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# The Silence of the Finns

## Exploring the Anatomy of an Academic Myth

*Margarethe Olbertz-Siitonen & Marko Siitonen*

### Abstract

This paper contributes to the discussion on so-called academic myths by analysing the idea of silence as characteristic of a Finnish communication style. By reviewing contemporary research literature and earlier sources, we illustrate how the concept of the silent Finn has emerged and how it endures, reproduced in both public and academic discourses while lacking empirical evidence. Our analysis proposes six key characteristics to academic myths: that they are built on shaky grounds, widely circulated, used as an expedient, intuitively appealing, resistant to change, and self-replicating. The paper addresses possible reasons behind the persistence of such myths and their implications for academic discourse.

Keywords: Academic myth, culture, Finnish communication style, silence.

### Introduction

A look at academic discourse on human social interaction reveals that certain claims and characterizations regarding culture and communication continue to be invoked with little to no effort expended on scrutinizing the background of such descriptions, or on offering new empirical evidence to back them up (see for example Tipton 2008; Voronov & Singer 2002). One example of such an enduring and widespread notion is the idea of silence as characteristic of the Finnish communication style. According to much academic literature, Finns differ from most other nationalities in their tolerance of silence and willingness to remain silent in conversation. Finns are described as people who do not mind silence and who therefore do not try to avoid it, or to fill silence with “unnecessary” information. This paper will demonstrate how this depiction of a Finnish communication style is repeatedly and uncritically used as a factual, exotic example of troublesome communication in literature on conversational silence and on intercultural or cross-cultural communication. In short, we propose that the idea of Finnish silence is what one might call an academic myth.

*Myth*, an interdisciplinary concept, is used in many fields of inquiry. This explains to some extent why no agreement exists on what constitutes a myth, or why researchers have found defining

myth difficult (see for example Doty 2004, 11–12; Honko 1972; Kirk 1984). Academics use the term in different manners and instances. In a classical sense, myth applies to storytelling and folklore, and the discussion centres on the nature, origins, and functions of myths in a particular culture. In a contemporary sense, however, the term myth occurs in combination with talk of false, widespread, unverified beliefs. As Robert A. Segal puts it, “In today’s parlance, myth is false. Myth is ‘mere’ myth” (Segal 2004, 6). One aim of academic papers and books dealing with contemporary myths is to debunk them; the connotation is that these beliefs are problematic, often even harmful. Here we follow this approach to myths; although, for reasons that will become clear, we will leave unanswered the question, “Is the myth of Finnish silence true or not?” (cf. Heydenrych 1993, 27; see also Alexander & Archer 2000, 540; Segal 2004, 6), and rather define myth more loosely as a common belief that lacks proof and which by definition may be true or false.

Academia is not free of mythical thought, although one might expect the opposite to be true (see also Heydenrych 1993, 27). Ideas in research and higher education that assume the form of fact without clear empirical evidence have been identified, for example, in research on tourism (McKercher & Prideaux 2014), health sciences (Rekdal 2014b), sociology (Schweingruber & Wohlstein 2005), and developmental psychology (Côté 2014). On a related note, Ole B. Rekdal (2014a) employs the term *academic urban legend* in describing mythical thought in academic discourse; he defines it as “a chain of reports that cite one another as sources, lending credence to a story that has little or no basis in reality” (p. 576). In this article we opt for the more widely used term *academic myth*.

This paper aims to question the idea of the “silent Finn.” Our particular interest is in examining the characterization more closely, answering such questions as, “What proof exists to support the idea of the silent Finn?” and, “What are the constituents of the notion, how has it come to be, and how does it live on?” We intend not only to expose the silent Finn as a myth, but to illustrate its features and ponder on the possible outcomes of its production and reproduction in academic and public discourse.

To explore the roots and current status of the claims of Finnish silence in communication studies, we conducted a close reading of contemporary and historical works that evoke the idea of the silent Finn or discuss it directly. Using combinations of search terms such as *Finland, Finn, Finnish, communication, speech, style, culture, silence, and silent*, we conducted literature searches using both general search engines (e.g. Google Scholar) and international scholarly publication

databases (e.g. EBSCO, DOAJ, Science Direct). In order to limit search results, we focused in particular on writings published (1) after the year 2000; and (2) appearing in academic journals, anthologies, scholarly books, or textbooks. The search resulted in a list of fifty-one sources (see Appendices 1 and 2). We turned also to public sources, which are included in our discussion in relation to the wide circulation of the myth. Our first step was to establish an overview of the status quo of the idea of Finnish silence. We then examined what sources contemporary works refer to and how these original sources are dealt with. Finally, we moved back in time to study the sources of these sources; in other words, we scrutinized the proof discoverable behind the initial claims.

## The Anatomy of an Academic Myth

On the basis of previous research on academic myths (see in particular McKercher & Prideaux 2014) and a close reading of works that reference the silent Finn, we propose six interrelated key characteristics that act as the building blocks of the myth. The silent Finn appears 1) to be built on shaky grounds; 2) to be widely circulated; 3) to be used as an expedient; 4) to be intuitively appealing; 5) to be resistant to change; and 6) to be self-replicating. Over the next pages we unfold the analysis behind each characteristic in more detail. Keeping the aforementioned conceptions of contemporary myths in mind, one may consider the first feature as the most distinguishing building block of an academic myth – a lack of empirical evidence ultimately signifies mythical thought.

### *Characteristic One: Built on Shaky Grounds*

Most contemporary publications that evoke the idea of the silent Finn refer back to two articles by Jaakko Lehtonen and Kari Sajavaara published in 1985 and 1997 – and on a text by Donal Carbaugh (2005). However, a closer examination of these sources reveals many shortcomings in the empirical background of Finnish silence as generalizable fact.

In 1985, Lehtonen and Sajavaara approached the issue of the silent Finn in a chapter of an anthology called *Perspectives on Silence*. They begin their eponymous article with a description of a scene that occurs in a Finnish film, following which they invoke several mood-setting Finnish proverbs and sayings that concern silence in interaction and indicate therefore – according to Lehtonen and Sajavaara – that silence is a Finnish conversational norm. The age of these examples aside (their relevancy was questionable even in the 1980s when the anthology chapter first appeared), we contend that a selection of movies, proverbs, and sayings are an insufficient

source for stating that an entire nation values silence in conversations. It is simple to find similar sayings in German or in English such as “Reden ist Silber, Schweigen ist Gold”, “Stille Wasser sind tief”, “Silence is Golden”, or, “Still waters run deep”, yet these are not, and should not, be used as proof of a silent speech culture in an academic context. Lehtonen and Sajavaara continue by referring to a list of humorous “Finnish ‘conversational maxims’”, originally published in the 1970s, that “recommend” Finns be silent and uncommunicative. Although they acknowledge the humorous intent of the original source, Lehtonen and Sajavaara move on to propose that underlying factual proof exists:

Although these “maxims” were intended as a humorous exaggeration, they are not without basis in fact. “The silent Finn” is a popular image both within Finland and without. Even at international meetings and conferences, Finnish participants are frequently labelled with this characteristic, either because they avoid taking part in discussion due to a lack of communicative competence in other languages, or because they transfer communicative patterns from Finnish.

(Lehtonen & Sajavaara 1985, 194.)

While Lehtonen and Sajavaara use the word “fact” in this passage, they offer no empirical evidence, later substituting the apparent lack of cross-cultural empirical data on how long different societies tolerate silence with what one might call mere fiction. For example, in the following excerpt, the terms “intuitive”, “similar data”, and “clearly” are deeply problematic: “Comparison of the *intuitive* data about the situation in Finland with *similar data* about America or Central Europe *clearly* indicates that the duration of silences tolerated by Finns in conversation is much longer” (Lehtonen & Sajavaara 1985, 194; our emphases).

The final passage of Lehtonen and Sajavaara’s article concerns “Finnish character”, referring to two academic sources that appear to relate to the issue at hand. However, one might consider the first reference – published in 1917 – to have been outdated by the time *The Silent Finn* was published. Lehtonen and Sajavaara quote Hugo Bergroth (1917, 31)<sup>1</sup> as stating that Swedish-speaking Finns are “phlegmatic, introverted, reticent, and unimaginative” (Lehtonen & Sajavaara 1985, 199). Bergroth’s work, however, is linguistic in nature and concerned with language use, not national characteristics. While Bergroth draws on rich data true to the linguistic issue he is

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<sup>1</sup> Bergroth’s book appeared in 1917, not in 1916 as indicated in Lehtonen & Sajavaara (1985).

examining (Bergroth 1992, VI–VII; Reuter 2005, 1651–1652), his assertion concerning Finnish introversion, reticence etc. is not supported (see Bergroth 1992, 30). Rather, Bergroth employs this stereotypical characterization of Swedish-speaking Finns to explain his finding that Swedes and Swedish-speaking Finns use their vocal chords differently. Tracing Lauri Hakulinen (1979, 32–34), Lehtonen and Sajavaara’s other source, also leads to a dead-end with regard to the silent Finn. Examining a later, unrevised edition of Hakulinen’s handbook, reveals that Hakulinen (2000, 32–34) does not offer empirical evidence for his claims either. While Lehtonen and Sajavaara (1985, 199–200) seem to recognize underlying problems with such sources – if half-heartedly and somewhat between the lines – they continue to make further claims about Finnish silence that lack empirical proof.

Twelve years after *The Silent Finn* first appeared, Sajavaara and Lehtonen (1997) returned to the topic in a revised version of the article. *The Silent Finn Revisited* considers Finnish silence more explicitly as a stereotype presented by foreigners, academic authors, and Finns themselves – and as an impression explainable, in part, by problems related to second language use.

Sajavaara and Lehtonen’s second article takes a more distanced stance than their first, particularly in its opening sections. The authors, for example, now state explicitly that the earlier characterizations put forth by Bergroth (1917) and Hakulinen (1979, 33–34) are unverified. However, as soon as in the subsequent passage, Sajavaara and Lehtonen imply – in the guise of a critique – that Finnish silence is fact; they embed this implication in an assertion that Finland is not the *only* silent nation. While the authors seem to aim to deconstruct the notion of Finnish silence, labeling it a stereotype, lurking somewhere in the background is the assumption that Finns are actually silent. The further one reads, the more clearly Sajavaara and Lehtonen continue to argue the idea of silent Finns presented in their earlier paper, albeit hidden to an extent behind a mantle of greater awareness and sophistication. Section four of their revised article, entitled “Finland: A Silent Culture”, makes this continued argument the most explicit; in it, the authors refine their assertion that Finns are not *solely* silent among nationalities:

The statement by Bertold Brecht that Finns are silent in two languages can be considered just a cliché today. In their attitudes towards speech and silence, Finns share the overall tendencies with their Nordic neighbours: just like their fellow Scandinavians they are of the opinion that you speak only when you have something to say. If you do not have anything to say, you keep silent. Talkativeness is an indication of slickness, which serves as a signal of unreliability.

(Sajavaara & Lehtonen 1997, 270.)

Later in the chapter Sajavaara and Lehtonen present a list of “speech-related characteristics that are typical of Finnish or, more generally, Nordic culture” (Sajavaara & Lehtonen 1997, 273). The list comprises twelve features presented as a description of a Finnish communication style. From beginning to end, each point depicts Finnish silence as an established fact. Again, we find in the text no source or reference to corresponding results from an empirical study, except the statement that “similar characterizations can also be found in Carbaugh 1995” (ibid., 273).

It must be said that Sajavaara and Lehtonen do use some sources to support their argument. The problem, we contend, is the nature of these sources and the manner of their use. All the sources referenced rely on questionnaires or interview data eliciting perceptions or stereotypes. Moreover, once integrated into the text, their scope and significance seems to change. For instance, when discussing a small-scale survey aiming to discover ethnic stereotypes and general impressions of communication styles (Rusanen 1993), Sajavaara and Lehtonen’s language gives the impression that the study collected and analyzed data on *direct* communicative behavior (“the Finn is normally a good listener but a poor speaker; he rarely opens up conversations, makes few initiatives, and seldom interferes in discussions”) (Sajavaara & Lehtonen 1997, 276). As a component of myth, this misrepresentation has a striking effect: in the present, these original sources recede into the background, becoming solid evidence that is no longer examined or challenged.

In summary, *The Silent Finn Revisited* follows an interesting path. Initially, Sajavaara and Lehtonen characterize Finnish silence as an (auto-)stereotype, going on to discuss stereotyping in relation to Finland and Finns. The further the argument proceeds, however, the more closely Sajavaara and Lehtonen insist on the validity of the stereotype, completely disregarding their earlier considerations. The result is what we witness when looking at how the revised piece is quoted today – as undeniable proof of Finnish silence.

The third source often evoked in discussions of Finnish silence is Donal Carbaugh’s book *Cultures in Conversation* (2005), two chapters of which deal with so-called Finnish features of communication as compared to allegedly U.S. American rules of conversation. The first chapter (“Silence and Third-Party Introductions: An American and Finnish Dialogue”, pp. 27–38) is a republication of another source sometimes referenced; namely, *By Way of Introduction: An American*

*and Finnish Dialogue* by Carbaugh and Saira Poutiainen (2000).<sup>2</sup> The second contains another republication of an earlier paper by Carbaugh.

Besides analysis of conversational events, Carbaugh's (and Poutiainen's) statements regarding Finnish preferences for quietude stand on hearsay, jokes, (funny) stories, and anecdotes (recorded via field-notes) told to Carbaugh by Finns who were mostly colleagues, and – in the chapter on third-party introductions – an interpretation of an encounter Carbaugh experienced when introduced to a Finnish professor as a Fulbright scholar. Analysis of this incident draws on a video recording of a *reenactment* of the meeting (see 2005, 37, endnote 3). Even if we do not take into account that people rarely remember exactly how they behaved in a situation – a consideration, for example, when conducting interviews (see Silverman 2006, 39) – we cannot discount the possibility that the participants have discussed (and laughed about) the incident, in effect preparing a script for the recording that may have been influenced by their notions of particular Finnish and American communication “speech cultures”. Carbaugh's description is of a *staged* situation characterized by short questions and long pauses on “the Finnish” part and long replies by Carbaugh himself. The authors provide the reader with analyses of the case from an American and a Finnish perspective. However, while Poutiainen's account in particular contains some noteworthy and important points, mostly concerning language proficiency, the analyses as a whole include many unjustified generalizations.

Particularly striking in relation to the chapter on third-party introductions is the implicit presumption that national membership confers upon Carbaugh and Poutiainen exclusive cultural expertise that they can rely on in their analyses. That Poutiainen is Finnish and Carbaugh U.S. American appears sufficiently authoritative to equal Poutiainen's perspective with “the Finnish perspective” and Carbaugh's perspective with “the American perspective”. This very positioning in turn affects how the data is approached: the authors analyse the incident against the backdrop of and with reference to Finnish and American conversation practices that Poutiainen and Carbaugh as innate “cultural experts” already “know”. As a consequence, the authors seem to move in a circle of self-fulfilling prophecy.

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<sup>2</sup> Because the republication appeared as an integrated chapter in a book collecting Carbaugh's work (the second author of this article, Poutiainen, is indicated in brackets), referring to this paper is difficult. In the following text, we mark this source as “Carbaugh (and Poutiainen).”



Carbaugh is sole author of the other chapter in *Cultures in Conversation* dealing with Finnish silence (pp. 39–54). Now he acts as an expert on Finnish rules of communication, arguing on the basis of anecdotes reported to him, and drawing on his “cultural knowledge”. This expertise is presented to the reader not only by avoiding sources at large, implying his own authority in the matter, but also, for example, by inserting (sometimes misspelled) Finnish words into the text (cf. the brilliant account of a similar practice in Tipton 2008, 9). The use of Finnish words throughout the text again depicts Finns as a sensation of sorts, an exotic people with several words for silence.

It must be said that Carbaugh and Poutiainen seem aware of the dangers of presenting far-reaching arguments on the basis of solitary cases. They also state that their interpretation of the subject is “very preliminary and tentative” (2005, 54). However, contemporary literature quoting these sources appears blissfully ignorant of such limitations, treating the propositions as hard and – above all, generalizable – facts (e.g. Bassett 2012, 126; Knafo 2012, 85; Nakane 2012, 169).

Besides the most popular sources discussed above, we found a few cases in which references are made to authors such as Richard D. Lewis (2005) or Peter B. Smith & Michael Harris Bond (1999). Lewis’ unabashedly stereotypical take on Finnish national cultural characteristics is undoubtedly entertaining, but should not be mistaken for serious academic inquiry. Smith & Bond appears to be also a dead-end, an argument standing entirely on a single untraceable 1986 conference paper. Other – less quoted – publications exist as well, but it is beyond the scope of this article to cover them all. From our point of view, most of them exhibit similar problems to the sources discussed above, such as reliance on personal observations, anecdotes and informal interviews that are used in painting a picture of an exotic Finnish communication style (e.g. Carbaugh, Berry & Nurmikari-Berry 2006).

In summary, an examination of the most often quoted sources and their background reveals that the academic idea of the silent Finn often leans on decades-old literature, research that does not necessarily fulfill today’s scientific standards, or personal experiences and anecdotes generalized to describe an entire nation. Unfortunately, little attempt has been made to truly explore the argument empirically, or to challenge the idea of the silent Finn. Instead, the notion is presented again and again, leading us to the next feature of the myth, namely “wide circulation”.

### *Characteristic Two: Wide Circulation*

The idea of Finnish silence is repeated and circulated widely in academic texts including research articles, essays, handbooks and textbooks, in popular scientific writings, as well as public discourse from blogs to web pages to introductory material for foreigners.

References to the silent Finn in research articles and books appear in contexts such as silence in *vipassana* meditation (Pagis 2010; 2015), the role of cross-cultural differences in courtroom interpretation (Hale 2014), mutual stereotypes of Estonian and Russian students (Mizera et al. 2013), the meaning of silence in  *Setswana* culture (Bagwasi 2012), silence in Spanish and German conversations (Fernandez 2008), silence in intercultural communication (Nakane 2007), and the participation of Japanese students in the classroom (Nakane 2005) (see Appendix 2). Sometimes the topic or topics covered relate directly to so-called Finnish speech culture, either by a comparison to the communication styles of others or as an issue in situations of social contact (e.g. Ala-Kortesmaa & Isotalus 2014; Degni et al. 2012; Huttunen et al. 2013) (see Appendix 1).

Handbooks, encyclopedias, and textbooks in particular often cite Finnish silence as an example of cross-cultural differences and intercultural communication problems (e.g. Archer, Aijmer & Wichmann 2012; Remland et al. 2015; Samovar et al. 2013). However, whatever the context of reference to the silent Finn in such books, the information provided remains fundamentally the same: long pauses and episodes of silence are presented as a typical, somewhat unusual characteristic of Finnish speech culture. The eighth edition of *Communication Between Cultures* contains one such example:

Many Scandinavians also have a view of silence that differs from the dominant [sic] U.S. culture. For example, in Finland, Sweden, Denmark, and Norway, silence conveys interest and consideration. In fact, your silence tells the other person that you want them to continue talking.

(Samovar et al. 2013, 303.)

Another example can be found from a chapter on “silence in interaction” in *The Encyclopedia of Applied Linguistics*, where the idea of the silent Finn is also presented as simple fact: “Lehtonen and Sajavaara (1985; revisited in Sajavaara & Lehtonen, 1997) discuss the well-known phenomenon of silence among Finns, in which long periods of silence can occur where in many other cultures silence would not be tolerated” (Kurzon 2013).

The notion of Finnish silence extends far beyond academic discussion and teaching. It is presented not only as a fact in popular scientific articles (e.g. Carling 2007, 28; Kampuri 2012,

66; Lehtonen 1994), but also introduced to tourists, expatriates, and international students as a cultural feature of which to be aware. People travelling to Finland for leisure or work can find many stereotypical descriptions of Finns that mention their appreciation of silence, whether through online travel guides (Alho 2002; The Official Travel Guide of Finland 2015), guides to working abroad (Diversicare 2011, 9 [“instructions” for Australians in contact with Finns]), or official sources such as the Finnish embassy in the U.S. (Embassy of Finland 2015) or Germany (Botschaft von Finnland 2011). Several Finnish universities provide similar information (University of Jyväskylä 2014, 57; University of Tampere 2015, 71, 76; University of Turku 2015). For example:

One thing that might strike you as a bit peculiar is our great tolerance of silence in conversation. A Finn may talk with you excitedly for several minutes and then suddenly there is a long pause – for no apparent reason. Generally, Finns speak up when they feel that there is something significant to say and silence is sometimes tolerated, and even preferred to empty phrases.

(University of Jyväskylä 2014, 57.)

The frequently affirmative manner of presenting Finnish silence to readers inside and outside academia implies that this characterization is proven scientifically. However, as we have demonstrated with respect to characteristic one, *shaky grounds*, closer scrutiny of the literature reveals a different picture. A wide circulation of the “truth” of the silent Finn is naturally consequential, feeding other characteristics of the myth such as resistance to change and self-replication. A direct outcome of this wide circulation is that references to Finnish silence appear in surprising contexts. The myth becomes a tool of sorts, called upon as an aid in making an argument.

### *Characteristic Three: Used as an Expedient*

In the reviewed literature, Finnish silence is repeatedly employed as a means to an end, a tool to prove a point. A typical example is how the notion is invoked in introductory textbooks or handbooks to support claims that appreciation for silence is culturally bound – or that communication between members of silent and talkative communities is particularly prone to difficulties (e.g. Archer, Aijmer & Wichmann 2012, 116; Kendall 2013, 25; Nakane 2012, 163–164, 169, 170; Remland et al. 2015, 159; Samovar et al. 2013, 303). However, the idea of the silent Finn also acts as a means to an end in a considerable number of research articles (e.g. Bagwasi 2012, 190; Fernandez 2008, 724; Hale 2014, 324; Kurzon 2010, 54, Footnote 2; Mizera et al. 2013, 272; Nakane 2005, 76).

Especially in those research reports that do not focus on Finland or on Finnish communication style, statements about Finnish silence sometimes produce an effect whereby Finns are depicted as people who silence their children or who are superstitious or backward and oppressed.

Mompoloki Mmangaka Bagwasi (2012) states, for example, that Finns ensure their children do not talk while eating, and particularly not when in the company of their parents. Such practices are labeled “observation” in the following text from Bagwasi’s article; however, they are not observation but separate claims in the source paper by Lehtonen and Sajavaara (1985, 199–200):

The practices described above are not unique to Setswana culture. Lehtonen and Sajavaara (1985, 193) have also observed that children in Finland traditionally observe silence during meals and are not supposed to be engaged in conversations with adults unless the adults clearly indicate their wish to enter into a conversation with them.

(Bagwasi 2012, 190.)

Another example of invoking the silent Finn as an expedient is Danielle Knafo’s (2012) discussion of solitude and relatedness. Using Finnish culture to substantiate her claim that culture plays a role in how solitude is experienced, Knafo ultimately implies that Finns might fear that talk has negative effects on their health. “Additionally,” writes Knafo, “culture determines how solitude and relationship are regarded and experienced. For example, Finns revere ‘sacred silence’ and believe that keeping quiet promotes health and thoughtfulness (Carbaugh, 2005)” (Knafo 2012, 85).

Following a different train of thought, Michal Pagis (2010) presents a particularly astounding explanation for Finns’ apparent appreciation of silence: “Other communities, from Amish to Finn, emphasize the importance of silence and lack the modern emphasis on the right for self-expression (Enninger and Raith, 1982; Lehtonen and Sajavaara, 1985)” (Pagis 2010, 313).

Reading literature that references Finnish silence quickly reveals that circulation of the myth of the silent Finn in research articles and books is often intertwined with misguided attempts at explaining what Finns *do* or *do not do*. This intertwining of myth and explanation leads, in turn, to Finns being reduced in description to a single perceived cultural trait, exoticized and pointed at for being abnormal in comparison to, and different than, most of the rest of the world. Such otherization is quite typical of traditional intercultural communication research or cross-cultural comparisons (Miike 2003, 247–248), which should encourage scholars to reflect critically on research and on findings in these areas in general.

### *Characteristic Four: Intuitively Appealing*

The fourth characteristic of the myth of Finnish silence is that the concept is easy to grasp and that it is intuitively appealing. In other words, the idea appears to resonate with popular sentiments, reinforcing rather than challenging generally held beliefs or stereotypes. When intuition takes the lead, folklore, movies, television shows, plays, anecdotes, proverbs, and hearsay are not approached as cultural products but as *de facto* evidence of communicative behavior. While research often has roots in everyday observation, this can of course only be a starting point for academic inquiry, not its finishing line.

Reading about the silent Finn may generate not only an exotic – and therefore exciting – picture of a quiet northern people; it may evoke a feeling of recognition whose logic resembles the sentence, “Oh yes, that sounds familiar; yes, it must be true” (cf. Kercher & Prideaux 2014, who found a number of academic myths in tourism research “too good not to be true”). In the case of Finnish silence, the dominant viewpoint is Western European and Anglo-American, as Lehtonen and Sajavaara (1985, 194) themselves remark:

That the use and tolerance of silence by Finns is different from that of other national groups, at least within the Western European culture area, is attested to not only by the experiences of Finns in contact with other nationalities, but by the intuitive impressions of other Europeans visiting Finland as well.

(Lehtonen & Sajavaara 1985, 194.)

Other arguments that “just make sense” include those that draw on the writings of well-known individuals such as poets and playwrights – consider Berthold Brecht or Zachris Topelius – or that use nature as an explanation for Finnish silence:

Historically, the cold climate with long, dark winters, sparse population and hostile environment (see Carbaugh et al. 2006) may account for the Finns’ appreciation of silence and low gesture use. Loud self-expression is incompatible with situations where one is in potential danger, and gestures have been difficult to produce because of thick clothing and poor visibility in the dark, both inside and outdoors.

(Huttunen et al. 2013, 97.)

The Finnish historian Matti Klinge (1990) has discussed how “the Nordic self” is at home on the periphery of Europe, in its beautiful northern hinterlands. Here, Finnish character has been forged while being exposed to nature’s extreme demands of cold, enduring darkness (in winter) and warmer, ever present light (in summer). Withstanding this wide range of conditions both requires and creates a strength of character, an appreciation of simplicity,

demanding that one require no more than is needed, while appreciating nature's emphatically diverse offerings.

(Carbaugh, Berry & Nurmikari-Berry 2006.)

Intuition is a powerful force, particularly if allowed to run free. We argue that researchers are just as prone to *selective skepticism* or *selective optimism* as anyone; people tend to unconsciously seek evidence supporting their presuppositions and dismiss or challenge evidence to the contrary. Through this process, anecdotal evidence is jumbled with generalizable data and used as a platform for sweeping generalizations. If the proposed result is intuitively appealing enough, why even go searching for hard evidence – after all, the whole idea just makes sense, does it not?

In the literature we reviewed, it was interesting to notice how research-based evidence was sometimes overruled with what one might call everyday reasoning. This brings us to the next characteristic, “resistance to change”.

### *Characteristic Five: Resistance to Change*

The wide circulation of the idea of the silent Finn appears to advance hand-in-hand with its unreflecting repetition in popular and academic discourse. Those who use the myth seldom challenge its premises and make little attempt to examine its origins. Some commentators have cautioned readers about the fictional background of the silent Finn, calling for care when referencing the idea (e.g. Wilkins & Isotalus 2009). Interestingly enough, however, a more careful stance has not proven as popular as the original characterization. The contemporary 2010s research and textbook literature examples given in this article demonstrate that many authors exhibit a strong preference for the original “silent Finn” articles over a search for more recent information (see Appendices 1 & 2). To make this even easier, Sajavaara and Lehtonen's *The Silent Finn Revisited* was republished in an unrevised form in 2011, almost twenty-five years after it first appeared.

Even when an attempt has been made to put the silent Finn myth into perspective, to change or disprove the idea, resistance appears. Such resistance to change is evident as early as in the original publications themselves (Carbaugh 2005; Lehtonen & Sajavaara 1985; Sajavaara & Lehtonen 1997). As we have shown, Lehtonen and Sajavaara's second paper addresses Finnish silence initially as a mere stereotype, but ultimately revives and reinforces the idea of the silent Finn as true without presenting tangible empirical evidence. Similarly, despite occasional words of caution, Carbaugh (and Poutiainen) still generalize Finns as highly valuing silence and quietude.

Similar contradictions can be found in subsequent research articles and book chapters referring to Finnish silence. The authors of these publications sometimes discredit the notion of the silent Finn as a mere stereotype, only to state moments later that the stereotype stands on the *fact* that Finns are more silent than other nationals (e.g. Archer, Aijmer & Wichmann 2012, 116; Knapp 2000; Nishimura, Nevgi & Tella 2008, 788–790). Nakane (2012, 164) even notes that her sources are unreliable, stating that “their claim is based on ‘comparison of the intuitive data’ (Carbaugh and Poutiainen 2000: 194) and they reveal that the frequency of pauses and the rate of speech in the Finnish sample group do not show differences from those of other cultural groups.”<sup>3</sup> However, instead of following this line of thought, the text does not discuss the matter further. On the contrary, on pages 169 and 170, Nakane (2012) continues to refer uncritically to and elaborate on the Finnish appreciation for silence, leaving the reader with the impression that Finnish silence is, nevertheless, a proven fact.

The tendency to fall back on limited sources means that empirical evidence and actual critical voices – the few that exist – have been overlooked systematically. For example, Gina Poncini (2004, 282) questions the idea of Finnish silence on the basis of authentic data, stating that a Finn was the most active participant in her dataset of international business meetings. Of course, a single case does not allow for generalization, but how does this differ from Carbaugh’s (2005) silent Finnish professor? Similarly, research that indicates language proficiency might be a valid explanation for silence – particularly if taken into account that it is usually the Finns who have to switch to a foreign language in contact situations (Louhiala-Salminen, Charles & Kankaanranta 2005; Vaara et al. 2005) – does not really enter the discourse on silent Finns. Even empirical work that is not critical of the notion, such as the studies by an Estonian research group comparing family conversations and peer talk in different countries (Tulviste et al. 2003; 2010), remains mostly unrecognized in the discourse on Finnish silence. Although their measurements of utterances per minute do not allow for drawing conclusions about cultural preferences, but rather uncover linguistic phenomena, their observations should be considered a worthwhile contribution. It seems, then, that intuition trumps empirical evidence, an observation that underlines our assessment that the myth is resistant to change.

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<sup>3</sup> Unlike Nakane indicates, the passage referring to the use of intuitive data appears in Lehtonen and Sajavaara (1985, 194), not Carbaugh & Poutiainen (2000).

We are concerned that the idea's resistance to change, in combination with its wide circulation and intuitive appeal, creates a *self-feeding* system. In this system, academia begins with lay characterizations; provides the public with unproven, yet intuitively appealing information; and then receives this information back again when conducting further research. This, we propose, is a feature of the final characteristic, the self-replicating nature of the myth.

### *Characteristic Six: Self-Replication*

A self-replicating academic myth obeys a circular relationship between everyday observations, intuition, academic research, training, and popular discourse, each feeding into and strengthening the others. In relation to the idea of the silent Finn this means – as we have seen – that people are made strongly aware of Finnish silence under the premise of scientific proof. When researchers later enquire in interviews or questionnaires or speak with informants about their experiences and perceptions of Finnish communication, there is an undeniable possibility that we receive back an echo of this pre-conditioning. Luostarinen (1997) offers a striking example:

Reserved behaviour is such an old belief that it has transformed into a social fact which can be observed in scientific studies. The Finns, for instance, have longer pauses in their discussions than most Europeans. It is not socially disturbing to be quiet (Lehtonen and Sajavaara 1985).

(Luostarinen 1997, 122.)

Researchers, and therefore research design, may also be influenced strongly by this idea, not only because “Finns are silent” is the information we receive from literature as fact, but because researchers are recipients of and participants in everyday public discourse as well. Carbaugh's account is a fitting example of this effect in action. He writes, “I had heard and read about ‘the silent Finn’ and was not sure when I should step into a conversation. Moreover, when I did so, I was not sure what to say, how long I should speak, nor what obligations I had to open or close the conversation” (Carbaugh 2005, 28). The quote highlights another aspect of self-replication; namely, that such knowledge of supposed cultural difference can cause co-participants to be overly wary when interacting with the “other”, and has the potential to change people's behavior and perceptions.

The self-replicating nature of the myth is further evident in how “layers” of quotation sometimes *remove* the initial position of the original source, strengthening the notion in the process. Consider, for example, the following description, which appeared in the original *The Silent Finn* (Lehtonen & Sajavaara 1985):



In Finland, children are traditionally not supposed to be engaged in conversation with adults unless the adults clearly indicate their wish to enter a conversation with them. Children may only talk under the conditions set by adults in the speech situation. At meals, silence rather than talk is the rule; it is not considered necessary to be engaged in social small talk while eating. This may have very important implications for socialization because for the important in-group of the family, meals are one of the few social situations where all the members are present.

(Lehtonen and Sajavaara 1985, 199–200.)

In the 2010s, this short characterization, based on the personal experiences or perceptions of the original authors, has gained an aura of empirical credibility (see also Bagwasi 2012, 190, quoted previously):

Lehtonen and Sajavaara (1985) have *observed* that, during meal-times, Finnish families engage in relatively less small talk than, for example, Anglo-American families. [...] These examples suggest that in some communities, when there is no immediate demand for instrumental talk, silence need not be perceived as awkward or uncomfortable to the degree it is perceived by members of other communities.

(Jaworski 2014, 114; our emphasis.)

The position we take here is that the self-replicating nature of academic myths calls for diligence on the part of researchers. Academics should be careful of reproducing such ideas uncritically, and rather actively challenge them. Scientific knowledge has considerable influence on the world outside the immediate framework of academia, which poses great responsibility on researchers.

## Implications and Conclusion

Thirty years have passed since the first – and in many ways seminal – paper on Finnish silence by Lehtonen and Sajavaara (1985). The claims made in that article continue to reverberate through academic and popular discourses with little to no resistance or attempt of challenge or validation. In reviewing contemporary research literature and its historical sources, we have aimed to deconstruct the notion of the silent Finn. Moreover, the six key characteristics presented by this paper contribute to the conceptualization of *academic* (or “contemporary”) *myths*. McGee (1985, 477) argues that myths constitute “demonstrably false beliefs [which] are (1) widely held, (2) of long-standing and, (3) never subjected to inspection.” The features presented in this article seem to resonate with and complement McGee’s characteristics of myths. Particularly relevant to academic discourse, we maintain, is the observation that research publications repeatedly use the idea of the silent Finn as an expedient.

It is important to remember, however, that discussion of academic myths does not necessarily offer definitive answers to the question, “Is this myth ‘true’ or not?” While one may be skeptical of generalizing claims – such as ideas about “national character” – in many cases we simply do not know what truth a myth holds today, particularly because its origins might be buried in time, or the phenomenon in question has not been studied recently. It is possible that valid reasons exist for the continuing existence of a myth. We propose, however, that a principle problem with academic myths such as the silent Finn is that they keep us from scrutinizing human behavior. If reasoning stops at an essentialist statement such as “Finns are silent because they are Finns, and that is how Finns are”, there is no *need* to look beyond culture as an explaining factor.

We propose that the evidence presented so far in discussions of Finnish silence does not warrant the kind of uncritical repetition of the idea we have witnessed in our review. Apart from suggesting that the assumptions underlying the depiction of the silent Finn are determinist and essentialist, fostering the illusion that human behavior is predictable – and excusable – on the basis of national membership (see for example Piller 2012), we contend that, upon closer inspection, the academic idea of Finnish silence appears to be originally little more than scholarly imagination and a recycling of well-known cultural stereotypes.

Discovering the “truth” behind a notion such as Finnish quietude requires generalizations about national character on a scale that presents, for us, an impossible and frankly unnecessary endeavor. However, for those interested in pursuing the topic, we suggest avoiding self-report data and interviews, as it is likely these only offer confirmation of existing stereotypical views.

The argument presented by this paper is also relevant to ongoing discussions of citation practices in academia (Rekdal 2014a; 2014b). We urge scholars not to forget that social sciences and humanities have considerable influence on, and therefore responsibility towards, the world of those outside the framework of academic work. As Dervin (2011) argues:

There is also an ethical component to this: researchers hold a responsibility towards their research subjects but also towards society at large and need therefore to be able to distinguish themselves from “common sense” (or the *doxa*), contradictory discourses and help to challenge and transform preconceived ideas and unconvincing claims about the “Other.”

(Dervin 2011, 37–38.)

Tipton (2008) presents a similar argument. Tracing and dissecting the enduring, mistaken claim of the thumbs-up gesture interpreted as rude in Australia, he notes in relation to textbooks in particular that, “for many students these texts will be their first contact with international

business and with foreign cultures. For them, authoritatively presented, but incorrect, alleged facts and interpretations can lead to later problems” (Tipton 2008, 8). Similarly, discussing “scientifically proven” Finnish silence may alter how people behave in actual encounters with others, or perceive and later on report on those encounters.

Against this backdrop, the uncritical, unreflecting, repetitive referencing of the idea of the silent Finn, reinforced quote by quote and year by year, is alarming and may be considered a symptom of a more serious problem in the current realities of academic writing. An increased pressure to publish and publish fast rarely offers room for careful and critical reading, for accuracy and time-consuming reconsideration of what has been presented before. It is easier and quicker to simply repeat the “truth” and disregard possible hitches in previous works than to dig deeper into the foundations of what is, allegedly, “known”. As a result, academic discourse on culture and intercultural communication seems often to rely ultimately on what one might call stereotypical representations and generalizations of national and ethnic groups. Sometimes this is labeled “sophisticated stereotyping”, a term referring to the grounding of stereotypes in theoretical concepts and empirical data. Even then it may be that, “we are supplanting one form of stereotyping for another” (Osland & Bird 2000, 66) and are mistaking a starting point for the end result. Considering the ease by which the myth of Finnish silence echoes through literature, we contend that the self-correcting “machine” that academia so strongly relies on is not working as it should.

While it is unsurprising to see a myth such as the silent Finn persist in popular discourse, we are surprised and disappointed that it features so strongly in academic literature and that so many researchers repeat and renew simple characterizations of national character without any apparent review of their sources. For us, trying to understand the communicative rules and practices that constitute our social lives continues to be a worthy goal. We should, however, be careful not to sacrifice life’s beautiful complexity in search of quick truths.

## Appendices

Appendices 1 and 2 are available online: <http://sosiologia.fi/pdf/olbertz-siitonen-siitonen2015appendices.pdf>

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