

Muted Group Theory: A Tool for Hearing Marginalized Voices

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Muted Group Theory (MGT) is a sociological tool that aids in the study of interactions between dominant and sub-dominant groups—including, but not limited to, men and women. MGT can help those who have become aware of dynamics between the powerful and the marginalized but do not have a clear framework for articulating this awareness. MGT is well suited to exploring the subtle and overlapping power issues that occur in various settings, including, for example, congregational ministry and missions. More specifically, MGT has frequently been found useful for understanding communication dynamics between men and women.¹

This article will be structured in three main sections. First, MGT will be introduced in terms of its development from the 1970s to the present, its basic tenets (dominance, acceptance, subordination, change), and current academic discussions regarding related theories, strengths, and weaknesses. Second, the article will test the usefulness of MGT by means of a case study involving female prisoners (a non-dominant group) and prison ministry volunteers (a dominant group). A discussion of practical applications of MGT will conclude the article.

The Beginning and Development of MGT

MGT originated within the discipline of anthropology. The husband and wife anthropological team of Edwin and Shirley Ardener coined the term “Muted Group Theory” in 1975.² Edwin Ardener, seeking an explanation for why women’s perspectives and voices were absent from anthropological studies, realized that women’s voices are “often more ‘inarticulate’ than men, and thus pose special technical problems for the inquirer.”³ He argued that women are at a disadvantage in expressing matters of concern unless their views are presented in a form acceptable to men or to “women brought up in the male idiom.”⁴ Edwin adopted the term “muted” over the word “inarticulate” to counter some feminists’ misunderstanding that he was referring to a biological condition.⁵

To further specify the historical context, MGT was building on Marshall McLuhan’s famous statement regarding communication theory, “The medium is the message.”⁶ Thus MGT claimed that it is not only the way that data is encoded by society (“the medium”) that results in muting. In fact, groups can be muted by the nature of discourse, even when the message contradicts the medium.⁷ Shirley Ardener noticed that, even when male anthropologists stated that they were taking women’s voices seriously, women were often literally parenthesized, that is, referred to as “(or her)” or “(and wife).”⁸

It is important to note that, although Edwin was looking at the predicament of women, their theory was not in response to gender alone. Shirley reminds us, “that MGT was not only, or even primarily, about women—although women comprised a conspicuous case in point.”⁹ In fact, it was Edwin’s experiences

as a scholastic youth among more powerful athletic youths that led him to conceive of the issues between dominant and sub-dominant groups. Therefore, while the first scholars to take up the discussion of MGT were feminists (such as the Australian Dale Spender, the American Cheri Kramarae, and the British Deborah Cameron), from its very conception MGT was intended to be more than a gendered, feminist theory.

The second MGT iteration is credited to Kramarae, who in 1981 discovered in MGT a relevance to the field of communications.¹⁰ She noted that MGT informs how power functions in speech, writing, and language in general. She applied MGT to gendered communication studies, arguing that, since accepted language practices have been constructed primarily by men in order to express their experiences, women have thus been muted.¹¹

Tenets of MGT

There are three basic tenets of MGT and how dominant and sub-dominant groups communicate. The first concerns dominance; MGT addresses the issues that result from unequal participation in generating and expressing ideas. The second concerns acceptability; MGT addresses the realities and values of sub-dominant groups when they are inadequately recognized by the dominant group. The third pertains to subordination; MGT identifies the mechanisms that limit access to arenas where societal rewards are obtained.¹²

Dominance

Because dominant and sub-dominant groups are afforded different experiences, they perceive the world differently.¹³ The dominant group, however, is privileged to create and define terms. These dominant and sub-dominant groups operate as “simultaneities,”¹⁴ though there may be movement between membership in groups that are variously dominant and sub-dominant.

Acceptability

The sub-dominant group’s modes of expression are less acceptable to and less respected by the dominant group.¹⁵ MGT focuses on the way language names experiences and therefore determines which facets of social and individual meanings and behaviors are recognized and respected.¹⁶

Subordination

Therefore, the sub-dominant groups must use the dominant mode of communication, either translating into the dominant mode of expression or becoming “bilingual” and speaking in both modes.¹⁷ Normalizing and centering all points of reference within the dominant experience, while the voices of non-dominant individuals and groups are minimized, stigmatized, or muted, can be described as cultural imperialism.¹⁸

Resistance and Change

Though not explicitly named by the Ardeners or Kramarae, I agree with Mary Meares and her co-authors that there is a critical, though often unstated, fourth tenet. An integral and vital component of MGT is that resistance and change are possible.¹⁹ This is what keeps MGT from being a pessimistic labeling of the marginalized and turns it into an optimistic tool for providing hope and voice to the marginalized. It is not enough that MGT states that change and resistance are possible; MGT also provides the tools for confronting and resisting the muting of marginalized groups.

Current Academic Discussions of MGT

Current discussions of MGT occur around two nexuses. The first concerns what distinguishes MGT from related theories, in particular Feminist Standpoint Theory (FST) and Co-cultural Theory.²⁰ The second issue considers the strengths and weaknesses of MGT.

Feminist Standpoint Theory

FST is frequently linked to MGT in academic literature.²¹ Both theories focus on providing a voice to the marginalized.²² FST is interested in language, culture, and politics functioning as “prisonhouses of conventional knowledge” in a way that is closely related to MGT.²³ Both MGT and FST recognize the hierarchical structure of society that results in some groups being dominant over others. Both also recognize and value the knowledge and lives of sub-dominant groups. In fact, a sub-dominant group’s knowledge may reflect reality more closely than that of the dominant group.²⁴

However, MGT and FST are distinct in two major ways. First, MGT focuses on language and the power of naming while FST focuses on knowledge and how this knowledge is structured by power relations.²⁵ The second difference entails the point of view. While MGT looks to the social landscape to see and hear the groups being described, FST listens to the labels used by individuals to describe their own places.²⁶ This individual focus results from FST entailing conscious knowledge of and struggle against the dominant group worldview; one must consciously choose a standpoint.²⁷ MGT’s position is in sharp contrast—not only does one not consciously choose to be muted, but due to the lack of language to describe life experiences, muted group members may not even recognize that they are muted.²⁸

Strengths and Weaknesses of MGT

MGT has been criticized, rightly, for having some deficiencies in accounting for gender differences in communications.²⁹ These deficiencies are exacerbated when MGT is unfortunately only found discussed in the gender section of certain undergraduate communication texts, where it hides as but one more incomplete theory of gendered communication issues.³⁰ A quick search on YouTube.com reveals a number of undergraduate presentations on MGT for communication classes where muted group and women seem to be synonymous. However, I reiterate that MGT was never intended to be primarily about gender, and gender is a complex issue that involves more than power dynamics.

MGT is about power dynamics, but it is relationships, not merely situations, which are responsible for muting voices.³¹ Understanding the processes of dominance and muting requires a broader analysis of the context—political, economic, and institutional—in which reality is negotiated.³² It is true that MGT does not account for all linguistic gender differences. Nevertheless, this is not a fatal flaw, for MGT does indeed still contribute significantly to understanding some gender differences.

A more serious drawback to MGT could be Kramarae’s admission that, simplistically used, MGT might encourage talk of victimization.³³ But just as above, this criticism is not inherent to MGT as much as it is with practitioners. If MGT is used only to label sub-dominant groups as muted or inarticulate, then victimization becomes an issue. But this is not using MGT within its intent; MGT has the capacity to explain how muting occurs so that corrective action by both dominant and non-dominant groups can be taken to the ultimate benefit of both.

Celia Wall and Pat Gannon-Leary answer the charge that MGT fails to acknowledge the fact that women do speak publicly with the observation that the concept of male/female arena division has been discredited and that “separate spheres are rarely truly separate.”³⁴ This charge falters because MGT does indeed account for the fact that the sub-dominant group may speak, but that the language of the dominant group must be used for that speech to be recognized and respected. I experienced this myself when, as a first year PhD student, I found myself being graded down for written use of language that my male teaching assistants considered “not academic,” but that I recognized was how many women speak. This was especially frustrating because I had already consciously chosen not to use forms and vocabulary that were associated with my enculturation. But I have now learned to use the language of the dominant group in order to have my voice heard within academia.

Further, while for the most part in the United States women are a sub-dominant group and men form a dominant group, not all men are always members of dominant groups. For example, power roles are reversed when the man is a prisoner and the woman is a correctional officer. MGT allows for and explains these reversals, accounting for the fact that no one group is always dominant and marginalized members sometimes participate in dominating other groups.³⁵

While some users of MGT may neglect the complex nature of gender, class, and ethnic domination, a great strength of MGT is that the theory itself respects the complexities of cultural differences.³⁶ Wall and Gannon-Leary, upon revisiting MGT in 1999, found it to still be relevant beyond gender-based applications.³⁷ Carol Pierce Colfer suggests that “valuable information and perspectives” are possessed by muted groups, which in the business world can aid in planning and building effective programs.³⁸

MGT is a tool for engaging with the various levels at which dominance and sub-dominance defines groups and affects the ability of persons to effectively articulate their life experiences. In this way, MGT accounts for the power dynamic that results

in muting between groups of women where the dominant group does not even recognize that they are dominant.

Meares has advanced MGT by research that has revealed that there are three types of muted response: 1. Muted but engaged, 2. Angrily disengaged, and 3. Resigned.³⁹ Their research was done in the context of business and mistreatment of employees, but their results reach beyond this immediate context. In accepting their assumption that it is reasonable to equate muting with mistreatment, their grouping of responses is applicable to other muted groups. Muted but engaged persons remain constructive and have not given up trying to work through the system, despite their frustrations from neither being heard nor receiving a response from the dominant group.⁴⁰ Angrily disengaged persons focus on anger, when their agency is limited, in order to avoid the situation or the mistreater.⁴¹ Their reaction to muting is thus to withdraw physically.⁴² The resigned response is an extension of the angrily disengaged, where no optimism that change is possible remains for the muted persons who therefore become resigned and apathetic.⁴³ Still, even when sub-dominant group members are resigned to not being heard, MGT provides an understanding that could result in dominant group members learning to recognize that muting has occurred, with the potential outcome of their learning to hear, accept, and respect the different experiences of sub-dominant group members.

A final and overarching strength of MGT that has been touched on throughout this article but bears specific mention is its recognition of intersectionality. That is, MGT navigates the intersections of dynamic categories such as gender, ethnicity, and class—a necessity for any framework that seeks to provide clarity and progress.

Case Study: California Institution for Women

My research involves advocating for women prisoners—specifically, proving the existence and significance of the communication gap between women prisoners and prison ministry volunteers (PMVs) in California prisons. I come to this interest honestly; I served thirty years as a prisoner at the California Institution for Women (CIW) in southern California.⁴⁴ For most of my years within the institution, I served as lay minister and “moderator,” a position that included acting as inmate liaison between the PMVs and my fellow inmates.

As a result, I personally experienced a communication gap with the PMVs, but did not have the vocabulary or framework to describe my experience. Upon embarking upon my PhD research, I knew that there was a power dynamic involved, but I could not initially find a theory that adequately explained this dynamic. It was not until I discovered MGT that the pieces started to fall into place.

My research is driven by a phenomenon I observed in prison that deeply troubled me. Women prisoners who made obvious life-changing commitments to Christ during their incarceration often subsequently violated conditions of parole and returned to prison. Particularly disconcerting was my observation that, frequently, these women presented themselves as being as happy to return to their “home church” in prison as they had been when

anticipating freedom and parole. This was in sharp contrast to biblical principles that proclaim freedom to the prisoner (e.g., Isa 42:7), transformation into a new creature in Christ (e.g., 2 Cor 5:17), freedom from sin (e.g., John 8:34), and newness of life in Jesus (e.g., Rom 6:4).

I began to suspect that this irony involved unrealistic perceptions by women prisoners of what the churches outside of prison were like and how much support those churches would provide. It was not until I had experienced both the reality of the prisoner and the reality of the churches in the free world that I realized the place of power dynamics and communication gaps. I recalled hearing PMVs on many occasions saying something to the effect of, “What a wonderful church you have here! I can just feel the presence of the Holy Spirit here! I attend a wonderful church on the outside, and your church feels just like one of our services. When you get out of prison you should come visit our church.” Indeed, I have a collection of church addresses given to me by these well-meaning and sincere volunteers.

It is important to remember that we prisoners who convert to Christ in prison do not generally have experiential knowledge of what a “wonderful church” is outside of prison. What these PMVs were trying to communicate, I have come to understand is a place where weekly or biweekly services are well attended by sincere believers and where the presence of God is meaningfully experienced through worship and word. However, as a prisoner, my understanding of church was quite different. Church at CIW happened several times a day, seven days a week. A believing prisoner at CIW is never farther than a hundred yards from other believers who are not only willing to pray for and with her at any time, but who share the common experience of what it means to be a prisoner. A Christian prisoner knows that the community of believers in prison will help and support her, whether through financial difficulties, finding a prison job, health issues, the emotional trauma of family issues, or any other life circumstance that is too great to handle alone. Given the prisoners’ understanding of church, therefore, I observed that many women prisoners, especially those in prison for a short time, prepared for release by focusing all of their time and energy on attending worship services, Bible studies, and fellowshiping with other believers, to the neglect of other preparatory activities such as vocational or academic education and sobriety programs. So how was I, as an academic researcher, to account for and explain this chasm between these two definitions of “church”?

MGT allows me to account for muting on both macro and micro levels. This ability is important because, while women prisoners are muted on many levels, many PMVs are similarly muted. On the macro level, while all CIW prisoners are women, many of the PMVs are also women. Even though MGT is most often used to explain the gender-based muting of women as a sub-dominant group to the dominant group of men, it is an improper understanding of MGT to limit its use to the gender dynamic. Frequently, women prisoners and women PMVs share membership in various marginalized, sub-dominant groups based on ethnicity, on socio-economic status, on education, or even on LGBT identity. But while gender dynamics are

significant, and these dynamics are present in communications between women prisoners and male PMVs, MGT allows me to explore additional power dynamics.

Prison mutes. This is not a covert and subtle muting. For example, universally known to prisoners and virtually unknown to the general public is that prisoners cannot be interviewed by media without the permission of prison administration and an organization such as the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation. Prisoner phone calls are universally monitored and only allowed under threat of punishment for anything deemed inappropriate communication. In the dining hall, the loudest voices are those of the correctional officers yelling, "Quiet! You're here to eat, not talk!" In the halls of the prison clinic, again the correctional officers loudly demand, "No talking! It's too loud in here!" with the implication of disciplinary action and loss of medical services for non-compliance.

PMVs often do not realize how great the gap is that is caused simply by their status as non-prisoners. For the most part, PMVs are local missionaries, entering into the foreign culture of prison. The degree of muting of prisoners in context with PMVs is lost even on the prisoners in comparison to the overt muting of the macro-level power dynamic. This is why FST, with its requisite cognition and resistance, proved an unsuitable theological foundation for this research. The critical reflection necessary to meet the definition of FST is for the most part nonexistent within the women's prison milieu. MGT's position is more applicable. A prisoner talking with a PMV has so many fewer constraints, and is so much closer to an equal power dynamic, that the micro-level dynamic is easily overlooked even by the prisoner. This is where MGT can explain the impact that even these micro level power differences have on communication. Both the more dominant PMV and the sub-dominant prisoner groups are unaware of the experiences of each other, which results in a double-blind communication gap. While it is the sub-dominant group that is hindered from making adequate preparation for parole by not comprehending the realities of the church in the community, the PMVs simultaneously lose the opportunity to experience church in a context that is much closer to the first century church.

Applications and Implications of MGT

In my several interviews in preparation for this article, it was common for me to hear a statement to the effect of, "MGT definitely relates to my area of specialization and gives me a way to explain the dynamics we all see but don't have a way to describe." This holds true for fields of interest as diverse as missiology and intercultural communication, at-risk children, leadership, and urban studies. In any context where power and dominance dynamics exist (are there any where they do not?), MGT is helpful in explaining not only how these dynamics function, but also the implications of these dynamics for those who are marginalized and sub-dominant.

It is further important to remember that it is not only the most dominant group in a specific culture that mutes. MGT explains the process by which any group that is more dominant may be

muting any group that is slightly less dominant. Egalitarians must specifically look for the occurrence of muting in terms of both macro-level and micro-level dominance differences. Some dominant and sub-dominant group-forming dichotomies are universal, such as the dominance of the rich over the poor. Others are obvious within particular cultures, such as exist within caste systems or within power inequalities stemming from gender or ethnicity. A prime example is the importance of macro-level muting of prisoners by correctional officers discussed above. Yet just as important is the micro-level dominance differences that occur where the dominance distance is subtle, such as between prisoners and PMVs.

Conclusion

MGT explains the communication dynamics between those of unequal power. Dominant groups experience and perceive the world differently than non-dominant groups. Further, the dominant group names experiences, while sub-dominant modes of expression are less respected or accepted. Risking the loss of societal benefits, the sub-dominant group therefore must speak in a language and mode that does not adequately describe their experience.

MGT makes clear that marginalized groups are muted groups, and vice versa. It explains why the muting of sub-dominant groups can be difficult to see from the dominant group's position of power. However, MGT's unstated fourth tenet, that resistance and change are possible, gives us hope. Even when we are in positions of relative power, we do not have to remain blind or deaf. This may mean either living as a member of a marginalized group or doing the hard but necessary work involved in gaining a nuanced understanding of that group's experience. I maintain that we are all, in some way or at some time, members of sub-dominant groups. If we apply what we experience there to situations in which we have some degree of dominance, we will be able to minimize our muting of others, help those who are muted to find a voice, and learn to hear what those voices are saying.

Open your mouth for the mute,
For the rights of all the unfortunate.
Open your mouth, judge righteously,
And defend the rights of the afflicted and needy.
(Prov 31:8-9 NASB)

Notes

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17. Wall and Gannon-Leary, "A Sentence Made by Men," 26.
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20. Co-cultural Theory is an attempt to integrate MGT and FST. See Mark Orbe, "Continuing the Legacy of Theorizing from the Margins: Conceptualizations of Co-Cultural Theory," *Women and Language* 28, no. 2 (2005): 65–66, 72; Allison and Hibbler, "Organizational Barriers to Inclusion," 261–62.
21. Allison and Hibbler, "Organizational Barriers to Inclusion"; Kramarae, "Muted Group Theory and Communication"; Consolata Nthemba Mutua, "Opposite Worlds, Singular Mission: Teaching as an ITA," *New Directions for Teaching & Learning* 138 (2014): 51–60; Richard L. West and Lynn H. Turner, "Introducing Communication Theory: Analysis and Application," 2nd ed., in McGraw-Hill Higher Education Online Resources (2004); Julia T. Wood, "Feminist Standpoint Theory and Muted Group Theory: Commonalities and Divergences," *Women and Language* 28, no. 2 (2005): 61–65.
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23. Kramarae, "Muted Group Theory and Communication," 58.
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36. Kramarae, "Muted Group Theory and Communication," 58.
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40. Meares et al., "Employee Mistreatment and Muted Voices," 13–14.
41. Meares et al., "Employee Mistreatment and Muted Voices," 15.
42. Meares et al., "Employee Mistreatment and Muted Voices," 16.
43. Meares et al., "Employee Mistreatment and Muted Voices," 16–17.
44. I was incarcerated at CIW from 1980 to 2010, as a result of domestic violence; the man with whom I had been cohabiting beat my two-year-old daughter to death. Because I was unable to stop him, and this was prior to the state's recognition of battered woman syndrome, I was considered an abettor and was sentenced to fifteen years to life in prison. For twenty-eight years I served as lay minister to the psychiatric unit of the prison. Most of my MTh degree from Fuller Theological Seminary was completed while incarcerated. After having parole granted by the Board of Prison Hearings eleven times between 1989 and 2010, and then vetoed the first ten times by California governors, I was finally released from prison on August 12, 2010. I am now discharged from parole, have completed a PhD at Fuller Theological Seminary, and continue to advocate for women prisoners.



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