Communication and Social Hierarchy: Their Relationship and Interconnection
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Abstract

What type of communication is most likely to confuse or break down the social hierarchy? The objective of this research is to explore the interplay between communication and social hierarchies through understanding the characteristics of different forms of media and how they impact how hierarchy is maintained, broken down, and manifested. Data were collected in 2015 through twenty-two in-person interviews and written exercises with professors, students, employers, and employees, and observations of student-professor and employer-employee events. Through employing these methods, I found that initiating an interaction requires a conscious decision about which medium is best suited for that particular communication based on the recipient, the situation, the content of the communication, and most importantly, the relationship with the recipient. I ultimately conclude that written communication is more likely to confuse the social hierarchy, whereas oral communication is more likely to break down the hierarchy. Both forms show a very clear relationship between social hierarchy and communication.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

All social interactions are dependent upon the type of subjects involved, the settings in which they take place, and the methods used to facilitate the interaction. People do not communicate with their parents, siblings, peers, friends, colleagues, employers, employees, or authority figures in the same manner. While not everyone interacts with a specific group in the same way as do other people, no one interacts with each group in exactly the same manner as he or she does with other groups. As a society, we code-switch and adapt our interactions to relate to our audiences and what they expect to learn from us and through the manner in which they expect to learn it. While one may opt to snapchat a friend, that same person will not relay that same information to his or her grandparent who does not own a cellphone. Societal interactions vary based on the audience and we learn to communicate to the targeted audience in a manner specific to them. Each audience allows for a different role to be played, and we present the part of ourselves most in line with what is an acceptable interaction in light of that audience and role.

In everyday interactions everyone plays a role, which Erving Goffman (1959: 16) defines as “the enactment of rights and duties attached to a given status.” Roles are a regimented and societally dictated particular set of behavioral rules governing different social arenas. In contrast, but closely related, status is a position in a social system and the relative ranking of a position compared with others. Certain roles have higher statuses than other roles and therefore, the same people behave differently when performing various roles. Goffman imagines the social world as a multi-staged drama in which we each perform different roles based on the type of situation and the others involved in that interaction (Meyrowitz 1985: 2). However, recently, many sociologists have turned away from the discussion of roles and focused on identity instead.
Scholars criticize role theory for being inconsistent in its explanations, its emphasis on social conformity, the way it is used to justify social inequality, and its inability to cope with the constant transformation of social forms (Biddle 1986, Jackson 2011, Connell 1979). However, I believe that roles are still an intrinsic part of society and are of paramount importance regarding social hierarchies and the maintenance of authority.

Power, according to Max Weber (1978b:926), is the ability to accomplish a goal despite the resistance of others. This power can be thought about both as micro-level power and macro-level power. In the macro-level, power is understood in the realm of society as a whole, such as economic power or the racial order. However, micro-level power is the power between individuals, rather than in society at large; micro-level power reflects and is supported by the macro-level systems of power. Micro-level power is maintained through individual interactions and communications and is usually exhibited through authority. When power is recognized as legitimate and warranted, that power becomes authority (Weber, 1978a). As a result of authority, people have to learn to enact authoritative roles and reciprocally, subordinate roles as well, and these roles lead to the perpetuation of social hierarchies. Therefore, the concept of the role is very useful in understanding the maintenance of authority in everyday interactions. Studying roles is important because it enables understanding and discovery of power relationships and of the continuity of social hierarchies.

The existence and perpetuation of social hierarchies depend on people accepting and knowing how to perform roles. Without various roles, such as professor and student, and the understanding of the relationship between the two, the hierarchical nature of the relationship
would not be able to be expressed. Although not all relationships are hierarchical, many in fact are.

Social hierarchies exist in many facets of society and have both positive and negative implications. In many circumstances of social hierarchy, injustices occur. The relative positions in the hierarchy seemingly lead to inequality and to unfairness within society. Some people abuse their hierarchical status and use the hierarchy for their own personal gain. However, the social hierarchy also has its advantages. Hierarchies enable social life to continue and lead to an understanding of position and without them, there would be less order.

Emile Durkheim (2002) discusses the importance of authority, not necessarily in a human form, but as an entity greater than the individual. He demonstrates that individuals cannot regulate their own passions and desires and therefore, need authority to impose order. He explains that the regulation “must come from a power which dominates individuals; but this power must also be obeyed through respect, not fear (212),” so the individual will not feel constrained by it. The imposed authority sets expectations and limits for individuals that correspond to what is realistically possible. These limits that are placed on individuals create satisfaction in life. Furthermore, Durkheim stresses the importance and benefits of authority in his discussion of religion and suicide (109-114). He wrestles with the question of why more Protestants than Catholics commit suicide, and ultimately concludes it is because Protestants have more religious individualism. He explains that Catholics have a more firm structure, an accepted hierarchy, and more authority figures as intermediaries. The nature of their religion is a more communal one. In contrast, Protestants have no intermediaries between themselves and God and have no hierarchical structure; they practice as individuals rather than communally.
Therefore, Protestants live lonelier existences and are more prone to suicide. It is through agreement about hierarchies and authority that social life can flourish as we know it. But regardless of whether hierarchy is overall beneficial or detrimental, it is currently an integral aspect of social life, and therefore, should be studied further.

I am particularly interested in studying hierarchies because of their prevalence in society. For better or for worse, hierarchies are commonplace in many settings and inform the behaviors of everyone. Some try to mitigate hierarchies while others try to reinforce them, but regardless of the goal, behaviors are transformed because of the existence of hierarchies. It is important to learn more about hierarchies because they are fundamental to the understanding of the way society functions. Understanding social hierarchies and how they are enforced, confused, and broken down leads to an understanding of the role that they play within society and the manners in which they are maintained.

Despite how common social hierarchies are in society, they still need to be sustained and maintained, rather than implicitly understood. Communication is one aspect that enables micro-level hierarchies to be solidified and acted out appropriately. While it is clear that we sustain these individual hierarchical relationships through communication, it is not apparent which forms enable these hierarchies and what modes of communication break them down. Everyone communicates and everyone participates in social hierarchies. The question is how are these two processes connected: how are our communications reflective of social hierarchies and what is the relationship between the two? Communication is an integral aspect of society and it is ubiquitous to all societies and all communities. Although not every society communicates in
the same manner, everyone uses some form of communication. Those communications establish micro-level social hierarchies, but the question remains of how they do so.

In the modern day there is a multitude of media through which communication occurs. The dependence on the internet, attachment to cell phones, and the accessibility of so many communication devices at our fingertips create a society in which communication is everywhere. We have forged a society with many methods of communication. With so many new types of communication inundating society, questions arise as to the appropriate ways of communicating. While updating your Facebook status about alternate plans for tomorrow may seem like a good way to let your friends know about your plans, it probably is not how you want your boss to find out you are not coming to work tomorrow. Because of the proliferation of communication media, it has become increasingly more difficult to recognize what is appropriate and what is not appropriate in communication and that confusion leads to challenges to the social hierarchy. These challenges are generally unintentional, but still consequential. Since the social hierarchy is maintained in part through communication, it is dependent upon the types of communications used and how interactions transpire within those methods of communication. Different methods of communication include written communication and oral communication. A further distinction can also be made between face-to-face communication and mediated communications, regardless of whether oral or written.

I began my project with one overall research question. Is written or oral communication more likely to confuse and break down the social hierarchy? Additionally, I had several secondary questions. How have technology and the introduction of new mediums influenced the way people write and communicate across mediums? How are slang and informality related to
medium use and what effects do they have on social hierarchy? Do people communicate differently using different media if there is a flat social hierarchy? Empirically, I set out to understand more about communication media and how they might work to affect hierarchical relationships. But theoretically, I wanted to learn more about one of the ways in which status is maintained as it is an important part of understanding hierarchical relationships. Furthermore, I wanted to understand how status maintenance in interactions helps us to understand bigger sociological questions, such as whether or not people perceive hierarchies as positive or negative and why people work towards maintaining or breaking down these hierarchies.

Many scholars have different understandings of what causes social hierarchies and the ways in which social statuses are structured. The literature discusses several different theories as to whether or not certain media break down or sustain hierarchies more than others, but there is no agreement. Using different methods and focusing on different areas, some scholars have determined that mediated communication better solidifies the social hierarchy while others claim the exact opposite. None of the works I have studied answer my specific questions about the interplay between communication methods, interaction styles, and status hierarchies.

When beginning this project, I believed that certain media are in fact more likely to maintain and break down hierarchies than others. My initial assumption, before engaging with the literature, was that written communication, whether on paper or electronic, solidifies the social hierarchy more so than spoken communication. I believed this because writing is seemingly a manner in which to communicate more formal matters and because of electronic written communication’s resemblance to print and formal hand-written letters. Based on the literature and further investigation, I thought that written communications were more likely than
oral communications to cause confusion about hierarchical positions and provided more opportunity to break them down. I believed this to be true because of the multitude of potential errors that could arise because of variations in etiquette between different written media, such as, emails, texting, and social media. These forms of communication could enable confusion about the hierarchy with something as simple as an “inappropriate” greeting or the lack of other clear hierarchical symbols. However, in face-to-face interactions, the dominant form of oral communication, there are other aspects that connote the hierarchy, so therefore, speech would not play as big of a role. For example, type of dress, setting, and formality of the situation all have an impact on the hierarchical structure. Because face-to-face interactions primarily occur orally, I believed oral communication was less likely to cause confusion and break down of the hierarchy.

In the following chapters, it will become clear that I was not completely wrong, but I was not completely correct either. I was correct in my assessment that media communications and social hierarchy are intrinsically related and must be thought about together. I was also correct in believing that written communication was capable of undermining the social hierarchy; however, I was incorrect about oral communication as I believed it would not break down the hierarchy. The very characteristics that I believed would hinder oral communication from breaking down hierarchies are in fact the characteristics that I now believe are responsible for breaking the hierarchy down. I realized I needed to make a distinction between confusing the hierarchy and breaking down the hierarchy. Confusing hierarchies can be characterized as actions or speech that inadvertently counters societal norms; however, breaking down hierarchies can be understood as a conscious occurrence with the intention of mitigating social hierarchies. I
then concluded that written communications are more likely to confuse the hierarchy, whereas oral communications are more likely to break down the hierarchy.

In order to learn more about the interplay between communication and social hierarchies I studied two very hierarchical relationships, the student-professor relationship and the employer-employee relationship. Through interviews, writing samples, and observations, I was able to study several different forms of communication and to learn how status differences were being sustained, and in some situations, broken down by violating expectations about appropriate role-playing. Throughout the next chapters, readers will learn about what scholars have said on the topic of communication and hierarchy and how my work contributes to the conversation, the methods I used and why I chose them, who the participants were, and what I found throughout the research.
Chapter 2: Theory and Research in Communication and Status Hierarchies

Introduction

Throughout this chapter I will highlight important theoretical perspectives related to social dynamics and communication and will discuss research studies related to my line of inquiry. I will begin by discussing theories behind social roles and explain what roles are and how they are used in society. Primarily using Erving Goffman as the basis for that discussion, I will then discuss social hierarchies and status from Max Weber’s theoretical perspective.

Once I establish a foundation for social roles and hierarchies, I will explain how they are maintained through language and will delve into the ways in which that occurs. I will continue with a theoretical discussion of various modes of communication, and how communication affects the maintenance of relationships. Following that, a comparison between interactionists and media theorists will ensue, which I will use to illustrate the need for these perspectives to work together, at least, regarding the topic of this thesis. I will then move to discuss some research questions, such as how computer mediated communication impacts hierarchy, and then I will explore research studies that illustrate aspects of social roles or speech variance. To conclude, I will explain why I believe my hypothesis varies from the other research studies I present.

Social Roles and Hierarchies

Social roles are an intrinsic part of the social order of society and are prevalent in all human interactions. Erving Goffman (1959:15) explains an interaction as a “reciprocal influence of individuals upon one another’s actions when in one another’s immediate physical presence.” Using the metaphor of actors performing on a stage, he explains that people play many roles in
different social settings and for each audience they portray different versions of themselves. Using dress, gesture, and other props, performers set the stage and define the general roles for themselves and for other performers. Goffman (1959:22) also explains that performers act differently when “backstage” compared to “front stage.” The front stage is where the performer presents to the audience, whereas in the backstage the performer is out of sight from the audience and with people of similar social roles to himself. The ideal conception of the social roles occurs in the front stage. The backstage is used to relax, rehearse the role, develop strategies for how to best perform the role, and to joke about behaviors that occur in the front stage. The performance that one enacts differs based on the specific situation and his or her role in the particular situation. Based on Goffman, it is apparent that roles change and people need to act differently in different company. Social roles, while ever-present, need to be continuously reenacted, and when they are not, those social roles can break down.

Every social situation requires a particular role and in every situation each interlocutor has his or her own agenda (Meyrowitz, 1985:24). One does not act or say the same things in every situation and certain behaviors are only appropriate in particular instances while they would not be in others. For example, a student does not behave the same way or discuss the same things when interacting with a professor as one does when interacting with a peer. While one behavior may be appropriate in one place, it can be entirely inappropriate in another. The manners in which people behave are shaped and modified by the socially defined situations in which people find themselves (Meyrowitz, 1985:27). The social situation fosters the social regulations that participants instinctively know and understand. Role structure is one of those situations that is regularly understood and performed accordingly. In a given situation, most
people know their places and what roles they are supposed to be playing in that particular instance. The way they act, what they say, and how they say it will be reflective of their social awareness and their understandings of role dynamics.

Another factor in social relationships is status hierarchy. In many situations there is one person whose social status is higher than the others’ and then too, the conversationalists need to account for that in their interactions. Weber (1978b) says that class, status, and party are three different dimensions that determine social differences and that status is based on an accumulation of honor. He explains status as someone’s social position relative to others, one’s prestige. One does not accumulate prestige through economic achievement nor political power, but rather through “social estimation of honor” (Weber, 1978b: 932); status is independent of political and economic power. This social standing is tied to a style of life and is based on what is considered popular, accepted, and cultural in a particular society. Through this understanding of status, social hierarchies are created and reinforced and subsequently, have an effect on how people communicate. In our society, there is an intrinsic relationship between social roles and status, whereas one plays a role within a status, and one accumulates status based on particular roles. For example, the role of teacher fosters honor from his students.

One particular example of a hierarchical role relationship is the student-teacher dynamic. Students know that when conversing with teachers, there is a clear role structure in which the student is acting as a student and the professor is acting as a professor and the teacher has a higher status than the student; no one is confused as to who occupies which role and the manner in which those two roles are supposed to interact. While everyone is aware of which role he or she is supposed to be playing, the ways in which those roles are performed differ and have been
changing over time. The internal societal norms are changing and therefore, students are acting out their roles differently.

This is seen in the area of communication. Many teachers say that they often receive very colloquial and informal emails from their students, using shorthand and incorrect spelling (Stephens, 2009). Colloquial emails diverge from the rigid role structure and blur the lines of how one is supposed to correspond with a teacher because they illustrate a lack of deference and suggest equality.

The social role dynamic as exhibited in any social relationship is predicated upon society’s role structure and the prescribed manner in which people are supposed to behave in certain situations. Social roles occur in every social interaction and dictate the way people interact, communicate, and express themselves.

Language

Once we accept that there are social roles, it is important to understand how they are maintained. One of the ways that social roles and hierarchies are exhibited is through the use of language; the language that one uses maintains social status and social roles. Language is an imperative part of the development of human thoughts and inner consciousness (McLuhan, 1964:83). The language used during an interaction is reflective of the type of relationship between the participants and it reinforces and solidifies the social roles.

One area of language that changes based on the role dynamic is the degree of formality used in conversation. Chambers (2003:4) wrote, “formality tends to increase in direct proportion to the number of social differences between the participants.” The more similar the social roles of the people conversing, the less formal their speech will be. For example, peers and
co-workers will speak to one another less formally than they would speak to their teachers or supervisors. The varying degree of formality demonstrates and perpetuates the social status dynamic, as formality also represents a degree of intimacy. Formality can be demonstrated through the use of honorifics and more grammatical, longer sentences, whereas informality would be characterized by shorter, less grammatical sentences.

Specialized words and group parlance are also aspects of formal and informal language. Mandelbaum and Kitzinger (2007) discuss diction and how that could be reflective of social class, social acceptance, or membership in a certain group. Mandelbaum and Kitzinger give several conversation examples and demonstrate that people do in fact use certain verbiage when speaking with people of their same group and different verbiage with people outside of the group. As they said, “When speakers effortlessly select lexical items and treat them as if their recipient should effortlessly understand them, they presume co-membership in whatever membership category is thereby made relevant (Mandelbaum and Kitzinger, 2007).” This co-membership is an illustration of informality and is representative that those communicating are members of the same group and probably of similar social status. Furthermore, pronoun usage is reflective of standings in social hierarchies as higher status is linked with attention towards others and the use of first-person plural pronouns; whereas low status is linked with self attention and the use of first-person singular pronouns (Karczewicz et al, 2014). Profanity and slang are both further examples of breaching the formal etiquette. Formality is just one aspect of speech that demonstrates social status.

Deference and degree of familiarity also indicate and perpetuate social status differences. It is through conversation and communication that specific roles are maintained (Garcia,
The degree of familiarity can be characterized by the form of address, the type of opening, and the structure of turn taking (Garcia, 2013: 8, 49, 96). Furthermore, degrees of familiarity may be detected by who has the authority to end the interaction, the ability to criticize during an interaction, and the jovial nature of a conversation. Deference is portrayed through not interrupting the other, using extra complimentary language, deflecting blame, and the tone of voice used. Formality, deference, and familiarity all simultaneously help to reinforce and to ambiguate status order. When they are used in the manner one would expect, social order is reinforced; however, when instances that counter what is expected occur, the social status is ambiguated. Language and the way it is used are integral aspects of understanding social status, social roles, and social hierarchies.

Modes of Communication
Another important manner for understanding how people maintain relationships is through the available modes of communication and when and how they are used. In contemporary society, there are many different media that people use to communicate. McLuhan (1964:57) says that there are “explosive hybridizations” when multiple media come together and create an energy, which emerge as societies move from one dominant medium to another; these transitions transform our world. One of the biggest transitions that McLuhan discusses is the transformation from orality to literacy; he says that the change brought about modernism in the Western world. He believed that oral societies produced people who were acutely in touch with their emotions, while literacy taught people to suppress their emotions in order to create a more practical and efficient society.
Oral societies were societies in which literacy and writing did not exist; the entire society communicated strictly through oral means. Not only did strict orality cause people to communicate differently, but it also had an impact on the way people thought. Because of the lack of writing, people needed to think and speak in a manner which would enable ease of remembering and therefore, they thought mnemonically (Ong, 1982:24-36). The limitation of oral communication is the inability to backtrack and review what has been said; once words are spoken, they disappear and can never be retrieved again. While strict oral cultures presented their difficulties, they also had many positive aspects that written communication lacks.

Through the move from orality to more mediated communication, many aspects of communication have been lost. Oral speech has various aspects that do not exist in mediated communications. For example, intonation only exists in speech and is not present in writing (Ong, 1982: 102). At best, written communication displays punctuation that enables readers to elicit minimal emotion when reading and will cue readers to know whether what they are reading is a question, an exclamatory statement, or just a regular sentence. With oral communication, speakers can emphasize certain words, express emotions through their facial expressions, and add intonations to their speech. Furthermore, writing is completely context free and can be detached from the author, whereas oral speech is intrinsically linked to the speaker and to the context in which the speaker is speaking (Ong, 1982: 78). Detaching the words from the author can lead writers to write things they may not be willing to say if their names were attached and reading their pieces of writing out of the context from which they were written may cause readers to misconstrue what is trying to be conveyed. Moreover, human communication is never only one sided and it is shaped in its content by an anticipated response (Ong, 1982: 176). Oral
communication always enables the opportunity for listeners to respond, but written communication does not necessarily afford the same abilities. Accordingly, while the shift from strictly oral cultures to multi-media cultures has been tremendous for society and as McLuhan (1964: 57) said, has brought about the modern world, certain aspects that existed in oral culture, such as intonations, context, and anticipated responses, have been lost.

As we have now entered into an age of media and mediated communication, the manner in which people communicate has changed. McLuhan (1964), a technological determinist, viewed media as extensions of the human body and believed that the changing media cause changes in society. He explains that new media have impacts on the technology of the society and the manner in which people communicate. Not all media have the same impact on society, but they all do play a role in the changing nature of it. The manner in which people converse has changed based on the technology that is available. For example, through the prevalence of mobile devices and caller ID, phone conversations and communication openings have changed (Garcia, 2013:183). When using mobile devices as opposed to landline phones, one’s location is unknown, and therefore, users often discuss their locations, whereas they would not have done so using a landline phone. Furthermore, because of caller ID, users are aware of who is calling before they answer the phone and subsequently, their opening communication is no longer an inquiry as to who is calling, but rather a traditional greeting. Meyrowitz (1985: 16) explained that different media have varying potentials for control because media that require particular skills or are difficult to obtain will be limited to and capitalized on by an elite class, but media that are readily available and easy to use will be more widespread across society and will equalize society as a whole. Each medium is perceived differently and causes different changes
depending on which society is using it (McLuhan, 1964: 39). The numerous different forms of media enable different kinds of interactions and allow people to communicate in ways that they had not previously. Some forms of media enable aspects that other forms cannot and the manner in which people communicate is often a result of the medium that they are using.

**Interactionists and Media Theorists**

Throughout the literature there is conflict between interactionists, like Goffman, and the media theorists, such as McLuhan. While they both focus on overall effects on the environment and both discuss social order, the two different groups of theorists do not necessarily line up (Meyrowitz, 1985: 33). They have different views as to why and how social dynamics vary, but they are not mutually exclusive. The media theorists suggest that media are used for much more than exchanging information; they say that media are themselves “social contexts that foster certain forms of interaction and social identity (Meyrowitz, 1997: 61).” Furthermore, these theorists rarely contemplate face-to-face interactions and discuss media as though they have very little to do with face-to-face communication. Contrarily, interactionists primarily ignore media communications and only focus on face-to-face interactions. Interactionists focus on describing situations and situational behaviors as they actually exist. Primarily, they believe that people are influenced by the situations in which they are engaging and adapt their social behaviors to adhere to the societal proscriptions, roles, and guidelines of that particular situation. They seem to ignore situations in which people resist social conventions (Meyrowitz, 1985: 32).

However, while the interactionists and media theorists both ignore media communication and face-to-face interactions, respectively, these two types of communication really go hand in hand and influence one another. Looking at them in isolation of one another will not display the
full picture, but rather they need to be considered as having an influence on the other. While the two different groups of theorists focus on different aspects, they could gain a fuller picture of the reality of society by working together, because society is very much influenced by both media changes and social factors. Throughout my thesis, I will attempt to incorporate both interactionist and media theories and attempt to bridge the two literatures.

**Research Questions and Studies**

Meyrowitz (1997:61) suggests that all forms of media have different impacts on individual interactions and societal interactions. He explains that at the individual level, choosing one medium over another has an impact on the situation and the interaction. More globally, he says that questions about media address how new media may change social interactions more broadly. Essentially, Meyrowitz argues that electronic media bring back the equality of oral communication. He explains that oral communication is open to everyone and is based solely on living memory, subsequently, disabling social differences in roles or experiences. Furthermore, he believes that electronic media, because of their accessibility and widespreadness, reintegrate many people of various different groups together, and once again remove barriers between people. In contrast, he believes that print media cause more defined social roles and separate people into groups. Whereas he believes oral and electronic media are accessible to everyone and universalize society, he believes that print media segregate people into groups and may only be accessed by some people. Meyrowitz is correct in his assessment that different media impact social situations differently, though he may not be entirely correct about how they impact social differences.
As Meyrowitz thinks of media in a more comparative way, many people have chosen to study particular modes of communication as well. Stephens (2009) conducted a study which shows that teachers are more likely to respond to an email request if the message was well written. However, despite the lack of formality, teachers appreciated receiving any emails because it was another avenue for students to be able to communicate and receive the help that they needed. Accordingly, while teachers value properly written emails, they prefer that students communicate in a non-ideal manner rather than not communicate at all.

Owens (2013) describes interactions between students and librarians who used computer supported methods of communication. Owens (2013) explains that students are more likely to ask questions over the internet using computer mediated communication rather than during a face-to-face conversation because the anonymity of the experience makes it is easier to avoid embarrassment. Through face-to-face conversations, the interlocutors are forced to see one another and would be able to see the other person’s facial and gesture reactions. Online, when one can hide behind a computer, identities do not have to be known and immediate reactions cannot be seen. Haines (2014: 779) found that people are more likely to participate in conversations when they are anonymous; he essentially found that anonymity removes accountability and enables reticent opinions to be shared. Furthermore, Sullivan (2002) studied females in online classes and concluded that many identified anonymity as the best feature of online classes. Many students said that they could “talk honestly” and that there was “no stereotyping or bias.” It was because of the anonymity that many female students preferred the online classroom dynamic.
In his study, Owens (2013) found that even through computer mediated communication students were trying to save face when asking the librarian questions to which they were embarrassed not to know the answers. In turn, the librarians responded to the students in a manner that made it possible for the students to retain their pride. Often times, librarians will put themselves down in order to make a student feel better about the challenge they are experiencing. The nature of computer mediated communication made this kind of interaction possible and enabled the students to ask questions more freely than they otherwise would have.

Different modes of communication will be better at sustaining the social status hierarchy than others. The interaction will differ in regards to what is said and how it said based upon what mode of communication is being used and with whom one is speaking. Boucher et al. (2008) discuss, but do not necessarily agree with, the status equalization hypothesis, which states that the elimination of social factors, such as dress and nonverbal cues, may eliminate the presence of social status in computer supported media. Because computer mediated communication eliminates certain factors, it equalizes social status and may have an impact on the way people interact.

A study by Gonzales (2014) illustrates that text based communication is better for self-esteem than face-to-face interactions. She explains that while face-to-face is the more dominant type of communication, people seemed to disclose more information while using text-based media. Because texting reduces the social pressures of a face-to-face interaction, there is a greater emphasis on the actual message, rather than the social pressures that surround it. Based on Gonzales’s study, it is apparent that there are differences in the manner in which people communicate and in the way people feel after using different media.
A study by Boucher et al. (2008) determined that role structure was more robust in computer supported media than in face-to-face conversations. They conducted a study in which people were randomly assigned a role of a particular social status and were told to interact with someone of either a higher or lower social status. Based on this study, people were better at enacting their assigned roles using computer mediated communication than in face-to-face conversations. Accordingly, it seems very likely that people act differently based on the medium with which they are using to communicate.

Furthermore, Kacewicz et al. (2014) determined that language is reflective of social status, taking various media into consideration. Their study had five different components to reflect different forms of media and how that might change the outcome of the study. The first method was a face-to-face group of people, with one appointed leader, who were working together to complete a task. They found that the appointed leaders, who assumed the power position, were more prone to using first-person plural pronouns and fewer first-person singular pronouns as opposed to the rest of the group. The second study was also a task oriented test, but was done using computer mediated communication between two people. Each person was asked to self report which person had more “power” in the conversation and it turned out that those who were ranked with higher power, once again had a higher rate of plural first person pronoun use. The third study was very similar to the second, except it studied two people in a face-to-face conversation without a formal task to accomplish, but found the same results, but to a lesser degree. The fourth study studied naturally written language by reading emails of various people in different roles of the social hierarchy. The results from this study did not reflect the findings of the other studies regarding pronoun use. However, the fifth case, which studied
written letters between soldiers and officers in the Iraqi Military, found that once again the higher status person used fewer first person singular pronouns than the lower status person. Accordingly, it is clear that certain aspects of language may be reflective of social status and social power and the five different methods used to perform the study illustrate that people communicate differently and language itself may change depending on the medium.

Most of the literature supports the idea that there is a role structure and the medium used does impact its enforcement. I believe that certain media help support or confuse the social roles more than others and that there are specific aspects of and differences in language across the media that cause this to occur. While studies have been done to determine if there is a difference in social role structure using different media, I used a different methodology and therefore, expected there to be different results. Boucher’s et al. (2008) study, which concluded that there was a more robust role structure dynamic using computer mediated communication, was done entirely with role playing and not actual role structure dynamics. Perhaps they found the results that they did because it is simply easier to pretend to be someone else over the computer than in person, rather than their study being indicative of which mode of communication most supports role structure. By using a different methodology and a new pattern, I was able to move towards more certainty and confidence in the findings and to discover that written communication confuses the social hierarchy, while oral communication breaks it down.
Chapter 3: Methods of Research

Introduction

The previous chapter describes several different studies about communication and hierarchies, yet, the studies all report vastly different outcomes from one another. Some of the studies look at only one form of communication while others analyzed social hierarchy structures by assigning roles to participants. Therefore, to bridge these literatures and really delve into understanding the relationship between communications and social hierarchies, I designed a study that draws on established research methods and utilizes several different modes of communication and already solidified hierarchies. I combined interviews, observation in natural settings, and an experimental situation that compares people's use of language using different modes of communication. Through these means, I have been able to observe and understand behaviors related to oral, written, and computer mediated communication. The interviews enabled me to learn about how people perceive their communications and interactions, the written component enabled an understanding of how written communications differ within hierarchies and across them, and the observations enabled insights into oral communication between various status hierarchy positions. I used a few different techniques in order to capture the multi-dimensional nature of communication. My study needed to reflect that people communicate using various different media and methods of communication. Therefore, I employed multiple aspects and modes of communication in the study.

In order to use pre-established and readily recognized social hierarchies, I studied two pairs of positions: students and professors and employers and employees. Several experimental studies have been conducted that fabricated the social hierarchies and assigned roles; however, I chose to study roles that already existed and are accompanied by a fixed social status
relationship. I wanted to learn more about how communication impacts these hierarchical relationships and how these relationships impact communication.

**Study Participants**

I wanted to study people of varying statuses and learn how communication differed when people assumed different roles. I chose to study two relationships, which I thought particularly captured a status hierarchy and reflected a clear superior and subordinate relationship: the teacher-student relationship and the employer-employee relationship. As the professor is always seen by the student as the superior, and the employer the superior to his employee, I thought these relationships exemplified the hierarchical structure. I contemplated using other relationships, such as the parent-child relationship, but that did not seem as universal of a hierarchy because everyone has a unique relationship with his or her parents. Therefore, I only selected these two relationships as they seem the most representative of a status hierarchy.

In an effort to recruit participants I used a few different methods. When recruiting employers and employees, I used snowball sampling in the New York metropolitan area. I asked a few people I know if they knew others who would be willing to participate and subsequently, asked those people as well. This method enabled a sampling of people from diverse speech communities. To recruit students to participate, I posted in various Facebook groups and had emails sent out to several living quads asking Brandeis students if they were interested in participating. Advertising in this manner allowed students from different speech communities, different majors and minors, and different years to participate. Lastly, I emailed various professors, with whom I did not have a prior relationship, from several different departments requesting that they participate in my research. Once again, this enabled a diverse group among
them. I intentionally did not speak with any professors with whom I have a relationship because I wanted the interview to be as anonymous as possible and I did not want a professor to feel that I was trying to pry into his or her personal business. I chose to only select professors, rather than lecturers, to ensure that there would be the same degree of official status among the professors.

Through these means I amassed a total of twenty-two people from different communities who all grew up in different areas and attended different schools. Of the five employees, two are male while three are female. All four of the employers are male. The students are comprised of four males and four females. I interviewed four male professors and one female professor. The employees range in ages from twenty-three to forty-eight, the employers from twenty to sixty, and the students from eighteen to twenty-two. Of the people I interviewed, nineteen are white, two are black, and one is Asian. The lack of meaningful racial diversity was not intentional, but was beneficial as it did not introduce the factor of code-switching, which may occur when an individual switches from speaking with someone of a different race than him or herself to a person of the same race.

While I did my best given the parameters, there are limitations to the conclusions I can draw. Firstly, the sample size used for this research is not enough to make generalizations about society as a whole. I can only draw conclusions based on the research I conducted and surmise that it may also apply to society at large. Furthermore, I primarily studied people who only speak English as a first language. Consequently, the results are only reflective of an English speaking population, rather than a more broad one. The students and professors used in the study are all from Brandeis University, and therefore, may reflect the Brandeis culture more than society at large. It is also important to keep in mind that my results are based on those professors
and students who were willing to participate in the study, rather than random sampling. It is possible that everyone who did not agree to participate may have had drastically different viewpoints. Additionally, the employers and employees all hold white collar jobs, such as finance, social work, consulting, and banking, which once again does not reflect the population at large. The manner in which the participants communicate in the workplace may be very different from people with blue-collar jobs, in the methods and media they use to communicate and in the content of the communications, as white collar jobs often require more computer mediated communications.

**Methods**

I used three different methods for this research. The first two methods I employed was an experimental writing sample in conjunction with an interview. I asked participants to write hypothetical messages to people of differing degrees of closeness, using various communication devices to simulate the actual experience. At each student interview, I asked participants to write a hypothetical email to a professor using my computer and a hypothetical text to a friend using my cell phone. During every interview with a professor, I asked the professor to write a hypothetical email to a student, type up a hypothetical student recommendation on my computer, and send a hypothetical text to a spouse or close friend using my phone. Each employee was asked to write a hypothetical email and memo to his or her boss using my computer, and to send a hypothetical text to a spouse, partner, or close friend using my phone. Each employer was asked to write a hypothetical email and memo to his or her employee on my computer and to send a hypothetical text to a spouse, partner, or close friend using my phone.
I chose to use this experimental method as a way to gain insights into the ways people communicate. Unfortunately, I was unable to gain access to actual correspondence because of the protection of human subjects and IRB regulations, so I opted to recreate such communications myself in a simulated manner. In order to make it seem more authentic and to more accurately simulate the experience, I asked the participants to type emails in an actual email window and asked them to write text messages using my phone.

Following these simulations, I interviewed and audio recorded those same participants, asking several questions about how they communicate and their preferred methods of communication (see interview guide). I specifically used open-ended questions and allowed the participants to answer as they saw fit. The interviews enabled me to hear people’s perceptions of how their communication influences social hierarchy and if those perceptions differed from their experimental writing, while the experimental situation demonstrated how people actually communicate through various media. The interviews lasted between fifteen and forty minutes, and the majority of that time was used for the interview questions rather than the experimental part, which only lasted about five or six minutes. The length variation of interviews was a result of how much participants had to say on the topic and how many follow-up questions I felt were appropriate.

As the last component of the research, I conducted observations. I attended several public gatherings, outside of the classroom, which were open to students, professors, and administrators. For example, I attended a public academic colloquium, a meet-the-majors event, a round table discussion between administrators and students, and a Brandeis open-forum discussion led by President Lawrence. At each of these events, I took note of the interactions
between students and professors and monitored their behaviors. These events allowed me to observe oral conversations between students and professors in a natural, though formal, setting.

I also attended a work function in New York, in which about one hundred and twenty-five employers and employees interacted with one another in a casual, informal manner outside of the office. There, I observed the employers and employees as they engaged with one another during speaker sessions and during a cocktails and networking hour. Through those observations, I began to understand the dynamics of their oral communications. By utilizing all of these methods, I was not only able to see differences and similarities in participants’ various forms of written communication, but I was able to compare their actual written communication to both how they themselves describe their communications and to oral communication in general.

Limitations

Some of the limitations of the study are caused by the small size of the sample. I found it difficult to determine if what one participant reports is reflective of the community at large, or is just the beliefs of one particular individual. It is difficult to generalize what I believe is just the sentiments of one quirky individual, rather than a reflection of the general population. Furthermore, I am concerned about the truthfulness of the information reported to me. Perhaps, people inform me about what they believe to be true, but may not be entirely factual. This came to my attention when one participant shared information about how he interacts with his employer, but I have prior knowledge from someone else in his network that his reports were not completely reflective of his actual actions. Additionally, all of the participants opted to partake in the study, but perhaps, those who declined to participate hold completely different viewpoints.
than those who participated. Lastly, during the hypothetical writing, I found that people have a tendency to proofread more because it was an interview setting. However, others proofread less because there are no consequences to that piece of writing; their friends, professors, employers, or employees will never actually see those pieces of writing and therefore, the writing exercises were not necessarily reflective of their real-life experiences.

The observations I conducted also presented limitations. The interactions that I observed between professors and students are only relevant to the Brandeis campus, and may not reflect society outside of Brandeis. Furthermore, the meet the majors event I attended was only for one humanities department, and may not be representative of every department at Brandeis University. Additionally, during all of the observations, I was never able to hear everything everyone said during every interaction and it is possible that I misheard information, took something out of context, or missed a conversation which would contradict my findings. Lastly, my presence as an observer may have had an impact on the interactions between students and professors and employers and employees.

**Analysis**

In order to analyze the data, I transcribed all of the interviews and assessed the writing pieces and notes on observations. I went through all of the writings looking for formality and informality, deference, and degree of familiarity. To identify familiarity or distance, I specifically looked at forms of address, who asserted authority to end an interaction, and the presence of a joking demeanor. To discern deference I looked at the tone, instances of interrupting others, whether there was deflection of blame, and if one was being extra complimentary. Formality and informality were assessed by looking at the usage of slang and
profanity and the usage and explanation of complex words. Furthermore, formal language can be characterized by longer sentences which are more complicated and more grammatical. Informality is characterized by delaying and correcting expressions and colloquial phrases. By operationalizing these aspects of communication, I was better able to determine how to recognize and identify when there were challenges to the status hierarchy or when it was being upheld and reinforced.

After going through all of the written simulations, interview transcriptions, and observation notes, I began to create lists of recurring themes and interesting thoughts that had come up and tallied how many participants shared the same ideas and sentiments. After amalgamating all the information, I was able to synthesize it and understand what was really going on during communications. I broke down the data into two very broad categories, the first being anything that was only related to which media one would use and the other to everything related to the social hierarchy. Within those categories I was able to make more categories and better understand the details of the communications, which you will read about in the following chapters.
Chapter 4: The Media of Communications

Introduction

The introduction of and advancements in new technology have enabled many more methods of communication to exist. Although most people choose not, in the current day, it is possible to be in constant communication every day and at all times. There are many ways to communicate and people choose particular media for certain types of conversations and for specific people. The same form of media is not appropriate for all people, nor is it appropriate for all kinds of communications. The manner in which one person corresponds with a friend will not necessarily be the same as the way he or she corresponds with a work colleague or a professor.

In the following pages I will discuss different media people use for communicating and try to elucidate in what circumstances those particular media are used. Through this, I will demonstrate that the choice of media is usually based on the nature of the relationship. I will then discuss the particular uses of language, more specifically, slang and profanity, and the impact that they have on our communications and on social hierarchies. I will then launch into a discussion of a particular medium of communication, texting, which many participants reported causes the status hierarchy to be confused. I will explain why people have this perception about texting and what causes it to be the medium “most likely to confuse the status hierarchy.” I focus on slang, profanity, and texting because, amongst the various media and patterns of language, these seem to provide the biggest challenges to social hierarchies. The use of particular media forms and the lack of use of others, seems to encourage a deterioration of formality, especially in the workplace. I will discuss the decline of formality and explain how
we see society casualizing. The next chapter will then discuss how the social hierarchy has been impacted by many of these processes and how these processes manifest themselves within the social hierarchy framework.

**Different Forms of Media**
Every form of media has its own characteristics and subsequently, causes people to communicate differently when using them and to use them for different types of communication. The manner in which individuals speak face-to-face, email, text, and talk on the phone are all potentially very different. Not only do people communicate differently through different media, but they also will only use certain media to communicate with certain people based on the nature of the relationship. Often times, participants I interviewed explained that they did not have the same favorite form of communication for all people, but rather that it changed based on with whom they were communicating. In order to better understand this phenomenon, I will discuss different forms of media as well as unmediated communication in light of the length and content of the communication, the degree of formality, personal closeness and distance, and the intended audience of the communication. All of these characteristics will help provide an understanding of the various characteristics of different types of media and why one medium is preferred over another.

**Instrumental Communication- Length and Content**
Increasingly, communication seems to have taken on a sense of being instrumental to building relationships, rather than being expressive; people are using communication as a means to an end, rather than communicating for communication’s sake. Because people engage in much more communication today than in previous times, efficiency in communication is more
appreciated and extolled. It is through communication that people forge relationships and in the modern day with the advent of social media, media predominantly created for social purposes, and the ability to correspond at all times, much of the communication is non-essential and instead is a tool used to create relationships. For example, one explanation for why people choose a particular form of media is based upon of the length and content of the communication. When participants described their favorite types of communication, there was a clear proclivity for face-to-face communication, but on careful consideration participants realized that there are different factors that contribute to why they chose a particular form of communication.

Participants explained that emails are more succinct than any form of verbal communication. As one employee said, “...but for work if I’m dealing with people who are quicker or more to the point, then email is better.” Emails are sent for a purpose, with an agenda, rather than to just check in and inquire about well-being. Similarly, text messages seem to be sent as a means to an end. They are shorter communications in which many people use abbreviations and do not use punctuation. Often, people use text messages in order to make plans, figure out the best time to meet in person, or to ask a very quick question. Although texts may include a “hey, what’s up” preamble, they rarely, if ever, receive a legitimate response answering about well-being, especially if the responder wishes to report negative well-being. Texting is not often the main medium used to build connections with people, but rather is used to facilitate the connection building interaction.

Face-to-face communication enables more depth than text messages and more clarity than emails. One employer explained that he finds email to be confusing and prefers oral communication. He explained that the day before, he had sent out an email with instructions that
he thought were fairly clear but the recipient wrote back saying she did not understand. Instead of emailing her back, he took the time to explain it to her orally, and in one minute was able to explain to her exactly what she needed to do. He said, “...and I saved all kinds of details and frustrations, so I find that’s just the easiest way to communicate. I think I get my point across better [orally than in email].” In face-to-face communication there is an exchange of unrelated small-talk that does not exist in email since email is much more straight-forward and purpose oriented. One professor explained that when communicating face-to-face one starts off with an unrelated conversation about something other than the direct matter at hand, perhaps about the weather. He said, “There’s sort of a natural culture of having that buffer when [one] starts that conversation.” Therefore, when choosing which medium to use, people may often consider what they are trying to communicate and how long that communication is. However, I believe the media used have more to do with the relationship between individuals rather than the length of the communication.

**Role of Formality and Informality**

The degree of formality is a factor that determines the type of media used to communicate, even more so than the length of the communication. Respondents have attributed formality as to why they do not use a certain method of communication, while others have said that they do use certain types specifically because of the formality associated with it. Formality is a characteristic of both language and medium. Formal language can be characterized as including longer sentences that are more complicated and more grammatical. Furthermore, the permanence of written communication and the severe consequences of it ending up in the wrong hands, is another indication of formality. Once something is written, there is no way to take it
back or to deny that it has been stated, therefore, if someone is willing to put something in writing it is more declarative and thus, more formal. Informality is characterized by delaying and correcting expressions and colloquial phrases.

For the vast majority of participants, emails, more than texting, face-to-face communication, video messaging, or social media, were perceived to be the most formal mode of communication. They were also perceived as the most professional. Much of this is attributed to the fact that emails are more thought out and are able to be drafted and edited before sending. After analyzing the experimental written exercises, it is apparent that people view emails and texts very differently. Everyone uses email to communicate with authorities and subordinates, as email is considered a more formal type of media. One employee said, “[When] speaking to someone of much higher authority, I would prefer to do email...because it’s just viewed as more professional.” The formality is communicated through the particular form that the email takes, beginning with a greeting followed by a statement of well wishes, and concluding with a salutation. The structure alone demonstrates formality. Many participants commented on the professional nature of email and how emails were much more likely to be used than text messages in professional settings. Furthermore, people were much more inclined to proofread emails, which is another illustration of their formality. Years ago, email was seen as the least formal manner of communication; however, today it seems to be the most. The written letter provided the model for email and now as the written letter is becoming obsolete, email is the prevailing medium. Print letters used to be much more formal than emails; however, emails have developed into the most formal form of communication because of the decline of print. In the absence of more formal media, email has become the most formal.
In comparison, text messages are considered the most informal and unprofessional form of communication. Today, people seem to use text messages for more informal interactions, such as making plans with people, determining the best time to meet up, share funny stories, and exchange quick information. No one uses text messages to have meaningful conversations and particularly not professional conversations. This is in part because of the immediacy texting demands and as a result of the colloquial nature of texting, both of which I will discuss in more detail in the following section. Participants have described text messages as a means to a different form of communication, or as not the ideal form, but as the most convenient. The informality of the text message and the formality of the email are connected to the degree of closeness of the recipient or sender.

Degree of Closeness
Many people will only send certain communications to particular people. For instance, as I stated, email is the most commonly used form of communication between authority and subordinates and texting is the least frequently used. The primary use of email in hierarchical relationships is a result of the perception of which media are most personal. About a quarter of the participants explained that texting is a more personal form of communication than email. The personal nature of text messages may cause the informality of them as one participant said, “[Texting is] a lot more personal. Like with an email, even though we all have it on our phones, I still have this idea that emails are sitting at your desk answering your emails, whereas texting you're lying on your couch watching tv.” She explained that this perception, albeit not necessarily correct, causes text messages to seem more personal than emails. Another participant explained to me that emails are less personal because they are usually general
information being passed along, rather than a specific message for a specific person. Most people said that they would never email their friends, that they reserve email for more professional and more distanced relationships. Similarly, people reported that they would never text their professors or students, or their employers or employees, and would much prefer to email them.

A few professors explained that they do not text because they don’t want to give students their cell phone numbers; one explained that there is an intimacy and informality associated with a personal cell number. Texting is perceived as more of a communication between peers than among people of different statuses. As one participant said, “texting [when used in a professional setting] blurs the lines between a professional and casual friendship,” and another said, “texting is more peer-to-peer.” Furthermore, the demand for immediacy in texting is an important component of why texting has become associated with peer-to-peer rather than hierarchical communication. As texting is modeled after phone communications and people always answered phones, text messages also always require a response. Cell phone use demands accountability and texting in particular requires an almost immediate reply or an apology explaining the delayed response. To demand an immediate response from someone of a different status would certainly confuse the hierarchy. Therefore, for now, texting remains primarily a peer-to-peer form of communication. The contrast between email and texting is a stark one; however, people had less strong feelings regarding face-to-face and phone communications.

Everyone seemed to agree that face-to-face was a more personal form of communication than speaking over the phone or through computer mediated communication. However, most people did not discuss face-to-face as a type of communication until they were reminded of it.
The immediate reaction was for people to associate communication with technology, rather than the “old-fashioned” face-to-face. This demonstrates how reliant on technology our society is today and how mediated communications have become more prevalent in our lives than unmediated ones. However, despite the pervasiveness of mediated communication, people said they preferred to communicate face-to-face because they are able to convey things such as tone, body language, and facial expressions, which they are unable to do in other forms of communication. More personality is able to come through with face-to-face communication, and participants felt that it allows for a more natural, casual, and less restricted communication. Face-to-face interactions are preferred by most people, but the convenience and accessibility of mediated communications have made them more dominant in society.

Accordingly, the various types of media all have their own characteristics and their own places in the realm of communication. The recipient of the communication and his or her relationship to the communicator will dictate what type of media is used and what is transpired through that communication. Some of the media are better suited for different types of communications and certain ideas and phrases are more likely to be communicated through one medium over another or to a particular recipient.

**Slang and Profanity**

The use of slang and profanity is very common in communication; however, it is more prevalent in certain media than others and is used in certain relationships and not in others. Some of the participants reported that they never use slang or profanity in any of their interactions regardless of with whom they are communicating or what media they are using to communicate. However, of those who use slang and profanity, they reported that they were least
likely to use it in an email. This notion was attributed to the fact that emails are documented and can be recalled at any time; others said it was because emails are more formal and slang is more informal. Everyone was more likely to use slang and profanity while texting, because they generally text people with whom they have more of a personal relationship and because texting is an informal manner of communication. Even though texting is documented and can be recalled at any time, participants generally text people with whom they feel comfortable using slang and profanity. Even if the texts are recollected in the future, the relationship allows for that type of language use and therefore, participants had no qualms about using slang and profanity in texting. However, people were most conflicted about face-to-face interactions. Some people said they would only use this type of communication in face-to-face interactions, while others claimed they never would in face-to-face interactions. Yet another group declared that their slang and profanity use was directly linked to the recipients of the communication, not the medium used.

None of the participants declared that they would use the exact same amount of slang and profanity regardless of the situation. Several people explained that they were more likely to use slang and profanity with their friends. Furthermore, people reported that they would never use this type of verbiage at work or with professors. Therefore, the lack of slang and profanity in the presence of superiors or authority figures preserves the status hierarchy, whereas the usage of it confuses it more. Because of the colloquial, informal, and improper nature of slang and profanity, using them demonstrates a more friendly, equal relationship that does not adhere to decorous conventions. When subordinates use slang and profanity it confuses the status
hierarchy, but when superiors use slang and profanity it is viewed as breaking down the hierarchy and mitigating it.

The use of slang and profanity plays an interesting role in society and in relationships in general. It is a more colloquial manner in which to interact, and is generally used with people with whom we communicate casually. However, people attempt to use slang in an effort to relate to others and profanity in a manner in which to gain respect. Because the use of slang and profanity is “improper,” using them demonstrates neglect of societal etiquette rules and therefore, enables people to be more relatable as a plebeian and more respected as an equal. The rejection of proper language may illustrate to others that the communicator does not believe he or she is more stilted than the person with whom he or she is communicating. One student said, “Swearing is pretty informal and professors do use it, and I think it gains a little bit of respect weirdly from students.” This student recognized that profanity enables perspectives to change, but the student herself thinks this is a weird phenomenon. Slang and profanity do play a role in the social hierarchy and based on with whom it is used and in what manner, the hierarchy may either be broken down, confused, or substantiated.

**Why Texts Confuse the Social Hierarchy**

Upon asking people what mode of communication is most likely to confuse the social hierarchy, an overwhelming number of participants responded texting, but the question remains what is it about texting that elicits this reaction from people? At this point it is important to make a distinction between breaking down and confusing the social hierarchy. Breaking down the social hierarchy can be understood as a conscious and intentional effort to diminish the hierarchical nature of a relationship, whereas confusing the social hierarchy can be understood as
doing, saying, or writing something that does not align with behaviors of that particular role or acting out of character and differently from the anticipated norms of the relationship. Texting has a tendency to confuse the social hierarchy, rather than break it down.

There are several aspects that contribute to most participants describing texting as the medium most likely to confuse the status hierarchy. Most subordinates do not communicate with their authority figures through texting. Therefore, to receive a text from an authority or from a subordinate is very unexpected and perhaps, even confusing. Texting is a very casual form of communication that generally occurs between people who are close to one another. The casualness of texting is illustrated through actors’ disregard for grammar and punctuation and the likelihood of using slang. Because texting is seen as a very casual and informal mode of communication, it is confusing to the hierarchy when it is used in an otherwise formal and structured relationship.

Furthermore, a phone is considered a very personal device. Because of our attachments to our cell phones, they are with us at all time and everywhere we go, which makes them an extension of ourselves and thus, a personal device. While comparing email to texting, one student said, “When you have someone's phone number, it’s definitely more personal, it’s a direct way to reach them, whereas the way our society is, it’s always on you, it’s a very personal object.” Texting is a way of communicating which is modeled after phone communication and therefore, includes some of the same etiquette as phone conversations. For example, there is a sense of immediacy with texting, one must respond within a few hours or it is considered to be rude or bad texting form. If an employee texts his employer, he is demanding an immediate response, and that alone confuses the social hierarchy, as it is traditionally the employer that
makes demands on the employee. Often times someone of authority will not text in an effort to maintain a wall between public and private life, much like one would not give out his or her home phone number.

These aspects of texting lead it to be the form of communication people most likely answer will confuse the status hierarchy. The informality and casualness of texting, in conjunction with its association with being a peer-to-peer type of communication, causes people to believe it would confuse the hierarchy. A media form primarily reserved for casual exchanges should not be introduced into a formal relationship without the expectation of confusion. However, at times, superiors intend to create a more casual environment and attempt to make the atmosphere a more casual one.

Casualization

While texting is most likely to confuse the status hierarchy, there has been a trend towards the casualization of society and the appearance of breaking down hierarchies, particularly in office environments. The workplace used to be a much more formal place in which the division between employers and employees was visible in almost every aspect of the work environment. However, that is no longer true today. The relationship between employer and employee, while still remaining a hierarchical one, has become less formal over the years.

One example of this casualization taking place is the absence of memos. I asked employers and employees to write a memo as they would write it at work. Several participants explained that they do not use memos at work and they would simply write an email instead. Others, who did write a memo, wrote something that looked exactly like an email. Only one participant, who happens to work for a consulting firm, wrote a memo formatted and structured
with a clear introductory paragraph detailing the purpose of the memo with subsequent paragraphs of relevant information. I believe it is because of the nature of consulting that she was the only one to write a formal memo; she was writing to someone outside of her immediate company. It seems that within companies there is a more casual and less formal environment.

Primarily, I have found that employers and employees are on a first name basis. While they are not equals in status, the lines between employer and employee are seemingly blurred. Through observations and interviews, I have witnessed that the workforce is becoming a place in which hierarchical relationships are less apparent. Even at an event I attended, which was very formal, with everyone dressed in formal attire, the conversations taking place were very casual. People discussed the speakers of the night, favorite television shows, and made classic small talk. The workplace is becoming a less formal environment with less obviously hierarchical tendencies as is evident through the media used and no longer used.

**Conclusion**

While everyone communicates, not everyone is aware of how much thought goes into each communication. Initiating an interaction requires a conscious decision about which medium is best suited for that particular communication. The initiator considers a number of factors such as the recipient, the situation, the content of the communication, and the relationship with the recipient. Then, once the initiator decides which medium to use, he or she still needs to determine how to best express the communication, what to include and what not to, and the tone the communication will take. All of these decisions are made very rapidly, but are integral to communication. One of the main components that enable people to make these decisions is social hierarchy. The choices of media and the manner in which those media are used are results
of hierarchies. By simply changing the recipient to someone of a hierarchical status rather than a peer, the entire communication differs.

There is a direct relationship between social hierarchies and the manner in which we communicate. As I demonstrated, text messages confuse the social hierarchy because they are a form of media that should not be used in a hierarchical context. Therefore, when they are used, the hierarchy is confused. The use of one particular medium could alter hierarchical relationships and hierarchical relationships can dictate which medium is used and the manner in which it used. In the following chapter, I will write more about specific trends in hierarchies, how hierarchies are manifested, and which characteristics of communication help to maintain hierarchies and which work to mitigate them.
Chapter 5: Manifestation and Maintenance of Hierarchies

Introduction

In the previous chapter, I discussed different forms of media and the role that they play in communication. In this chapter, I will use those ideas and concepts to help explain my findings about social hierarchies more generally. This chapter will provide insights into status hierarchies and the ways that they are maintained and broken down. Status hierarchies exist in many facets of society, but some are more acknowledged than others. The employer-employee hierarchy is an acknowledged and accepted hierarchy among most people as the employer has clear authority over the employee. So too, the student-professor relationship is one with an authoritative component. The social hierarchy is an important aspect of social life and will be explored further.

In this chapter, I will explain some of the differences between the manner in which people communicate with their peers as opposed to how they communicate with authorities and subordinates. One of the main aspects that helps create the status hierarchy is the aspect of fear and I will discuss the role that it plays in hierarchical relationships. Then, I will launch into a discussion of some of the ways that workplace and academic hierarchies differ. Following that, I will discuss specific examples taken from my research of where the hierarchy has broken down or been confused and then illustrate participants’ sentiments about the maintenance of the hierarchy. The way in which the hierarchy is maintained and the durability of these status hierarchies will follow. Lastly, I will describe the disconnect between the appearance of breaking down the hierarchy and maintaining the underlying power differences. I will conclude by explaining how all of these different dimensions come together and help determine the endurance of these status hierarchies.
**Differences Between Interacting with Friends and with Authorities and Subordinates**

Many people are aware of the differences in the manners in which we communicate with peers and with people of differing statuses than ourselves, and others are unaware, but regardless, the differences exist. Through interviews, written exercises, and observations I was able to understand these dynamics better, recognize some of these differences, and learn about how communications change based on different relationships. There are certain aspects of communication that characterize interactions with friends or peers and others that are reserved for interactions between people of a different status. When I asked professors if they believed there were differences in the manner in which they communicated with friends and students, one answered, “Of course there are, huge differences,” and another professor responded, “Yes, deliberately. You have a different relationship with students…”

When using computer mediated communication, people correspond differently with authorities and peers. One student said, “[communicating with professors is] very different, because with my friends if I have a typo I wouldn’t care…but with my professors I have to have all the “i”s capitalized and use apostrophes…” The exact same sentiment was expressed by an employee who said, “[I] make sure to check spelling and read over emails for my employer, but with friends, I may have mistakes or breaks in middle of sentences or send half texts or a half of sentence in a text and then follow up with the rest.” Typos and proper grammar are one of the main aspects that differentiate authority and peers in computer mediated communication. Many of the participants reported that they would make an extra effort to use appropriate grammar when communicating with people of a higher status, as one said, “…but with professors I articulate and spell out the full word and use perfect punctuation and apostrophes.” Participants
stressed the importance of correct grammar, punctuation, and spelling. However, with peers, punctuation, spelling mistakes, typos, grammatical errors, and incorrect diction are accepted. These errors do not matter with friends because of the casualness and comfort of the interaction. Participants expressed that they could truly be themselves and did not have to present a front consisting of attention to grammar, political correctness, and maturity with friends as they did with superiors.

Based on analyzing the written exercises, I also came to understand the relationships expressed through emails and text messages. When people were texting their spouses or friends, there was an expression of closeness, either by using a nickname, term of affection, or exclamatory language and punctuation. People used terms such as “Hi Hon,” “hi luv,” and “hey man” as terms of endearment or nicknames. “Hey!,” “Hiii!!” and “What are you doing this weekend?!?” are all examples of extra exclamatory statements that existed in the text messages with friends and spouses, but did not in the emails to supervisors or subordinates. All the exclamations indicate intense emotion, excitement, and informality. Nicknames and exclamation are characteristics of a closer, more comfortable relationship. In contrast, the emails that were sent to subordinates and authorities lacked this sense of closeness and informality, illustrating a more distant, and more professional, relationship.

Another aspect that is different when communicating with peers compared to people of a higher or lower status is the structure and the amount of planning that goes into what is being communicated. When asked about how communications differ with an employer and with friends, one employee responded, “When I am speaking to my employer, I am definitely more careful with my words. I make sure that I gather all the information I need before I start
speaking, whereas with my friends I am more relaxed and I can just start talking even if I don’t know exactly where I am headed.” This participant was essentially describing her enactment of Goffman’s theory of front stage and backstage. When the employee speaks with her friend, she is in the backstage, the more comfortable and relaxed environment; however, when she speaks with her employer, she is on the front stage, an environment in which a performance is necessary (1959, 22). Many participants alluded to this notion of not having a structured plan when speaking with friends; they explained that it was more of a free-flow conversation that could go in any direction. However, with authorities, participants prepare what they will say beforehand and have a specific goal in mind for each interaction. Students do not just show up in their professors’ offices without a reason for being there or with the expectation of just spending time chatting, but they would enter a friend’s room with no real purpose and spend a few hours there. With authorities and subordinates, communications are much more topic centered and filled with purpose than conversations with friends and peers, which are typically about communication and connection for its own sake.

When corresponding with peers and friends, there are significantly fewer instances of formality and pleasantries. With people of differing statuses there are well wishes as a preamble to the actual message. From the emails the participants wrote, there are several examples from students, professors, and employees of such an introduction. “I hope all is well with you,” “I hope your day is going well,” and “I hope you're doing well” are three different emails in which the participants began the email with a hope of positive well-being. This type of preamble is not a genuine inquiry about well-being as it does not allow for a negative response, but it is simply a statement intended to show deference and to be polite. This well wishing does not exist among
correspondences with friends and is one example of formality in communication. Furthermore, participants explained they are much more formal with someone of a higher status than a peer. One student discussed how he always uses his full name with professors and his nickname, which is an abridged version of his first name, with his friends. An employer explained that his demeanor changes to a much more formal, more serious one when speaking with employees. Formality can exist in many different forms, and it is clearly demonstrated in relationships between people of differing degrees of status.

“I think with my friends I wouldn’t be as guarded with what I say where an employee I probably wouldn’t go there or I would be very careful how I say it,” one employer answered in reference to how his communication differs with his friends and employees. This sentiment of being more guarded came up numerous times. Many people felt that they would pay more attention to the actual words that they are using when speaking with someone of a different status. Political correctness, diction, and grammar were all things mentioned that people take into consideration before speaking with someone other than a peer. Furthermore, a few people alluded to the idea that they would never challenge their employers, whereas they would their friends.

Lastly, some employers and professors reported that they were more curt with their subordinates than their friends. One employer said, “with employees, unfortunately you tend to be more curt… it’s more command oriented. It's not really a lot of depth to the conversation, but with friends you're discussing issues.” While this expression of curtness was not true unilaterally, everyone felt that the content of the communication differed between friends and people of different status. Many people expressed that they do not discuss anything personal,
they share less, and they diverge less from the direct topic at hand when corresponding with people of higher or lower status. Social status and relative position in the social hierarchy have great impacts on the manner, style, and content of a communication.

**Fear**

A major component of the social hierarchy is fear. While people show respect and act differently among their superiors, a lot of this behavior is tied to fear. Students fear that their grades are at risk if they do not adhere to the professor’s guidelines and demonstrate the appropriate respect. Ultimately, it is fear that causes students to engage in and to continuously reproduce the hierarchical relationship. Many students recognized the accomplishments of their professors, the fact that their professors are more knowledgeable than they are, and that their professors earned their right to be of a higher status; however, if professors did not give grades or write recommendations -essentially, if the professors had no power in the futures of the students- much of the hierarchical nature of the relationship would be ignored. Students and professors alike both discussed that ultimately, it is grades that demonstrate the status hierarchy the most.

One professor explained the impact grades have on the hierarchy perfectly:

> In many ways I’m always trying to minimize hierarchy, but the truth is, and this is the reason I don’t want to be phony with students, I give grades, that’s a hierarchical action, I affect their futures. Students can write a bad evaluation of my course, I have tenure, I will not be fired, but their future is more dependent on what I do than mine is on what they do, at my stage. So it’s a real hierarchy, I don’t want to pretend [otherwise].

This professor demonstrates the important role that grades play in the social hierarchy and how much of an impact they really have.

Similarly, fear is a component of the workforce hierarchy as well. While employers do not give grades, they hire, fire, recommend, and promote. Fear is an even larger component of
employment relationships than academic ones. One employee succinctly answered how relationships are different with employers when she said, “They’re the boss, you don’t want to get fired.” Her initial reaction to the question of why and how the relationship is different was fear. While fear is not the only thing that creates the hierarchy, it is a manifestation of the power of authority. Fear is an aspect of the hierarchy, which is applicable to both the academic and workplace hierarchies; however, there are also some aspects that these two types of hierarchies do not share.

**Differences Between The Workplace and Academic Hierarchies**

While much of my work has viewed both the workplace and the academic setting as representative of hierarchical dynamics, there are many differences between them which are important to recognize. One of the main differences between the two is the manner in which the hierarchy is expressed and appears in the two types of relationships. In reality, the workplace hierarchy is a strong, more solidified hierarchy. The employer has more ways to exercise authority over the employee than the professor has over the student. However, in practice, it is in academia that the hierarchy is more ritualized; the nature of the professor-student relationship is more overtly hierarchical than the employer-employee relationship.

Many of the ways in which I have characterized hierarchies and hierarchical relationships are more pronounced in the student-professor relationship. The difference in the degree of acknowledging hierarchy became particularly clear after comparing two different observation experiences. I attended two very different events, but the contrast between what I observed at them was striking. I attended a small humanities department’s meet-the-majors event and a large business advisory services company’s networking and idea sharing event in New York City. At
both of these events, I observed the interactions between people of differing statuses and found that the interactions at the meet-the-majors event were more formally hierarchical. The first thing I noticed was the type of address used. At the workforce event, everyone called each other, referred to one another, and introduced others by first name. In contrast, all of the students at the meet-the-majors event called their professors using the title Professor and professors referred to one another as Professor when speaking to students.

The non-verbal aspects of the face-to-face interactions were quite telling as well. The body language of the students and employees varied drastically. The students seemed highly uncomfortable while speaking with professors, who seemed quite at ease. Students were fidgeting, looking around, and overall, looking uncomfortable. One conversation even took place in which the student stood, while the professor sat. Contrarily, based on body language alone, it was almost impossible to differentiate between the employer and the employee. Another noteworthy observation was noticing who had the authority to end the conversation. Again, with the employers and employees, seemingly anyone could end the conversation by simply saying “nice to meet you” or “excuse me.” However, it was primarily the professors who ended the interactions with students, almost as if dismissing them from the conversation. The professors had control over how long the interaction lasted, when they ate and drank, and where in the room they stood during the interaction. For example, at the suggestion of one particular professor, he and the student with whom he was speaking moved their conversation to the drink table, both got beverages, and moved back to a location in the room that the professor chose.

The content of the conversations also illustrated hierarchy, or the seeming lack thereof. Among the students and professors, the content of conversation was strictly academic. They
discussed schedules, classes, internship opportunities, and projects, but never did they venture into anything personal. One student approached a professor and after complimenting her necklace, immediately apologized for not taking her class. While these conversations were very pleasant and friendly, they were purely academic. This was not true for the employers and employees. While they still did not discuss private issues, they discussed sports, television, stories, and of course work as well. Their conversations tended to be more informal. It was a formal event, in which everyone was in formal attire, but with very casual conversations. After comparing the two events, particularly the face-to-face interactions, it is clear to me that the hierarchical nature of the professor-student relationship is more explicit than the employer-employee relationship. It is because of the characteristics of face-to-face conversations, such as body language and nonverbal communications, that this comparison was elucidated.

Where The Hierarchy Breaks Down and Is Confused

By looking at the areas and manners in which the social hierarchy is both broken down and confused, two different processes, we can learn more about how hierarchy is maintained. Participants reported of times in which they were the recipients or the senders of a communication that either broke down or confused the social hierarchy. Those who discussed a time in which the hierarchy was confused were referring to a time in which they received or sent a communication that was out of place for that type of interaction, something inappropriate either by content, context, or medium. Those who discussed breaking down the hierarchy discussed times in which they consciously stepped outside of the hierarchical role, and acted counter to the role designation for a particular purpose. It was an intentional mitigation of the hierarchy.
The suggestion of closeness when it is unwarranted was the theme that came up the most as confusing the hierarchy. Participants explained that when there was someone who seemed to be referring to them or engaging with them in a manner of more closeness than the relationship deserved, they felt the hierarchy was confused. In the same vein, the casualness of an address further confused the hierarchy. One professor reported receiving an email addressed “Hey professor,” and felt the colloquial nature of the slang word, hey, and the lack of actual name demonstrated a confusion of the hierarchy. Participants also reported that when someone of a higher status curses, a professor does not invoke superiority, the “wrong” medium is used in a particular situation, an angry unprofessional email is sent, there are errors in authority correspondence, or when authorities use the vernacular of a teenager, the hierarchy is confused.

The confusion of the hierarchy often happens inadvertently, but the breakdown of the hierarchy is almost always intentional. Personal tragedy was one instance in which people felt the need to break out of hierarchical roles and extend an interaction counter to their role in the hierarchy. Upon answering if he had ever sent a communication that broke down the hierarchy, one employer said, “whenever somebody has a personal tragedy or a loss in the family I jump right into that and I want to console them. We take our leadership responsibility seriously…We try to project a certain family style to it, but it’s a very serious family, we like being able to break out of hierarchy at the appropriate time.” He explained that in the wake of personal tragedy, it is important to step outside of his role as employer and boss and to “be a person first.” Thoughtful and kind acts are another manner in which the hierarchy slowly gets broken down, because they demonstrate a human-to-human relationship outside of the hierarchy. All of these examples of
breaking down the hierarchy, also illustrate how the hierarchy is maintained and the conscious effort that is required to break it down.

**Perceptions of the Maintenance of Hierarchy**

As I have argued, the hierarchy is a large part of relationships and is consciously being maintained or broken down. People differently perceive the necessity for hierarchy and the need to either maintain or break it down. Many of the people I interviewed have mixed feelings about the hierarchy. While they recognize the importance of it and the role that it plays, many people work to break it down or mitigate it at some level. However, others believe it is imperative to reinforce the hierarchy rather than minimize it.

Primarily, the professors I interviewed had the strongest feelings about whether the hierarchy needed to be mitigated or reinforced. Only one employer and only one student mentioned their thoughts about the maintenance of the hierarchy. The student felt that the hierarchy was only an issue when students blindly believe all of the big ideas and sweeping statements their professors teach and make, particularly in the humanities. The employer expressed that he tries to find the balance between hierarchy and approachableness. He explained that he wants employees to feel like they can approach him, disagree with him, and voice concerns without the fear of consequences. This employer is willing to break out of the hierarchy as needed but he also keeps interactions formal and likes the role division. On the other hand, not even one employee discussed his or her ideas about either maintaining or reinforcing the hierarchy.

However, every professor I interviewed had an opinion on the matter. They did not necessarily agree with one another, but each one of them had thought about it and works to
create the relationship that he or she believes to be desirable. The professor who had the strongest stance on the importance of maintaining the hierarchy said:

There should be some status structure between faculty and students. I’m not paid to be an equal and not paid to be your friend, I’m paid to really try to turn you from a high school kid to an adult that can go out there and will have a rich and full life. So, I want to maintain it but I also want some balance of respect and not try to lord the structure over you, I’m not trying to be on a power trip or something.

Even he, who felt the hierarchy must be maintained, recognized the need to be respectful and not be abusive of his power. Another professor believes that it is important to break down the hierarchy “in so far as it enhances the academic pursuit.” He explained that he is “concerned in breaking it down if I think it’s a barrier to the learning process, [and if it’s not a barrier] then it’s not my job, my job is the learning process.” Only if it enables him to do his job better is he happy to break down the hierarchy. Another professor took a more middle-of-the-road perspective. She believes in the balance between being there for students and enforcing the hierarchy. As she said, “my relationship with my students is a professional relationship, it’s a warm relationship, it’s a, I hope enabling, helpful relationship but it’s not [a] personal intimate relationship and I feel very strongly about respecting the boundaries of students’ personal space and being available to them but not invasive.” Lastly, yet another professor felt that one has to break down status, rather than create it. He said, “You try to do things that don’t reinforce or communicate that status, you don't want people to feel uncomfortable.” One professor understood that his feelings were not shared by others and said, “my comfort with seeing myself as an equal to students is not shared by everyone.” Accordingly, everyone has a different opinion about how important it is to maintain the hierarchy and to what degree we should work to mitigate or reinforce it and it is the professors who have given this the most thought.
However, the discomfort with hierarchical confusion and the desire to know the nature of the relationship was ubiquitous.

“Breaking Down” Hierarchy While Still Maintaining Underlying Power Differences

Like the professors who have attempted to mitigate the hierarchy, many others have aspired to break down hierarchies as well. However, despite all of these attempts to break down the appearance of the hierarchy, the underlying power differences remain. The impression of the mitigation of hierarchy, both in the academic world and the workplace, does not necessarily reflect the reality of the power differences within the hierarchy. Today, many people have a discomfort with hierarchy and attempt to mitigate it, at least to convey the appearance of mitigation. They feel that hierarchy is antiquated and in the modern day, everyone should be considered equal. Furthermore, they feel that hierarchy diminishes the humanity within people and disables a sense of camaraderie and community. However despite the discomfort, the classically defining hierarchical structures are still in place. While professors may report that they attempt to mitigate the hierarchy, they still give out grades, are referred to as Professor, and invite students to their offices, rather than meet in neutral areas. So while they may want to mitigate the hierarchy, they do not want to eliminate it entirely.

There are several ways in which the differences in status are covered up. Primarily, the workplace is a seemingly less hierarchical environment than it used to be, but the degree of power and authority is the same as it has always been. While everyone is on a first name basis and the topics of conversation may have expanded slightly, the employer still holds authority over the employee and despite rapport or friendship, that power remains. Similarly, professors may attempt to befriend their students or lessen the degree of separation between them, but
ultimately, the role is a hierarchical one and professors are not looking to deteriorate that completely. The attempt to pretend that hierarchy does not exist stems from discomfort with hierarchy and the need to equalize. However, the hierarchy has and will continue to be maintained, despite the appearance of its decline.

**Conclusion**

As I have discussed, the hierarchy needs to be constantly reinforced and one of the ways in which we do that is through communication. Based on my observations, listening to interviews, and reading written exercises, I have learned what people do in an effort to maintain hierarchy, who wants to maintain hierarchy, where it breaks down, and how people choose to break it down.

The hierarchy is sustained via communication in a few different ways. The main way in which it is maintained is through the content discussed. As was clear through the observations, written exercises, and interviews, people are more likely to share personal and private subjects with friends and peers rather than authority figures. “Confidential information, well also personal information, my employees don’t need to know everything about my life,” one employer explained when answering how his spoken speech differs when he speaks with employees and with friends. The content of conversations with people of a different status is very different, and knowing which content to divulge and the authority’s lack of sharing reinforces the hierarchical aspect of the relationship. Furthermore, the person of higher status who uses shorter and more terse responses indicates his or her position over someone of a lower status, because only someone who was not looking for the approval of another would write curtly. The way one signs his or her name is also an indication of reinforcing hierarchy. One
professor explained, “To students I sign off with my initials, to friends I sign off [with my first name].” His distinction of specifically not using his first name with people of a lower status reinforced that they are of different statuses and that there is a hierarchical structure.

Another component of maintaining the hierarchy is about beginning and ending interactions. Again, it is the person of a higher status who has the authority to do so, and their doing so demonstrates and sustains the hierarchical nature of the relationship. Furthermore, the particular forms of media used, or those that are particularly chosen not to be used, once again, reinforce the hierarchy. The expression of who goes to whose territory is a very strong indication and invoking of hierarchy; as one professor said, “there’s a hierarchy of status, you came to my office I didn’t come to you, but when I meet with the dean I always go to him.” This statement demonstrates that each person is part of a larger hierarchy and everyone needs to abide by the hierarchy of which he or she is a part.

Involvement in one particular hierarchy does not exclude one from being part of another hierarchy and being the person of a higher status in one hierarchy does not preclude one from being of a lower status in another. The perpetuation of hierarchies is based on the roles each person plays, rather than based on the individual themselves. Like all social roles, hierarchies need to be reinforced and maintained and one way in which that is done is through communication. The manner in which people communicate, the content of their communications, the body language accompanying the speech, and the location of the communication all play a role in both maintaining and mitigating the hierarchical relationship. Based on the manner in which people reinforce and reproduce hierarchies, a lot can be learned about how hierarchies are challenged.
Chapter 6: Conclusion

Introduction
While I have provided a lot of information, both about different forms of media and when we use them and about the social hierarchy, I have not yet interwoven the two to answer the overall question: Is one form of communication more likely to confuse and break down the social hierarchy? In this chapter, I will explain the role of media within the hierarchy by discussing the two issues together. I will then demonstrate why some of the theorists discussed in the literature review were correct and why others were mistaken. Following that, I will discuss the differences between confusing and breaking down the hierarchy and why that is an important distinction to make. Finally, I will conclude with an explanation of why I believe written communication is more likely to confuse the hierarchy and why oral communication is more likely to break it down.

Symbiosis of Data
In Chapter 4, I discussed how people use different media for different situations, characteristics of media of communication, and particular uses of language and their relation to specific interlocutors. Overall, I determined various characteristics of different types of media and why one medium is preferred over another. I discussed both written and oral communications and face-to-face and mediated communications. I explained that deciding which method one uses for a particular interaction is a conscious decision and is dependent upon the recipient, the situation, the content of the communication, and the relationship with the recipient. In Chapter 5, I discussed how hierarchies are maintained and broken down through communication, the differences in communication between peers and authority figures, some
examples of where the hierarchy breaks down, and moreover, that the content of communication, the beginning and ending of interactions, and media choice reinforce hierarchies. Now, I will discuss the impact that each of these sets of phenomena has on the other one.

Understanding the data together is extremely important when trying to comprehend the interplay between communication and social hierarchy. As I have stated, social hierarchies constantly need to be reinforced and one of the ways in which to do this is through communication. It is clear that choices about type of medium are made in part because of the hierarchies and it is through those choices that the hierarchies are reinforced. Several of the examples participants described of hierarchical confusion occurred because of usage of a particular medium, one different than the relationship warranted. The media used to communicate, and the media that are chosen not to be used are much of what causes the social hierarchy to be reinforced.

In my literature review, I claimed the importance of combining both the interactionist and media theory positions, especially in light of the research for this thesis. To reiterate, while both sets of theorists focus on overall effects of the environment and both discuss social order, the two diverge in their beliefs as to why and how social dynamics vary. The media theorists suggest that media are social contexts that foster interaction and social identity. The interactionists believe that the situation in which people are engaging is the most influential and that people change their social behaviors to fit the norms and conventions of that particular situation. As I have shown, both are true. The media that participants use to communicate do foster interactions, as is demonstrated by people changing their behaviors and communication styles based on the medium that they are using. At the same time, participants vary their
communications to fit the situation, and more particularly, based on with whom they are communicating. However, the media that are used, participants’ “social contexts,” are intrinsically related to with whom participants were communicating, “the situation.” The situation strongly influences which media people choose, and then, that medium influences the communication style of the interaction. Furthermore, as the media theorists claim, it is through different media and because of the use of particular media that social hierarchies break down, thus illustrating that the medium does foster social context. The interplay between social situation and media is particularly pronounced when thinking about social hierarchies and the media that influence them.

**Research Questions Revisited**

One of my initial questions was whether people communicate differently using different media in the absence of a social hierarchy, that is, when participants are of equal status. I would venture to say, based on the data I collected and presented in Chapter 4, that different media will have an effect on the manner in which people communicate. As I explained, the length of interactions differs based on the device and medium being used. For instance, longer written communications generally take place in emails, while text messages favor shorter ones. Furthermore, the use of slang and profanity are often used more in texting than in email. Consequently, it is clear that different media have an impact on the manner in which people communicate, even when there is no status difference. However, the presence of status distinctions only intensifies the differences between communication using different media and the reason for selecting a particular medium.
I have demonstrated that the status equalization hypothesis, which states that the elimination of social factors, such as dress and nonverbal cues, may eliminate the presence of social status in computer supported media, is flawed. The social factors that exist in face-to-face interactions, do in fact enforce the social status more so than mediated communications. Consequently, social status is quite apparent in face-to-face interactions. While there is an elimination of certain social factors, other indicators of social status in computer mediated communications are still quite prevalent.

In chapters 4 and 5, I explained in detail many of the ways in which social status is actualized in computer mediated communications. Chapter 4 discusses various elements that demonstrate different conventions associated with computer mediated communications, such as how the length of message varies with each medium, how the recipient has an impact on the type of language used, whether or not one uses slang and profanity, and why emails are primarily a more formal, more professional mode of communication, while texting is primarily peer to peer. In Chapter 5, I explain how those conventions manifest themselves in a manner in which the social hierarchy is reinforced or, alternatively, broken down. Accordingly, despite the lack of social factors in computer supported media, social status is very much present. Computer mediated communications, regardless of whether oral or written, and face-to-face communications, which are always oral, are both capable of reinforcing social status.

Oral communications and written communications are both able to reinforce hierarchies; however, the question is whether one form is more likely to confuse or break down the social hierarchy more than the other. My research has primarily described how different forms of media impact social hierarchy and how hierarchies are sustained. Based on that research, I have
been able to learn about confusing and breaking down the hierarchy as well. Before answering
the question at hand, it is imperative to reiterate the distinction between confusing and breaking
down the hierarchy.

While confusing and breaking down the social hierarchy both refer to the deterioration
and mitigation of the hierarchy, they differ in their motives and in their outcomes. Confusing the
hierarchy can be classified as an action that does not completely upset the social hierarchy, but
rather causes at least one person in the interaction to take pause and acknowledge that something
about that interaction was wrong or out of place. Something about the interaction differs from
the societal norms of that particular role relationship. In contrast, breaking down the hierarchy is
the intentional act of doing or saying something outside of the confines of the hierarchical
structure in an effort to mitigate the hierarchy. When one breaks down the hierarchy one is
intentionally trying to lessen the status difference and create a more equal relationship, rather
than a hierarchical one. This distinction is important because it is critical to answering the
question of whether one medium is more likely to break down and confuse the social hierarchy
than others.

I found that I am unable to answer my initial question of whether one medium is more
likely to break down or confuse the hierarchy more than others, because breaking down and
confusing the hierarchy are not the same thing. Once I separate the question into two different
questions, it is possible to propose an answer. I believe that written communications are more
likely to confuse the hierarchy, while oral communications are more likely to break down the
hierarchy. Therefore, it is imperative that I differentiate between confusing and breaking down
the hierarchy.
Written Communication Confuses the Hierarchy

Written communication, particularly emails, is likely to confuse the status hierarchy, more so than oral communication. Because there is more of a regimented structure in written communication, there is more of a likelihood of breaking a rule than in oral communication, which has significantly fewer rules. The multitude of rules and guidelines makes it easy to err or to not adhere to all of the standards of written work, consequently, confusing the hierarchy. However, one instance counter to the hierarchy will not completely upset the hierarchy, though it will cause the other interlocutor to take pause. For instance, the formality of email and the documentation of written language are integral to the structure of written communication. As written communication enables drafts and rewrites, it demands structure and lends itself to a defined format. Two participants reported that they would only use slang in person and would never in written communication, also illustrating the formality of written language. Despite the desire not to use slang or deviate from the structure in written communication, it is incredibly easy to do so inadvertently. It is primarily because of its structure that written communication is more likely to confuse the hierarchy than oral communication.

As I discussed, many professors have received emails from their students which confused the hierarchy, but never did the relationship change because of an informal or inappropriate email. One professor reported receiving emails from students addressed “Dear[first name],” “hey prof [first name],” and “dude,” but he explained that he just writes a very short email back and signs with his initials. While these inappropriate greetings countered the structure of the hierarchy, this professor never felt as though the hierarchy was breaking down, perhaps despite the efforts of the students. He found a way to thwart the attempts of students and to demonstrate the hierarchical nature of the relationship with a terse reply and signed initials. Hierarchical
relationships can’t be completely broken down by written language alone, but it is very easy to confuse them.

Furthermore, the use of typographic mistakes in written communication is quite pervasive. While people claim to proofread emails, there were many typos in the emails and text messages that participants wrote during the written exercise. For example, in a student’s “email” to her professor explaining that she will not be able to attend class tomorrow, her subject read “Class tomorrow 2/4.” Furthermore, one professor wrote to a student “Sorry to say I have a faculty meeting tomorrow” when canceling a meeting with him. An employer, when canceling a meeting with an employee, wrote, “Something has come up,” and an employee to her employee wrote, “These participants will be essential.” All of these people claimed that they read over their emails, especially those to people of a different status, before they send them, yet, typos still exist. So while people try to avoid errors, their presence in written communication does not break down the hierarchy in so much as demonstrate lack of care, which may confuse the hierarchy because it indicates indifference, and consequently, a lack of respect. Based on typos alone, no one will believe that the nature of a relationship has changed, but once again, it may cause the receiver of the communication to take pause.

Additionally, the permanence of written language reaffirms the social hierarchy as there are severe consequences for errors in written communication. The communication and the error can be preserved and can be recalled at any time, which allows the error to be more glaring and permanent. Many participants discussed the documented aspect of written communication and how it can always be referenced. Some explained that they would prefer to put things in writing because of its permanence, but others did not use written language for the same reason. The
nature of written language is that it is permanent and therefore, carries a lot of weight. However, as I said previously, one mistake will not erode the social hierarchy, but it will cause confusion.

**Mitigation of Hierarchies Illustrated Through Casualization**

As I explained in Chapter 4, there has been a decline of formality in the workforce. This casualization was recognized through a lack of formal writing and particularly, through in-person interactions. In Chapter 5, I discussed the desires for hierarchies to appear mitigated, but still maintain underlying power differences. While the hierarchical nature of the relationship between employers and employees seemed to have been lessened, the power dynamics between them did not change. This discrepancy between appearance and reality is a result of the casualization of the hierarchy.

This phenomenon is most apparent in face-to-face interactions, because it is much easier to be more casual while still maintaining the underlying power dynamics and hierarchical structure in person than in written communications. In written communication, too much casualness may come off as inappropriate and therefore, confuse the hierarchy, which is why this was not the manner by which casualization occurred. However, oral communication enables a more diverse range of personas and registers while still being able to maintain the hierarchical structure and therefore, casualization was most pervasive in oral communications. Casualization could not have occurred to the same extent through written communication, because the structure of written communication is not flexible enough to have adapted to it and instead, would have caused confusion. Consequently, written communication is more likely to cause inadvertent confusion to the hierarchy than oral communication.
Oral Communication Breaks Down Hierarchies

However, it is much easier to break down the hierarchy in oral communication than in written communication. Oral communication allows the speaker to alter speech as it is being produced and to change what is being said based on the reaction of others, so as to avoid confusion about roles and hierarchies. If one speaker realizes that he or she is not playing his or her role correctly, oral communication allows for the speaker to make corrections. Therefore, one is less inclined to unintentionally say something that disrupts the social hierarchy in an oral communication than in a written one, and subsequently would be less likely to confuse the hierarchy. However, when one consciously tries to diminish the social hierarchy, oral communication is the best way to do so.

Oral communications are the best, most authentic, most primitive, and most effective form of communication, and therefore, are best for intentionally conveying a challenge to a social hierarchy. With oral communications, one can convey much more than simply the words themselves. For example, as participants mentioned, tone is a huge component of oral communications. Tone is often missed in written communications, as it conveys emotion, sarcasm, and attitude. Many participants reported that they do not joke or try to be funny in written communications, because it is never effective. The ability to hear tone in oral communications causes the nature of the communication to be a richer, more fulfilling communication.

Furthermore, in oral communications one is able to achieve more depth and clarity than he or she would in a text or an email. In oral communications, one can immediately account for the responsiveness and comprehension of the other person and adjust the communication accordingly and there is the expectation that this will happen. There is more flexibility regarding
what can and cannot be said because of the lack of written account and because of the nature of oral communication, but there is also more opportunity to correct an inappropriate response. Oral communication is much more expressive than written communication because one can convey emotion, intonation, and pitch and it can be done quite rapidly. In oral communications there is a greater possibility for more enthusiasm, spontaneity, and emotional responses.

In particular, face-to-face and simulated face-to-face interactions, such as video chatting, have their advantages as well. Nonverbal cues, body language, facial expressions, and eye-contact are a huge component of face-to-face communications and it is not possible unless the two interlocutors can see one another. The experience of being able to see the facial expressions and body language of the other communicator is not replicable in written communications. Overall, this advantage makes oral communication a better, more advantageous form of communication. Furthermore, in most oral communications, and particularly in face-to-face communications, the interlocutors are aware of whether they have the complete attention of the other. There is no question about how many other things the person might be doing or where his or her attention is actually focused. Therefore, oral communication is a much more effective, direct, and authentic communication experience.

Accordingly, as face-to-face interactions are often communicating something about the relationship of the interlocutors, oral communication is more effective and more likely than written communication to break down social hierarchies. Hierarchies need to explicitly be challenged in a manner in which both people understand that the hierarchy is being broken down. In oral communication, there are more ways to challenge power explicitly than in written communication. The nature of people being able to alter speech and the fact that oral
communication is a more expressive and more direct form of communication demonstrate why it is less likely to confuse the hierarchy and why oral communication will be more effective for the conscious effort to break down the hierarchy.

**Predictions About the Future**

Based upon all I have learned about communication and media and given the trends I have found, I speculate that all hierarchical relationships will appear less hierarchical in the coming years. While they will still maintain the same differences in power, the appearance will be of fewer status distinctions. As more people have access to more and more information, they will begin to believe that the hierarchy is outdated and unnecessary. José Ortega y Gasset (1985) describes in *The Revolt of the Masses*, which was originally published in 1932, that because of mass communication, the general population believes that they know everything and can find everything out, and therefore, they stop having respect for authority. Today, we have a similar phenomena with the prevalence of the internet and anyone’s ability to become an expert in anything through using Google. I predict that it will only escalate with the access to more knowledge in the future. However, while students may believe they know more than their teachers or can acquire just as much knowledge, as long as professors are still giving out grades or employees are still giving out jobs, the hierarchy will remain intact.

With the advent of so much new technology and new media, people will find all sorts of ways to communicate. Face-to-face communication will never become obsolete, but it is and will continue to become less frequent as we will move towards many more mediated communications. As it is now, handwritten communication has almost completely disappeared, and I would not be surprised to see it vanish completely in the coming years. However,
electronic written communication will become much more popular than it even is today. Although I am only speculating about what will be in the future, I am most confident that the social hierarchy will continue to be intrinsically related to media and the two will continue to impact each other.

Conclusion
In conclusion, it is imperative that hierarchy must be thought about in connection with communication, because the two are intrinsically related. They cannot be understood in isolation from one another, but rather must be thought about together. Hierarchical relationships are reinforced, confused, broken down, and demonstrated through communication and likewise, communications differ based on the nature of the hierarchy and those involved in the communication. Understanding the relationship between social hierarchies and media enables a richer understanding of how hierarchies manifest and what it takes to maintain them. While media and hierarchy can both be explored as separate entities, in order to fully understand them, they must be understood jointly. Initially, I questioned whether or not media had an impact on social hierarchy and I conclude not only do they have an impact, but they also are of paramount importance when maintaining or mitigating social hierarchies.
Appendix A: Interview Guide

Interview Guide for Interview with Students:

1. Is it okay with you if I record this conversation? You can decline to answer any question and can stop this interview whenever you want

2. What kind of communication devices do you own? (make light pen and paper)

3. There are many different ways of communicating, such as, face to face, telephone, texting, emailing, social media, writing notes and letters, video chatting, and online chatting. Do you have a favorite way of communicating?

4. If yes, Why?

5. Do you have a different favorite type of communication depending on to whom you are speaking?

6. Are there situations in which you would prefer one over another?

7. What type of communication do you like to use with your friends?

8. Why?

9. What mode of communication do you generally use when speaking with your Professor?

10. Why?

11. Do you use any other methods of communication?

12. If no, why not?

13. Is there a difference in the manner or style in which you communicate with your friends and your professor?

14. Is there a difference in your speech?

15. In computer mediated communications?

16. How do your interactions differ?

17. Is it different communicating through different methods?

18. Do you communicate differently with different communication devices?

19. How so? (Is it more formal? Do you use slang?)

20. Do you have your professor in mind when writing formal papers?

21. How does the style of your communication differ when writing formal papers?
22. Does you style differ from professor to professor?
23. Do you like formal writing?
24. How do you address your professors?
25. Do you think the ways in which people communicate demonstrate status differences?
26. How so?
27. What within communication styles causes or perpetuates that status hierarchy?
28. Have you received communication which seemed to confuse the status structure?
29. How did it do so?
30. What about the communication confused you?
31. Have you ever sent communication which seemed to confuse the status structure?
32. Do you think certain methods of communication are more likely to confuse the status hierarchy?
33. Do you ever worry about the social hierarchy? If yes, how does it inform your behaviors?

Interview Guide for Interview with Employees:
1. Is it okay with you if I record this conversation? You can decline to answer any question and can stop this interview whenever you want
2. How old are you?
3. What kind of communication devices do you own? (make light pen and paper)
4. There are many different ways of communicating, such as, face to face, telephone, texting, emailing, social media, writing notes and letters, video chatting, meetings, and online chatting. Do you have a favorite way of communicating?
5. If yes, Why?
6. Do you have a different favorite type of communication depending on to whom you are speaking?
7. Are there situations in which you would prefer one over another?
8. What type of communication do you like to use with your friends?
9. Why?
10. What mode of communication do you generally use when speaking with your employer?

11. Why?

12. Do you use any other methods of communication?

13. If no, why not?

14. Which type of communication do you favor?

15. Is there a difference in the manner or style in which you communicate with your friends and your employer?

16. Is there a difference in your spoken speech?

17. In computer mediated communications?

18. Is it different communicating through different methods?

19. Do you communicate differently with different communication devices?

20. How so? (Is it more formal? Do you use slang?)

21. Do you have your employer in mind when writing formal reports and memos?

22. How does the style of your communication differ when writing formal reports or memos?

23. Do you like formal writing?

24. Do you think the ways in which people communicate demonstrate status differences?

25. How so?

26. What within communication styles causes or perpetuates that status hierarchy?

27. Have you received communication which seemed to confuse the status structure?

28. How did it do so?

29. What about the communication confused you?

30. Have you ever sent communication which seemed to confuse the status structure?

31. Do you think certain methods of communication are more likely to confuse the status hierarchy?

32. Do you ever worry about the social hierarchy? If yes, how does it inform your behaviors?
Interview Guide for Interview with Employers:

1. Is it okay with you if I record this conversation? You can decline to answer any question and can stop this interview whenever you want.

2. What is your age range? (general box)

3. What kind of communication devices do you own? (make light pen and paper)

4. There are many different ways of communicating, such as face to face, telephone, texting, emailing, social media, writing notes and letters, video chatting, meetings, and online chatting. Do you have a favorite way of communicating?

5. If yes, Why?

6. Do you have a different favorite type of communication depending on to whom you are speaking?

7. Are there situations in which you would prefer one over another?

8. What type of communication do you like to use with your friends?

9. Why?

10. What mode of communication do you generally use when speaking with your employee?

11. Why?

12. Do you use any other methods of communication with employees?

13. If no, why not?

14. Is there a difference in the manner or style in which you communicate with your friends and your employee?

15. Is there a difference in your spoken speech?

16. In computer mediated communications?

17. Is it different communicating through different methods?

18. Do you communicate differently with different communication devices?

19. How so? (Is it more formal? Do you use slang?)

20. How does the style of your communication differ when writing formal reports or memos?

21. Do you like formal writing?

22. Do you think the ways in which people communicate demonstrate status differences?
23. How so?

24. What within communication styles causes or perpetuates that status hierarchy?

25. Have you received communication which seemed to confuse the status structure?

26. How did it do so?

27. What about the communication confused you?

28. Have you ever sent communication which seemed to confuse the status structure?

29. Do you think certain methods of communication are more likely to confuse the status hierarchy?

30. Do you ever worry about the social hierarchy? If yes, how does it inform your behaviors?

Interview Guide for Interview with Professors:

1. Is it okay with you if I record this conversation? You can decline to answer any question and can stop this interview whenever you want.

2. What kind of communication devices do you own? (make light pen and paper).

3. There are many different ways of communicating, such as face to face, telephone, texting, emailing, social media, writing notes and letters, video chatting, and online chatting. Do you have a favorite way of communicating?

4. If yes, Why?

5. Do you have a different favorite type of communication depending on to whom you are speaking?

6. Are there situations in which you would prefer one over another?

7. What type of communication do you like to use with your friends?

8. Why?

9. What mode of communication do you generally use when speaking with your students?

10. Why?

11. Do you use any other methods of communication with students?

12. If no, why not?

13. Is there a difference in the manner or style in which you communicate with your friends and your students?
14. Is there a difference in your spoken speech?
15. In computer mediated communications?
16. Is it different communicating through different methods?
17. Do you communicate differently with different communication devices?
18. How so? (Is it more formal? Do you use slang?)
19. Do you have your student in mind when writing formal evaluations or recommendation letters?
20. Do you like formal writing?
21. Do you think the ways in which people communicate demonstrate status differences?
22. How so?
23. What within communication styles causes or perpetuates that status hierarchy?
24. Have you received communication which seemed to confuse the status structure?
25. How did it do so?
26. What about the communication confused you?
27. Have you ever sent communication which seemed to confuse the status structure?
28. For FEMALE Professors: have you ever been called Mrs. by your student? How was that received?
29. Do you think certain methods of communication are more likely to confuse the status hierarchy?
30. Do you ever worry about the social hierarchy? If yes, how does it inform your behaviors?
Appendix B: Prompts for Written Exercise

For students:

Please write an email to your professor explaining that you will be missing class tomorrow because of an extenuating circumstance.

Please write a text to your friend asking her/him what her/his plans for the weekend are and letting her/him know yours.

For professors:

Please write a brief recommendation for a study abroad application for your student, Jim.

Please write a text to your spouse/partner (or if not applicable, good friend) inquiring about when he/she will be home tonight.

Please write an email to your student canceling a meeting that you have scheduled for tomorrow because the department scheduled a mandatory faculty meeting.

For employers:

Please write a text to your spouse/partner (or if not applicable, good friend) inquiring about when he/she will be home tonight.

Please write an email to your employee canceling a meeting that you have scheduled for tomorrow because a client/associate called and needs to meet with you at that time.

Please write a memo to your employee discussing your disappointment at his/her most recent piece of work.

For employees:

Please write an email to your employer explaining that you will have to arrive late to work tomorrow because of an extenuating circumstance.

Please write a text to your friend asking her/him what her/his plans for the weekend are and letting her/him know yours.

Please write a memo to your employer expressing your negative feelings about the report you just read.
Works Cited


