As a female student in civil engineering, I have always been aware of the noticeably small number of other females in my classes. For example, it is not uncommon to be in a class with 25 males and only 5 females, including myself. Despite these staggering numbers, I never actually felt like a “minority” in the engineering environment. My teachers do not favor male over female students; I am treated as an equal and always have been. As an engineering student, I work hard to prove myself with my engineering abilities, not my gender. Throughout the past four years, I have even become accustomed to the idea of being in classes with more males than females. In fact, it has become the norm. It was not until I recently began my research on the inequalities of female engineers, however, that I would now use the term “minority” to describe myself.

In a world that is tirelessly pushing toward the equal rights of minorities, research shows that the engineering profession has resisted in integrating its male dominated culture while most other professions have not (Sinkele). Despite the fact that women have been practicing engineering since the late 1800s, the engineering profession is still viewed as a “man’s job” (Bix). Why has it been so difficult to alter the face of engineering? What has held women back from pursuing careers in math and science? Why are women still not easily accepted in a profession in which they are just as qualified as men? Through my research, I have discovered that these questions are actually a lot more complex than I originally thought. There are different
ways in which minorities can react to a dominant environment. In the engineering profession, females are the minority and according to some researchers, they must either sacrifice their femininity and conform to the masculine culture or embrace being a female engineer but sacrifice their acceptance by male engineers (Powell). Ultimately, female engineers tend to either establish a feminist or a conformist role in the profession. While one promotes the equality of female engineers, the other actually maintains the inequality.

These contrasting roles are evident in the everyday workplace not only with the way that female engineers dress but with their interactions with male engineers as well. Male engineers, although they may not realize it, make it harder for women to fit in by excluding them from masculine interactions and gestures that they share only with fellow males (Faulkner I). From a man’s perspective, these exchanges are inappropriate to be shared with females, especially those who are more “womanly” than others. However, some female engineers tend to establish a more masculine identity to make interactions with male engineers more comfortable. In turn, these conforming female engineers are more easily accepted by the men in the office and ultimately more likely to succeed. According to Faulkner, “it seems that, by refuting or playing down the significance of gender, women engineers are better able to strengthen or protect their fragile membership as engineers, while... heightening their visibility as ‘women’ can...threaten their belonging in the community of practice” (Faulkner II, 177). While conforming to the masculine culture might be the easier and safer option, it continues to preserve the inequality of female engineers in the profession.

After discovering these contrasting primary roles of female engineers, I realized that I am still unsure of how I react to the dominantly masculine ways of the engineering profession. Before researching this topic, I never questioned my femininity as an engineer. I never realized...
the extent to which women are expected to conform in order to be successful. While I knew that there are far fewer female engineers than male, I was not aware of the implicit dynamics of gender issues in the engineering environment. Powell states that “while women are becoming undone in a good way and breaking barriers about womanhood by entering male-dominated areas, they are simultaneously becoming undone in a bad way, when their gender is disqualified as a condition of their success in that arena” (414). Because there are great disadvantages and advantages to both methods, I am somehow stuck in the middle. While I am not willing to sacrifice my femininity, I also want to be able to successfully prove that I am a reliable and well qualified engineer. Ultimately, I would like to be viewed simply as a female engineer - not a feminist engineer or a conformist engineer.

G.

You did a good job introducing us to the issue and outlining the conversation. I think you could have explained these quotes a bit better, but you’ll have more space to do that in later papers. I think one of the most difficult barriers you’re going to have to get past will be your use of these terms, because savvy readers (I’d like to think I’m a part of that group! Ha!) will push you to define the terms “feminist,” “conformist,” “masculine,” etc. For instance, if a woman is trying to display traditional Southern femininity in a male-dominated field, is she conforming or rebelling? What about in a female-dominated field? Is that important? These questions aren’t easy ones to answer, but they do seem essential to your project. You might check out some feminist theory for background or even for a quotable source. Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* is one of the most famous texts on the subject, but it’s highly theoretical and will take some time to spool through. You might try to get your hands on a copy and give it a read. Regardless, I think you should consider the way you’re using these terms and look for a way to stabilize them (before your paper throws them into doubt, that is).

I’d love to talk to you about this stuff more, so let me know if you want to come in at some point and discuss any roadblocks you run into.

M. Grade: A- (92)
Work Cited


