

Conquest, Compliance, and Conformity in the College Classroom: Gender, Power, and Social Identity in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Classroom dynamics are complex and fluid, representing the emergence, negotiation, and navigation of a range of social roles and identities. Gender and power are important faces of these ever-evolving, highly contextual, and continuously (re)negotiated social roles within the classroom environment. This text proposes the completion of an ethnographic research study based on the field observation of group work dynamics in a post-secondary classroom. The proposed study will be based on and motivated by the theory and research of Barrie Thorne and Carolyn Frank. The text describes a preliminary field study to be followed later by an ethnographic study of social roles and social identities in both individual and group contexts in the classroom environment using a combination of ethnographic interviews and the creation of written artifacts by ethnographic informants selected through classroom observations. The proposed study will fill a gap in the existing literature by using ethnographic methods to examine social identities in higher education as contextual and dynamic.

Keywords: *ethnography, social roles, gender, power dynamics, higher education*

1. INTRODUCTION

The classroom environment has garnered significant attention from ethnographic researchers for decades. Kervin, Mantej and Lipscombe posit that “ethnography can help researchers understand...complexities as they gather information by watching and talking with people, reading available reports and records and mapping out the environment” (par. 1) [2].

However, as evidenced in studies such as those by Thorne [1], the central focus of this research has been largely on primary and secondary school environments. This proposal argues that the post-secondary school environment is a rich but relatively understudied field of ethnographic research. In the fluid environment of the university classroom, ethnographers may observe the emergence, navigation, and negotiation of individual and group identities, and those of gender roles and power dynamics.

Thorne’s text describes an ethnographic research study of a post-secondary English composition class based on field observation, ethnographic interviews, and the creation of written artifacts by students selected as

cultural informants based on the central roles, they have been observed to play in group activities within the class. Through this study, the ethnographer will explore gender and power dynamics in higher education, filling a significant gap in the existing literature, with its principal focus on primary and secondary school classrooms.

2. VIGNETTE

Suddenly, the classroom buzzes with activity. The professor has asked the students to “group up” for a close reading activity. The students join their groups with alacrity, laughing and smiling and moving expertly into position, as if this routine has by now become familiar, comfortable—and even fun for them. As the students settle into their groups, one student from each group walks to the front of the classroom and takes an index card from the professor. On this card is written the critical reading question that the group will work together to answer.

The ones who take the card for their group seem automatically to take a leadership role in the group. There doesn’t seem to be much discussion as to who this leader will be. At most, a quick nod between the group members is all that’s needed. Often, even this signal is not given, and the card-taker makes their way to the front of the class

without seeming to need, or ask, for permission or approval.

Once the groups have their index cards, a similar pattern emerges between them. The card-takers read the group's question aloud to their teammates and then the card is passed around for those who wish to read it for themselves. At the same time, the card-taker opens their notebooks and also begins to search for the designated passage in the course text. Usually, one or two of the other members of the group also begin looking up the passage in their own text.

In all the groups, it is the card-takers who initiate the discussion about the group's assigned question. And in all cases but one, the card-taker is a female and their strategies for launching the group work are similar. They open with a question that both invites and requires the others to respond, such as, "So, what do you think?" or "How should we start?" Interestingly, the only male card-taker launches his group's discussion using a different approach. Instead of soliciting his teammates' responses, he opens with a self-effacing question that invites his group's aid. "So," he says, "what's this all about?"

In all groups, the conversations begin slowly and tentatively, with brief initial pauses as the students read and reread both the question and the designated passages. After a few minutes, students begin venturing their ideas, usually couched in disclaimer or hedge, such as "Well, I think..." or "Well, I'm not sure, but..." Once again, in all cases, it is the card-takers who also make the notes for their groups, writing down their teammates' ideas as they give them. Once the flow of responses slows or stops, the note takers appear to take stock of the notes they have made and then begin to synthesize the group's ideas, asking questions and seeking clarification. This leads to a brief back-and-forth among the group members, while the note takers make additional notes. When this is done, the note-taker repeats back the group's conclusions, seeking validation before the groups unanimously determine that they are "finished" and ready to present their answer to the class. This pattern seems to flow naturally for all the groups, though whether this pattern is the result of habits formed from repeated group work or for some other motive is unclear.

Once the groups have settled on their answer, the individual members lose their air of concentrated focus. Some pick up their phones and begin scrolling or texting. Others chat genially with those closest to them. And still others simply appear to sit still and wait, sometimes fidgeting with their books, their clothing, or their nails.

When all the groups have their answers ready, the professor calls an end to this segment of the class. It is now time for each group to present its question and answer to the class. One person from each group stands up and gives the group's answer. It might be expected that that person would be the same one who had taken the lead

in getting the group's question, in initiating the group discussion and making notes, and in synthesizing the group's answer. But in only one case did the person who had led the group throughout the entire activity also present the group's findings to the class—and that was the group with the male card/note-taker. On the other hand, only two of the five girls who had taken the lead in the group activity thus far ended by presenting their group's answer to the class. For the remaining groups, the job of presenting to the class was assumed by males.

Watching the six groups and comparing behaviors within and between each group piqued my interest in group dynamics and in how the students perceive their roles in the class in general and in groups. In addition, the significant shift in leadership roles when it was time for the groups to present their answers to the class was intriguing. Given the fact that three out of five of the females allowed male group members to present the group's answer based on the notes the girls had taken raises some important questions about how gender dynamics and gender roles are perceived or played out in the class. These issues are one which the forthcoming ethnographic study will explore.

3. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

As suggested in the above vignette, this class offers some intriguing opportunities for exploring group dynamics in a post-secondary educational setting. Thus, based on these preliminary field observations, an ethnographic research study is proposed in order to explore the following questions:

- How do students perceive their roles in the English composition class?
- How do students perceive their roles in class group activities?
- How do students perceive and enact group dynamics in the class?
- How do students perceive and enact gender roles in the class, including how, or if, they perceive and enact gendered power differentials in the class?

4. BACKGROUND AND RELATED RESEARCH

This ethnographic research study will draw on the conceptual framework developed by Thorne in their exploration of gender dynamics in the contemporary classroom [1]. Thorne asserts that her principal research interest is on gender as it functions in groups, where gender-based power dynamics and social roles are continuously renegotiated based on evolving social contexts. Thorne asserts, therefore, that models of gender which focus on socialization and development often

grossly oversimplify a highly complex and dynamic process, as can be seen in these processes of gender creation and recreation in individual's daily interactions with others.

Conceptualizing gender in this way, Thorne asserts, is necessary to remediate the deficiencies of the socialization and development models of gender which, she argues, deny the agency and the uniqueness of the individual while at the same time defining this process as largely deterministic and unidirectional. In other words, Thorne argues, traditional models of gender socialization and development suggest that the subject is wholly shaped by socialization processes, while discounting or entirely denying both the possibility, let alone the actuality, of individual choice in gender development and performance. Further, Thorne suggests that these outmoded models conceptualize gender as linear and unidirectional process, one in which outcomes are known and in which development processes move predictably from one stage to the next until a pre-determined end state is achieved. The only exceptions, this model suggests, are those for whom socialization processes have somehow "failed" or "deviated" from the "normal" course, in which case the individual may express a disquieting gender ambivalence or ambiguity.

Thorne's conceptual framework, however, refutes the traditional model and replaces it with one that understands gender, both as idea and as practice, as an ongoing process of construction and deconstruction. This process, moreover, is one of continual negotiation between one's goals, values, and needs within one's unique and ever-evolving social context. This is the conceptual framework that motivates the proposed ethnographic research study, as an endeavor to understand how the students in the English class negotiate and navigate gender in the shifting contexts of the class.

For example, as was shown in the vignette presented above, of the six groups formed by the students in the group activity, five were initially "led" by females, who took charge of collecting the group's question, launching the discussion, and notating, synthesizing, and finalizing the group's response. However, when the class transitioned to the presentation and class discussion phase of the activity, three of the female group "leaders" allowed the group's findings to be presented by a male team member. Interestingly, I did not notice any discussions regarding this group role change. The female note-takers passed their notes to the male speaker without comment. Again, this may have become habitual for the groups in this class.

Nevertheless, these dynamics appear to confirm Thorne's assertions that gender, especially as these relate to gender power dynamics, are neither fixed nor deterministic. Rather, they appear, as Thorne suggests, to be fluid, multi-directional, and context driven. Other research suggests that gender still plays a significant role

in educational constructs, so it is important to keep that in mind when considering Thorne's assertions on gender. [5] Thus, Thorne's conceptual framework will be used to compare group dynamics both within and between the male-led group, the two female-led groups, and the three groups that were initiated by a female leader but represented by a male leader. Thorne's insights will be leveraged in this comparative analysis to endeavor to understand how gender is "created and recreated" within and between the groups.

In addition to Thorne's conceptual framework on gender, the proposed ethnographic study will also utilize Frank's frameworks for the ethnographic study of the classroom [3]. More specifically, Frank suggests that each classroom embodies its own unique ecosystem in which students and professors engage in ongoing processes of negotiation, deconstruction, and reconstruction in response to the evolving social dynamics of the class. However, though the classroom ecosystem is intrinsically amorphous, Frank notes that patterns quickly begin to emerge and may be observed and analyzed. Frank argues that classroom practices are "situated," meaning that they are highly dynamic, based on evolving interactions between participants and the social and environmental contexts in which they meet. Frank's description of "situated classroom practices" is particularly significant for the purposes of the forthcoming ethnographic research project because the concept helps to motivate and direct the analysis of the group dynamics described here. Specifically, it will be beneficial to attempt to understand how these situated classroom practices shape students' understanding and practice of their social roles, both within groups and in the class. Further, as has been suggested previously, a particular point of interest is how situated classroom practices may shape students' conceptualization and practice of gender in the class setting, both inside and outside of groupwork. It is important to note that student perceptions of gender among female students results in a feeling of being "silenced," which is one of the ways that female students may perceive their social roles (p. 412). [4]

5.METHODS: DOING ANTHROPOLOGY WITH A FOCUSED MIND

Given the current challenges imposed by the resurgence of COVID-19, and travel restrictions, it will not be feasible to resume field observations of the physical classroom. Because of the emergence of the Delta variant, I have been compelled to return to my home in China until travel restrictions are eased. However, there are copious field notes made from the classroom observations, which will be used to facilitate the execution of the present study.

5.1 Practicing Mindfulness and Minimizing the Observer Effect

As described in the field notes, the site observations endeavored to include practice of the techniques of mindfulness, reflexivity, and reflectivity that have been featured so strongly in this course. These techniques have already proven highly beneficial in the site observation process because they have required consideration and minimizing the impact that the observer's presence might have on class culture, and the ecosystem being observed in the hope of understand it without influencing or disturbing its machinations. Taking at least ten minutes, and ideally around half an hour, before each field observation to pause, center, meditate, and focus my intentions before each observation was hopefully helpful in engaging the class as a participant observer without unduly disrupting or changing the class ecosystem. As observed in previous field notes, the students did not seem to be perturbed at all by an observer presence. Only a few seemed even to notice that it, and even they seemed to quickly forget the quiet observer in the back of the room once the class began.

Nevertheless, my role as a participant observer at the field site was somewhat unique, insofar as ethnographic fieldworkers rarely have the luxury of observing without also engaging. Due to observing class meetings, this field work was necessarily limited in duration. The longest site observation, for example, lasted just over an hour. The limited time enabled observation of the site without actively engaging in the class, as opposed to ethnographic studies which require researchers to become participating members of the cultures they study.

Thus, in executing the forthcoming ethnographic research study, the field notes taken from previous site observations will necessarily be required to provide data in the absence of the opportunity to conduct additional observations. However, in drawing on these field notes, it will be necessary to be mindful of the distinctions between the brand of participant observation used to compose the field notes and other forms of participant observation, such as that conducted by Van Maanan. More specifically, it will be necessary to be cognizant of the possibility that the students may feel somewhat constrained by an observer's presence or may be reticent to be forthcoming with an observer who they do not perceive to be a part of the class "in-group." Efforts, in other words, to remain unobtrusive may make it more challenging to leave behind the etic perspective and cultivate an emic view of the culture of the class. The methods that to be pursued in executing this ethnographic study will prioritize efforts to develop a strong rapport with the study subjects, ensuring that methods, purposes, and intentions are clear and candid and that subjects recognize that questions, concerns, and comments are welcome without reserve or judgment.

Because additional field observations are not possible, at least at present, in addition to the data drawn from existing field notes, extensive ethnographic interviewing will be used. Not only is this a practical benefit given the pandemic environment in which the study will be completed, but it will also be a methodological benefit as well. As shown in the vignette, observations of the class's group dynamics have given rise to intriguing questions regarding students' perceptions of their roles within the class, both in and out of the group work context. Further, as has also been shown, the exploration of group dynamics and social roles relates strongly to gender dynamics, the negotiation and renegotiation of power-infused gender roles.

Given what has already been described in the field notes from the site observations, ethnographic interviewing will be the most effective instrument for exploring the research questions motivating the forthcoming study. More specifically, ethnographic interviews will be conducted with the students who played leadership roles in the group activity observed during the field site analysis. This will include the three females who served as note-takers for their group; the three males who presented their group's reading response based on the notes made by their female teammates the two females who served both as note-taker and presenter for their group, and the male who served as both note-taker and presenter for the group.

5.2 Video conference and Interview

Because of geographical constraints, the nine interviews will be conducted by video conference and scheduled at the interviewees' convenience. The interviewees' permission to record and transcribe the interviews will be solicited. If any of the interviewees prefers not to be recorded, notes will be recorded throughout the interview process, striving for the highest standards of accuracy and comprehensiveness. To ensure that nothing significant is forgotten, notes will be made on all interviews, with questions and reflections, immediately after the interview.

The goal for these interviews will be to ask open-ended questions to better understand how these students perceive their roles in the class. Unless the topic naturally arises from the conversation, the topic of gender will not be explicitly raised. Rather, the goal is to use the "grand tour" approach to interviewing in order to identify the topics that are most significant to the interviewees. As such, broad, open-ended questions will be asked including, "Tell me about the close reading exercise you did in class that day?" and "How would you describe your work/role in the group?" The females who did not present will be asked, "I noticed that when it was time for the group to present, you passed your notes to another student. Can you tell me more about that?" In addition, the students who presented but did not take notes for their

group will be asked, “I noticed that when it was time for your group to present, you took the lead. Can you tell me about that?” The goal in phrasing questions will be both non-directive and nonjudgmental. As a result, an attempt will be made to phrase the questions with significant neutrality and also to take care, during the interview process, not to respond through facial expression or body language in a manner that the interviewee might perceive as either positive or negative. Taking care to be receptive and accepting but noncommittal will be necessary to motivate the interviewees to speak as freely and voluminously as they want.

Finally, interviewees will be asked to engage in a bit of reflective creative writing and asked to think back to the day of the group work on Walls’ memoir and to write their own mini memoir of the event. They will be asked to describe the group activity from their point of view. My goal is to have my subjects create an artifact that will help to see the class, and the group activity, from an emic perspective, through the eyes of these group leaders.

Rhetorical analysis and open field coding will be employed to analyze the data derived from the interviews and creative artifacts. This will enable identification of important themes emerging from the subjects’ perspectives on the group work and their perceived role in the class. These data will then be applied to the question of how students perceive gender in these contexts, including exploring the question of whether gender appears to be a conscious point of concern or consideration.

6.POSITIONALITY

As emphasized throughout our course, I have attempted to practice mindfulness, reflexivity, and reflectivity in all my ethnographic work. Nevertheless, I recognize that I cannot presume to experience or understand the class through anyone’s eyes other than my own. I also recognize that the things that I notice, the things that interests me, and the questions that I ask are driven by my own experiences, expectations, and values. Thus, my training as a researcher, and my significant studies of culture, gender, and ethnographic research have attuned me to questions of power, identity, and rationality. These, however, are my focus, my concerns. I cannot presume my study subjects have the same concerns. For example, just because I have questioned whether gender power constructs motivated the three girls to allow their male teammates to present the group’s findings does not mean that is necessarily true. Indeed, gender may not have played a role, whether consciously or unconsciously, in this behavior at all.

Thus, my obligation as a researcher is always to test my assumptions and to make good faith efforts to avoid confirmation bias by actively looking for evidence that undermines or complicates my assumptions. In addition,

it will also be important to recognize my positionality relative to my subjects. I am a graduate student and a researcher. I am not a student in the class and have no real stake in it, as my subjects do. Thus, I do not have as much to lose as the students do should there be disruptions or challenges regarding the class. My subjects may perceive me to be in a position of power or authority, at least insofar as, unlike them, I am not trying to earn a grade in the class. They may also have concerns that I hold some measure of influence with the professor, my contact, and, therefore, that I may be able to impact their grade. Thus, it will be necessary to continually reassure the subjects that their participation or lack thereof in the research will have no influence on their standing in the class.

7.PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Based on the ethnographic interviews and field observations, it is anticipated that Thorne’s argument that gender is not fixed, but rather is a process of continual creation and recreation, negotiation, and renegotiation, will be confirmed. This is based on the observation that, though three of the female group leaders allowed their notes to be presented to the class by male teammate, they did, nevertheless, play an important role in leading their respective groups. As was described in the field notes, none of the three girls was observed asking for permission to get the group’s question or to make notes of the group’s responses. This indicates the girls felt comfortable in assuming a position of authority in the group, even if it was only temporary. Similarly, two of the groups were female-led from start to finish, from the receiving of the group’s question to the presentation of the findings. Again, this supports the premise that “traditional” gender power hierarchies do not necessarily apply, or at least not without complication, contextualization, and problematization.

Such assumptions are also supported by the observation that only one group was led, from start to finish, by a male. The remaining five groups, on the other hand, were led at least at the outset, by females. The fact that three of the groups saw a sort of transfer of leadership from a female discussion leader to a male presenter supports Thorne’s argument that gender constructs and power differentials are dynamic and contextual, with leadership positions negotiated with and between genders.

Further, the observation that five out of the six groups were initiated by female leaders suggests that, indeed, the students not only do not question the role of the female leader, but that the students also may perceive the females to possess talents. For example, as previously noted, the female note-takers appeared to be especially skilled in opening the group discussion, using questions that invited all team members to engage, in contrast to the male leader, who used a different approach to launch the discussion. These different rhetorical techniques will warrant further investigation in ethnographic study.

8. IMPORTANCE

This study is important because it explores not only group dynamics but also gender dynamics in the post-secondary classroom. There is still research to support that women feel devalued in their desire to seek higher education (p. 17). [6] This will contribute to research on the socialization and the performance of gender by young adults, which will be an important addition to the extant literature, which focuses primarily on younger persons. These questions, moreover, will help to test Thorne's theory that gender is not linear, fixed, or deterministic, but is renegotiated and recreated through one's daily interactions across the entire lifespan. This research may also contribute to a better understanding of gendered outcomes, which are still rife in post-secondary education (Francis, Skelton & Smulyan, p. 173). [7]

9. FINAL REFLECTION

I have learned a great deal about ethnography in this class and I think that what has surprised me the most is how much attention is given to the researcher him or herself. For most of my life, I had assumed that a researcher needed to be wholly "objective" in order for their research to be "valid," and that this objectivity meant that the researcher had to largely disappear from the research process.

However, thanks to this class, I realize that complete objectivity is impossible. Even more importantly, I realize that the effort to be "objective" can be dangerous because it falsely suggests that a researcher's findings are unquestionable and are completely uninfluenced by the researcher's experiences, interests, goals, and values. Therefore, I have appreciated the focus on mindfulness so much. Taking the time before each observation or interview to center and focus has been such a help. At the same time, reflecting on my field notes even as I wrote them has helped me to draw to conscious awareness important issues that might have been hidden or even denied in presumptions of unassailable "objectivity."

My work in this class has required me to think not only about what I observed and what I asked but also about what conclusions I have drawn, and that process has been illuminating, because the more I test my own perspectives, the more I find to explore. For example, the ethnographic study I am proposing here is based on my efforts at reflectivity and reflexivity. I am hoping, more specifically, to use the forthcoming study to test my own assumptions that gender dynamics are at play during the group activity.

10. CONCLUSION

This proposal is based on preliminary field observations of a post-secondary English class. Motivated by the theory and research of Barrie Thorne and Carolyn

Frank, the paper describes research examining social roles and social identities in the classroom environment using ethnographic interviews and written artifacts. Based on these observations, the text proposes a further ethnographic study social roles and group identities and their navigation and negotiation with each other in the context of a higher education classroom. The proposed study would go on to examine, more specifically, the evolution of gender roles and power dynamics in fluid social contexts. This will fill a substantial gap in the ethnographic literature, which has focused principally on primary and secondary school environments.

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