

SILENCE

Mary Field Belenky

What would it be like if you had no idea who you were? What if your sense of self was so underdeveloped that you defined yourself by where you tended to be or by what others told you to do? Unfortunately, women in our society may be more likely than men to fall into this condition.

Mary Belenky and her colleagues studied “silent women” who were economically, socially, and educationally deprived, examining their lack of self-concept and their dependence on external authority. This selection from *Women’s Ways of Knowing* examines how these women became “deaf and dumb” and the context which reinforced their condition.

The reading also speculates about the sorts of social interactions that enable social autonomy. Whereas Plato, Jefferson, and Emerson might simply advocate independence, Belenky and her colleagues argue that social support can set women free. They suggest that society, including the educational system, can create a context giving women voice. As you read this selection, think about what sorts of experiences enabled you to develop your own voice. What skills must you develop to better think for yourself? Q

Where language and naming are power,
silence is oppression, is violence.

—Adrienne Rich, 1977

A woman we call Ann described being locked into a world of silence throughout her childhood and early adult years: “I could never understand what they were talking about. My schooling was very limited. I didn’t learn anything. I would just sit there and let people ramble on about something I didn’t understand and would say, Yup, yup. I would be too embarrassed to ask, What do you really mean?” Trying to find meaning in the words that others spoke was painfully difficult for Ann, but talking with others was even more terrifying. Feeling dumb, Ann was certain that no one could understand her, or that if

someone did, it would be only to tell her she “had it wrong.” “I had trouble talking. If I tried to explain something and someone told me that it was wrong, I’d burst into tears over it. I’d just fall apart.”

Responding to the demands and status conferred by motherhood and to the support of a children’s health program, Ann had just begun to acknowledge and cultivate her intellectual capacities. Ann’s story of herself as a knower—the notions that she had adopted, questioned, and replaced—weaves in and out of the first chapters of the book *Women’s Way of Knowing*. She is a particularly articulate spokesperson for adolescents and adults who have only begun to think about thinking. Q

... We begin our description of women’s

Belenky, Mary Field. “Silence.” From *Women’s Way of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind* by Mary Field Belenky et al. Basic Books, 1986, pp. 23–34. Copyright © 1986 by Basic Books, Inc. Reprinted by permission of Basic Books, a member of Perseus Books, L.L.C.

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ways of knowing with the simplest way we could discern. While only two or three women viewed the world from this perspective at the time of the interview, others, like Ann, described the outlook in retrospect. These silent women were among the youngest and the most socially, economically, and educationally deprived of all those we interviewed. We met them in the social agencies for parents, not on the college campuses. We recognize that the designation of *silence* is not parallel to the terms we have chosen for the other epistemological positions; nevertheless, we selected it because the absence of voice in these women is so salient. This position, though rare, at least in our sample, is an important anchoring point for our epistemological scheme, representing an extreme in denial of self and in dependence on external authority for direction.

Feeling “Deaf and Dumb”

Figures of speech suggesting gaining a voice were used repeatedly by many of the women we interviewed to describe how they experienced their own growth and development—particularly the growth of mind. Such images, however, were conspicuously absent from the descriptions given by the women of silence.

Even though each of the women had the gifts of intelligence and of all their senses, they were unaware of the potential of such gifts. While no one was actually “deaf and dumb,” this metaphor suggests their experience more accurately than does “gaining a voice.” They felt “deaf” because they assumed they could not learn from the words of others, “dumb” because they felt so voiceless. As one person said, “Someone has to show me—not tell me—or I can’t get it.”

In trying to understand the experience of voice for the silent women, we searched their stories for all references that had, by the broadest stretch of the imagination, any association with the idea of voice and found that one theme stood out in bold relief: Words were perceived as weapons. Words were used to separate and

diminish people, not to connect and empower them. The silent women worried that they would be punished just for using words—any words. The following examples give the flavor of their experience:

I deserved to be hit, because I was always mouthing off.

I don’t like talking to my husband. If I were to say no, he might hit me.

I had to get drunk so I could tell people off.

The baby listens to him. Men have deep voices. But me, I can’t do anything with him.

At home people talk about you. People know your business and everything else. . . . Lots of rumors are always going around.

The silent women lived cut off from others in a world full of rumor and innuendo. Words arise out of wrath, and they provoke wrath. One young woman described the war of words that was waged in the aftermath of her father’s being sent to jail for their incestuous relationship. “Nobody liked me. Everybody used to make fun of me. This girl came over and beat me up and she said, ‘I wouldn’t spit on you if your guts were on fire!’ Then the landlord yelled at me—not my mother—because the house was such a mess. It was all too much for me to handle, so I ran away.” The young woman had only one way to think of herself: “I was a loudmouth. I didn’t think nothing of telling someone where to go.” She conceived of her voice as aggressive and incriminating.

While we found in these interviews a few descriptions suggesting the barest experience of dialogue with others, there were no indications of dialogue with “the self.” There were no words that suggested an awareness of mental acts, consciousness, or introspection. When asked to finish the sentence “My conscience bothers me if . . .” Cindy, a pregnant fifteen-year-old, wrote

“someone picks on me.” She did not comprehend words that suggest an interior voice that could give herself mental directions and exhortations.*

Experiencing Disconnection

Although the silent women develop language, they do not cultivate their capacities for representational thought. They do not explore the power that words have for either expressing or developing thought. Language is a tool for representing experience, and tools contribute to creative endeavors only when used. Language—even literacy—alone does not lead automatically to reflective, abstract thought (Scribner and Cole 1981; Sigel and Cocking 1977). In order for reflection to occur, the oral and written forms of language must pass back and forth between persons who both speak and listen or read and write—sharing, expanding and reflecting on each other’s experience. Such interchanges lead to ways of knowing that enable individuals to enter into the social and intellectual life of their community. Without them, individuals remain isolated from others; and without tools for representing their experiences, people also remain isolated from the self.

The seminal work of Russian psychologist A.R. Luria (1979, 1981) was one of the first attempts to describe structures of thought held by those who had not developed their capacities for representational thinking. He interviewed illiterate peasants still living a medieval way of life at the time of the Russian Revolution. To distinguish practical from conceptual forms of thought, Luria (1979, pp. 77–80) asked the peasants to solve problems whose content was presented in the form of words divorced from the peasants’ practical experience, such as: “In the far north, where there is snow, all bears are white. Novaya Zemlya is in the far north. What color are the bears there?” By following their answers, Luria determined if they were able to draw conclusions based on logical deductions from linguistic propositions as well as from their actual experi-

ence. Unable to work from words for making inferences, the peasants would say such things as, “If you want an answer to that question, you should ask people who have been there and seen them,” “We don’t talk about what we haven’t seen. What I know, I say, and nothing beyond that,” “Your words can be answered only by someone who was there, and if a person wasn’t there, he can’t say anything on the basis of your words.”

While Luria’s peasants had considerable difficulties working and learning from the verbal accounts of others, these interview fragments suggest that they speak with a high degree of confidence in the knowledge they have gained through their own observations, experiences, and actions. The repeated use of the pronoun *we* in the interviews also intimates collaborative efforts and shared learning. Although the peasants’ world may exclude meaningful learning and communication with those beyond their immediate experience, one may assume that they live in the midst of a richly populated community where common experiences are readily shared and understood.

Unlike Luria’s peasants, the silent women have no more confidence in their ability to learn from their own experience than they have in learning from the words that others use. Because the women have relatively underdeveloped representational thought, the ways of knowing available to them are limited to the present (not the past or the future); to the actual (not the imaginary and the metaphorical); to the concrete (not the deduced or the induced); to the specific (not the generalized or the contextualized); and to behaviors actually enacted (not values and motives entertained).

Unlike Luria’s peasants they have no sense of “we-ness” with others. Their difficulties with establishing the most basic connections with others are dramatically illustrated by Bonnie’s inability to find meaning in the cries of her baby, an inability that seems similar to the difficulties she experienced in trying to find meaning in the words used by others. When her baby was first born, Bonnie thought all her

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daughter's cries sounded alike. Later Bonnie realized that her daughter's cries could be differentiated.

"There are certain cries to a baby. If they want to be held, or if they want a bottle—things like that. I never used to listen to her cries. I used to pick her up and put a bottle in her mouth. I thought that's all babies wanted. You put a bottle in the baby's mouth and she'll be quiet. That was before I kind of realized that there's more than just a bottle. For some reason, I never thought about changing her diapers. I don't know why. I couldn't. It never clicked in my head to change her diaper. There are some things that just wouldn't click in my head that I should have done. Now I think of all those nights that I could have just changed her diaper."

Bonnie's retrospective account leads us to believe that assuming the responsibilities of parenthood had encouraged her to move out of silence, and that with this move she had become more able to find meaning in her daughter's utterances.*

Obeying the Wordless Authorities

The inability of the silent women to find meaning in the words of others is reflected also in their relations with authorities. While they feel passive, reactive, and dependent, they see authorities as being all-powerful, if not overpowering. These women are aware of power that is accrued to authorities through might but not through expertise. They do not envision authorities communicating their thoughts through words imbued with shared meanings. In their experience authorities seldom tell you what they want you to do; they apparently expect you to know in advance. If authorities do tell you what is right, they never tell you why it is right. Authorities bellow but do not explain. They are unpredictable.

The women see blind obedience to authorities as being of utmost importance for keeping out of trouble and ensuring their own survival, because trying to know "why" is not thought to be either particularly possible or important.

Cindy depended almost completely on authorities for direction. She could not consider abortion because her mother doesn't approve of abortions. When asked why her mother doesn't approve, she said it's because her grandmother doesn't approve. When asked why her grandmother doesn't approve, she said, "I don't really know. She just says she doesn't believe in them."

Cindy then went on to say that she, her mother, and her grandmother belonged to a very strict religion and "we, in our religion, don't believe in abortion." Asked why their religion opposes abortion, she said that no one had ever explained the reasons to her. "They didn't say; they just said we didn't believe in them." The wordless/mindless authorities carry great weight.

Even if the authorities explained their reasoning, there is little evidence that the silent women could imagine themselves actively listening to the authorities' ideas, understanding what they were saying, and then choosing to obey. The commands and the actions are undifferentiated—like puppets moving with the jiggle of a thread. To hear is to obey.

The actions of these women are in the form of unquestioned submission to the immediate commands of authorities, not to the directives of their own inner voices. Because their own inner representations or thoughts do not control their behavior, the women are given such labels as immature, impulsive, having a short attention span, acting-out, hyperactive, delinquent, psychotic, and so on.

Feeling cut off from all internal and external sources of intelligence, the women fail to develop their minds and see themselves as remarkably powerless and dependent on others for survival. Since they cannot trust their ability to understand and to remember what was said, they rely on the continual presence of authorities to guide their actions, if they do not act on impulse. Those adolescents with no confidence in themselves as knowers, when faced with the responsibility of motherhood, cling desperately to their own mothers and other authorities for guidance.

Cindy, anticipating the birth of her first child, would not let her mother out of her sight. "I go wherever she goes. She has a hard time getting away from me now. I told her I didn't know that much about babies. If it started to choke or something, I wouldn't know what to do." Another very young mother recalled similar anxieties. "After I had the baby, I had a fear of being by myself. I just felt scared that there would be something that I did not know about. I didn't know what was going on. Right now I know most of it, but—you know, before you thought that you were dumb. Being nervous . . . lost. I thought I was the dumbest one of all." She, like Cindy, was flooded with panic at the thought of losing contact with her mother.

Maintaining the Woman's Place

The extreme sex-role stereotypes that the silent women accept reflect the powerlessness they have experienced. Men are active and get things done, while women are passive and incompetent. This view undoubtedly helps the women make sense of their own dependence and deference to authorities. The culture, needless to say, supplies many experiences that maintain and nourish such notions. As Ann recounted, "I was brought up thinking a woman was supposed to be very feminine and sit back and let the man do all the stuff. . . . You just had to have a man."

Unable to understand what others were talking about and having no sense of her own ability to figure things out, Ann relied on her husband to do everything. She believed that if he were to die, "I would be lost." In actuality, it was she who supported the family financially and raised the children. Given her husband's drinking, violence, and thefts of the family's meager resources, Ann might have seen him as life-threatening to both her and her children, rather than as a source of security.

Another woman explained her dependence on a brutal, violent husband in terms similar to Ann's. "The only reason I did not kick him out a

long time ago was 'cause I was afraid I just wouldn't live. I didn't know how to do anything. I couldn't—I was just scared to death." Although the silent are by no means the only women in our sample who have experienced sexual and physical abuse, they are notable for their inability to speak out to protest. Thinking for themselves violates their conceptions of what is proper for a woman. Another woman said, "I didn't think I had a right to think." That probably goes back to my folks. When my father yelled, everybody automatically jumped. Every woman I ever saw, then, the man barked and the woman jumped. I just thought that women were no good and had to be told everything to do."

These women are passive, subdued, and subordinate. However powerless their men may feel, it is agreed that the women will be even more powerless. The men to whom they subjugate themselves, while being very loud, are remarkably inarticulate. A seventeen-year-old described such a husband: "Sometimes he loses control. He gets mad at the baby and then he hauls off and swings at me. So I do whatever makes him happy. As long as he is happy, I am happy. I'm afraid to say no, as he might hit me." This woman even aborted her second pregnancy on her husband's orders: "He told me that I should have it done. I was listening to everyone." Some months later, the husband decided that he wanted another child. Responding to the jiggle of the thread, she submitted, although she wanted no more children and was deeply worried about her ability to care for the child they already had.

The silent women see life in terms of polarities. Everything is either big or little, good or bad, win or lose. "Every now and then, he thinks that he's always right in something and I'm not. Or else, I'm always right in something and he's not. That's what it is with us." They believe that if another were to win, they, of necessity, must lose. Because the women see themselves as slated to lose, they focus their efforts on assuring their own continued existence during a losing battle. They wage their struggle for survival without an awareness of the power inherent in

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proposes a
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their own minds and voices and without expectation of cooperation from others. It is a stacked game waged against men who seem to be bigger and better, men who think they have a right to be the winner, to be right no matter what the circumstances.

A young mother who has begun to orchestrate her own life looked back on a time when she felt totally dependent on others for the most minute and constant directions, because she could not trust her mind either to know or to remember anything. Trying to explain why she stayed with a man who battered her for ten long years, she said, "You know, I used to only hear his words, and his words kept coming out of my mouth. He had me thinking that I didn't know anything. But now, you know, I realize I'm not so dumb. . . . And my own words are coming out of my mouth now." She now connects the voicelessness, the confusion of tongues, and her blind obedience with her belief that she had been mindless—dumb.

Conceiving the Self

Q "How would you describe yourself to yourself?" "Is the way you describe yourself now different from the way you would have described yourself in the past?" "How do you see yourself changing in the future?" We borrowed these questions from Carol Gilligan and her colleagues (Belenky 1978; Gilligan 1977, 1982; Lyons 1983) and posed them, not to ascertain what each person's "real self" was actually like but to understand how women with different ways of knowing might conceptualize the self—to see what kind of picture of the self they were able to hold out for their own viewing. The themes we found in the self-descriptions were intricately related to the themes we found in the ways the women thought about thinking.

Describing the self was a difficult task for all of the women we interviewed, but it was almost impossible for the silent ones. One young woman, deeply puzzled by such questions, said, "I don't know. . . . No one has told me yet what they thought of me." As is common with young

children (Rosenberg 1979), these women believe that the source of self-knowledge is lodged in others—not in the self. Because the silent women live in a world with so little conversation, those who might have told them about themselves and helped them begin building a sense of self never said a word.

F. Emerson
no sense of self

When the women finally attempted to answer the question, they described themselves in terms of their own movements in and around the geographic space that surrounded them. Again, Cindy presented the clearest example:

I am a person who likes to stay home. Before I got pregnant, I used to go and come as I wanted. *[Is the way you describe yourself now different from the way you used to describe yourself?]* Yah, 'cause I used to describe myself as not being home. And now I am home all the time. So that's about the only thing that is different.

Another young mother spoke in remarkably similar terms. Although she could not describe herself, she could say how she was changing.

When I was younger I was constantly running the streets. I was never staying home or anything like that. And now that I've got my kids, I stay at home with my kids more often. As a matter of fact, I very seldom go out. I'm just with my kids more than what I would have been back then.

When these women attempt to describe the self, they remain standing in their own shoes, describing only what they see gazing outward from their own eyes. They find no vantage point outside of the self that enables them to look backward, bringing the whole self into view. They do not even provide a portrait of the physical self. No one says anything like, "I'm tall, fat, blonde." None could describe the changes she anticipates would or should occur in the future. As Cindy said, "I haven't thought about the future."

Seen But Never Heard

Women who live in silence have much in common with each other. . . . we will touch on the familial roots of such silence here.

Each of the women grew up in great isolation and, for one reason or another, seldom had friends while growing up. The families themselves were cut off from the broader community. Discussion with family members and anyone else was actively discouraged. "I was never able to ask for help before. I was brought up to think that you kept your troubles to yourself. You didn't talk about them. I never let anyone know what was going on—what was troubling you. You just didn't do it."

In their families at least one parent routinely used violence rather than words for influencing others' behavior. Typically, the other parent remained silent and compliant, often victimized. A woman described the pattern. "My father was a first-class bastard. The only way he believed of doing anything was with a club, a stick, or with the back of his hand. All you had to do was to breathe."

The bleak images that emerge from these stories suggest childhoods with neither much play nor dialogue. Growing up without opportunities for play and for dialogue poses the gravest danger for the growing child. Lev Vygotsky (1962, 1978) and his colleagues suggest that exterior dialogues are a necessary precursor to inner speech and an awareness of one's own thought process. They argue that play itself is a precursor to symbolization and meaning-making. Play provides children with their first experiences in creating metaphors, where an object and the children's actions combine to suggest other objects and events. Thus, when children saddle a stick and ride off on their imaginary horses, the stick becomes a symbol for the horse; and that symbol and the power of their own ideas govern their behavior. The physical stick becomes a tool that helps them dislodge the meaning of horse from its usual embodiment. In play, it is the meaning chosen by children that determines the significance of the stick. Play provides children

with their first opportunities for adopting a pretend or a hypothetical stance.

In the ordinary course of development, the use of play metaphors gives way to language—a consensually validated symbol system—allowing for more precise communication of meanings between persons. Outer speech becomes increasingly internalized as it is transformed into inner speech. Impulsive behavior gives way to behavior that is guided by the actor's own symbolic representations of hopes, plans, and meanings. Without playing, conversing, listening to others, and drawing out their own voice, people fail to develop a sense that they can talk and think things through (Vygotsky 1978). (See also Gardner 1982; Luria 1961, 1979, 1981; Piaget 1951.)

A recent review (Belenky 1984) of research on the intellectual and ethical development of the deaf illustrates the importance of face-to-face conversations and the utilization of an effective symbol system. This research suggests that development is greatly facilitated when hearing-impaired children are raised in a sign-rich environment, enabling them to be full participants in any ongoing dialogue. Children with early access to signed language do not have the difficulties with impulsiveness, social immaturity, and academic work that routinely plague hearing-impaired children who have not had such opportunities. When deaf children, adolescents, or adults who have been denied these opportunities move into a stimulating, sign-rich environment, not only do they learn that form of language very rapidly, they largely overcome the developmental delays that are typical of deaf children (Furth 1973). Such findings lend support to Vygotsky's claims about the importance of outer speech for the development of inner speech and the sense of mind.

The silent women like Ann and Cindy had little formal schooling or had found school to be a place of chronic failure. Most had been passed along from one grade to the next, as all those words just slipped past. Typically, educators assume that by the time a child enters school he or she will have a well-developed capacity for

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representational thought (Sigel and Cocking 1977). In most schools, beginning with the earliest grades, the main focus is on the manipulation of symbol systems. However, these symbols and metaphors are likely to be dissociated from the concrete referents, actions, and experiences that the symbols stem from and express (Greenfield 1972; Greenfield and Lave 1982; Scribner and Cole 1973, 1981). Furthermore, most schools continue to provide meager opportunities for the give-and-take of dialogue. Verbal interchanges tend to be unilateral and highly constrained as they are predominantly teacher-initiated and -dominated (Sirotnik 1983). As one adolescent said, "In school you get detention for talking to others."

While the lack of dialogue and the dissociation of language from experience is problematic for all children, concentrating on the written forms of language before children have developed proficiency in wielding the oral forms is likely to be tragic. The silent women had limited experience and confidence in their ability to find

meaning in metaphors and were lost in the sea of words and numbers that flooded their schools. For them school was an unlikely place to "gain a voice." For them the experience of school only confirmed their fears of being "deaf and dumb."

We believe that individuals grow up to see themselves as "deaf and dumb" when they are raised in profound isolation under the most demeaning circumstances, not because of their genetic intellectual endowment. That anyone emerges from their childhood years with so little confidence in their meaning-making and their meaning-sharing abilities as did Ann and Cindy signals the failure of the community to receive all of those entrusted into its care.

*Several studies suggest that it is not uncommon for immature adolescent mothers to have difficulty communicating with their infants and conceptualizing their infant's psychological states and needs (Epstein 1982; McLaughlin et al. 1979; Osofsky and Osofsky 1971).