Gauging student’s general perception and comfortability when approached by innocent strangers: an ethnography at Parkland College.

As a group of diverse females, we wished to put together a research study that questioned how others initially felt within situations of being approached. We all noticed that as we all knew each other from a classroom setting, it was easier to communicate, however, still not extremely comfortable. We therefore took it upon ourselves in our ethnographic research to ask others how they felt about stranger approachability.

We realized and argued that our collected data could yield two completely opposite results. Thus, our hypothesis at the beginning of the study was that groups and/or individuals that we observed in social situations and of whom we would ask questions would provide one of two responses:

- Most individuals are not very open when being approached by individuals of different demographics and prefer someone their own age, gender, and race.

Or

- Most individuals are open minded when being approached by an innocent stranger and have no problem with diversity.

We collected data through different means and our project included audio and visual results from observations, personal approaches, and interviews. We began by sitting in Parkland’s most populated areas (dining hall and student union) to ask random groups initial
questions about their preferences on being approached by a stranger; had they had any. Our meeting, questioning, and discussing these topics with people began to slightly shift our research from approachability on its own to approachability and diversity.

I had found that, personally, when I approached others of any demographics I myself was slightly uncomfortable. I believe that this was something that we found to be a pattern throughout our findings. However, past the initial discomfort, no one cared about where you came from, what color of skin you had, or what accent you spoke. They only cared about who you were and what you were doing at the moment of your approach.

In Jane Hill’s article “Language, Race, and White Public Space”, she touches on racism in anthropology. This article relates to our initial arguments and data as it talks about how levels of comfortability vary across different cultures. At one point in this text she focuses on people of Spanish speaking descent and their experiences in white public space. Hill wrote the following on her findings based off her research on bilingual Puerto Ricans, “Speakers are anxious about far more than "accent," however: they worry about cursing, using vocabulary items that might seem uncultivated, and even about using too many tokens of "you know." Mediated by cultural notions of "correctness" and "good English," failures of linguistic order, real and imagined, become in the outer sphere signs of race: "difference as inherent, disorderly, and dangerous"(Hill 1999: 681).

The idea of anxiety over speaking another language in an English space reminded and connected me to the diversity in Parkland and the struggles I am sure plenty of ESL and non ESL students’ alike face. I recall during my research a moment when my partner and I approached a table of only Asian males. Almost immediately there was a sense of discomfort. Their English was poor, unlike that of the people in Hill’s research. You could see the discomfort they felt
having to communicate with someone of my demographics; white, female, and most definitely an English speaker. When my partner and I asked them the questions regarding approachability, they had an individual at the table answer for all of them, as they seemed too embarrassed to try to communicate with us in a language not their own. Surprisingly, they were also the only table that said if they were to be approached by a stranger, they would absolutely prefer them to be of similar demographics to their own to ensure comfortability.

Another aspect we were sure to include in our research was a focus on male versus female responses. We tried to see if there were any differences in opinions on comfort with strangers approaching based on gender. We did so by making sure to include an equal number of individuals from both genders in our observations. We also interviewed two male students, one male faculty, and three female students, in addition to asking our more simple questions to many more individuals.

In fact, my original idea before we began any data collection was to ask **would women want a specific verbal approach from a male stranger and another approach from a female stranger? Would men ask the same questions about the opposite gender?** Deborah Tannen’s article “Talk in the Intimate Relationship: His and Her’s” is a perfect depiction of the connection to diversity in the male and female mind as she emphasizes gender communication styles and differences. Although her article focuses mainly on conversation, and our research is about everything before the conversation, there are still points that Tannen touches upon that connect with our research. We quickly learned from our interviewee’s that, mostly, they had no preference to someone's demographics, but most definitely had a preference to their physical features and approach. Tannen states that “Little girls and little boys learn how to have conversations as they learn how to pronounce words: from their playmates (Tannen 1986: 117).
She adds that as children and growing up into adulthood, it is from their peers that they learn how to socialize. In our study we further learned that a lot of students we interviewed, though they said they had no preference of being approached by someone of their own demographics, found themselves socializing outside of Parkland with people of similar demographics and gender. This could be explained by Tannen’s theory that our socialization as children deeply affects our social interactions. She states, “Girls like to play cooperatively….. Their (boys) is often competitive talk about who is best at what.” (Tannen 1986: 118)

Surprisingly, for a such a diverse group of student life, we had found through our studies that in fact, most individuals are open minded when being approached by an innocent stranger and have no problem with diversity. The common theme we saw throughout was there being no preference to who you were, but you were doing. It seems as though we as a society have taken a step in the right direction of acceptance and comfortability by being approached by strangers, yet we have some trust issues to work on. I believe further research in this study is not only important but could be extremely fruitful. Had I had more time, I would have liked to have focused more on gender and racial stereotypes as well as having more personal interviews, as it seems it is a lot easier for someone sitting at a table full of many other people to just repeat the words of those around them. Personal interviews provide an opportunity to really understand how someone feels without the pressure of an onlooker or peer.

This opportunity to explore a field in which I never truly put my own thoughts and ideas was a very eye opening experience, and I am grateful for the chance of this research assignment.
Bibliography:
