice is natural and it is also cultural… Voice is a new key for understanding the psychological, social, and cultural order—a litmus test of relationships and a measure of psychological health. (p. xix)

**Theoretical Basis**

Muted group theory emerges as a relevant theory to apply toward this experience of exclusion and silencing. The theory considers the non-dominant members in a communication system. It holds that marginalized groups must communicate in a manner that is representative of the dominant members’ experiences rather than their own (Orbe, 1996). “Those experiences unique to subordinate group members often cannot be effectively expressed within the confinements of the dominant communication system” (Orbe, 1996, p. 158). The group’s communication becomes ineffective, muting its authentic voice. Scholars of muted group theory argue “women’s voices are less heard than men’s in part because they are trying to express women’s experiences” (Henley & Kramarae, 2001, p. 38). The theory arises from feminist and critical theoretical beliefs aimed at “exposing, intervening in, and transforming oppressive
structures” (Lindloff & Taylor, 2011, p. 53). According to Kramarae (2005), when focused on gender communication, muted group theory suggests the following:

In many situations, women are more constrained than are men in what they can say, when and with what results. Accepted language practices have been constructed primarily by men in order to express their experiences. This means that women are constrained (muted). (p. 55)

The theory aids in understanding the struggles women may face as a non-dominant group in certain workplace settings.

**Review of the Literature**

Organizations are historically patriarchal and masculine language dominates even unbiased attempts at communication like employee evaluations (Kissack, 2010). Evaluations are written in male-preferential language “thus holding women’s performance to masculine standards” (Kissack, 2010, p. 543). It is this type of adaptation to the dominant language that renders feminine voice mute. Feminine voice, which is characterized as utilizing relational communication techniques, is viewed as inferior when compared to the task oriented communication patterns of men (Brescoll, 2011; Holmes & Marra, 2004). Kissack (2010) asserts three assumptions of which muted theory is based upon: members of differing social groups have differing experiences, dominant groups exist over the others, and inferior groups must accommodate their language to meet that of the dominant group. This assimilation process forces those of the subordinate group to function in a system that is unrepresentative of their experiences (Orbe, 1996). Orbe (1996) focuses on more than gender and collectively assesses the reaction to mutedness from the perspective of marginalized groups such as minorities, women, and homosexuals. This method is an applicable framework for the research questions
proposed in this study. The degree to which women are muted has a direct impact on power in the organization (Baker, 1991b).

The result of male dominated power in the workplace could cause stereotypical views of female behavior, such as being compassionate, motherly, nurturing, and gentle, which increases female mutedness (Kissack, 2010). Gray’s popular book *Men are from Mars; Women are from Venus* (2002) has dangerously perpetuated such stereotypes (Ahmad & Rethinam, 2010). The self-help book attempts to educate readers on gender communication differences. Since the publishing of the book, the title has become a metaphor for the expression of gender differences (Ahmad & Rethinam, 2010). One stereotype says that women interrupt less often than men and those rare interruptions are less assertive than a man’s interruptions. This generalization and several others are found false in Ahmad & Rethinam’s research. Researchers also concluded against Gray’s claim that women self-disclose more than men. This is only true in conversations with other women, and men actually talk more in mixed-sex dyads (Ahmad & Rethinam, 2010).

Baker (1991) asserts why application of theories like communication accommodation are unsuccessful in understanding the delicate balance of power in the workplace. Baker makes the case for reciprocal accommodation or sociolinguistic theory when stating that the female could alter her communication strategies. This sort of accommodation is the exact reference scholars in muted theory point to regarding the dissonance a female might experience (Kissack, 2010). Meares, Oetzel, Torres, Derkacs, and Ginossar (2004) address four premises of muted group theory.

- The different experiences of each group results in differing perceptions of the world.
- Privileged members “determine the dominant discourse for that society, reinforcing their worldview…”
• Those groups that are not privileged have fewer opportunities to express their experiences, perceptions, and world views in the societal discourse” (Meares et al., 2004, p. 8).

• Resistance and change are possible.

Note that the fourth premise is not present in Kissack’s (2010) pillars; however, both studies argue that muted group theory can be applied to both the spoken and written word (Kramarae, 2005; Meares, 2004).

**Perception Matters.** Studies reviewed address the importance of perception as they apply to email and face-to-face communication methods. It is difficult to separate perception from the resulting communication practice. The following section attempts to provide foundational support for the importance perception holds in this study; however, the issue of perception is a recurring theme in the literature. The level of perceived mutedness can impact productivity (Meares et al., 2004). Meares et al. (2004) analyzed the perceptions of muted employees and assigned them to three levels. The muted-but-engaged category describes the employee as being frustrated, but has not completely given up on the organization. Angrily disengaged describes those who are no longer committed to the organization. Finally, those in the resigned category are apathetic and have given up hope of change. The Meares et al. (2004) study provides groundwork for this thesis because the levels of mutedness provide research-based criteria to understand perceived mutedness. Other research shows that females are more productive when their relational communication preferences are targeted for participatory decision-making (Allen & Judd, 2007). Such a process of actively engaging the female’s voice results in increased job satisfaction (Allen & Judd 2007). Organizations would be wise to enforce strategies that welcome the female voice. Orbe (1996) studied subordinate groups
found the emergence of “communication strategies that are consistent with their self image yet
do not disrupt the expectations of the dominant society” (p. 159). Orbe’s findings reveal that
participants felt silenced by people in more powerful positions. “The stated cause of their silence
varied—age, ethnicity, gender, affection/sexual orientation, or class — but hinged on their
perceived powerlessness in different situations” (Orbe, 1996). Orbe’s study identified 12
communication strategies non-dominant groups may use when communicating with the
dominant group. One strategy is the use of respectful communication to intentionally avoid
being perceived as threatening or too assertive (Orbe, 1996). This respectful type of
communication is also associated with affiliative language.

**Communication Power Struggles.** Research over the past decade reveals that women’s
verbal strategies are more relational and are perceived as less powerful than male forms of
communication (Baker, 1991a). Relational discourse and affiliative language are used
interchangeably in the literature. Both are forms of speech focused on “emphasizing the
relationship and interaction with others” (Baker, 1991a). Research relating to gendered
discourse is exhaustive. Among those are studies that make valid arguments revealing a woman’s
regular use of emotional or relational discourse (Allen & Judd, 2007; Bakar, Mohamad, &
Mustafa, 2007; Calnan & Davidson, 1998; Colley & Todd, 2002; Kissack, 2010; Leaper &
Ayres, 2007a). Relational practice is considered support work that a woman does to keep things
moving in the organization (Holmes & Marra, 2004). Because it is a behind the scenes type of
job, much like housekeeping, it has been associated with feminine discourse (Holmes & Marra,
2004). For simplicity, relational practice (RP) is most easily considered as work that preserves
relationships in the workplace. Holmes and Marra’s (2004) research shows that both men and
women enact RP. Thanks to gender stereotypes, even when men do enact RP it is perceived as
feminine behavior (Holmes & Marra, 2004). “Gender is a socio-cultural category, and, regardless of whether we are biologically perceived and categorized as women or men, we are continuously constructing relatively masculine or feminine social identities in our ongoing social interactions” (Holmes & Marra, 2004, pp. 391-392). This perception has a direct implication on power in the workplace, which results in potential mutedness. It enforces a cyclical pattern of powerlessness that recreates gender differences in power in the organization (Raggins & Winkle, 2011). Researchers note the double standard created and the challenges women face when going beyond those stereotypical norms. Women are discouraged and discriminated against for acting outside the stereotypical feminine role. “Thus, assigned to a set of language rules that marginalizes their words, women are doubly restricted from expressing their voice” (Kissack, 2011, p. 545). Women must balance whether to be an effective professional or stay inside the lines of stereotypical feminine behavior (Allen, 2011; Barker & Zifcak, 1999; Kissack, 2011).

Studies of female communication strategies are limited because researchers consistently focus on gender differences between women and men. It is understandable a variable is needed to comparatively test female communication patterns; however, it is unfortunate that scholars so often choose to use male patterns as the comparison. Assuming that men still dominate organizational leadership positions (Allen, 2011), this limits our understanding of honest female communication because the female voice is stifled. This thesis removes gender comparisons and focuses on an intra-group of women who perceive themselves as muted. While prior research is lacking in this type of intra-group study, it aids in our understanding that the muted experience occurs throughout the workplace setting. This thesis seeks to investigate the communication patterns this intra-group employs in both face-to-face (FTF) and email communication.
**Communication Patterns.** Researchers have questioned whether email is as lean a medium as was once believed during its infancy. Some argue, “all communication technologies attenuate the social-context cues available in face-to-face conversation” (Dubrovsky, Kiesler & Sethna, 1991, p. 123). Kissack (2009) would disagree asserting that email increases mutedness by limiting the relational communication women inherently prefer. For this reason, and the wide use of email in an organization, it seems incomplete to address communication without including both email and FTF. Kissack maintains that studies applying muted theory on email communication among females are rare. This study extends Kissack’s argument that more application of muted theory to email communication is needed. In a meta-analysis of differences in communication, Baker (1991a) also addresses a lack of research focusing on written communication. Baker (1991b) recommends future research focus on both oral and written communication and evaluated in several contexts including structured business settings. The most common female communication technique researched in workplace communication studies continues to be affiliative language use.

Affiliative language is displayed in written and verbal settings. This technique is described as an attempt to involve or engage others in the conversation and is more common among females due to their traditional caregiver role in society (Leaper & Ayres, 2007; Leaper & Robnett, 2011). In their meta-analysis, Leaper and Ayers (2007) found that across all 47 studies reviewed, women used more affiliative speech than men. Women are also more likely to use affiliative language in the workplace than are men (Baker, 1991a). The use of hedges (“perhaps”, “could”) and tag questions (“right?”, “isn’t it?”) are two linguistic features of affiliative speech (Baker, 1991a). The same features are also used in email. Some studies have found that this affiliative technique is more successful than others when used in certain written
situations. Affiliative strategies were more advantageous when requesting charitable contributions (Baker, 1991a). In the written form, the use of feminine style language is not limited to only women (Thomson, Murachver, & Green, 2001). A study of emails to and from friends showed no connection to gender and use of affiliative language (Thomson et al., 2001). Participants in the Thomson et al. (2001) study were equals and did not experience the social hierarchy needed for mutedness to occur. This study supports the notion that it is the perceived level of mutedness, not gender alone, that results in certain communication techniques. “Thus if women tend to use powerless language more often than do men, it may be because women are more likely than men to be in positions in which they lack power” (Leaper & Robnett, 2011, p. 130). Regardless of the possible advantages of affiliative language, when compared with men’s instrumental language, which is task-oriented, women are perceived as less powerful (Baker, 1991a). This leads to a muted situation in which women must assimilate to the dominant language; however, it appears the affiliative role is one that women could be forced to play (Baker, 1991a).

In both spoken and written settings women face a difficult decision regarding whether to assimilate to the dominant language or stay in an ill-perceived powerless communication role. When women act outside their socially prescribed form of communication they are often discriminated against (Kissack, 2010). Female web designers report negative reaction to their participation in a male-dominated realm (Kennedy, 2000). A specific female web developer in Kennedy’s study (2000) faced the same label as what Kissack (2010) describes when women attempt to adapt to male-standards. “They find themselves ostracized for being cold and ‘bitchy’” (Kissack, 2010, p. 543) due to the conflicting view of how a woman actually behaves
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versus what society expects (Heilman, 2001; Ragins & Winkel, 2011). This dissonance perpetuates female muted voice.

Brescoll (2011) concludes that a fear of backlash prevents a woman from adopting instrumental or more assertive language. The research found that high-powered women who spoke disproportionately more than men faced backlash. Participants rated a female CEO who talked longer than others as less competent and less suitable for leadership than a male CEO who spoke the same amount (Brescoll, 2011). The women studied were found to reduce their amount of talking time to that of a subordinate colleague. This finding is contradicted when talk time is studied in relation to status of the speaker rather than the gender (Dubrovsky, Kiesler, & Sethna, 1991). Research considering the difference of decision-making via FTF versus computer-mediated communication finds high-status members speak more than those of lower status, thus conforming to social order not gender (Dubrovsky et al., 1991). While Dubrovsky et al. (1991) attempt to recreate status differences by gathering participants of diverse education, their study is limited in the fact that it lacks true workplace hierarchies. Concerning computer mediated communication (CMC), Dubrovsky et al. (1991) note that email seems to have an equalization effect. The “equalization phenomenon” assumes that “with less evaluation anxiety, high-status and expert persons have reduced threat to their position and low-status and inexpert persons have less fear of rejection” (p. 125). In their study, topics that would place the more educated participant at an advantage during FTF communications had the opposite effect in email. Thus email puts everyone at equal status. This study is dated and the increased use of email as well as development of emoticons reveals a need to consider further study of email communication.

The equalization effect could be refuted in studies that research the use of emoticons. Research has shown that women employ a higher number of emoticons than men (Wolf, 2000).
What causes this increased use? This is another instance where researchers have failed in their studies by consistently focusing on the difference between genders. Relative to men, women use emoticons more in chat groups (Wolf, 2000). While this is not email, it does study a technique that women may use to overcome their limited ability to express emotion in communication technologies. Women increase the use of emoticons to represent sarcasm, but only do so when going from a female-only group to a mixed gender group (Wolf, 2000). This suggests a fear of backlash, as sarcasm is most associated with male styled communication (Wolf, 2000). Research findings related to female email communication techniques are contradictory. Li (2006) has the same mixed findings in a meta-analysis of male and female behaviors in CMC. Li’s analysis reviewed 50 studies involving approximately 64,000 participants. One of Li’s findings suggests that females are more muted in email communications as Kissack (2010) argues. Li notes that women do not believe CMC to be as important or useful as men. Li validates claims that females use more emoticons and attributes this to women’s engaging and relationship-oriented approaches. It appears that “subordinate groups may have a lot to say, but they tend to have relatively little power to say it without getting into a lot of trouble”(Kramarae, 2005, p. 55). Women find themselves in a difficult situation when communicating via email: use emoticons to overcome the leanness of CMC and be perceived as less powerful, or adapt to different communication styles and risk backlash. From the findings above it seems that most women chose the former thereby reinforcing their muted voice.

Rationale

The literature reviewed proves a need for research applying muted group theory to FTF and email communication techniques among the intra-group of muted women. Specifically the need is to narrow the focus of study toward the intra group of women who perceive their voices
to be silenced. Kissack (2010) noted the absence of such study as it relates to email communication; however, speech and email have many similar features. Email bears linguistic similarities to writing and speech (Colley & Todd, 2002). It is reasonable to associate the increase of CMC in the workplace with an increased possibility of mutedness among female employees. Recognizing the contradictory findings among studies, Leaper and Robnett (2011) suggest an alternative to the gender differences approach be used when interpreting tentative speech. Gilligan (1982) calls for research that elucidates the effects different perspectives have in the workplace where communication could be impeded as a result of mistranslation. Based on the research discussed, muted group theory focusing on relational speech in both FTF communication and through emoticon use in email is the best contender.

Muted group theorists argue that the dominant and subordinate group each has its own perceptions of the world that determine group members’ communication strategies (Kramarae, 2005). The purpose of this study is to examine communication patterns among females who perceive themselves as muted. The study focuses on this intra-group of women in the workplace setting. Previous research compares female communication with male communication, which does little to understand how women communicate from the perspective of the subordinate group. Women walk a difficult path regarding the use of emotional communication in the workplace and must carefully consider how it should appropriately be displayed (Ragins & Winkle, 2011, p. 385). The purpose of this study is to understand the direction of this path depending on the degree of perceived mutedness. The literature reveals two needs for future research: (a) to apply muted theory to female communication; (b) to consider only the intra-group’s communication without making comparisons to the dominant male group. This study advances the following questions:
RQ1: How does the perceived level of muted voice in the workplace impact a woman’s use of relational speech in FTF and email communication?

RQ2: What workplace situations create an increased perception of muted voice?
Chapter 3: Scope and Methodology

Scope

This study used critical discourse analysis (CDA) and feminist methods to understand how women perceive their voice being silenced in the workplace and how such perception impacts this intra-group’s use of affiliative language. The study focused on face-to-face and email communication in the workplace. Research was also directed toward learning what types of situations create the muted perception. Is muted voice constant or does it occur in settings like boardroom meetings, performance evaluations, or when a woman’s opinion differs from that of a dominant group member? Kramarae (1996) argued that women do not fear dealing with difficult issues as long as it is in setting that appreciates differing perspectives.

Unlike much previous research on gender communication techniques, this study has focused only on female communication. Male speech and/or email patterns were not of interest as previous literature is filled with comparative gender studies. The focus was on the intra-group of females who feel muted and how they employ affiliative language both in the spoken and written form. Affiliative language analyzed includes the use of tag questions and hedges in both spoken and email communication. Additionally, research investigated tactfulness/politeness and avoidance in FTF conversations as this is also known to be a powerless form of communication (Holmes and Mara, 2004). Use of emoticons may be a way to convey politeness or emotion in email (Kissack, 2010), so this study also considered how women say they use emoticons as well as analyzed actual emails through the perspective of muted group theory.

Women who feel they have a voice in the workplace were also interviewed. Their perceptions were equally important to provide insight to RQ1 analyzing the perceived level of muted voice.
Methodology

Qualitative methodology was utilized as this study researches “the performances and practices of human communication” (Lindloff & Taylor, 2011, p. 5). Qualitative research focuses on understanding perspectives, retrieving experiences to gain information, and in the case of this study, “understand(ing) sensitive relationships” (Lindloff & Taylor, 2011, p. 3). Qualitative methods were chosen because this research is less interested in numerical data and more interested in learning the complexity of perceptions and muted behavior. This study identifies with the critical paradigm of qualitative communication research that “promote(s) ethically and politically sensitive study of the relationships among power, knowledge, and discourse that are produced in situations of historical and cultural struggle” (Lindloff & Taylor, 2011, p. 10).

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) studies “social phenomena which are necessarily complex and thus require a multi-disciplinary and multi-methodical approach” (Wodak & Meyer, 2009, p. 2). Muted voice and the communication patterns it causes is a social phenomenon that would benefit from a challenging, critical investigation (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). CDA assisted in understanding the context question of this study as the methodology considers context a crucial component (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). This thesis conforms to Wodak and Meyer’s described features of CDA approaches; the research is problem-oriented and theory and methodology are integrated to understand the problem. CDA focuses on “dynamic (socio)cognitive or interactional moves and strategies” (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). Therefore the methodology allows a better understanding of the strategies women use when they communicate in a perceived muted environment. CDA goes beyond linguistic investigation as the name may imply. Power is a central concept of CDA and muted groups are powerless because the groups
must conform to the dominant discourse (Kramarae, 2005; Wodak & Meyer, 2009). The CDA methodology in this study takes the approach of power being a specific attribute of social exchange (Wodak & Meyer, 2009). Researchers recommend a multi-methodical approach along with CDA, so this study also employed feminist methodology during the data collection and analysis process.

Feminist methodology is abstract and difficult to define (Cook & Fonow, 1986); however, its principles help guide the research for this study. The five principles identified by Cook and Fonow are (a) realizing the significance of gender as part of social life, including the conduct of research; (b) to use consciousness-raising as a methodical tool; (c) the researcher is part of the process and brings experiences into the research; (d) concern for ethical implications of feminist research; and (e) seeks to empower women and transform oppressive structures through research. The research is designed to understand the female’s lived perspective. Interview questions were aimed at raising subject’s awareness to the problem being studied. Subjects were briefed on the topic to increase their awareness. A poststructuralist feminist approach allows the researcher to “deconstruct language and discourse to understand how gendered identities are developed” (Lindloff & Taylor, 2011, p. 59). This approach was applied to the critical analysis of texts collected through interview transcriptions.

Feminist methodology guided the criteria sampling of interview subjects, thereby incorporating their voices in the research (Lindloff & Taylor, 2011). Women were selected based on their position in the organization with a goal of reaching those who work in organizations that have previously been or continue to be dominated by men. Examples are the financial sector, upper levels of academia, and the military. Ages ranged from mid-twenties to upper forties. Diversity is important and whenever possible different races, ages, and sexual
orientation were included. “Producing research that is inadequately diversified… has become a sign of methodological weakness and moral failure, an impermissible reflection of a lack of effort and unwitting prejudice” (Reinharz, 1992, p. 255). CDA was employed via the texts transcribed from recordings of interview and focus group sessions. References to backlash, power, feeling unheard, and communication techniques all in relation to the workplace were targeted for analysis. “Feminists hold that since data is produced in the context of a relationship, it should be recorded and interpreted accordingly…The interview (is) not simply a transparent means of producing but are themselves data” (Lindloff & Taylor, 2011, p. 60). One-on-one interviews were conducted in casual locations like restaurants. The study utilized respondent interviews that allow subjects to express their perceptions and actions as it relates to muted voice. Focus group sessions were also conducted and varied in size. This study recognized the “time pressures of many adult women—notably those juggling childcare and paid employment—the method was self-consciously feminist in allowing participants to dictate the timing” (Kennedy, 2000, p. 710). For this reason focus group sessions varied from two to five participants and were held during or after participants’ work hours.

An interview schedule was created (Appendix B) to direct questions aimed at answering this study’s research questions. The questions focused on comfort of speaking, how a woman might speak in a particular situation, use of exclamation points and emoticons in email communication, and whether she receives backlash from being assertive. The questions were chosen as a way to learn whether she perceives having a voice in the organization and to what degree her voice is heard. Questions related to how she may speak in certain situations were created to answer RQ2. After asking questions related to her perceived level of muted voice, the interview focused on specific techniques employed to answer RQ1. As it relates to muted group
theory, these questions help define (a) whether the experiences are different from the dominant group; (b) whether the workplace privileges some over others; (c) whether there are fewer opportunities for these respondents to express their voice; and (d) whether the women interviewed feel they must use the communication style of the dominant group to be heard (Meares et al., 2004). Focus group sessions attempted to stay within the frames of the interview schedule, but the participants’ conversations also dictated the course of the session. The interview schedule helped to recognize emerging themes when the sessions were transcribed and analyzed using CDA.

Email texts were gathered based on the writer’s use of emoticons, exclamation points, tag questions, hedges, and fillers. The emails were coded based on the use of emoticons and in what style. Emails were coded as whether they were instructional, casual, or informational. Notations were made when emoticons were used and what their purpose seemed to be. Was the smiley face intended as a way for the writer to avoid being perceived as bossy or to lessen the severity of the topic? Analysis also identified the type of affiliative language. The findings of actual emails were compared with interview findings to document similarities of when affiliative language is used. Once similarities were identified they were placed in a matrix with other communication strategies broken down by each source. The email portion of the study provides a challenge and is a limitation because it is difficult to create hypothetical email messages in an interview setting, and subjects rarely keep actual emails. Attempts to overcome this limitation were made by reviewing actual emails with the writer to understand the reasons for her technique.

Reliability
Recognizing that reliability is not as great a consideration for qualitative research (Lindloff & Taylor, 2011), attempts were still made to generate consistent results. The interviews employed in this research are not repeatable because “each informant is asked a particular set of questions only once” (Lindloff & Taylor, 2011, p. 272); however, the interview schedule increased opportunities to recognize consistent themes drawn out during the analysis process.

**Validity**

Lindloff and Taylor (2011) point out that qualitative research is more concerned with validity; however, it is applied in ways differing from objectivist science. Self-disclosure was used during interviews to increase validity of data. Feminist researchers have found that disclosing their own struggles have resulted in more honest and forthcoming discussions with their interviewees (Reinharz, 1992). This method reflects the study’s foundational belief that women are relational. Self-disclosure allows a relationship to be formed between the researcher and the subject. Feminist methodology follows this construct and believes that objectivity in research furthers the “biased stance of privileged white males” (Reinharz, 1992, p. 262). This study reflects that belief and has applied the researcher’s own personal experiences to formulate the parameters of the study.

Utilizing the researcher’s personal experience is a distinguishing feature of feminist research. Personal experience typically is irrelevant in mainstream research, or is thought to contaminate a project’s objectivity. In feminist research, by contrast, it is relevant and repairs the project’s pseudo objectivity…Personal experience can be the very starting point of a study, the material from which the researcher develops questions, and the source for finding people to study. (Reinharz, 1992, p. 258-260)
The use of personal experience and self-disclosure challenge objective reality as a test of validity; therefore, crystallization provides an alternative (Lindloff & Taylor, 2011). “In crystallization the sets of knowledge produced… are all shaped by a researcher’s partial, contingent, embodied, and historically situated experience” (Lindloff & Taylor, 2011, p. 277). Feminist methodology reviewed for this work is both understandably realistic and imaginatively abstract.

Feminist research is amoebalike; it goes everywhere, in every direction. It reaches into all the disciplines and uses all the methods, sometimes singly and sometimes in combinations. The amoeba is fed by the women’s movement. The women’s movement, in turn, is fed by women’s outrage and hope. (Reinharz, 1992, p. 243)

Understandably women’s emotions and perceptions should not be boxed into a scientific approach that for decades has excluded their voice. However the absence of structure is unfamiliar. It seems fair that feminist researchers call their studies a journey (Reinharz, 1992). This is not a weakness, but rather a different path to answering social problems. The unfamiliarity of this path further proves the lack of feminine voice in social research (Gilligan, 1982). Through incorporating feminist methodology and CDA, this journey leads to a better understanding of female muted voice in the organization, the settings that cause perceived muted voice, and the communication patterns the intra-group of muted females employ.

Ethical Considerations

This study deals with human subjects and each subject agreed to the informed consent form (Appendix A) to participate in the research. The agreement describes the study and informs the woman that there is no risk and the only benefit is a greater understanding for the problem being researched. Subjects are free to cancel their participation at any time. Because of the
somewhat controversial topic and the fear of disclosing information to the researcher that may jeopardize their employment, subjects were informed that names and employer information would be changed. Names and employer information were kept in a location known only to the researcher.
Chapter 4: The Study

Introduction

This study considers the communication techniques of an intra-group of females in the workplace. The intra-group consists of those women who perceive their voice as muted in the organization. The study seeks to understand how the perception of muted voice impacts certain communication techniques and the situations that cause the muted experience. Through semi-structured interviews and focus group sessions, the research investigated:

- situations where muted voice is more likely to be perceived;
- use of emoticons in email communication;
- perceived backlash from being assertive and other perceptions that impact mutedness such as stereotypes related to gender, age, and race; perceived double standards; and perceived inequality; use of relational communication; and
- social role expectations.

Two focus group sessions were conducted. One focus group had five participants; the other consisted of three participants. Individual interviews were conducted with five other women; two of the women participated together in a phone interview. The face-to-face interviews were conducted at restaurants after the participant’s working hours. Additionally, workplace emails were gathered to assess the use of emoticons. Emails were collected from a respondent who admitted to using emoticons regularly. Emails were gathered until enough data could be analyzed to understand how and when the subject used emoticons and tentative language. Eight emails were analyzed using CDA. This section describes the coding and analysis process of the transcript texts from the interview, focus group sessions, and emails. Findings are grounded in
muted group theory and will reference applicable literature previously reviewed. Table 1 shows the participant demographic data.

Table 1. Participant demographic data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Manager (M), Non Manager (N)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alice</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amy</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darla</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erica</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>African-American</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gwyn</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jane</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emily</td>
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<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Molly</td>
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<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jen</td>
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<td>African-American</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tracy</td>
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<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tommy</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sonia</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>M</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Results

Interview transcripts were analyzed and grouped into themes that emerged. This section will review the interview questions and summarize the interviews, highlighting the most relevant findings. It will then discuss the themes and their relation to answering the research questions.

**Summarization of interviews.** The women who feel most muted in their workplace discuss gender role spillover assignments. One woman who was hired for a management position is expected to deliver coffee, dry cleaning, and run errands for her male boss. These women discuss communicating in an expected manner. One woman said she had no voice in the organization and portrays the stereotypical feminine behavior to appease her supervisor. She said, “Oh, I bat my eyes and give nice, sweet smiles because that’s how we are supposed to behave.” These women also discuss their ideas being ignored “yet when a male or other counterpart repeats the same idea, they run with it.” The women who feel most muted discuss a fear of backlash from assertive communication. The two African American women struggle with this fear more than the others because of the “angry black woman” stereotype. Racial stereotypes are a constant factor in how they chose to communicate. One black woman said, “I feel like I am constantly holding back. I feel like am not being my true self.” The two Hispanic females feel muted around Hispanic men and self-silence because of cultural expectations. One woman said, “We’re supposed to be unquestioning, submissive, and domestic.” This woman is naturally a loud speaker and chooses silence for fear she may be accused of acting angry or harsh. All of the female managers who feel muted also discuss self-silencing around their subordinates for fear of being perceived as harsh, cold, or “bitchy”.

Transcripts also revealed discussion of mutedness from women who say they have a voice in the organization. One woman discusses how emoticons are a natural way of CMC for
her; however, she chooses not to use them in email communications with management. Emoticons are widely adopted in her email communications to staff because she fears being perceived as bossy. In her emails, she worries about hurting feelings. How an email will be received is her biggest worry when sending staff emails. She fears appearing like she is "above" staff. When pitching ideas she suppresses her energy and excitement because she perceives a lack of emotion is better received. She admits to making ideas seem like they belong to her supervisor so the idea will be implemented. Following her interview she stated, “I really didn’t think I was, but what I’ve said now I’m wondering if I am (muted).” Another woman admitted to holding back criticism because it has the potential to be perceived as whining, needy or complaining. She carefully considers when to speak noting that silence could be perceived as uneducated, but speaking out too much is complaining.

**Identified intra-group.** Based on the textual analysis, seven sources were identified as having the greatest perceived level of mutedness. After identifying the seven-member intra-group, CDA compared what each source said about her particular communication style and the situational context of the perceived mutedness (Appendix C). Note that the selection only consists of those who perceive themselves as having a muted voice. This analysis was utilized to answer RQ2. Situations that resulted in an increased perception of muted voice range from the overall organizational culture to situations where the possibility of backlash exists. One woman spoke of meetings where she feels unprepared, but describes her idea of preparation for meetings as extensive research. She recognizes that her counterparts do not go through such preparation and describes a situation where she came to a meeting with an idea to brainstorm about:

Amy: I just had thought about it that day. And so that scarred me a little bit, you know? I'll never do that again. That was very uncomfortable. I feel like I've learned when I have
something to say or when I feel like something needs to be said, or I have an idea I go in with the idea with no expectations of feedback.

Another female shares these feelings of excessive preparation.

Jen: They assume that women are such emotional creatures maybe we're just doing something because we feel its the right way...it's kind of a preconceived notion so maybe we have to have all these extra facts to back it up. Because I feel the same way... If I say anything about you know, I feel this way or this person was really upset, my boss does not react to that. He wants numbers. Numbers will make him move, but feelings won't.

One of the African American women said she feels muted in situations where she has a level of expertise, like following Robert’s Rules of Order.

Erica: There's just a sort of structure that I bring that's just sort of innate and I think people take that as um, you know, being strict and mean and really I'm like a robot. I've been to so many trainings.

Another woman who is a younger and less-tenured manager worries of backlash from her female subordinates. She feels muted in situations of assigning tasks and holding her staff accountable. She also perceives herself as muted around her direct supervisor and avoids conversations regarding salary and benefits because she believes her pay is unequal to a counterpart and she says she is more qualified. She and another younger manager said in situations where they must act in a managerial capacity they change their voice to match an expected female form of communication. A recent college graduate also discussed increased mutedness in situations regarding pay. Like the female above, she also faced perceptions of unfair pay. This female self-silences and increases politeness during meetings over salary.
Summarization of interview questions. Interview questions (Appendix B) were created to assess level of mutedness and the various communication techniques. Questions were also derived to understand what types of situations caused perceived mutedness. Previous literature helped guide the interview questions. Questions one, three, four, and five all assessed perceived mutedness and its situational context. Questions two, five, and nine were investigating any perceptions that might result from non-socially prescribed female communication techniques. These questions resulted in the most comments related to perceived backlash. To determine communication techniques employed in emails, questions five, six, and seven were specifically directed toward emoticons, exclamation points and relational practices in CMC. The interview questions resulted in four concepts identified during the critical discourse analysis and are discussed below.

Data Analysis

Four major themes resulted in the analysis of texts: (a) situations resulting in perceived muted voice; (b) communication technique; (c) relationships; and (d) perceptions. Initial coding revealed numerous themes. Those themes were then reanalyzed and grouped into the resulting four primary themes mentioned above. Each primary theme is discussed below.

Relationships decide communication technique. This was the only theme that emerged without a specific question. Subjects had repeated uncertainty addressing how assertive they would be during a particular situation. Relationships dictated their response more than a particular situation. Texts revealed that from email to FTF communication, the type of relationship is an important factor in determining level of authentic or muted voice. A Hispanic female discusses this when deciding whether to address a sensitive subject or difference of opinion:
Tommy: I think the relationship has a big part in how or if I would even address it. Sometimes I would just not say anything. Most of the time... I think it (sugar-coating) does go to relationship because it's important to know how receptive the other individual is going to be and what is their style of communicating.

Regarding email communication, relationship was also addressed as it pertained to the use of emoticons.

Emily: If you had an email with someone that you never met who only comes into your office once a year, then you would probably write your email that way. I mean, not a cheesy smile at them. It can be perceived as lack of intelligence. It can be perceived as flightiness, goofiness, immaturity.

When she discussed her FTF communications this female also addressed the role relationship plays in her mutedness:

Emily: It just depends on who it is. With friends am very blunt, but for the most part I approach it very cautiously. Review everything. Make sure that all my ducks in a row. Something to back it up. Something to prove. I would qualify it: well I could be wrong but... I'm thinking that I saw this... I think that maybe I understood.

The “angry black woman” stereotype causes both African American women to self-silence when engaged with others in unestablished relationships.

Erica: I pride myself on building a relationship internally but I’ve had to censor how I talk to people or do things or, does that make sense?

**Perceptions they face.** Interview questions two, three, four, five, and nine provided answers to whether perceived backlash played a role in mutedness. Subjects were aware of the perception assertive, straightforward communications may create. They were also aware of the
perceptions they must overcome. Seven references were made to how the participants believe men perceive certain communication from females. Emotional communication is perceived as weak; however, a certain degree of anger is an emotion men better relate with. Two women discussed feeling less credible when voicing their opinion. They referenced times when their ideas were not heard, but when a male counterpart said something similar it was acknowledged. Texts also show a belief that anger, firmness, and direct behavior in women are written off as pre-menstrual syndrome.

Sonia: when I was in law enforcement with predominately all male it was challenging because when you did something to assert yourself right away it went back to are you on the rag, you're just being a bitch.

Respondents in managerial positions reported struggling with being assertive among other women. Other women may perceive the assertive behavior as the respondent having a superiority complex stating, “she thinks she’s better than me.” A lack of relational communication may cause other women to perceive the female manager as uncaring and lacking compassion. One woman discussed how she believed other females to be her toughest critic. She struggles with managing an older female employee.

Gwyn: I read my email at least once. Whether it's to my staff… I’m still new. I've got an employee that's got several years on me, you know? I can't just go, “do this.” It's always with her, “I know you're really busy, but you think you have time to take this on?” I know she has time, but I have to play it off very politely. Because sometimes other women are some of your toughest critics as well.

References to being heard, having a voice, and silenced were coded as their perceived level of mutedness. This theme focuses on references from suppressing true thoughts or feelings to
behaving in an expected way. This code assisted in identifying respondents to select for analysis of their communication technique for RQ1. It was referenced the most followed by perceived backlash.

Tommy: I got that I came across as being rude, bitchy. It was in a social services setting... just trying to convey what policy was. Just sticking to what the outlay was and conveying that information. I got reported for being rude and bitchy, and unfeeling because I was being matter of fact.

Another concept under this theme is the choice of speaking in a socially-expected powerless way and risk being heard, or speak assertively and be negatively perceived. This challenge is referenced in Ragins and Winkel (2011). Ideas such as women are soft-spoken, compassionate, caring, nurturing, and more emotional were coded in this theme. The belief that women are expected to communicate in a specific way affects whether they believe their voice is muted. Of the minorities interviewed for this study, each discussed race as a basis for either self silencing or not being heard. The two black females struggled with the “angry black women” stereotype. The two Hispanic females struggled with being assertive to an elder Hispanic male as a result of the cultural expectation to be submissive.

Erica: you can't be strong, you can't have ideas, um... or you're perceived as something different or you're perceived as a bulldog. Many people, their first instinct is to protect the underdog... and being an African American woman I feel like I'm always portrayed as the angry black woman. It’s quite a joke actually ... I am acting no different than anyone else. I just have opinions. I'm acting confident. A counterpart can be the same way and it’s taken totally different. I'm too strict, too harsh, um, don't sugar coat it enough and that has definitely been a struggle.
Sonia: I think also traditionally just in the Hispanic culture we don't second guess. It's disrespectful especially with your elders even if they're wrong and you know they're wrong and you disagree toward a question. Their word is law. The Hispanic male that was on our board would sometimes say things that he's an older man and I felt instantly like I was in the role of his child and he was the parent.

**Situational context of perceived mutedness.** Interview questions one, three, four, and five were oriented toward determining in which situations muted voice is most likely to be perceived. This theme assists in answering RQ2. Descriptions of the scene, environment, and what could be the direct cause of their mutedness was coded in this theme. Boardroom meetings, conversations with superiors about wages and/or benefits, and new relationships were instances where participants felt they were muted. Some respondents and email texts reveal email communication to superiors as well as mass emails to staff result in a self-silencing. Emails to superiors take on a direct tone which is unnatural to one respondent who feels more comfortable using emoticons. Emails to all staff are overly friendly. The female may include extra emoticons and exclamation points to avoid a misperception of being bossy or harsh.

Amy: I think that's the biggest thing you have to worry about. Not so much on how you say something, but how it's going to be received. And that's what causes me to fluff it up or to add those things because it will be received 15 different ways or 15 million different ways and I do worry about that.

**Communication techniques.** Questions three, four, six, seven, and eight, are all related to communication techniques. Texts reveal that communication technique does vary and is related to perceived level of mutedness. The perceived theme and communication theme bleed into one another at times. Most of the texts dealing with assertive behavior have a negative
connotation. Assertiveness is viewed as pushy, bossy, complaining, even nagging. References to perceived backlash and self-silencing are most associated with the theme of assertiveness. The women prefer to exhibit assertiveness in person rather than via email because of the richness of face to face. This follows prior research findings suggesting that females are more muted in email communications where emotion is difficult to display (Kissack, 2010; Li, 2006). References are also made to feeling the need to gather numbers, facts, and research before asserting an idea. Rather than asserting a stance or taking initiative, many said they are polite and seek approval. Offering unnecessary apologies is a form of politeness discussed and questioned in a focus group:

Jane: This lady came into my office and said you're doing this and I said I'm sorry I'm not doing this today. It's not due until November. I don't know why said I'm sorry but I did.

Emily: I do the same thing. But first of all why do I feel the need to apologize? And second when I'm looking you and say sorry I'm clearly not really sorry. It's like you should look at the person and go, “I don't give a damn. Deal with it, screw you, get over it.”

Using humor to deflect the situation and appear “softer” was also referenced.

Email communication. Most of those interviewed say they use email to build or maintain relationships. One respondent used email to keep in touch with staff members who office elsewhere because leaving her office is difficult. Others who manage staff off site find email convenient. The transcripts show that issues regarding concerns are better said in person.

Amy: Email's great because I love to be able to think out my thoughts, but a lot of times you risk the chance of them not reading it all the way through, not responding, not knowing if they read it, who they're showing... not knowing how they can take it. And so
I think the best way to ever communicate is to speak to them in person and let them know how I feel and you know, why I felt that way and what I would like changed.

Women discuss using emoticons in external communications to maintain a relationship or if they know the receiver uses them. Emoticons are used in a reciprocal nature.

Erica: Externally I do not unless I have a very good relationship with someone in the community and I know that's how we would normally relate and have fun and laugh because I know that's all a part of building a relationship with that person. In business emails, never. Definitely not. Internally it depends on the culture of the organization... here it's very relaxed.

Women in superior roles prefer not to use them with supervisors or in internal emails. Perceived backlash also dictates if and when emoticons are used, as seen above. Older women view emoticons as a technique of the younger generation and are less likely to use them.

Sonia: Don't you think it has to do with the generation because this is new...I didn't know you could take a colon and a zero to make a nose!

Tommy: I think it is a generational thing.

Sonia: Some that are the younger generation fresh out of college…it's always in the big letters in the different colors real loud and smiley faces. That old-school me is like, that's not appropriate.

**Tag questions in speech and email.** Tag questions were rarely referenced, but they were used during the interviews. One respondent recognized them as a weaker form of communication. Respondents discussed using them purposefully in both speech and email in conversations with their supervisor to appear less demanding.
MUTED VOICE AND FEMALE COMMUNICATION PATTERNS

Tracy: I never wanted to use it. Like, I really wanted to stick it to him. Like, I'd type up the way I was really feeling and go back and erase it or add some exclamation points, the happy faces, you know. Change my statements to questions, I felt a lot of the time.

Further critical analysis of the texts will be discussed in the following sections and gave insight into the behavior of the muted individuals.

**Application to prior research**

The themes were analyzed by respondents to determine perceived level of mutedness. Appendix C illustrates the intra-group identification process. Levels of mutedness are difficult to quantify, but using the mutedness hierarchy Meares et al. (2004) describe aided in this assessment.

- Muted-but-engaged refers to those who express frustration from not being heard, but have not given up on finding a solution to their struggle.
- Angrily disengaged focuses on anger with avoidance of the situation. This group “reflects deep hurt” (p.16).
- Resigned is an extension of the angrily disengaged, but this group discusses “giving up hope for change in the organization” (p.16).

Based on these descriptions of mutedness, the seven members of the intra-group can be organized in the following categories:

**Muted-but-engaged.** Four women could be considered under this category. These women all reference times in their employment when they self-silenced for fear of backlash or because of gender communication expectations. “Their frustration (comes) from the experience of not being heard or not getting a response, yet trying to work through the system and remain constructive” (Meares et al., 2004, p. 15). Analysis of Gwyn’s texts reveals several instances
where she expresses frustration because she is unable to address concerns about her wages with her supervisor. She also speaks of times where she repeatedly warned of possible organizational problems and her warnings went unheard. Both Amy and Gwyn speak of the need to be overly polite to their supervisors to avoid being perceived as demanding. Amy suppresses her excitement when discussing ideas. She believes that less emotion creates better results when dealing with her supervisor.

**Angrily disengaged.** Only one female met the criteria of this category. Her description of writing an email like she just wanted to “stick it” to her boss reveals her anger toward her workplace situation as well as a sexual innuendo representative of the dominant group she feels is causing her mutedness. Meares et al. (2004) describe someone in this level as viewing themselves a victim in the situation and believes management is at fault for causing the mistreatment and not correcting it. She expresses this in her interview when she references that the president of the organization allowed her mistreatment to continue. At this level the employee is physically withdrawn from the situation (Meares et al., 2004). She recently resigned from the organization.

**Resigned.** The word to describe this category should not be confused with leaving the job as in the above situation. Resigned refers to giving up and reaching a stage of apathy (Meares et al., 2004). One woman falls in this category. She berates herself for not addressing issues of gender-role spillover and being forced to silence her voice in email communication. She uses the slang “grow some balls” to describe a communication technique. What she wants is to assert her voice; the slang phrase reflects whose voice is actually heard. The literal impossibility at what the phrase suggests further validates the figurate truth to the statement: she
cannot express her voice. This subject questions what good addressing her frustrations would do.

Alice: They don’t care. My name’s not on the door is what they’ve told me.

The above categories only apply to those women who recognize that they are muted. Meares et al. (2004) does not address a category for those who discuss symptoms of being muted such as fear of backlash, self silencing, and the need to communicate like the dominant group (Brescoll, 2011; Kissack, 2010; Orbe, 1996). This study proposes an additional category. Symptomatic mutedness will address those who say they have a voice in the organization, but also reference being muted. Prior to critical discourse analysis one female (Amy) would fall into this category. The critical nature of the interview allowed her to recognize and acknowledge areas where her voice was silenced.

**Symptomatic mutedness.** Three women reference areas where they feel the need to suppress their voice. One subject often says she has a voice but follows the comment with techniques she uses to silence her true self. She describes herself as “too honest” and will use tag questions and politeness in the form of apologetic statements to seem less critical. She works on not voicing her opinions too much because she worries about being perceived as nagging, too critical, or a complainer. If relational practice is viewed as “women’s work,” under a critical perspective it seems Emily wants to avoid appearing like a nagging housewife (Holmes & Mara, 2004). When asked how she would approach a difficult situation where she might be viewed as harsh, she replied that she would “grow a pair.” While this subject may feel she is not silenced, her answer proves otherwise, according to muted group theory, revealing that she must adapt to the dominant group and communicate like a man (Kramarea, 2005). The other women in this category speak of learning to avoid backlash. The Hispanic women feel most muted in areas
where they are held to the stereotypical Hispanic female behavior. Both said they only experience this with some Hispanic males. A former military member says she is in the position of recapturing her relational voice. She perceives her assertiveness as militaristic and evokes humor to soften her communication. “Humor in the workplace is an obvious candidate for inclusion in a review of strategies that qualify as manifestations of RP (relational practice)” (Holmes & Mara, 2004, p. 383).

Based on the levels of perceived mutedness and the analysis of each intra-group member’s communication style, RQ1 can be assessed. The answer is not definitive as no single perception is the same. The subjects use similar strategies that help to examine the relationship between perceived mutedness and communication techniques RQ1 seeks to understand. Women in the muted-but-engaged level discuss a mix of “talking like a man,” assimilating to the dominate group’s style. These descriptions follow the theory’s constructs as the intra-group has taken on the communication of the dominant group thus communicating in a manner that is unrepresentative of their own experiences. Several of the managers interviewed mentioned gathering facts and figures and numbers before presenting an idea. Orbe (1996) references extensive preparation as a communication technique marginalized groups may use. Five women discuss the need to present numbers in meetings rather than thoughts or feelings. To the extent that a woman may assimilate to the dominant culture’s way of speaking she will do so. The women describe a fine line of being assertive and being perceived as harsh. This line is most often met with politeness rather than crossed. Orbe also recognizes this strategy and Brescoll (2011) defines it as relational practice. The respondents interchangeably use the words “polite” and “respectful.” Orbe (1996) also labels this as being “gracious communicators” (p. 166). Politeness is the most common technique used in email when muted voice is perceived. Second
to politeness are emoticons. Email texts and interviews both reveal emoticons used as a form of politeness and humor. “Humor is a very flexible communication strategy…It is an effective means of creating team, but it can also be used to attenuate the force of negatively affective speech acts such as disagreements, refusals, complaints, and criticisms” (Holmes & Mara, 2004). As in face-to-face conversations, these women recognize the situations where sprinkling a few smiley faces or relational communication in the email will prevent backlash.

The females in the angrily-disengaged and resigned categories have completely or almost given up on assimilating and are more apt to self silence then use a voice uncharacteristic their own. Orbe (1996) labels this as avoidance and self-censorship. This study supports Orbe’s (1996) findings that “many times the decision to monitor reactions was a direct result of the perceived consequences that might follow an honest, open response” (p. 166). Relational communication techniques are still present in these levels, but in rare occurrences. The woman in the angrily disengaged level uses more than her normal amount of emoticons, tag questions, and respectful communication in email. She acknowledges her manipulation of stereotypes labeling women as gentle, sweet, happy, and compassionate. This is another situation where the female is forced to express the voice the dominant group expects. In contrast, the female in the resigned category shows no emotion in her emails after she was ordered to stop using exclamation points. In other categories where participants let the relationship determine the use of emoticons and relational communication, she suppresses her true feelings and communicates in an instructed manner. She mentions that she is a morning person and is chipper. She wants others to feel as happy as she does when they read her email. She had used exclamation points as a way to convey this, but was told nobody cares how she feels. The mutedness here creates a
lack of respect for the organization or the organization’s leaders (Meares et al., 2004). A relationship is neither desired by the employee nor sought from the supervisor.

Research question two seeks information on the situations where perceived muted voice is likely to occur. From the responses transcribed perceived mutedness occurs more often in situations where gender role expectations are present; in situations where racial stereotypes exist; and in situations where backlash is possible. The study was seeking specific settings like board meetings. Subjects did identify similar situations where they felt they needed to suppress or silence their voice. The most common, as evidenced during the coding process, are situations that may result in backlash. The type of situations that may result in backlash differ but many involve meeting with a supervisor who causes the female to feel muted; managerial-type meetings where there is a need to over prepare; negative emails—tardiness, dress code, mandatory events, policy issues; communications with those where no relationship has been built; and occasionally subordinates with specific mention to female subordinates.

**Discussion**

The idea that women communicate differently because of different lived experiences is a key point of muted group theory (Kissack, 2010). One Hispanic female’s lived experience illustrates why she is a loud speaker: she comes from a large and loud family. The idea that her volume renders her as harsh proves that she sees herself “as represented in the dominant discourse” (Kramarae, 2005, p. 55). She chooses self-silence, which according to theory is a way the dominant group has succeeded in stifling her voice (Kramarae, 2005). The same could be said for the two black females who struggle most with racial stereotypes and admit to toning down and softening the firmness of their communications. These two women face a greater
amount of perceived backlash that stems from both racial and gender stereotypes. They speak of intentionally using emoticons as a way to come across less threatening or bossy.

Self-silencing is used by another during interactions with management. She does not bring forth ideas unless they are fully researched because she perceives this as a preferred method. She discusses suppressing her excitement when pitching these ideas:

Amy: You know how you'll go to somebody and you'll be so excited and typically that other person’s just like a downer. But if you go in with this idea with no expectations they may be excited. It's just the opposite effect. So I guess I go with no expectations. Just some ideas rather than a full-blown presentation and kind of let them feed off of the ideas. I think also if you kind of make it seem like it's their idea…then they seem to receive it better.

This text provides examples of how she takes on the dominant group’s communication to express her ideas. She suppresses her true voice to the extent that her ideas are even portrayed as those of someone else. She must “assimilate to masculine norms…Such assimilation mutes feminine voice and renders women as inarticulate due to the necessity of having to express themselves through a language that does not accommodate to their experiences” (Kissack, 2010, p. 541).

As a whole, this study reveals that communication techniques are funneled based on the perceived level of muted voice. Those in the first level of muted voice employ numerous techniques to alter their true voice. The analysis discusses politeness, relational practices, emoticons, and less assertive communication for the muted-but-engaged level. As the levels of mutedness increase, the communication techniques decrease. There is evidence that an inverse relationship exists between mutedness and communication techniques. The participant in the resigned level, the greatest level of mutedness, chooses to use the least communication
techniques. The findings align with muted group theory and reveal that “dominant groups of the social hierarchy (e.g. men) largely determine the dominant communication system of society, and the ways subordinate groups (e.g. women) are silenced and made inarticulate in the language” (Henley & Kramarae, 2001, p. 38).
Chapter 5: Summaries and Conclusions

This research brings attention to the communication struggles many women face in the workplace where their voices may be muted. The study shows muted voice is a challenge among females, and the communication styles employed vary depending on the individual’s perception of mutedness and the type of relationship that exists.

Limitations of the Study

The study has limitations that were a result of time allowed. Future research could overcome such issues. The study is limited in the amount of email communication reviewed. Subjects rarely volunteered work emails. Attempts to overcome email scarcity were made through interview questions directed at email techniques. Time and resources also did not allow for participant observation. The research would have benefited from this methodology to confirm the subject’s responses with how they behave in their environment. Observation would also make a better assessment for studying the exact type of communication techniques used and follow up with the participant based on what was discovered. Other limitations include sample size of subjects. Efforts were made to diversify the sample of women; two African American, and two Hispanic women were interviewed. Increased diversification would be beneficial. Most of the women interviewed were in managerial positions. Differing of positions in the organizational hierarchy was limited.

Further Study

Future research related to the topic of female muted voice in the workplace is still needed and could take on many forms. Future research could consider studying the communication patterns of female executives. Additionally an ethnographic study of several organizations would be useful in analyzing the affiliative language patterns as they occur and in what
situations. Research focusing specifically on muted voice in email communication would be beneficial for today’s organizations. Generational studies on email communication could investigate what several participants in this study mentioned: emoticons are used more and accepted with younger generations in the workplace. Have these emoticons helped or hindered female muted voice? Future research could consider whether emoticons are a tool to expressing voice or a way to prevent perceived backlash. There is more territory to cover in terms of female communication, and researchers should continue to study such patterns with less consideration of male-female comparisons. The organizational climate could play a greater role in determining communication strategies than gender. A company like The Body Shop, a female directed organization with support for intuitive decision-making, has a different social reality than Nike would for some women (Barker & Zifcak, 1999). Future research could also focus on mutedness in terms of relationships. This theme presented itself without any specific question directed toward relationships. Future work could assess how relationships impact mutedness based on perceptions. The African American women interviewed felt less silenced around those who knew them and were less likely to perceive them as an “angry black woman.” More research is needed specifically investigating this minority group and the angry perception black women face and must overcome.

Conclusions

This research (RQ2) sought to learn the specific situations that may cause muted voice, instead it appears that the situation is relationally based. For many respondents relationships are the key element in which muted voice is perceived. This aligns with the study’s philosophical assumptions. “The reinterpretation of women’s experience in terms of their own imagery of relationships thus clarifies that experience and also provides a nonhierarchical vision of human
connection” (Gilligan, 1993, p. 58). Mutedness or the process of being silenced is not a “fixed condition” (Orbe, 1996, p. 172). This research supports that claim. Participants were most interested in the relationship of those with whom they are communicating. Participants discussed the relationship as being a valuable factor in deciding their communication technique. Those interviewed had difficulty describing how they would communicate in situational events where the relationship of the participants was undefined. Interview questions asking how one might communicate in a particular situation were met with participant follow-up questions seeking information to define how they knew the other party and in what capacity.

Organizations would be wise in pursuing efforts for ongoing relationship development among employees. This study reveals the important role relationships hold in the level of perceived mutedness, and this should be a valued component of employee development. This relationship building could also assist in decreasing potential mutedness that may arise outside of gender in groups such as minorities and homosexuals. Muted group theory argues that the subordinate group’s voice is less heard because they are trying to communicate experiences that are unimportant to the dominant group “and they are trying to express them in a language system not designed for their interests and concerns” (Henley & Kramara, 2001, p. 38). How the relationship arises as a point of concern with the respondents is understandable. Women seem to be readily aware of relationships where their voice is important and those where attention to their experiences is rarely given (Henley & Kramarae, 2001). In some instances rather than assimilating to the dominant group’s communication, the women take on the communication the dominant group expects from women. Manipulating stereotypes is noted in Orbe (1996) and appears in this study as well. Several women discuss adding more emoticons because women are “supposed to be” gentle and compassionate. Others mention softening their assertive
approaches because of the same stereotype. This study pushes for a new consideration of muted group theory that includes: (a) the subordinate group’s intentional perpetuation of stereotypes to be heard, rather than assimilating to the dominant group’s communication style, and (b) self-silencing rather than making any assimilation attempts. “At both junctures, they are neglected the opportunity to utilize a language that is informed by their lived experiences” (Kissack, 2010, p. 543). The additional category added to the Mears et al. (2004) levels of mutedness pushes for realization that mutedness is not black and white. Muted voice has varying degrees as Mears et al. argue. However the previous literature does not address those who feel they have a voice yet unknowingly discuss symptoms of mutedness. Like the woman in this study who realized she was muted, bringing attention to the characteristics of muted behavior and reflection of one’s communication techniques may help advance the struggles women face in the workplace with an understanding toward solving them.
References


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doi:10.1177/0001839212439994


Appendix A: Informed Consent Agreement

**Project Title:** Female communication in the workplace

**Purpose of the research study:** The purpose of this study is to investigate how women communicate and the common techniques they use.

**What you will do in the study:** You will be asked to participate in a focus group discussing your experiences.

**Time required:** The focus group session will be no longer than an hour.

**Risks:** There are no risks.

**Benefits:** There are no direct benefits other than to understand female communication habits.

**Confidentiality:** The information that you give in the study will be handled confidentially. Your information will be assigned a code. The list connecting your name will be in a location known only to the researcher. When the study is completed and the data have been analyzed, this list will be destroyed. Your name will not be used in any report.

*Your participation is completely voluntary. You have the right to withdrawal your participation at any time.*

**Agreement:**

By signing below, I understand the statements above and agree to participate in the study.

Signature:__________________________
Appendix B: Interview/Focus Group Questions

1. Describe your level of comfort in sharing ideas, concerns, and questions with your organizational leaders or others in your organization.

2. Discuss a time when you tried to be assertive and its effect.

3. If you have ever been employed at a place where you often felt it best to “bite your tongue,” how would you discuss a major issue or concern?

4. When do you feel the need to “sugar coat” something and how would you phrase it?

5. What are some situations you might have chosen your words (verbal or written) so that you communicate in an expected way because you feared backlash of being assertive?

6. When do you use emoticons in your work emails? Why or why not?

7. Have you had a situation where you debated using emoticons or extra exclamation points?

8. When emailing someone in a superior role how assertive would you say you communicate?

9. How are women expected to communicate?
Appendix C

Table 3

*Source analysis by perception sub-themes*

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<th>Perception sub-themes</th>
<th>Muted Level</th>
<th>Backlash</th>
<th>Double Standard</th>
<th>Self Silence</th>
<th>Unequal Treatment</th>
<th>Age</th>
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Note: Highlighted sources were identified as the intra-group of muted females.