

## Leadership, Risk Taking, and Social Gender Roles Among Colombian Female Undergraduate Language Learners

Liderazgo, toma de riesgos y roles sociales de género entre mujeres colombianas estudiantes de un pregrado de idiomas

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This case study sought to understand how 17 undergraduate students in the humanities and science, technology, engineering, and mathematics majors positioned themselves in terms of gender in relation to their leadership and risk-taking skills. For this study, I used students' artifacts, semistructured interviews, and focus group discussions, which tied into the objectives of the Academic Writing for Professional Development course that the participants signed up for at a public university in Colombia. To analyze the data, I used aspects of the grounded theory method. The results revealed that the division of labor and social gender roles supersede the students' initial positions. Because of this, women's leadership and risk-taking abilities are invisible, an assertion which continues to perpetuate social gender roles, gender stereotypes, and the patriarchy.

*Keywords:* academic writing, gender, leadership, patriarchy, positioning, risk-taking, social gender roles

Este estudio de caso exploró el modo como diecisiete estudiantes de pregrado en las humanidades y las ciencias, tecnología, ingeniería y matemáticas se posicionan en términos de género en relación con sus habilidades de liderazgo y la toma de riesgos. Se utilizaron artefactos estudiantiles, entrevistas semiestructuradas y discusiones en grupo alineados con los objetivos del curso "Escritura académica para fines profesionales". El análisis de datos se basó en aspectos de la teoría fundamentada. Los resultados revelaron que la división de labores y los roles socialmente asignados por género opacan las posiciones iniciales de las estudiantes. Por esta razón, el liderazgo femenino y la toma de riesgos es invisibilizada, lo cual continúa perpetuando los roles socialmente asignados por género, los estereotipos y el patriarcado.

*Palabras clave:* escritura académica, género, liderazgo, patriarcado, posicionamiento, roles socialmente asignados por género, toma de riesgos

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### Introduction

Around the world, women continue to be under-represented in academia and the workforce. Despite the fact that more women are finishing college and entering the workforce, their numbers in research, tenure roles, first and last name author positions, and grants fail to reach the 50/50 mark. This holds especially true for careers in STEM areas (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics). As shown in Figure 1, the decrease in female participation becomes even more

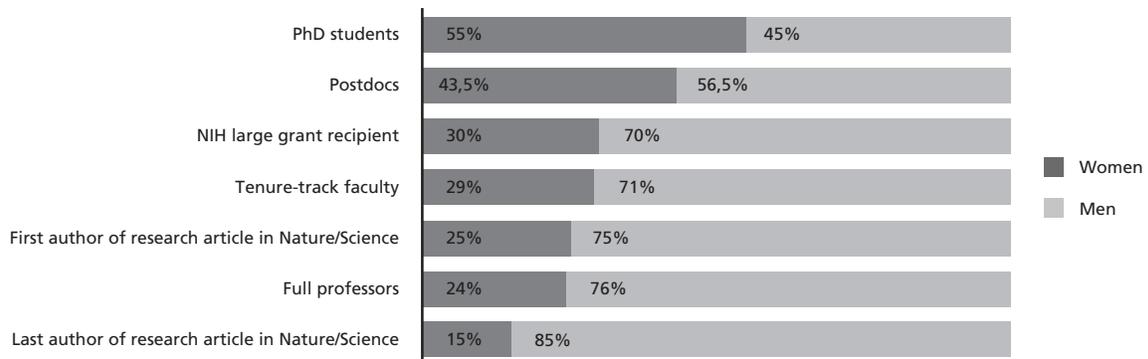
apparent once in the workforce; thereby, contributing to the gender gap.

Though Figure 1 is specific for the University of Washington, it is not far from the realities we face in Colombia. In 2016, the percentage of women researchers in Colombia was below the 50/50 mark. Though the percentage of women researchers increased from 34.38% in 2013 to 37.65% in 2016, the increase is not as steep as one would hope. In fact, 2014 and 2015 were years of stagnation with no increase in women researchers (see Figure 2).

**Figure 1. University of Washington Neuroscience PhD Program Enrollment and Participation by Gender**

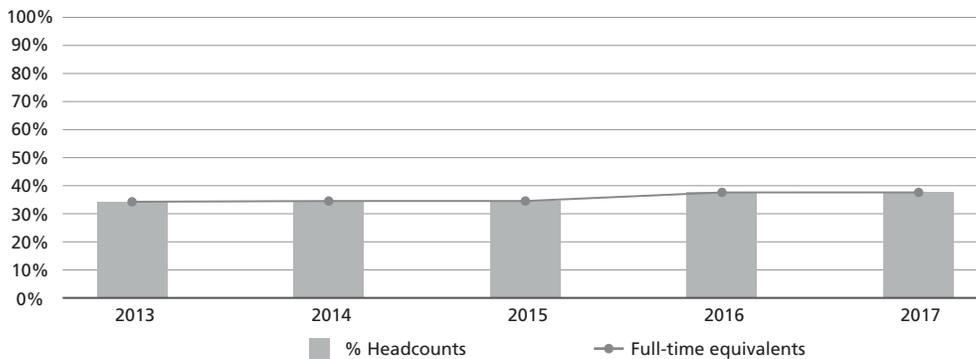
**Number of women in neuroscience**

Women and men now receive neuroscience phds in about equal numbers. But in what’s been called the “leaky STEM pipeline,” women haven’t advanced as far toward equity in academic careers. However female underrepresentation is even more extreme in high-profile journal publications.



Note. From “Perish not publish? New study quantifies the lack of female authors,” by I. Fine and A. Shen, 2018, *The Conversation*, “Female scientists underrepresented,” para. 3 (<https://bit.ly/2X3SZU5>). CC BY ND.

**Figure 2. Full-Time Women Researchers in Science, Technology, and Innovation in Colombia**



Note. Adapted from *Colombia: Human Resources in R&D*, by UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS), 2016 (<https://bit.ly/39KCKxH>).

In 2018, Colciencias, the Administrative Department of Science, Technology, and Innovation of Colombia, released their new initiative “MujerEs Ciencia” as a strategy to tackle female underrepresentation in STEM. According to Colciencias,

Women continue to be underrepresented in investigation and development. There are more women enrolling in college, but few choose a scientific career. Numerous obstacles exist that are associated to the educational journey, from the stereotypes faced by girls to family responsibilities and the prejudices that women must face when choosing a career. (2018, “¿Y en Colombia?” para. 1, translated by the author)

Many of the obstacles mentioned above are still misunderstood by the academic community. STEM researchers and international organizations, like UNESCO, have invested a lot of time and money seeking to understand why female participation declines during and after college. Part of the answer lies in social gender roles and gender stereotypes mediated by ideologies of the patriarchy, which dictate how men and women are expected to act in society.

For this qualitative case study, I sought to understand how 17 undergraduate language learners in the humanities and STEM positioned themselves in terms of gender in academic writing in regard to leadership and risk-taking skills. The participants were taking an academic writing course at a public university in Colombia. I looked at their cover letters, résumés, job interviews, and focus group discussion to see how the students positioned themselves when seeking employment, scholarships, and internships.

After analyzing the students’ work, I found that social gender roles predominate in the students’ discourses. The female participants often highlighted their supportive roles when talking about the work they do in research groups. Unfortunately, literature shows that communal leaders with supportive characteristics come second to hegemonic masculine forms of leadership and risk

taking when selecting a leader. As language teachers, it is essential to help our students express their unique strengths as communal leaders. By opening up spaces to rethink, question, and reflect on the current situation, we can also tackle gender inequalities within the classroom before undergraduates enter the workforce.

## Literature Review

For this study, I asked the question: “How do female undergraduate language learners position themselves in terms of gender when it comes to leadership and risk-taking skills?” Before answering the question, it was necessary to understand the concepts of gender, leadership, and risk taking.

### Gender

It is a common mistake to think of gender as a male and female binary. However, gender as a social construction takes on a different definition based on “the socially constructed characteristics of women and men—such as norms, roles and relationships of and between groups of women and men” (World Health Organization, 2018, “Gender,” para. 1). Butler (1990) defined gender “as a shifting and contextual phenomenon, gender does not denote a substantive being, but a relative point of convergence among culturally and historically specific sets of relations” (p. 16). Similarly, Coates (2004) mentioned that “gender is never static but is produced actively and in interaction with others every day of our lives. . . . Every time we speak, we have to bring off being a woman or a man” (p. 217). Because gender is socially constructed in interaction with others, we can also note that culture, lived experiences, history, and language are just a few factors that influence our construction of gender.

Perhaps one of the most cited explanations of gender comes from Simone de Beauvoir, who said “one is not born, but rather, becomes, a woman” (1949, p. 283). In other words, men and women take on the roles they are expected to perform in society based on

the interactions they have from birth. Based on the previous, gender cannot be studied as a static binary. Rather, it is a multiplicity of positions understood as femininities and masculinities.

### **Femininities and Masculinities**

The terms “femininities” and “masculinities” appeared as a means to define positions of gender in social interaction. After Simone de Beauvoir pioneered the second wave of feminism in 1949 (the first wave was gaining women’s right to vote), other social groups became interested in studying how men and women interacted. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, sociologist Raewyn Connell led the research on masculinities to understand the different ways men positioned themselves based on gender as a social construct. Particularly, masculinities became an exploration of male expression that challenged the hegemonic, or power, ideals associated with manhood.

Today, we understand that men and women can represent varying degrees of femininities and masculinities, of which some carry positions of power over others. An example of a power position is the “hegemonic male,” which was defined by Connell as the “configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimization of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (2005, p. 77). As mentioned by Connell, the idea of “hegemonic masculinity” takes dominance over other positions of masculinities, and in turn, femininities as well. This is because the “hegemonic male” is meant to embody and promote ideas of patriarchy. In this sense, we can see how positions of leadership, risk-taking, decision making, and strength have been historically associated with hegemonic masculinities. Given the previous, society has continued to promote these ideals in the workplace, even when men are no longer the only breadwinners of the household.

Social role theory suggests that the patriarchy prevails despite the push toward gender equality and

the recognition of femininities and nonhegemonic masculinities. Social role theory (Eagly & Wood, 2012) relates the sex-roles, which have been determined by the physical differences between men and women, and the social roles we expect men and women to play according to gender stereotypes. One of the dangers of perpetuating social gender roles is that the “others” are excluded from sharing roles of power in social interaction.

As a society, it is crucial to understand how social gender roles and stereotypes limit nonhegemonic groups from reaching their full potential at home, school, and the workplace. Research on gender positioning and gender identity has shown that an individual’s performance can be limited depending on how they position themselves. For example, Hruska (2004) found that local gender construction can affect participation in the classroom. Castañeda-Peña (2010) found that preschool girls only listened to their peers when the former assumed positions of power. In the United States, Brutt-Griffler and Kim (2017) focused on a group of language learners in higher education. The students interacted based on the social gender roles they had in their home country. For example, a female student mentioned “So whenever I talk much in Japanese, my mother said to me, . . . ‘Speak courteously in a polite manner,’ and my mom sometimes gave me a demonstration with a very high, feminine tone” (p. 112). These studies show that social gender roles are constructed at a young age and perpetuated into adulthood.

As part of this case study, I wanted to understand how female undergraduate language learners positioned themselves in terms of gender when referring to their leadership and risk-taking skills. Both of these abilities are crucial for employment, but they have been historically associated with masculine social gender roles.

### **Leadership**

Female leadership is a main concern for many companies, and we continue to see gender inequality in the distribution (and appointment) of leadership

positions among women. For example, only 25 women were listed as company CEOs in the Fortune 500 list, which is equivalent to a 1:19 female to male ratio (Abadi, 2018). In Colombia, women continue to be underrepresented in leadership roles in companies, government, and academia. The 2018 Colombian elections for congress revealed that only three political parties chose a female candidate as their head representative. Additionally, only 56 of the 258 members of Congress were women, without a single woman in the top ten elected candidates in the country (El Tiempo, 2018).

Part of the problem is the way effective leadership is perceived by society. Competitiveness and assertiveness are still seen as the “defining qualities of the leader role” by both men and women (Vial & Napier, 2018, p. 1). Meanwhile, communal characteristics like being supportive are “nice ‘add-ons’ for leaders” (p. 1), but they are nonessential and mostly appreciated by women. In a meta-analysis conducted by Badura et al. (2018), leadership among men and women was analyzed once again after 25 years (Eagly & Karau, 1991). Initially, the authors understood that several variables were present when selecting a leader, such as group interaction time, communication skills, behavior, and stereotypes. The results of the meta-analysis, which looked at more than 19,000 participants over 136 studies, showed that men were more likely to be selected as leaders than women (Badura et al., 2018, p. 348). Another major finding was that communal traits, such as caring and supporting others, had a negative effect on selecting a leader (Badura et al., 2018, p. 354). Overall, the literature has shown that femininities come second when selecting a leader, and they can even have a detrimental effect on leadership selection. Nevertheless, communal leadership can promote motivation, efficiency, and belonging in a group, as well as help women and nonhegemonic males outshine in these areas.

### Communal Leadership

As mentioned before, leadership can have multiple facets, one of which is communal or community leadership. One of the key components of communal leadership is the community. According to McMillan and Chavis (1986, as cited in Martiskainen, 2017), community leaders help reinforce the group’s needs, create a sense of belonging, provide emotional support, and promote change within the group. As a consequence, communal leadership diminishes hierarchies of power and more accurately voices the opinions of the whole group.

Education and its subfields, such as English language teaching (ELT), have seen the emergence of communal leaders among students, teachers, and directors. Stephenson (2018) mentioned that the intricacies of education have developed a need for shared leadership instead of the traditionally exalted individual. In her study, Stephenson worked with five ELT leaders in order to understand their successes and the events that influenced them as communal leaders. The findings showed that professional learning and leadership socialization were among the most important areas to develop leadership awareness. Additionally, she added that “the increased complexity of leadership will continue to require greater individualized and contextualized support” (p. 198). The work being done on leadership in education serves as a model for other fields where leadership continues to be male dominated. Furthermore, personalized leadership awareness is key in the professional development classroom. For this study, the objective was to understand how undergraduate students, especially women in the fields of STEM, expressed their strengths and weaknesses in a foreign language. Consequently, the participants could become aware of the type of leaders they were and highlight their unique qualities. As a language teacher, I could help learners in the future discover how to promote their personal skills instead of enforcing a hegemonic masculine leadership ideology.

### Risk-Taking

Like leadership, risk-taking has long been regarded as a characteristic of hegemonic masculinity. From a social perspective, women may be stereotyped as being “risk averse” or strong opposers of risk taking. Taking risks may seem as “anti-female” and going against preestablished “norms.” However, Maxfield et al. (2010) surveyed 661 female managers and found that women also take risks. Factors like power, self-efficacy, and networks motivate risk taking (p. 593), although risk aversion stereotypes persist due to invisibility. According to the authors, the invisibility of risk taking is a product of society and the risk taker herself. Maxfield et al. mentioned that, “regarding invisibility, society may not see women taking risks because American culture does not expect them to take risks” (p. 594). Furthermore, women tend to be more modest about their risk-taking decisions, often times using the collective “we” to “refer to her own accomplishments, thus redirecting attribution for the risk taking elsewhere” (Tannen, as cited in Maxfield et al., 2010, p. 594). Understanding risk taking in the workplace is a necessity in breaking gender stereotypes that diminish women’s efforts.

### Research Design

This case study is part of a master’s thesis, which sought to understand undergraduates’ gender positioning in their academic writing. I followed a qualitative approach to discover how undergraduate students positioned themselves in terms of gender in relation to leadership and risk-taking skills. I conducted the study with a group of 17 undergraduate students (14 females, 3 males) at a public university in Colombia. Though the study focused on the female participants’ voices, I chose to include the male perspective in order to contrast the participants’ discourses. This study was situated, participant-oriented, holistic, and inductive (Richards, 2009).

For this case study, I asked the participants to write under real-world conditions, and their texts were

analyzed for meaning. To engage in a holistic and critical perspective, I used multiple instruments that facilitated data collection based on the participant as the “frame of reference.” As data collection instruments, I used students’ artifacts, semistructured interviews, and focus group discussions. The instruments were connected to the objectives of the Academic Writing for Professional Development course, which helped students prepare for job interviews and English proficiency exams. As a final product, the participants had to submit a final draft of their documents and perform a mock job interview.

The students’ artifacts were the cover letter brainstorm map (see Appendix), cover letter rough draft, cover letter final copy, and résumé. The second instrument was two semistructured interviews. According to Barriball and While (1994), semistructured interviews “are well suited for the exploration of the perceptions and opinions of respondents regarding complex and sometimes sensitive issues” (p. 330). I asked the participants questions about themselves, as well as behavioral-based questions meant to mimic a job interview. The final instrument was two focus group discussions, which were meant to support and understand the data gathered from the other data collection instruments. According to Denscombe (2007, as cited in Dilshad & Latif, 2013, p. 192), “focus groups consist of a small group of people who are brought together by a trained moderator (the researcher) to explore attitudes and perceptions, feelings and ideas about a topic.” The idea was to understand the group’s points of view, the terminology they used in their work, and their experiences in college.

### Context

The study took place at a public university in Colombia. This university is among the top ten in the country when it comes to investigation. It has about 134 investigation groups, with national and international students and researchers. Students are encouraged to participate in internships, apply for scholarships abroad, and publish in English. All of these activities are beneficial

for the students' future employment. Cover letters and résumés are required for internship applications and employment abroad, while writing articles in English makes local research visible worldwide.

Because of the community's needs to learn English, I decided to create the Academic Writing for Professional Development course. The students elaborated narratives, essays, cover letters, résumés, articles, and correspondence. Additionally, I would help them prepare for job interviews and international English proficiency exams. After opening the course with the university language institute, about 120 students and staff signed up. Of the total population, I selected 17 students who had an intermediate to advanced level of English, participated in research groups, and were at least halfway through their majors.

The students were studying different majors in the humanities and STEM areas, such as modern languages, foreign languages, biology, transportation engineering, environmental engineering, and math education. Each student signed a consent form and chose a pseudonym to appear in the study. In addition to meeting the university's academic needs, this study sought to contribute to social equality in a public, higher education setting.

### Data Analysis and Findings

Since I used multiple instruments to collect the data, I decided to use aspects of the grounded theory method (GTM) to organize and analyze the information. GTM was initially proposed by Glaser and Strauss (1967). The method got its name from the fact that theories came from the data collected, hence being "grounded." The authors believed that theory needed to "fit" and "work" with the data and not the other way around.

I started with open coding. Open coding is the procedure of looking at the data with an "open mind." To do so, I had to read each line of the data and assign it a code (Urquhart, 2013, p. 10). As I coded the data, I created a matrix that proved to be useful for constant comparison among the participants, data, and theory.

Once I had separated the data, I moved to the selective coding stage. Selective coding is the process by which the data are placed together once again as a whole. It "requires decisions about which initial codes make the most analytical sense to categorize your data incisively and completely" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 57). In practice, this meant looking at the data once more for commonalities, which would become themes and then categories. The last procedure I used was theoretical coding, which compares the common themes found during the selective coding process. The idea was to join all of the statements, codes, and themes to arrive at a complete picture of the data. In addition to comparing themes, I also reviewed the theory to add depth to the analysis.

### Categories of Analysis

As mentioned before, the categories presented here are the result of the data analysis. It is worth mentioning that other categories emerged from the master's thesis, but the following categories were selected based on the current research question. They also represent commonalities found with the data and instruments among the participants (see Table 1).

Table 1. Categories From the Data

Research Question	Category
How do female undergraduate students position themselves in terms of gender when it comes to leadership and risk-taking skills?	I Support Others: The Roles Women Are Expected to Play I Am a Risk Taker: Invisibility of Risk-Taking Skills

#### I Support Others: The Roles Women Are Expected to Play

Being supportive and caring for others have traditionally been associated with female gender roles. This comes from a history of taking care of children, supporting husbands, and being the moral keepers of society. So,

this category was named after the femininity of supporting other people. Among the participants, supporting others was a femininity most exemplified among the undergraduate modern and foreign languages female students. The connection was that these students are preparing to become language teachers. Since teaching is an occupation associated with the care and support of children, femininities are preferred. On the other hand, STEM undergraduates rarely mentioned femininities in their résumés and cover letters. However, female students in both fields tended to position themselves as supporters in the job interview and focus group discussions.

The first excerpt comes from Alejandra, a foreign language student. One of her key attributes in her brainstorm map was her leadership skills. She wrote, “I’m leader in any activity, which I develop because I like that everything is good made” [*sic*]. In the classroom, it was evident that Alejandra was the leader. She often took command and led group activities in the classroom. Below, I have included an excerpt from Alejandra’s cover letter, where she described her abilities,

I consider I am the best candidate because I can transfer several appropriate skills, such as my creative work, the proposition of dynamic activities, which will encourage the students, and my persistence to achieve my goals. Additionally, I can promote indispensable moral values in the classroom like the respect, the solidarity, the friendship and so far. [*sic*]

One thing that I found interesting in Alejandra’s cover letter was that she failed to mention her strong sense of leadership. Instead, she opted for pointing out how her creative work and dynamic activities will encourage her students. Additionally, she said she would promote moral values, solidarity, and friendship. Here, we have a case of a student making decisions on how to position herself based on the roles she is expected to play in her future job. If being a teacher is closely connected to supporting others, then it seemed pertinent to highlight these femininities. Among other female students in the humanities, I noticed that

support, teamwork, and responsibility were preferred over leadership, persuasiveness, or individuality regardless of how they positioned themselves in interaction with others.

For the participants in STEM areas, teamwork was mentioned but not expanded on in their cover letters and résumés. In most cases, leadership, innovation, and creativity were preferred over supporting others. The next example came from Dani, a female electronic engineering student. She has been working as a tutor since 2012. Despite being involved in pedagogical practices with younger children, she decided to apply for a position as a manufacturing process engineer. In her cover letter she wrote,

I would like to give my ideas and capacity to develop innovative technologies, in order to contribute to the company and to the world. Capacities such as leadership, creative, communication, willingness to search for new knowledge and always with a positive attitude. [*sic*]

Dani positioned herself based on the skills she assumed the job required. The undergraduate students were aware of the skills they needed to promote. They picked which ones would likely get them hired, even when those skills failed to represent their previous experience or how they positioned themselves in interaction with others.

Another aspect that I looked at was how students positioned themselves in relation to their research groups. The female undergraduates, regardless of their major, used a collective “we” to describe their roles. In the following excerpts, I contrasted two interviews, one from Caim and the other from Max Power. Caim is a female undergraduate majoring in biology. She has been part of her research group since 2017. Max Power is a male undergraduate majoring in transportation engineering and has worked as a consultant engineer in his group since 2018. I asked both students to describe a previous work experience based on their résumés. Caim and Max Power’s interviews are as follows:

*Nosotros' analizamos transectos, nosotros analizamos dos en Arcabuco, dos en Santa María. Eh, evaluamos todos las familias en lo que en el transecto se recogió todo lo que se identificó, o sea, todo lo nuevo, digamos. Eh, lo que hicimos después es identificar todas las familias a géneros, algunas especies, no todas, por eso solo lo dejamos en géneros.*

[We analyzed transects. We analyzed two in Arcabuco and two in Santa Maria. We evaluated all of the families, whose identities we collected from the transect. In other words, we identified all of the new transects. What we did afterwards was identify some of the species in families of genres]. (Caim, Interview 1)

Yes, well, eh, when I started working with transportation, they also needed a special banner for a bus for publicity. They don't, they didn't have the resources to hire a graphic designer. So, they needed someone who could take care of that situation, I offered myself. I showed them some of my work, and they told me it was real, really good. And I did the final banner, and it's the one they are currently using at the bus. [sic] (Max Power, Job Interview)

I chose to contrast these two interviews because it was apparent how one student took on the individual credit, while the other preferred to credit her team. As I mentioned before, the collective "we" came up every time I asked a female student to explain what they did on a project or as part of their research group. To provide another example, Juana, a female biology student, described her participation as,

My role in my research group, I work many things at the same time like clean specimens, going field to collect data, also I used to make data analysis. We have to show our work in congresses, symposiums, things like that. [sic] (Job Interview)

Even though Juana started off by using the personal pronoun "I," I could see that everything she did as an

1 In Spanish, the pronoun "we" is gendered. "Nosotros" refers to a group of men, while "nosotras" is used for a group of women. However, if there is at least one man in the group, "nosotros" is used.

"I" eventually led to the support of her team. When she concluded her statement with a positive outcome, she used the pronoun "we" to credit her research group. Despite the fact that all three participants had to utilize similar skills, the female undergraduates always gave credit to their team, even if teamwork was not explicitly mentioned in their cover letters and résumés. To explain this phenomenon, I turned again to social role theory. Ridgeway (2001) said that,

Even in situations where gender stereotypes do not control behavior, however, men and women may still act slightly differently due to their gender differentiated skills. . . . The theory predicts that women will generally act more communally and less instrumentally than men in the same context, that these differences will be greatest when gender is highly salient in the situation, and that gender differences will be weak or absent when people enact formal, institutional roles. (p. 14186)

Based on the data and social role theory, I analyzed that even when the job skills needed are similar, men and women will act differently based on the femininities and masculinities they and others have positioned them in. The idea of supporting others is deep-rooted in the roles society expects women to play. For Alejandra, positioning herself as a supporter was a must for future employment. For Caim and Juana, playing a supporting role equated to the success of their team, and ultimately, their research. However, for Max Power and Dani, supporting others was never mentioned in their cover letter as an essential skill, despite having worked as volunteers and tutors. In speaking about their work, individuality was preferred over the community in order to highlight leadership from a masculine perspective.

#### **I Am a Risk Taker: Invisibility of Risk-Taking Skills**

"I am a risk taker" was a specific phrase used by several participants to describe their strengths. For the participants, risk taking embodied making a decision without knowing the outcome. The result could be

favorable or not, but it required taking the initiative. In the following excerpts, I contrasted two students who had initially positioned themselves as risk takers. For them, being a risk taker meant trying new things and making decisions even when they did not know the outcome. The first excerpt comes from Juana, a female biology student, who described her top skills as: *dynamic, creative, willingness to search for new knowledge, risk taker, and resilient*. She went on to write,

I am creative because I desing my choreographies, I am a risk taker because I like to try new things, I am person who likes to search for new knowledge, I easily make friends I am resistent because I don't give up so easy. [sic] (Brainstorm map)

Later on, she restated “risk taker” and “willingness to learn” as adjectives that identified her. She wrote that, I am loyal with my family and friends, I like to take risks in my life. I am a very passionate person when I find something that I love to do, like my profession or hobbies. Communication is definitely a part of my life, because I like to present my ideas. [sic] (Brainstorm map)

In describing her top skills, I noticed that she mostly used masculinities to define herself. Words like knowledge, risk taker, and resistance have been associated with a traditional view of hegemonic masculinity. In terms of what identifies her, Juana positioned herself as having both femininities and masculinities. For example, she mentioned that she was loyal to her family and friends. Nonetheless, she continued to be a risk taker and knowledge seeker. Juana’s descriptions of herself embodied a mixture of femininities and masculinities, in which she has the ability to choose and challenge positions based on the context.

In order to follow up on Juana’s use of the word “risk taking,” I looked at her cover letter, résumé, and interview transcript. What I found was that Juana failed to explicitly mention the word again. For me, this was particularly interesting because she had mentioned

it twice in her brainstorm map. Though the position she was applying for (laboratory curator) would have required risk taking, she decided to focus on her “relevant academics, campus involvement, and volunteer work” (Juana, Cover letter). In describing her transferable skills, she wrote,

I am excited for the chance to contribute to your organization and I am prepared to engage in the continuous learning. I enjoy sharing my passion for Biology. And I would be thrilled to lead educational mountain walks, manage the snakes program, and coordinate visits of the museum. [sic] (Cover letter rough draft)

As her cover letter showed, Juana positioned herself as a person who can contribute to the institution where she is applying. Throughout her letter, she made it clear that she had the educational and managerial requirements to fulfill the position as a laboratory curator. In the excerpt above, she also positioned herself as someone who does not know all the answers but is willing to learn. This statement was one of the top skills that appeared in her brainstorm map as “willingness to search for new knowledge.” In addition, she decided to highlight her ability to “lead” and “coordinate,” which are terms associated with leadership. All in all, Juana has positioned herself once again as having hegemonic masculinities, though she manages a nonassertive tone and uses modifiers such as “I would be.” However, the term “risk taker” did not appear in her cover letter.

Juana’s résumé also failed to mention the word “risk taker.” She mentioned four skills, which were: laboratory, interpersonal, leadership, and communication. For the first three skills, she wrote:

**Laboratory skills:** identification of herpetological keys, handle [sic] of snakes, data collection and interpretation.

**Interpersonal skills:** ability to collaborate and suggest solutions, team player with the capability to work in fast-paced environment.

**Leadership skills:** strong analytical, problem-solving and decision-making capabilities. [sic] (Résumé)

Though the term “risk taker” was not explicitly mentioned, I noticed that decision making, problem solving, and suggesting solutions were. These terms were brought up during the focus group discussion as words associated with risk taking. For the job interview, I asked Juana what her strengths were, and she mentioned the following,

My strengths. I'm a good team worker. I like to have a good ambient in my group now. Like good relationships with my coworkers, my teachers, you know, things like that. And we also have, I like to learn languages. So, I think it's, apart from Biology, a strength. [sic] (Job interview)

Even though Juana was applying for the same position as a laboratory curator, she failed to mention any of her initial top skills. She did not use the words that appeared in her brainstorm map, which were *dynamic*, *creative*, *willingness to search for new knowledge*, *risk taker*, and *resilient*. Instead, she took on a different position of “team worker.” She discussed her relationship with her coworkers and teachers, as well as her ability to create a good working environment. However, her discourse more closely resembled the femininities seen in the previous category.

I decided to look at the trajectory of another participant, Max Power, a male transportation engineering undergraduate, who had mentioned “risk taker” in his brainstorm map. Under his top skills, he wrote: *leadership*, *communication*, *computer*, *risk taker*, *creative*, *quick learner*, *respectful*, and *dynamic*. He mentioned the following,

**Leadership:** always ready to guide and help

**Creative:** it's easy for me to think and share ideas

**Risk Taker:** I think the first failure is not trying

**Communicative:** it's easy for me to share ideas

**Quick Learner:** I tend to understand career thematics quite easy and fast [sic] (Brainstorm map)

Max Power positioned himself as a risk taker, a term which he defined as involving decision making that could lead to a great success. His statement strongly affirmed

that failure comes from not trying, so taking a risk is already a success. His definitions of leadership, creativity, communication, and quick learning also reflected strong personal statements associated with masculinities, such as guiding others and understanding things easily.

Later on, I compared Max Power's initial brainstorm map with his cover letter, résumé, and interview. Like Juana, Max Power did not explicitly mention the term “risk taker” in any of his later work. However, he was more consistent with positioning himself as taking initiatives, making decisions, and solving problems that always led to positive outcomes. Max Power wrote the following about himself in his cover letter,

I am highly qualified, full of initiatives and new ideas...I have the creativity and management skills in order to give the company a new perspective. I can lead my workmates to new paths and ideas. [sic] (Cover letter)

Though the term “risk taker” was not mentioned, he used the action word “initiative.” In this case, taking an initiative could also mean making an individual decision without knowing the outcome. He used the term “new,” which related to the definition of risk taking provided by Juana as “trying new things.” Max Power also tied in other concepts of leadership, such as “lead” and “management skills,” to his creativity. In his résumé, Max Power utilized action verbs to describe his experience in road and transportation engineering. Once again, he failed to mention the word “risk taker,” but his actions consistently demonstrated a connection to decision making and leadership associated with taking risks. Max Power stated in his résumé that he has done the following things:

- Designed a public transportation route of 26.7 km to cover the whole urban area.
- Obtained the information about the demand of transport for 300 people with disabilities, 100 users of the service, and 50 drivers.
- Analyzed the data in order to calculate the demand for a total population of 45,000 users of public transportation in the city.

- Modelled an intersection with high volume (over 3,000 vehicles/hour) to find the optimal timings for traffic lights.
- Proposed an alternative for unsignalized intersections, avoiding the use of traffic lights, and reducing energy consumption. [*sic*]

The action verbs *designed*, *obtained*, *analyzed*, *modelled*, and *proposed* are closely connected to Max Power's association to creativity, leadership, and risk taking. In using this terminology, Max Power positioned himself as someone who looks for a solution on his own. Individual decisions to take action have led to favorable outcomes that ended up benefiting the entire city. In his job interview, Max Power also stated examples that showed how he made a decision that resulted in a positive outcome. In a previous excerpt, Max Power mentioned how he designed a banner that is used by the city today. He stated a problem: The company did not have the money to hire a graphic designer. Later, he introduced the initiative: He volunteered to design the publicity. Finally, he described the result: His publicity was praised, and is currently being used around town. From the example, we see a clear connection between problem solving and taking the initiative. Moreover, his decision to volunteer himself to design the ad led to a great success for everyone involved.

Though the participants positioned themselves as being risk takers, they do not necessarily mention the term when applying for employment. Rather, the participants tend to explain risk taking through the actions they take. Depending on how examples are presented, employers could perceive candidates as being risk takers or not.

In the case of Juana, the description of herself varied from being a leader to supporting others. She stated that she was qualified in handling specimens, leading walks, and coordinating visits to the museum. She also mentioned that she had problem solving and leadership skills in her résumé. Meanwhile, she focused her strengths on her ability to cooperate with others in her job interview. Max Power also positioned himself as a risk taker. Like

Juana, he failed to mention the term again in his cover letter, résumé, or job interview. Nonetheless, he focused on positioning himself not only as a leader, but as someone who takes initiative. This was apparent throughout his work. He used the words *proposed*, *new ideas*, and *full of initiative* to show his risk-taking skills. Additionally, he took on an approach to mention a problem, initiative, and positive outcome that helped many people.

## Conclusions

To answer the research question, the female undergraduate language learners positioned themselves with an array of femininities and masculinities in relation to leadership and risk-taking. However, social gender roles and their relation to the division of labor marked the students' work when they talked about themselves for employment and scholarship opportunities. Initially, the modern language and foreign language students highlighted their supportive roles, while the students in STEM areas talked about their leadership and problem-solving skills. However, despite studying different careers, the female participants tended to refer to their supportive roles in research groups and teams, even when they had mentioned masculinities in their initial work. Because of this, female leadership and risk-taking skills were invisible, especially when the female participants used the collective "we" to credit their groups for the work they had done.

The way we position ourselves in terms of gender for employment and scholarship opportunities has wide implications on how employers see us. As the participants get ready for graduation, it is clear that how they position themselves will either open or close opportunities for them as future leaders. Even when we are leaders and risk takers in our daily lives, failing to mention these terms could lead to the invisibility of women as leaders and risk takers. Additionally, we continue to see that social gender roles, oftentimes based on a history of women as caretakers and men as breadwinners, supersede more progressive positions of female leaders and supportive males. From this study, I also found that undergraduate

students modified their speech to accommodate the employers' expectations, which could lead to the perpetuation of social gender roles within their careers.

Several things can be done to tackle the gender gap in female leadership within Colombia and worldwide. The first would be to question the employment system itself. Job interviews already have a predetermined hegemonic relationship established, where the employer is in a position of power while the candidate must please the employer. By having more relaxed and communal problem-solving groups, employers can select candidates based on their actions rather than what they have written in a cover letter or résumé. Additionally, employers can pick communal leaders that are willing to help others, as this will also lead to the team's success.

A second thing we can do is decolonize social gender roles in the classroom. As teachers, we can ask female students to lead groups or male students to express their feelings through creative writing. We can adapt English language material, which oftentimes shows gender and culture in a superficial way. For example, we can provide our students with supplementary material on female scientists and male teachers to promote other perspectives left out of language learning books. More importantly, we can open up spaces for students to talk and express themselves. These spaces of reflection go hand in hand with critical literacy and critical thinking skills. In a recent activity, I exposed my students to media ads, which often overexploit social gender roles. The undergraduate students had the opportunity to talk about chauvinism and feminism in their context. One student remarked,

I think that this class is strange for English, but it is important because its a space that we don't have in any other class. This spaces are important for trying to change the minds people who thinks that these topics are not important, and that is what I think this class do, try to open our minds. [sic] (Ark, Focus group)

As language teachers, we sometimes get caught up in teaching the language structures, and we forget

that language is also part of culture and society. Yet, I have come to find that the English class will be the only contact with the humanities that most STEM majors will have during their college years. Therefore, we have the opportunity to bring the social and cultural aspects of language back into the language classroom.

Finally, defeating gender inequality would be incomplete without our educational communities. As we start to open up spaces of dialogue in our classrooms, we begin to see how students also start to question the images, stereotypes, and roles they have deemed as norms and realities. As teachers, we can encourage our students to use the language as a means of expressing their unique characteristics as strengths rather than weaknesses. By appreciating diversity in our educational community, we may see a new wave of leaders willing to challenge the current employment system.

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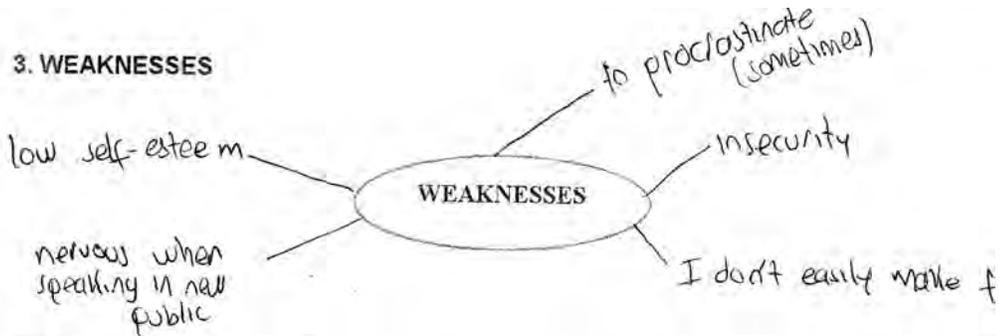
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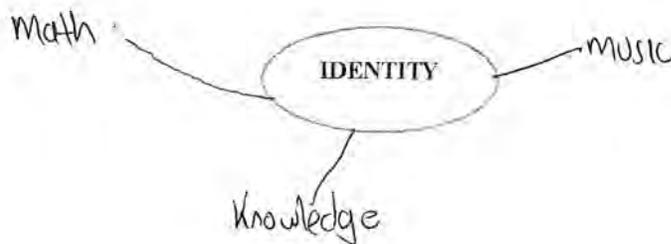
### Appendix: Sample of a Participant's Brainstorm Cover Letter



What are your weaknesses?

I'm a little insecure because sometimes I don't have faith in what I do. I have low self-esteem because sometimes I do a lot of critics about me.

#### 4. IDENTITY



What identifies you?

When I was a child, I admired the scientists. So I always want to learn, to think, to teach all that knowledge that I can.

Music is a personal passion.