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Finding the ''Sense of the Meeting'': Decision Making Through Silence Among Quakers

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Decision making through silence may seem counterintuitive. However, many unprogrammed Quakers believe that their deliberative process of finding the ''sense of the meeting'' in monthly administrative meetings is based in silence. Drawing on the ethnography of communication and cultural discourse theory, this article analyzes recordings of naturally occurring interaction during Quaker meetings for business. Building on research on silence as generative, it argues that, in this context, communal silence plays an active role in decision making through a process understood to take precedence over its outcome. This article contributes to an understanding of the functions of silence in different cultural contexts. The analysis suggests that in the context of Quaker meetings for business, silences serve to prepare participants to take part in decision making and also structure the unfolding of the decision-making process, as participants wait and listen for guidance. The article also explores the situated processes of community formation embodied in these meetings.

Keywords: Cultural Discourse Theory; Decision Making; Ethnography Of Communication; Quakers; Silence

Some communities of Quakers in the United States use a decision-making process called finding the ''sense of the meeting'' or ''corporate discernment'' in their monthly meetings for business (New England Yearly Meeting Faith and Practice Revision Committee, 2009).[1] This practice is based in the activity of listening in

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communal silence to be led by the "Light," a Quaker term for the divine, which, it is believed, will guide those present in making their decisions (Birkel, 2004; Humphries, 2009; Morley, 1993). However, viewing decision making as a process based fundamentally in group silence is uncommon within a wider cultural context. Ellis and Fisher (1994) observed that while listening in silence is considered a necessary part of decision making, "prevailing myths" about listening often devalue it, considering instead the speaker to be "responsible for communication" (p. 103). Thus, those outside Quaker communities may wonder exactly when and in what way silence functions in this context.

Although Quakers have written many spiritual and instructive texts about finding the "sense of the meeting" within their communities, there is relatively little research from a communication perspective that examines in detail the step-by-step enactment of this practice and the role of silence in it. Recent work on deliberation and small groups has stressed the need for inductive research on direct experience and observable interaction, rather than reliance on abstract principles or normative expectations of idealized group processes (Bonito & Sanders, 2011; Mansbridge, Hartz-Karp, Amengual, & Gastil, 2006; Townsend, 2009). This article is an attempt to address this need through a detailed descriptive and interpretive account of decision making within one Quaker community by analyzing recordings of naturally occurring speech during meetings for business. Examining silent practices within decision making in a particular speech community is of significance for communication scholars because it facilitates a deeper understanding of the functions of silence in different cultural contexts. Adopting an ethnographic perspective and drawing on cultural discourse theory (Carbaugh, 1988, 2007; Scollo, 2011), this work seeks to demonstrate the active role of silence in Quaker decision making and to connect this to wider cultural premises involving the preeminence of process and of worshipful practice that underlie communication within the community.

Relevant Literature

The Complexity of Silence

Scott (1993) wrote that if an observer were to see two situations, one in which a person were alone and silent and another in which a person were silent in the presence of others, "it would be the second that would the more strongly invite interpretation" (p. 12). Scott's presentation of these contextualized silences complicates a conception of silence as meaningless and suggests for silence an interactive dimension. In many studies of silence, conducted in a range of disciplines and especially those from a "Western" perspective, silences have frequently been treated as all the same, regardless of context. Scott noted, instead, that silence has different forms and uses. Acheson (2008) also called for a more "robust understanding of silences," arguing, "If we are to understand silences in all their complexity, not simply as a field for speech, and not merely as a zero-signifier when the speech object is missing from that field, the study of silences as events, like speech, like action, must become the rule" (p. 551). She provided a broad overview of the literature on silence from various

cultures, disciplines, and paradigmatic perspectives (Acheson, 2007). Just as verbal communication practices function in different ways in diverse settings (Hymes, 1972, 1974; Rosaldo, 1982), Acheson (2008) emphasized that understandings of silence differ cross-culturally, and variations in cross-cultural interpretations of silence are as likely to cause misunderstandings as differences in interpretations of speech.

Ethnographic research on communication has sought to explore the variety of experiences of silence in different cultures. For example, Basso (1970) analyzed enactments of silence among the Western Apache, such as when meeting strangers; Wilkins (2005) introduced the communicative term, *asiallinen*, or a nonverbal style of communication used in certain contexts in Finland; and Carbaugh (1999, 2005) studied a spiritual and physical event of silent attentive listening to one's surroundings among members of the Blackfeet Indian Nation. Of particular relevance to this analysis is Philips's (1976) work, which examined the function of nonverbal communication in the regulation of communication in different cultural contexts, in particular in terms of the influence that speakers and listeners exercised over each other's turns at talk during a public meeting called by the governing body of the Warm Springs Indian Reservation. These ethnographic works, among others, reveal that in some cultures silence plays a more prominent role and is in some contexts more valued than speech (C. Braithwaite, 1990; Carbaugh, Berry, & Nurmikari-Berry, 2006; Wieder & Pratt, 1990). Drawing on ethnographic work, Covarrubias (2007) proposed a broader conceptualization of silence practices in which she contrasted various functions of silence, introducing the idea of generative silence, or "the type of silence that serves as a creative and powerful communicative means" (p. 268).

In terms of research on silence among Quakers, it is important to recognize the role of silence as a cultural symbol in this community. Bauman (1983) explored how both speaking and silence were not just descriptions of communicative practice, but key elaborating symbols for 17th-century Quakers. Lippard (1988) examined how silent worship promoted participatory identification in her article on the rhetoric of silence in Quaker meeting. Ferguson (2011) also recognized the constitutive nature of silence in Quaker meeting for worship, observing that in this context silence was "actively and overtly" used to create community (p. 123). Like Scott (1993), Acheson (2007, 2008), and Covarrubias (2007), Ferguson observed that silence cannot be reduced to having only one role. Past research on Quaker silence has not, however, examined how the culturally informed practice of silence plays an active role in the step-by-step unfolding of the Quaker decision-making process in meetings for business. Examining the practice of silence among Quakers in this context expands on research on silence in meetings for worship and challenges assumptions about the inherent absence or simplicity of silence.

Decision Making, Small Groups, and Community

The decision-making process called finding the "sense of the meeting" is distinguished from consensus; consensus is understood as a secular, rather than a spiritual,

process (Morley, 1993). However, consensus is closely related to the process under consideration in this article. Research on decision making in the United States indicated that the most common types of decision rules practiced are consensus and majority rule (Sager & Gastil, 2006). Although there is great variety in how these two processes are enacted, decision by consensus generally takes longer since members can choose to continue discussion if they oppose a particular item, while in decision by majority rule, a majority vote can end discussion (Gastil, 1993, 2010; Snyder et al., 2001). Another key distinction is that majority rule frequently leads to a contest between the two most popular positions, but consensus often necessitates the integration of the positions of all group members. Research on whether the decision rule of consensus or that of majority rule resulted in higher quality decisions has not yielded definitive results. However, research has seemed to indicate that the consensus decision rule actually led to a more deliberative process and more satisfaction with the final decision (Nemeth, 1977); although the advantages of consensus were strongly linked to the context in which it occurred (Falk & Falk, 1981; Tjosvold & Field, 1983).

The process of decision making adopted by a group reflects and informs the characteristics of that group and creates certain possibilities as well as limitations for members participating in the group. Scholars of small group research have examined groups from a variety of perspectives and theories. Phase models identify phases of group development; functional theory focuses on the roles communication plays in effective group decision making; structuration theory is concerned with the influence of wider social structural forces; and symbolic convergence theory emphasizes groups' shared fantasies or dramatic stories (Ellis & Fisher, 1994; Fisher, 1970; Hirokawa, Cathcart, Samovar, & Henman, 2003). Small group researchers have also adopted a naturalistic perspective (Frey, 1994), emphasizing the need to study "bona fide" natural groups in relation to their wider context (Putnam, 2003, p. 9). Other work has used an ethnographic perspective to look at processes of group formation in decision making. Witteborn and Sprain (2009), in their study of a meeting of a community development project, drew on cultural discourse analysis to examine the connection between community and decision making, arguing that "groups do not exist a priori but are constituted, shift, and reconstituted in situ" (p. 30). Researchers have noted, however, a lack in small group work of research with a specific focus on a "decision-making group's local setting" (Gastil, 2010, p. 76).

The connection between decision-making practices and group characteristics and actions in a religious context can be seen in the work of Conrad (1988), who studied decision making and member satisfaction among Southern Baptists. Conrad cited research claiming that "members' participation in decision-making episodes, more so than their participation in generalized activities sponsored by the church, generates high levels of satisfaction and psychological commitment" (p. 346). Hoffman's (2007) work stressed the significance of communicative processes of decision making among Benedictine communities. Processes of making decisions are thus grouping practices that enact, reinforce, and reconstruct social identities—they can be

understood to perform what Philipsen (1989) called the communal function of communication, drawing groups together with a sense of shared identity.

Both Sheeran (1996) and Wick (1998) conducted research specifically on Quaker decision making. Sheeran's analysis of the decision-making process of Philadelphia Quakers examined tensions between different spiritual beliefs, and Wick's work looked at the distinction understood to exist between a spiritual and a secular process in committee meetings. Previous work has not, however, focused specifically from a communication perspective on the function of silence in Quaker process during meetings for business. In light of the argued significance of decision making in group dynamics and the perceived lack of research with a focus on local group contexts, it seems important to examine finding the "sense of the meeting" in terms of its characteristics and the cultural meanings associated with it.

Background on Speech Community and Quaker Decision Making

This research was undertaken at a Quaker "monthly meeting," the name that Quakers give to the local religious group, which will be referred to here with the pseudonym, Glen Meeting. Quakers, or members of the Religious Society of Friends, are part of a religious community that was founded in the 17th century in England. Friends stress the centrality of the individual's experience of the divine, without an intermediary. There are currently several branches of Quakers within the United States, and the speech community discussed here belongs to a branch that is called "unprogrammed," in reference to their worship service, and "liberal," in reference to the wide variety of their beliefs. The more structured worship ceremony of "programmed" Friends is a prepared service, while "unprogrammed" Quakers practice a silent form of worship each Sunday, during which the group sits together for an hour in silence in the meetinghouse. Participants may occasionally stand and speak when they believe that they have received a message from the "Light" that is intended to be shared with the group.

In addition to weekly meetings for worship, members also participate in a monthly meeting for business. Quaker practice in meeting for business has a long history in Christian tradition. Sheeran (1996) traced elements of the process back to the practices of the apostles and noted that similar ways of making decisions were much more common in the mid-17th century than they are currently. However, there are still similar processes that place an emphasis on communal silence used in other religious communities today (Frykholm, 2007; Hoffman, 2007). The process of finding the "sense of the meeting" refers to a feeling of agreement or unity among the group regarding a particular decision. The understanding is that the group is led to this decision by the "Light," and since there is no voting during meeting for business, this agreement must be "sensed" (Smith, 2002, p. 27).

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

Covarrubias (2007) drew attention to a bias against silence practices in much communication theory as a result of situated sociocultural predispositions that stress

speaking over silence, and she proposed the ethnography of communication as "an alternative theorizing for generating holistic theories that are more culturally inclusive and relevant" (p. 266). Continuing in this tradition, this analysis began with a descriptive account of the speech event of Quaker meeting for business, based in the elements outlined by Hymes (1972), in particular those of scene, participants, and act sequence. Next, in the custom of cultural discourse theory (Carbaugh, 1988, 2007; Scollo 2011), I identified and focused on particular instances of communicative phenomena, in this case silences, in order to describe patterns that characterize these phenomena. I also drew on research on decision making and politeness to examine the function of these silences in interaction. I attempted to interpret the communicative meanings at play in the situation, through a formulation of cultural premises that represent what participants understood to be distinctive and important about the conduct in which they were involved. These premises both form a foundation for conduct and can be modified through conduct. The analytical framework employed here in this way provides a model for studying silence and decision making as culturally distinct communicative practices.

This analysis is based on approximately 2 years of regular attendance at meeting for worship and meeting for business while conducting research. I was an "attender" of the meeting at this time; "attender" is a Quaker term for someone who is active in the community, but not an official member. In 2009, there were approximately 71 active "attenders" of Glen Meeting. The primary data analyzed in this article are audio-recordings of 2 meetings for business that occurred during 2 consecutive months at Glen Meeting. Other data that I have considered in this analysis are detailed field notes on 11 other meetings for business and 58 meetings for worship that I attended, as well as recorded interviews with 13 members of Glen Meeting that I conducted. Permission to audio-record meetings for business was requested and granted during a prior meeting for business and informed consent forms were signed at the beginning of each meeting. There was some concern about the appropriateness of recording a spiritual process, so I did not request to video-record to minimize intrusion. I, therefore, draw heavily on my field notes for visual information. For each recording, the audio-recorder was placed on the clerk's table in the center of the room at the beginning of the meeting.

Act Sequence of Meeting for Business

Meetings for business at Glen Meeting took place in the meeting room of the meetinghouse on the second Sunday of the month at approximately noon, an hour after meeting for worship ended. The clerk and recording clerk, who facilitated the meeting, were frequently the first to enter the room for meeting for business, as they were the ones to prepare the room for the meeting. Several rows of wooden benches lined the walls of the meeting room, where participants sat in silence during meeting for worship, all facing the center. For meeting for business, the clerks moved a wooden table and an easel with the agenda written on it into the middle of the meeting room and arranged their notes on the table. They then sat in silence side by side behind the

table facing the benches on the right side of the room while other participants entered and took their seats.

Glen Meeting had approximately 150 members. Although a report indicated that average attendance at meeting for worship in 2009 was approximately 68, many did not stay for meeting for business, so average attendance at meeting for business the same year was 26. The two meetings that I recorded each had around 30 people present. When I recorded these meetings, the clerk and recording clerk had been clerking together for almost 2 years. The term for clerks at this meeting was 2 years,

Table 1 Act Sequence of Meeting for Business

Parts	Events
I. Opening	a. Participants entered and sat on the benches facing the clerk's table
	b. There was silence for approximately 1 to 3 minutes
	c. The clerk read a quote and posed a "query" related to the quote
	d. Participants participated in "worship sharing," which was conducted in silence with people standing to share messages related to the "query"
	e. The clerk welcomed everyone and introduced the agenda
II. Agenda	a. The clerk introduced agenda items and called on others to present reports
	b. Participants came forward and presented reports on agenda items
	c. The clerk asked for questions or comments once presenters had finished
	d. Participants stood when they were called on and spoke, often facing the clerk
	e. Participants sometimes said, "That Friend speaks my mind" when they agreed with something that had been said
	f. The clerk sometimes recommended that the group sit in silence if a "sense of the meeting" was not emerging
	g. When he felt a decision was emerging, the clerk attempted to formulate the "sense of the meeting" into a minute and asked for approval of the minute
	h. Others said "approve" or raised their hands to be recognized to speak if they did not approve and wanted the discussion to continue (there was no counting of how many people approved)
	i. If participants said they approved the minute that the clerk had formulated and no one raised his or her hand to express a desire for the discussion to continue, the clerk asked the recording clerk to record it
	j. The recording clerk read back the minute to the group
	k. After the minute had been read back, the clerk asked if it could be approved
	l. Others said "approve" or raised their hands to speak and continue discussion
III. Closing	a. The recording clerk read a minute that approved all of the minutes
	b. The clerk asked for approval of the minute and participants said "approve"
	c. Closing worship occurred with several minutes of silence and participants rising to speak if led

and the meeting alternated between male and female clerks, who were chosen by a committee.

Following recording, I transcribed the two meetings for business in full. I then reviewed the transcript of the first meeting for business, identifying speech events that composed the act sequence. This act sequence was used as a reference to review the transcript of the second meeting for business in order to confirm the identified events. Reference was also made to notes on the 11 other meetings for business that I had attended. I formulated a table of the act sequence of meeting for business in which I divided the act sequence into three main parts: the opening, agenda, and closing. I have included an abbreviated version of this table (Table 1), which summarizes events that occur during these three parts. The opening ranged between 20 and 25 minutes, and the closing lasted approximately 5 to 10 minutes. Meetings for business at Glen Meeting lasted on average 2.5 to 3 hours.

Discussion

Decisions Made

In reviewing the transcripts of the two recorded meetings and the notes on the 11 other meetings with reference to this act sequence, I noted that there were several different types of decisions made during the meeting for business, which were different in character, involved different events, and required different amounts of time. The distinction between these types of decisions was important in terms of the way the process progressed. I identified three types of decisions made including:

1. Decisions about agenda items;
2. Decisions about whether the process was being performed correctly; and
3. Decisions about the wording or rewording of minutes formulated by the clerk or written by the recording clerk.

The first type of decision, or agenda item decisions, often required the most amount of time of any of the types of decisions. The nature of the agenda item decisions ranged from ''receiving'' a report presented by a committee about its activities over the past year to deciding whether or not the meeting should endorse a statement about immigration proposed by a local town.

The second type of decision, or process decisions, involved whether the process of making decisions in the meeting for business was being performed correctly. For example, there was careful distinction made regarding what type of action could be taken on each agenda item—in other words, whether the item was to be ''accepted'' or ''approved.'' I observed several instances in which participants said they had referenced Glen Meeting's handbook, and others mentioned consulting the ''*Faith and Practice*'' of the ''yearly meeting'' in preparing for the meeting in order to know how to proceed correctly. Each ''yearly meeting'' (which is made up of groups of ''quarterly meetings'' that are composed of groups of ''monthly meetings,'' like Glen Meeting) publishes its own ''*Faith and Practice*,'' which is a book of Quaker practice that is periodically updated by the ''yearly meeting'' (Earlham School of

Religion, 2011). Also, in meeting for business, those who had less experience would sometimes ask others with more experience in Quaker decision making for advice on how to proceed with the process.

The third type of decision identified was about the wording or rewording of a minute formulated by the clerk or written by the recording clerk. In this type of minute-wording decision, we see the distinction made by Sheeran (1996) when he noted that participants in the meeting for business must ask themselves two questions: If the minute formulated by the clerk captures the ''sense of the meeting''? *and* if they are comfortable with the decision embodied in this ''sense of the meeting''? (pp. 65–66). While Sheeran's second question represents agenda item decisions, his first question represents minute-wording decisions. This difference is interesting because it was possible for a person to recognize that a minute did in fact capture the ''sense of the meeting,'' while still disagreeing with that ''sense of the meeting.'' Also, the ''sense of the meeting'' could include the discomfort of some, who may still choose to approve the decision. Thus, the ''sense of the meeting'' was meant to capture where the whole group was at a given time. In the revised chapter on ''corporate discernment'' in the ''*Faith and Practice*'' of New England Yearly Meeting, the distinction between agenda item decisions and minute-wording decisions was emphasized. A member of the ''yearly meeting'' was quoted as saying,

> The sense of the meeting is not unanimity—everyone present need not agree with the action being taken. I have had the experience of concurring in a sense of meeting with which I disagreed, knowing it was the sense of the meeting. (Hoffman, 1988, as cited in New England Yearly Meeting Faith and Practice Revision Committee, 2009)

Minute-wording decisions allow for the rewording of a minute so that all may be represented in a decision. As I will now discuss, silence played a role in the making of all three of these types of decisions.

Silence during Meeting for Business

In reviewing the transcripts and act sequence, I identified when silence occurred during meetings for business at Glen Meeting. Scollon and Scollon (1990) cited ''around one second or less'' as ''the regular length of time'' that a mainstream American or Canadian English speaker would wait between a turn at talk (p. 273). I used, therefore, three seconds as a conservative marker of silences that would be notable in this context with relation to the wider cultural context. In addition, I looked for times when instances of silence were directly referred to as such by participants or were oriented to by participants through nonverbal acts such as lowering one's head, closing one's eyes, and remaining still, which I noted in my field notes. As mentioned above, silences have different forms in different speech communities and what would be considered silence among Quakers may not be considered silence in other contexts. Smith (2002), in his glossary of Quaker terms, wrote that the silence during Quaker meeting for worship would not necessarily be considered ''absolute'' silence

in that it is not the "silence of death," but the "quiet of listeners" (p. 28). Smith observed that what constitutes a disruption of Quaker silence would *not* be the sound of nature, children, or traffic. Punshon (1987) wrote of the quality of Quaker silence that "it is stillness, I am sure, not the absence of noise, which is the sign of true Friends worship" (p. 7). Identifying silences thus drew on several characteristics of the event.

I classified the silences that I identified into different types. The primary distinction that I found was between:

1. The silence that frames the event and occurs in the opening and closing parts; and
2. The silence that occurs during the process of decision making when agenda items are being considered.

The distinction between these two types of silence was initially made based on time of occurrence in the act sequence and was also connected to the functions of silence in the decision-making process. There was a difference in length between these types of silences, with opening and closing silences generally being longer, around 2 to 3 minutes, and agenda silences generally being shorter and having more variation in length, between a couple of seconds to a minute and a half. While there was likely overlap in the functions of silence between these two types, I have made this distinction in order to highlight what appear to be different primary functions of silence at different times during the act sequence of meeting for business. In order to demonstrate the different characteristics of the silences described above and their role in decision making, I present analyses of several examples of silence from selected excerpts of my transcripts.

"Centering": Opening and closing silences

This section provides examples of opening silence as representative of the longer silences that occurred at the beginning and end of meeting for business. Sample 1 below was from the opening section of the second recorded meeting for business. In the transcript, I have marked pauses lasting more than 3 seconds in bold and used an arrow in the left-hand margin to indicate those silences that I specifically refer to in my discussion.[2] Prior to this excerpt the clerk and recording clerk had organized the room and sat down. In the excerpt, the clerk read his opening quote and posed a "query."

Sample 1: Opening

→ 1 **(02:59.2)**
2 **Clerk:** As membership in the meeting (.) is membership in a community (1.6) the
3 test of membership (.) is compatibility (.) with the meeting community. (1.9)
4 Members join (.) because they desire to fit into the pattern of behavior peculiar to
5 the meeting (.) and (.) find themselves (.) able to do so. (1.3) .hh The test of
6 membership (.) is not a particular kind of religious experience (.) nor acceptance
7 (.) of any religious belie- any particular religious social or economic creed. (2.2)
8 Sincere religious experience and <u>right</u> religious belief are both important (1.5) but

9 they develop in the course of participation in the activities of the meeting. **(3)**
10 Anyone who can become so integrated with a meeting (.) that he helps the whole
11 (1.3) and the whole helps him (1.4) is qualified to become a member.
→ 12 **(01:53.8)**
13 **Adam**: I find that definition to be (.) very supportive (.) of my understanding of
14 membership **(3.1)** and this seeing us as a community of seekers (1.9) which
15 together is helpful (.) to each of us.
→ 16 **(00:24.4)**
17 **C**: I now invite all us- all Friends here to (.) ((noise of computer starting)) join in
18 (.) a (.) continuation of this worship and worship sharing with a query (.) as
19 follows. (1.3) Based on (.) your experience and your observations. (1.1) What
20 does it mean to be a member of Glen Meeting (2.7) .hh What distinction do you see
21 between being an attender (1.8) and being a member?

The first lengthy silence that occurred at the beginning of the excerpt in line 1 was the longest and contained a lot of background noise at first. Although people were entering and sitting quietly, there was still the noise of movement as they arranged their belongings. After approximately 24 seconds, the clerk whispered to another member to close the door. There was also some other whispering between other participants. This sound of movement and whispering gradually decreased beginning around the 1-minute mark. As this happened, the sound of breathing and of people clearing their throats became more noticeable. The distant sound of cars on the road and of birds chirping could be heard around the 2-minute mark. A participant's stomach rumbled about 10 seconds before the clerk read his opening quote, indicating the degree of stillness that had been achieved by this point. This transition from rustling papers, movement, and whispering to the sound of breathing, birds chirping, and a stomach rumbling represents what Quakers call "settling" into worship. The next two longer silences, at lines 12 and 16, were shorter than the first, but they were not as marked by noises of movement or whispering; the predominate noises were breathing and the sound of birds and cars in the distance.

Sample 1 illustrates the practice of silence that a group gathering for meeting for business at Glen Meeting engaged in. The initial silence involved a process of entering, sitting, and becoming still, followed by periods of silence that made up a time of worship. The end of meeting for business had a similar form, with a period of silent worship. I have labeled this section "centering" to connect to the process also understood to take place at the beginning of meeting for worship each week when Friends entered the meeting room. Taber (1992) wrote of the beginning of meeting for worship, "Once we are settled into a seat with our body in a reasonably relaxed . . . position, we are ready to continue going through the Door Inward, of going through the process of 'entering and centering'" (p. 12). Taber described "entering and centering" as a process of "transition from one level of consciousness to another" (p. 13). The idea of "centering" also captures the function of opening and closing silences during monthly meeting for business because, in establishing a worshipful atmosphere at the beginning and end of the meeting, these longer, unifying silences prepared a group first to engage in meeting for business and then to emerge from

meeting for business and carry out the decisions that had been made. In the first silence in the excerpt above, the process of "settling" that occurred as the meeting began established a sense of worship. Later, the final silence of meeting for business facilitated a transition out of meeting for business and into postmeeting activities.

Researchers focusing on group interaction processes have also observed initial periods of orientation during decision making. For example, Fisher (1970) noted that among the groups he worked with, group interactions during the initial part of decision making served a purpose of "socializing and developing a socio-emotional climate conducive to task accomplishment" (p. 58). In addition, phase models of decision making have described the last period of decision making as a time when group members "validate their decisions" (Ellis & Fisher, 1994, p. 156). This practice appears similar to the final part of meeting for business at Glen Meeting, in which the minutes as a whole were approved, and the group engaged in silent worship. Thus, the value attached to the function of silence at the beginning and end of meeting for business could be contrasted with a view of silence as simply a passive marker of the space between speaking. Instead, this silence was an active preparation that was an essential element of the process of making and enacting decisions in this context.

"Waiting" and "Listening": Agenda silences

The next two excerpts include silences that represent agenda silences. As mentioned, agenda silences were generally shorter than opening and closing silences. The first sample was taken from the transcript of the first recorded meeting for business.

Sample 2: Formulating a Minute

1777 **Clerk:** Ok I'd like to test (.) see where we are right now. (.) We hadn't expected to
1778 come to a (1.5) final discernment. (.) um (.) I think we've heard (1.4) a number of
1779 concerns that (.) reflect (.) uh (.) serious doubts and for which additional
1780 information will need to be sought. (1) Uh we've also heard some positive
1781 statements (.) that this might be a good thing to consider. (1) I would like to see
1782 if we (2.5) can agree that (.) the (1.5) to move forward from here asking the- the
1783 uh (.) meetinghouse committee to (.) take what (1.1) what we've learned (.) and
1784 move (.) forward in the questioning (.) of whether we should do this or not. (1)
1785 I- (.) I did not hear (2.4) a clear (1.8) uh (.) sense of the meeting that we should
→ 1786 definitely not move forward. **(4.2)** But that- that we sh- we should cautiously
1787 move forward and digest this information. (1) Is that. (1.4) Craig ((calls on Craig
1788 to speak))
1789 (.)
1790 **Craig:** Um (.) given that they're asking to begin I believe in September (1) um it
1791 strikes me that it's (1.2) probably unlikely that we'll be able to resolve it
1792 (.)
1793 **C:** hmm=
1794 **Craig:** that quickly. (.5) um (.) especially given the concerns (1) um (1) I have a
1795 number of- (.)

1796 **C:** Mm-hmm
[ ]
1797 **Craig:** additional questions myself (.) which I'm not going to bother to ask but (.)
1798 um that's (.) that was my sense when I- when I heard all ( )
[ ]
1799 **C:** Is- is that shared?
1800 (.)
1801 **Several Participants:** Yes (.) mm-hmm (.) yes
[ ]
1802 **C:** Ok so the word unlikely that we'll be
1803 able to come to a (.) positive decision (1.3) by this September (.) will be in the (.)
1804 minute (.) but that we're (.) we're not slamming the door. (2.8) Ok (.) Doug ((calls
1805 on Doug to speak))
1806 (1.7)
1807 **Doug:** I'd like to speak for the meetinghouse committee that uh (.) we are um (.)
1808 small in number and (.) and (.) um (1.3) I guess I'll speak for myself (.) have (.)
1809 little energy or time to (.) devote to this. (.) It it seems like there's an enormous
1810 number of questions that need to be resolved (1.3) or answered. (1) So if there
1811 are Friends that (.) we (.) we might minute (.) that if there are Friends that (.5) feel
1812 a calling to pursue this further (.) they might approach the meetinghouse
1813 committee (1.2) to see how they might assist. **(3.8)** In in terms of (.) in terms of
1814 evaluating (.) the (.) the (.) answering these various questions that have come up
1815 (.5) logistics questions and code (.) and (.) that sort of thing.
1816 **(3.6)**
1817 **C:** Ed ((calls on Ed to speak))
1818 (1.9)
1819 **Ed:** Given what Doug said (.) I (.) would be for just minuting that we do not see
1820 our way clear to pursue this matter further at this time.
1821 (.5)
1822 **Fran:** (you're right)
1823 **Greg:** yeah
1824 **Ed:** And we have lots of other things to (.) deal with
→ 1825 **(6.5)**
1826 **C:** Ok we'll test that one. (2.6) If we minute that we at this time do not see clear to
1827 (.) move forward on this.
1828 (.7)
1829 **Louis:** yes
1830 (.)
1831 **Several Participants:** approve (.) approve (.) approve

This excerpt provides an instance of the emergence of a "sense of the meeting" and the clerk's attempt to formulate this sense into a minute in lines 1781–1787 and lines 1802–1804. Several participants, in particular Craig and Doug, raised concerns regarding the proposed minutes, indicating a different "sense of the meeting" that was then formulated by another participant, Ed, and finally "tested" by the clerk

in lines 1826–1827. Instances of agenda silence took place as the clerk ''tested'' proposed minutes. The clerk paused frequently in forming the minutes; specifically, a pause of approximately 4 seconds occurred in line 1786, when he tested if participants did not want to move forward with the proposal at all. He stated directly before this pause, ''I did not hear (2.4) a clear (1.8) uh (.) sense of the meeting that we should definitely not move forward.'' That he was understood to be allowing silence and testing the minute in this line was evidenced by the fact that Craig responded to the silence by raising his hand in order to continue discussion, rather than indicate approval. Again this happened in line 1825, following Ed's statement that the meeting should minute that they would not ''pursue this matter.'' The clerk did not call on anyone or respond to Ed's comment for approximately 6.5 seconds, giving participants time to absorb what had been proposed. He then proceeded to formulate the minute, and it was approved.

The final sample is another instance of agenda silence—this time when the clerk called for silence. A discussion regarding the budget had been going on for about 40 minutes when this excerpt occurred and would continue for another approximately 55 minutes following it.

Sample 3: Clerk Calls for Silence

792 **(23.6)** ((clerks whisper together))
793 **Clerk:** I think we'll just take a (.) we- we we've added a lot of good (.5) information
794 and sharing and it's it's at many levels and (.) I'd like to just take a few minutes to
795 (.5) sit in silence with it (.) and then we will resume.
→ 796 **(01:33.6)**
797 **C:** Thank you. **(3.2)** Ok (.) this is still (2.6) a discussion that starts with the (.)
798 line in (.) uh property (.) operations for (.) capital improvement fund (.) transfer
799 (.5) but as (.5) we've discovered it (.) expands out into (.) uh (.5) some broader
800 issues (1) and uh (.) I think it's (.) good that we keep focusing on this. (1) Yes
801 (.) Andrew ((calls on Andrew to speak))

The silence in line 796 that was in response to the clerk's request was longer than the silences in Sample 2 and similar in length to the silences in the first excerpt. It was not disrupted by much background noise, although there was some whispering at one point. During the silence, one could hear people clearing their throats and coughing along with the recording clerk typing.

The silence that occurred in this excerpt could be classified as agenda silence due to the time at which it occurred in the act sequence and the function it served during meeting for business. This silence was called for following the sharing of several differing opinions regarding what should be done about a particular budget line. As there did not seem to be a ''sense of the meeting'' emerging at this time, the clerk was attempting to give some space for this to take place by encouraging participants to come together in silence. He stated in lines 794–795, ''I'd like to just take a few minutes to (.5) sit in silence with it (.) and then we will resume,'' and after the silence, he suggested that the meeting continue to focus on this budget item. This lengthier example

of agenda silence that was directly called for by the clerk occurred at times when an agenda item was considered important, and there were differing views shared about it.

I have labeled this section ''waiting'' and ''listening'' to describe the function that agenda silence achieved in this context, as demonstrated in these two samples. The terms ''waiting'' and ''listening'' recur in Quaker communication, for example, in W. Braithwaite's (1912/1955) account of early Quakers who engaged in ''meetings for waiting on the Lord, in silence, or in fervent prayer'' (p. 138), and more recently in *Friends Journal*, Humphries (2009) explained, ''Quakerism is about listening in silence'' (p. 23). The ''sense of the meeting'' was understood not to emerge through debate or voting, but through ''sensing'' it, and in the examples above, participants listened for this sense as the clerk tried to formulate it in Sample 2 and when the clerk called for silence following the presentation of ''information and sharing'' in Sample 3. Since decisions came from the ''Light'' and were revealed through the messages received by participants, the right decision could not be made during meeting for business unless it was listened for. Consequently, when Friends at Glen Meeting sat in silence during meeting for business, they were actively ''waiting'' for and ''listening'' to the ''Light'' coming through each other. As evident in the longer example above, the more difficult a decision, the more silence that was needed.

The above examples also reveal how silence was incorporated directly into the step-by-step interaction sequence of decision making during the agenda portion of the meeting. The silence itself could be viewed as a turn in the sequence of interaction—in the silence the ''Light'' moved people—and thus comments that followed this turn were not understood to come directly from those who shared them, but resulted from ''listening'' to the ''Light.'' For example, in the second sample, in line 1786, the silence as the clerk formulated a ''sense of the meeting'' gave space before Craig's comment. While Craig's message could be understood as disagreeing with the ''sense'' that the clerk had presented, in this context, the source of the dissenting message was understood as the ''Light'' and not the Friend who shared it. Silences could thus function to minimize the potential face threat to others of expressing a different opinion in decision making because expressions of differing opinions by participants did not immediately follow what had previously been said (Brown & Levinson, 1978). In this way, the use of silence during the agenda could be understood as an element of a more general community style of indirectness, which it has been suggested was active in other meeting activities (Molina-Markham, 2011, 2012).

Relatedly, in his observations of Quaker meeting, Sheeran (1996) found that sometimes significant shifts in opinion would follow periods of silence. One way of understanding agenda silence is as a point at which the pattern of interaction was interrupted and changed, similar to a ''breakpoint'' in decision making (Ellis & Fisher, 1994, p. 170). The introduction of a change in the sequence of communication by the clerk through calling for silence could reorient the group and shift the direction of the discussion—thus, changing the pattern and leading to ''new and productive affordances and constraints in future conjoint action'' (Cronen & Chetro-Szivos, 2001, p. 59). Sheeran's observation also suggests another possible aspect of the function of silence in meeting for business, related to the notion of politeness in terms of the

speaker's own face. Listening in silence could be understood as functioning to enable changes of opinion that were not perceived as directly contradicting what a speaker had previously said. Fisher (1970) wrote that attitude change was generally not abrupt, explaining that in his observations "dissent proceeds to assent via ambiguity" (pp. 63–64). While an abrupt change in opinion could make one seem inconsistent, a change after a period of silence, such as in line 796 of Sample 3 above, was understood in this context to emerge naturally from the process of Quaker meeting for business. Thus, in the space given for "waiting" and "listening" in silence, a meeting participant could change his or her opinion without threatening his or her own face.

Conclusion

Cultural Premises Active in Finding the "Sense of the Meeting"

In the tradition of cultural discourse theory, I summarize key findings from this analysis into cultural premises that speak to the cultural meanings associated with finding the "sense of the meeting." The examples above demonstrated the way in which opening and closing silences set the stage for decision making and for carrying out decisions after meeting for business. In between opening and closing silences, agenda silences allowed for a time of "waiting" and "listening" for the "Light," as the clerk formulated a "sense of the meeting" or when a complicated issue was under consideration. A cultural premise could be formulated as: *Silence during meeting for business prepares participants to participate in spiritual decision making and allows space for participants to listen for a decision to emerge.* Given the relative shortness of agenda silences in comparison to opening and closing silences, it is important to note that pauses of as little as half a second have been observed by communication researchers to play a significant role in the interpretation of communication between conversants (Scollon & Scollon, 1990). Frequent interruption and misunderstanding can result from different cultural conventions of pausing (Tracy, 2002). It seems, therefore, that this frequent use of silence during Quaker decision making, even relatively short pauses during agenda discussions, required shared understandings and expectations of what silence accomplished.

The role of silence was also closely connected to the importance of worship during the process of finding the "sense of the meeting" in this community. As noted, the silence that occurred at the beginning of the meeting for business could be understood to establish a reverent atmosphere and remind participants that the process they were engaging in was based in worship (Humphries, 2009). A cultural premise could be stated as: *During meeting for business, it is important to draw on and remain in a state of worship as practiced in silence.* I did not observe anyone resisting the norm of worshiping in communal silence during meeting for business, although I did observe times when children talked during the silence of meeting for worship, and once an adult spoke when others were taking part in a moment of silence during another meeting activity because she did not realize that a moment of silence was taking place. In both these cases, the breach was recognized when the children were instructed not to talk and the adult apologized and stopped talking. I also frequently

observed people asked to be quiet in the vestibule leading to the meeting room, either immediately before or after meeting for worship or immediately before meeting for business. Talking in the vestibule at these times while others were engaged in silence in the meeting room was understood as an interruption of the silence. Those asked to be quiet in this situation would apologize and stop their conversation.

The value of remaining in a state of worship emphasizes the role of process in this context, which was also evident in the discussion above of the types of decisions made. Decisions during meeting for business were not just about agenda items, but were also about whether the process was being conducted correctly and whether the "sense of the meeting" recorded in a minute was in fact the true "sense of the meeting." Recorded minutes represented not only the decision reached, but also the state of the group that had made that decision in an inclusive fashion. Thus, among participants at Glen Meeting: *The process of meeting for business is more important than the decisions that result.* Relying on "sense of the meeting" offered a possibility for creating and sustaining community in decision making that may not be possible in other contexts when voting is relied on. While voting separates a group into those who agree and those who disagree, "sense of the meeting" sought to include everyone, even those who disagreed, recognizing that their disagreement was an element of the "sense of the meeting"—it was a part of the message from the "Light"—and their presence was an important and valued part of the community. Thus, the goal of meeting for business, while it included reaching community decisions, was to an even greater extent that of following a specific community-oriented process, which participants engaged with throughout the meeting by participating in enactments of communal silence.

Summary

In his pamphlet about Quaker decision making, Morley (1993) wrote, "When I try to think of decisions made in business meetings that were more important than the process by which they were made, I am unable to" (p. 22–23). He explained, "The pursuit of the sense of the meeting involves nurturing a process which is completed when God's recognizable presence settles over us in silence" (p. 11). However, making decisions through a process grounded in silence may seem difficult from the perspective of one used to relying on debating or voting in deliberative bodies. This analysis of the Quaker practice of finding the "sense of the meeting" sought to approach silence not as an absence or as the opposite of speech, but as a deeply meaningful communicative event that can be analyzed on its own terms as actively achieved. In particular, in a Quaker context, silence practices of "centering," "waiting," and "listening" facilitated the negotiation of difference through an indirect style that separated differing opinions in an interactional sequence and framed differing ideas as coming not from the individuals who stated them, but from the "Light." In my analysis here, an overview of the act sequence of meeting for business, along with a description of the silence that took place during it, explicated the Quaker belief that for this community a process based in silence, rather than its product, is the center of decision making.

Notes

[1] Terms commonly used by members of the Religious Society of Friends have been placed in quotation marks.

[2] In my transcripts, I drew from the notation developed by Jefferson (1984) in conversation analysis. However, I modified standard transcription styles. My focus was on the content of talk and the pausing and silences in talk.

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