

Silence as a Power

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Sociological, political and feminist writings most often associate silence with powerlessness, particularly in relationships characterised by power imbalances. The greater the power of certain individuals, the more likely others with less power will experience humiliation and pain, and conclude with silence (McNay 1992; Eriksson et al. 2008; McLaren 2013). Hence, to understand the silence of the subject individual, one could propose that silence is a product of power rather than that of the individual.

Disempowered groups in a given social system likewise become silenced by the greater socio-political powers around them (Chávez and Griffin 2009). In particular, the power structures in some cultural contexts have vested interest in muting the scope and extent of particular social problems; silencing, therefore, may lead to increasing power of authorities and ongoing reinforcement of cruelty towards the oppressed. One significant example is the silencing of the extent, scope and ongoing abuse against women and children in some cultures and nations, which Romito (2008) locates as a *deafening silence* that persists despite genuine advances in the understanding of gender power and violence.

Those who are silenced send a variety of discursive messages, including that they are weak, passive, powerless or voiceless. Silence may then be interpreted by those with more power as assent to continue the domination, but paradoxically there exists a discourse-power dynamic in which silence is a product, and also a producer, of power (Foucault 1972; Butler 2006; McLaren 2013). This is a complex and ambiguous feature of power dynamics that are intrinsic to silence and this is instrumental in sustaining imbalances in the world. While power inflicts silence, silence also has the capacity to destabilise existing powers and structures of control. This brings to the forefront understanding that silence has discursive power.

In conceptualising silence as an unspoken language or text, it can then be agreed as a discourse in itself. Silence, as a discourse, has power. The power of silence is evident in many forums, including in education to motivate learners (Bista 2012) and in art to induce emotions and sensations among viewers (Stark 1963). In certain cultures silence is used to express politeness and it persuades respect (Shafiee Nahrkhalaji et al. 2013). In government and political systems, silence is

often used strategically as a social influence, evident in media reporting on Australia's 'official policy of evasion' in regard to immigration detention (Opray 2014) of refugees and asylum seekers. Government silence on *boat people*, including children, held on Manus Island detention centre has 'kept in the dark' human rights advocates and concerned individuals about violence and a lack of safety in immigration detention centres (Opray 2014). Silence has, in this case, served to ensure that human rights violations are not easily brought to the public sphere, thus minimising the influence of social protest. Finally, some forms of silence in official Australian policy are so powerful that they have endured, such as, for example, the lack of recognition of Aboriginal Australians in Australia's Constitution. In doing so, silence mobilises particular ways of thinking, knowledges, actions and relationships. Done so without words and without actions, silence significantly impacts on the power differentials between people, groups and political leadership. These power differentials exist locally, nationally and globally.

The first author in this edition is an Aboriginal woman of the Wiradjuri nation. Suzanne Ingram examines the shifts in social justice advocacy in which Western feminisms have historically spoken for Aboriginal women on the issue of domestic violence, often in ways that have rendered Aboriginal women voiceless by both social justice discourses and in their kinship systems. In using the concept of *influence*, Ingram elucidates the need for Aboriginal women to take a stand against being silenced in their interpersonal relationships, geopolitical contexts and the multiple layers of hegemonic structures.

Glory Gatwiri and Anne Karanja explore the silent protests of Kenyan women who *bargain with patriarchy* through mobilising silence in the face of oppressive situations. Using three case studies, the authors acknowledge patriarchal dominance and women's oppression. At the same time, they illuminate how silent protests are enacted by Kenyan women to negotiate existing hegemonic ideology and social organisation. Silence, as a *soft power*, they propose enables some women to negotiate their relationships within sections of society that are suffused in patriarchal and oppressive cultural practices.

In their article, *Silencing the Hardship: Bangladeshi Women, Microfinance and Reproductive Work*, Faraha

Nawaz and a colleague draw from an empirical study on microfinance. While microfinance is often argued to empower women by offering visions of alleviation from poverty, many women endure long hours in productive work for small incomes while continuing to endure reproductive work by virtue of being housewives in a patriarchal space. The authors argue that male domination and social respect prevent women beneficiaries of microfinance from speaking out about the double burden. This double burden is reinforced by microfinance advocates who assert it as empowering for women with such vigour that it obscures negative consequences for women. It is possible that powerful silencing of the double burden by key players may serve to increase women's oppression and not their empowerment.

While continuing with the theme of women's oppression at the hands of men's violence, Dora Owusu from Ghana reports on her research into domestic violence. Relevant to this themed edition is how women have become a muted group in Ghanaian society as a direct result of traditional practices, religion and economic dependency on men. Dora argues that many abused women are mute in pain, in silence, as a result of domestic violence and patriarchal dominance that is reinforced by the broader society. Imposed silence upon women, here, is a product of power rather than that of the individual. However, women's imposed silence also serves to silence violence against women in ways that prevent human rights, gender equity and social justice to advance. Dora offers normative and alternative conceptions about the politics of silence, including paradoxes in which silence is simultaneously consequential to power and an instrument of oppression in itself.

The fifth article provides this edition with a distinct shift to political-organisational considerations in the use of silence as a power. Cassandra Star explores the Australian Government's use of silencing dissent of non-government organisations (NGOs), including environmental advocacy organisations, during the era of the Abbott Government. She argues that the act of shrinking, de-legitimising and limiting NGOs' access to judicial systems was a tool of control; this silenced the democratic rights of NGOs, changed the nature of dialogue in the public sphere and undermined civil society. Government manipulating silence through these actions, argues Cassandra, served to shift the nature of Australian democracy.

Tejaswini Patil and Gretchen Ennis, too, draw on how silence is a discursive practice that has substantial influence in the public sphere and social consciousness. They employ a theoretical framework in which to explore notions of what can and cannot be said in the public sphere, including how this is manipulated by media to influence the public mind. Patil and Ennis

draw from a media case study and demonstrate the many ways in which dialogue becomes skewed from core issues as a result of media's manipulation of silences. Using as an example the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) television program *Insight*, particularly the episode *Joining the Fight* [in Syria], they offer an approach to understanding how discursivity may exist in what is not said (silence) as much as in what is said. Intentional manipulation by media, therefore draws on the overreliance of the public mind on what is said, as opposed to what is silenced. This power dynamic, which is intrinsic to silence, they suggest maintains dominant values and cultural perspectives over alternative views.

In the final paper, I draw from a small study of internet imagery with my Kenyan PhD scholar whose thesis focuses on the lives of African women living with vaginal fistula. On first noticing an imbalance of race represented in Internet images of vaginal fistula, Glory Gatwiri and I continued our exploration of how non-spoken silences may be influential in representations of race. This is achieved specifically with a focus on Internet images and we argue that silence is a power practised in visual forums in ways that may deny concern for lower class individuals and Black nations – thus silence operates at a broader level in regard to black women's health problems.

The contributors to this edition offer a context in which to commence guiding the reader on how silence operates as a power, but the power of silence is not exhaustive. In viewing silence as an intentional act by individuals, society and political players, particularly entities already endowed with power, silence may then be understood as a strategy used by individuals, groups in society and governments to 'get what they want' and to keep the oppressed mute. Using silence in this way to dominate, control and maintain the *status quo*, as opposed to silence as an end-product of power, is a much lesser theorised phenomenon. Both are elucidated in this edition.

The contributors to this special edition have located silence as power in interpersonal, cultural, social and political spaces, as well as in text (discourse), thus illuminating the role that silence plays within, across and between nations. However, theorising on silence is most often focused on the marginalised person, or persons, who are silenced as an end-product of discursive power. While these mainstream understandings of power in relationships are at the individual and systemic levels, unorthodox dialogues that challenge mainstream thinking are offered here in this all-inclusive theme that addresses *Silence as a Power*. In building relationships between silence as an act and silencing as an end-product, contributing authors expose how the understanding of silence as a power is critical for the deconstruction of silence more broadly.

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Reality haiku

"That woman with the Chinese accent,
She's hard to understand."
"We're all hard to understand."

MALACHI DOYLE,
MELBOURNE, VICTORIA.

Lucretia

It wasn't sudden, the rape.
For weeks I felt his eyes undressing me
fondling my breasts at his father's banquets.
I didn't like it but I could deal with it.
His mind – that was another matter –
imagining a pleasure and a power
that not even a Tarquin lust
could deliver.

Younger sons are often the best liars –
And Sextus was violent.
Prick! Prick! Prick!
Forget Shakespeare's decorous argument:
he slipped into my bed chamber
came up behind me
ripped off my robe.
I froze.

He hit me
held me down
forced my legs apart
hit me again, spat on my slit
to smoothe his swollen cock's forced entry.

It hurt.
And again when he rolled me over
split me from behind, he hit me more.
Blood on the marriage bed
for the second time.

I thought I was safe, married.
O I'm undone. Dirty.

I'll get the sleazy bastard.
Brutus and the boys will catch him,
push a sword slowly up his noble arse,
cut the prick off in his prime.

I'll get the whole rotten line of them
even if I have to die for it.
Where are you, husband?

DAVID GILBEY,
WAGGA WAGGA, NSW