Comparing Social and Gender Roles of College Students in Mixed vs. Homogenous Groups

Growing up, kids are taught to think a certain way, although sometimes unintentionally, through their parents’ and friends’ influences, media and outside environment. While these thoughts are still technically original, it allows ethnographers to make more clear assumptions about the purpose of why people behave how the do in communication by examining social trends and techniques used by parents and teachers during early development. Greater ideologies such as establishment, social structures and differentiated respect between genders often hold a greater weight and are thought of as ‘more important’ in the eyes of those individuals. The male members of my group portray these ideas by code switching in the presence of females to appear more inclusive, behaving a certain way based on the unspoken social codes set by the fraternity that they are apart of, and maintaining power in the conversation to satisfy the stereotypical male role that can be traced back millennia in human history.

“Code switching is the process of shifting from one linguistic code (a language or dialect) to another, depending on the social context or conversational setting.” (Source 1) In the case of my observations, the male’s code switched in several ways when around females versus when they are alone with each other in a similar situation. First, the males swear much less in the mixed group than they do in the homogenous group. This code switch can be justified by three different texts that we have seen throughout this course. “Inner-City Teens and Face Work,” by Robert Garot, uses code switching when the characters from the text decide to fight or to avoid a
fight. While the males in my group may want to swear [instead of fighting], there may be too much to lose in doing so, the lose respect of their audience, or the odds may not be in their favor. Essentially, if the stakes were high enough, and they evidently were based on my observation, the males would internalize their use of swearing to ultimately better their situations just like the males in the text would internalize their anger to walk away rather than fight and risk losing everything that is important to them. In “Swearing as a Function of Gender,” by Thomas E. Murray, the author demonstrates that there are several differences in the words that make each gender more uncomfortable, therefore, making those words feel more vulgar. In the mixed group, the males combat this discomfort by swearing less and, when they do swear, by using words that are less offensive to the audience. Similarly, in “Put Down that Paper and Talk to Me: Rapport-Talk and Report-Talk,” by Deborah Tannen, the mixture of genders plays a part in the comfort level of the participants and leads them to speak differently than they would if there were with a familiar group of friends of the same gender. While the concept of Rapport-Talk and the idea of private versus public groups both generally apply to females, I argue that it has an affect on the observations that I have seen personally. I believe, whether it was a conscious decision or not, the males used the ideas of these texts to allow the females to be more involved in the conversation. Knowing that the females would be less comfortable in this scenario than they would be with their own private groups, the dominant male from Fieldnotes 1 speaks less often and allow others to participate more frequently. Similarly, the less dominant male speakers from Fieldnotes 1 (all male) who spoke only a few times throughout the entire conversation were much more involved during Fieldnotes 2 (male and female) and helped promote the female’s conversation when they would bring up subtle points to further the discussion. For example, not within the transcript, but one of the females had just gotten her hair dyed and said, “What do you
guys think of this [hair]?” and several people complimented her to make her feel good whether they truly liked it or not. Although every attempt was made to make all participants feel more comfortable and to feel involved in the conversation, it was evident that only one of three females were even remotely comfortable speaking; therefore, I assume that she felt most familiar with all members of the social group.

Fraternity’s have a very stereotypical nature about themselves that, I believe, that the members of the group’s fraternity attempts to avoid and attempts to promote. People have the right to do want they want, so long as they are willing to face the consequences if they step outside of the law, but as an influential institution it is the responsibility of the fraternity to endorse certain behaviors. On the better side of the line, fraternities are very involved in philanthropy and giving back to the community in various ways, reinforcing that social good. On the other hand, many fraternity brothers, mostly outside of house executives, may push others to have unhealthy relationships with females or do things that could get them into trouble with the university of the police. Focusing on the unhealthy relationships, our fraternity heavily advocates for the respect of women from the brothers and attempts to influence individuals in a positive way. As members of any fraternity, however, the females involved in the conversation may realize the typical stereotype that goes along with male Greek Life and be uncomfortable being at the fraternity house in general, the location of Fieldnotes 2. While each of the females involved know the males and are familiar with every member of the group, they still feel like they must guard themselves emotionally, like most young females are taught, to ensure that they remain safe whereas men do not feel the need to do this as much and are more free to do as they want. This mentality might force them to restrain from entering the conversation. Similarly, from the males’ point of view, they are adhering to the expectations put onto them by the organization
by not pressuring the females into an uncomfortable situation. While this was a very lighthearted conversation and no individual had any chance of being hurt, it is still important to acknowledge the stigmas that come along with the overarching system and attempt to demonstrate its absurdity by being personable and not saying it outright. Conversely, Fieldnotes 1 shows the opposite side. In the company of only males there was plenty of opportunity to be hurt emotionally through jokes or insults but each of the individuals still participated in some capacity. For example, when you of the members is talking about cleaning his room, he says “It was starting to look like ‘name’s’ room,” which could be very insulting if he were there. Lastly, the fraternity has its own language between brothers and, while the members of the group do code switch, it is still difficult to fully avoid the language that is used when around their brothers whom they are very familiar. This is where the limited swearing comes into play; the males in the conversation cannot help but swear occasionally to continue showing that level of connection between themselves and their brothers who are apart in the conversation. It is important to the organization that they do not completely flip their personalities just because you are around different people. Basically, if you do not act the same around the brothers you are familiar with when compared to the people in the outside world because you are too ashamed, why were you pretending to act like that person in the first place. This is a big piece of the brotherhood and is a vital part of the fraternity organization, therefore, members do not want to break that bond.

As we spoke about in class, in most cultures throughout the world, males have held the power since the beginning of civilization. For example, males have controlled the government, military and business world for many centuries. While this is changing in our current society, the ideology of male power is still partially engrained in their minds and can be seen in both of my observations. In Fieldnotes 1, there was a clear leader for the entire conversation; he was able to
hold the power by telling jokes, making fun of members of the same social group who were not present, sharing stories about his personal life, bringing up new topics immediately after a conversation ended and, most interestingly, taking on a female role of adding minimal diminished responses to make others in the group feel like he was interested in what they were saying to gain a different form of power. In Fieldnotes 2, however, he had to take a different approach to power – he became the moderator of the conversation. For example, when one of the females was asking a question, the others in the group who answered did not fully understand what type of answer she wanted, which you can find in “A Cultural Guide to Male-Female Miscommunication,” by Daniel Matlz and Ruth Borker. As soon as the alpha decided that the bashing had gone on long enough, he interjected with a question of his own, “So you’re asking like specific specific? [[LF]],” to make the female feel like the alpha and everyone else understood and the male was the one who did not but also make the male feel like it was the female’s fault for not being specific. This was very clever; the conversation moved onto the next topic and neither of the individuals were upset because they did not feel blamed for the miscommunication. This portrayed power in his ability to not only decide when the conversation should end but also because he was able to end the conversation in a way that made everyone happy enough to forget about the whole situation when confrontational. This was where his social role completely differed. Instead of being able to talk about himself and lead the conversation exactly where he wanted to go, he had to step back and let others start a conversation, end it when he saw fit and make sure everyone was comfortable with the way it played out. I think this is another reason that he was only one of three people to swear during the conversation; to make the females comfortable he had to limit the amount of time he swore and the level of vulgarity but to make sure that the brothers felt more comfortable with him he had to
swear to prove that he was still the same person that we all know and love. While this power grab is totally different that something the President or a King might do, this is a very inclusive way to hold power over the conversation in the modern age. By taking power and not letting the people think that they hold too much power, the audience will be more agreeable, friendlier and like the person more - which is, ultimately, what every person wants to achieve.

Gender and social roles did play a big part in the differences between the interactions of Fieldnotes 1 and Fieldnotes 2 but there were also many outside contributors that had an impact in the conversation. By changing their roles, the males were able to achieve nearly the same outcomes between a group of only males and a group of males and females – showing friendship and relaxing in the presences of each other. By doing this, they were able to gain social capital and create a social relationship with the other group members that can now grow. If the males had acted the same in both scenarios, people would have been much more offended, would not have talked, and I would have had a much duller experience observing.
Outside Sources