



Countering Silencing: A Summary of the Dialogue and Deliberation

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This article reports on the innovative session held at the 2011 SCRA Biennial conference in Chicago, IL titled “Countering Silencing with Dialogue and Deliberation” that was hosted Friday June 17th, 10:45-11:30 am (Dello Stritto, Loomis, Shpungin, & Allen, 2011). Below we provide the purpose and relevance of the session and the history leading up to the development of proposing a dialogue session. Then summary comments of the dialogue are reported and reflected upon before closing with future recommendations.

Purpose and relevance to the SCRA Biennial Conference 2011:

The purpose of this innovative session was to provide a dedicated time and place for participants to dialogue and deliberate about silencing and to develop strategies to stop it. This innovative session provided an opportunity to discuss, explore, and document strategies for both individuals and the SCRA community to be more inclusive and prevent silencing from occurring in the future. The session directly addressed diversity and the discriminatory experiences of our members. It was directly related to the conference theme: *NEW pathways toward community change and transformation* because it focused on giving voice to session participants who co-developed strategies to change the interactions within our professional community, and to transform it into an organization that does not replicate societal power differences and abuses.

The results are being provided to SCRA to be posted on its website (in a summarized format different from what is reported here) as a resource and may be used in future sessions.

History:

At the 2005 SCRA Biennial the Women’s Committee hosted a roundtable discussion on feminism. The topic of sexism within conference interactions was raised, and brought to the Women’s Committee meeting. Members shared personal experiences and observations about what came to be labeled as examples of silencing: affecting women, students, people of color, people with disabilities and persons from outside North America. Silencing is defined as times when: a member’s “voice” seemed to be ignored, de-valued, shut out, or truncated – either subtly, directly, or through a lack of accommodation and/or support.

Examples include:

- members with less privilege being interrupted (or talked over)
- speakers routinely being cut short of their allotted time on panels
- having their comments/ideas ignored or dismissed

- being treated as a stereotype of their demographic group
- lacking appropriate/adequate accommodations for their disability or lifestyle (e.g., multiple ways of presenting information that did not assume all participants could hear or see well);
- being personally attacked based on their (non-majority) opinion, body of work, or group membership

The Voice Committee was established to explore ways to address silencing within the organization. The committee created an intervention to raise awareness of the issue while modeling alternative (voice-giving) ways of communicating within the organization. In 2007 SCRA Biennial, the committee presented the opening Plenary Session called— Sounds of Silence (Loomis, Dello Stritto, Allen, N., & Shpungin, 2007). This was based on the silencing stories collected from the membership. The committee selected themes and reworked personal narratives into scripts and monologues that were presented in the Plenary. At the same biennial, we held an innovative session in which participants practiced strategies and responses to silencing scenarios. The feedback we received was that participants enjoyed working with the anti-silencing tools and would enjoy further interventions.

Dialogue:

A total of nine participants (including co-presenters) formed two groups and participated in two rounds of dialogue.

The following is a summary of the discussions that occurred during each round. This summary does not attempt to interpret or thematically organize issues raised, but rather tracks the course of issues raised.

Round 1 Question: What are individual and structural factors that permit silencing to occur?

Group 1:

1. Formal and Informal factors: The group started with a discussion of formal factors that are a result of the silencer having more power. Power and status are two important factors. For example, the power and status that comes with being a faculty member may permit silencing to occur. Silencing can affect anyone not just individuals from structurally oppressed groups given certain contexts.
2. Voice of status: The group also discussed individuals who have power and status have the voice to say anything regardless of whether or not what they are saying is factual. Also, the language one uses can be silencing.
3. Expectations: An individual's expectations can be a factor that permits silencing. One's personal biases can affect what we expect someone to say or not to say and thus we don't really "hear" what they say (i.e. silencing). The example of accents was brought up. One may have an expectation based on hearing another's accent and this contributes to silencing. Another example was shared in which an individual came up to a Latina woman at a conference and apologized to his own ethnocentrism. He stated that he just saw the speakers as "Hispanic Ladies". In this case, the group discussed how just a name can be a factor (i.e. Latina name) can trigger expectations that may lead to silencing.
4. Personal power or empowerment was discussed as a factor in silencing. The group mentioned that if an individual feels empowered they may be less likely to be silenced.
5. Contextual factors were also discussed: Where a person is located in a room at the back or front of the room can influence silencing.
6. Ecological context: For example, is a room set up for individuals to sit in circles or are the tables built-in? The group discussed how the physical setting in classrooms reflects power that could contribute to silencing.

7. Token person status: An individual who is the token representative of their group may lead to silencing (or not). One participant discussed how this process is silencing to that individual because they have to speak for their entire group and their own personal voice is not heard. Another participant countered that there can be power in that token status when people are ready to listen to them.

Group 2:

8. Individual factors: Even though the question was for structural issues this group began by discussing individual ones, which may be an implicit comment about the need to address individual issues and (or before as a group of psychologists, or from social and cultural factors of living in the U.S.). At the individual level the following issues effect communication style: smiling, personality, sensitivity to including others, and sensitivity to attribute exclusion of self or others as cultural or ethnic issues,
9. Structural factors: One structural issue may be SCRA's professional culture; perhaps it has underlying/implicit norms for individual responsibility to speak so others to not monitor who speaks and who is silent. Another point raised was about avoiding embarrassment by asking someone else (who has been silent) to contribute when perhaps s/he is not prepared, engaged or interested in participating in the discussion. A point was raised about a possible cultural conflict with cultures that value silence.
10. Settings: There was discussion about the need to create settings/spaces at the conference that are more conducive to including marginalized and oppressed voices.
11. New Members: The importance of having structures in place to give "new members" voice was discussed, with the "mentoring" program mentioned. Also, it was noted that during at least one past conference "new members" had a unique color ribbon and others were encouraged to explicitly include new members in conversations and invitations (e.g., to dinner, coffee, etc.).
12. Organizational structures: Perhaps some institutional analysis can be conducted to assess which current structures of the organization unintentionally result in "othering".
13. Disciplinary explanations for silencing were also raised, for example psychology having a more dominant voice at the conference over women's studies, public health, etc.

Round 2: The groups were introduced to the concept of Restorative justice (RJ): when interpersonal damage has been done, how do we restore and undo this damage?

Question: How do you envision that RJ principles may be applied to counter silencing?

Group 1:

1. The group discussed the example provided in Round 1 in which an individual approached the Latina speaker and apologized for his ethnocentrism.
2. Sponsor a workshop to address racism and ethnocentrism
 - a. One participant suggested that some individuals are unwilling to "see" silencing that is happening. When the experience is not internalized they may not be able to really understand silencing. Thus, having an experience of silencing needs to come first. This could be simulated in a workshop.
3. Counter your own silencing. One participant provided an example of when she had silenced, she apologized directly: "I inadvertently did this....". This group also discussed the public apologies, social policy changes, and the giving back of land in New Zealand as restorative justice for the Maori population.

4. Commitment to global inclusion: Allow for individuals to submit abstracts to conferences in US in other languages beyond English.
5. One participant recounted an experience she had when attending a presentation from a woman who was a refugee from El Salvador who had been mutilated. She was telling her story but there was no audience and thus her voice was not heard. It was suggested that her story being included in the concurrent sessions in a format that was atypical for the usual conference presentation may have resulted in fewer attendees. SCRA biennials may continue to adopt innovative formats so that there is space for such first person narratives. Also, it was suggested that SCRA should also consider working with an organization that could help such refugee women.

Group 2:

6. Apologies: The role of “apology” was discussed with questions raised about power and who would apologize when and how. Again, professional cultural norms were highlighted.
7. Recommendation: It was noted that there is a need for “a third party” to intervene, so a structural recommendation is for SCRA to develop and sustain a prevention and intervention task force for educating for prevention and intervening when injustices of silencing occur.

Closing discussion, reflections, and future directions

Reflecting on silencing issues in the present conference:

The proposal for this session requested 90 minutes, however, when accepted and scheduled it was cut to 45 minutes. Ironically, this programming change in effect silenced the work of the SCRA Voice Committee because there was not sufficient time to fully develop the dialogue or to provide needed information on restorative justice. Further, this conference session was assigned a space that included the lunch set-up and staff coming in and out which was disruptive. Finally, the session was not well attended. This can also have a silencing effect and may reflect the number of concurrent sessions offered relative to the number of attendees. This likely reflects a tension regarding the inclusion of many proposals and the desire to populate all sessions with participants. In spite of the limitations faced in this particular innovative session, we continue the movement to raise awareness about the need for addressing structural issues within the Society for Community Research and Action that privilege some voices while silencing others (see Shpungin, Allen, Loomis, & Dello Stritto, in press).

Ideas for future biennials:

1. Including in several sessions (plenary & symposia) consciousness raising about silencing and having trained facilitators who work to include silenced voices.
2. Publish in the program (online and in print) tips for “deep listening”.
3. Have educational interventions derived from critical pedagogy and combined with interactive performance practices. The goal is to provide various forums for us to interact in ways that create opportunities for individual and societal engagement in authentic dialogue on silencing and resolutions to stop it. Theatre has been suggested as an approach for engaging faculty members for diversity training (Burgoyne, Placier, Taulbee, & Welch, 2008) and may be appropriate for SCRA members. Some formats for these exchanges include Restorative Peacemaking Circles (Boyes-Watson, 2005), Theatre of the Oppressed (Boal, 1985; 1992; 1995), and Theater for Development (Shpungin et al., in press).

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