

On banter, bonding and Donald Trump

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In [my last post](#) I argued that gossip—personal, judgmental talk about absent others—is not the peculiarly female vice our culture would have us believe. Both sexes gossip. But one common form of male gossip, namely sexualised talk about women, is made to look like something different, and more benign, by giving it another name: ‘banter’.

A week after I published that post, along came [That Video](#) of Donald Trump doing the very thing I was talking about—and trying to excuse it, predictably, by calling it ‘locker room banter’.

There are many things I don’t want to say on this subject, because they’ve already been said, [sometimes very eloquently](#), in countless tweets and blog posts and [columns](#). I don’t need to repeat that Trump is a misogynist (which we already knew before we heard the tape). I don’t need to upbraid the news media for their mealy-mouthed language (the *Washington Post* described the recording as containing ‘an extremely lewd conversation’, while the *Guardian* has referred to it as a ‘sex-boast tape’—as if the issue were the unseemliness of bragging or the vulgarity of using words like ‘tits’). But what I do have something to say about is banter itself: what it does and why it matters.

A lot of the commentary I’ve read about the tape does not, to my mind, get to the heart of what’s going on in it. So, that’s where I want to begin. Here’s a (quick and very basic) transcription of the start of the recorded conversation: Trump, the *Hollywood Access* host Billy Bush and a third, unidentified man are talking on a bus which is taking them to the set of a soap opera where Trump is making a guest appearance.

THIRD MAN: she used to be great. she’s still very beautiful

TRUMP: you know I moved on her actually you know she was down in Palm Beach and I moved on her and I failed I’ll admit it

THIRD MAN: woah

TRUMP: I did try to fuck her she was married

THIRD MAN: [laughing] that’s huge news there

TRUMP: and I moved on her very heavily in fact I took her out furniture shopping she wanted to get some furniture and I said I’ll show you where they have some nice furniture. I took her out furniture— I moved on her like a bitch [laughter from other men] but I couldn’t get there and she was married. then all of a sudden I see her and she’s now got the big phony tits and everything she’s totally changed her look

In this sequence Trump is not boasting about having sex: he’s telling a personal anecdote about an occasion when he didn’t manage to have sex (‘I failed I’ll admit it’). He then returns to what seems to be the original topic, how to assess the woman’s physical attractiveness. The first speaker’s turn suggests that this has diminished over time (‘she used to be great’), but whereas he thinks ‘she’s still very beautiful’, Trump’s reference to her ‘big phony tits’ implies that he no longer finds her as desirable.

What’s going on here is gossip. Like the young men’s gossip I discussed in my earlier post, this is judgmental talk about an absent other which serves to reinforce group norms (in this case, for male heterosexual behaviour and for female attractiveness). It’s also male bonding talk: by sharing intimate information about himself—and especially by

admitting to a failed attempt at seduction—Trump positions the other men as trusted confidants.

It's not clear whether the discussion of the woman's appearance has reached its natural end, but at this point, as the bus nears its destination, Billy Bush intervenes to point out the soap actress Trump is scheduled to meet, and she becomes the next topic.

BUSH: sheesh your girl's hot as shit. In the purple

THIRD MAN & BUSH: woah! yes! woah!

BUSH: yes the Donald has scored. Woah my man!

TRUMP: look at you. You are a pussy.

[Indecipherable simultaneous talk as they get ready to exit the bus]

TRUMP: I better use some tic-tacs in case I start kissing her. You know I'm automatically attracted to beautiful—I just start kissing them. It's like a magnet just kiss I don't even wait [laughter from other men] and when you're a star they let you do it. You can do anything

BUSH: whatever you want

TRUMP: grab them by the pussy [laughter] do anything.

Trump's contribution to this extract looks more like the 'sex boast' of the news headlines. But we shouldn't overlook the fact that this too is an enactment of male bonding. Trump, the alpha male of the group, takes centre stage, but the other men support him throughout with affiliative responses—saying 'woah' and 'yes', echoing his sentiments ('Trump: you can do anything' / 'Bush: whatever you want'), and above all, greeting his most overtly offensive remarks with laughter. They laugh when he says he doesn't wait for permission to kiss a woman; they laugh again when he mentions 'grab[bing] [women] by the pussy'. (You can listen for yourself, but my assessment of this laughter is that it's appreciative rather than embarrassed, awkward or forced.)

The transgressiveness of sexual banter—its tendency to report markedly offensive acts or desires in deliberately offensive (or in the media's terms, 'lewd') language, is not just accidental, a case of men allowing the mask to slip when they think they're alone. It's deliberate, and it's part of the bonding process. Like the sharing of secrets, the sharing of transgressive desires, acts and words is a token of intimacy and trust. It says, 'I am showing that I trust you by saying things, and using words, that I wouldn't want the whole world to hear'. It's also an invitation to the hearer to reciprocate by offering some kind of affiliative response, whether a token of approval like appreciative laughter, or a matching transgressive comment. ('I trust you, now show that you trust me'.)

When a private transgressive conversation becomes public, and the speaker who said something misogynist (or racist or homophobic) is publicly named and shamed, he often protests, as Trump did, that it was 'just banter', that he is not 'really' a bigot, and that his comments have been 'taken out of context'. And the rest of us marvel at the barefaced cheek of these claims. How, we wonder, can this person disavow his obvious prejudice by insisting that what he said wasn't, 'in context', what he meant?

What I've just said about the role of transgressive speech in male bonding suggests an answer (though as I'll explain in a minute, that's not the same as an excuse). Public exposure does literally take this kind of conversation out of its original context (the metaphorical 'locker room', a private, all-male space). And when the talk is removed from that context, critics will focus on its referential content rather than its interpersonal function. They won't appreciate (or care) that what's primarily motivating the boasting, the misogyny, the offensive language and the

laughter isn't so much the speakers' hatred of women as their investment in their fraternal relationship with each other. They're like fishermen telling tall tales about their catches, or old soldiers exaggerating their exploits on the battlefield: their goal is to impress their male peers, and the women they insult are just a means to that end.

As I said before, though, that's not meant to be an excuse: I'm not suggesting that banter isn't 'really' sexist or damaging to women. On the contrary, I'm trying to suggest that it's *more* damaging than most critical discussions acknowledge. Banter is not just what commentators on the Trump tape have mostly treated it as—a window into the mind of an individual sexist or misogynist. It's a ritualised social practice which contributes to the maintenance of structural sexual inequality. This effect does not depend on what the individuals involved 'really think' about women. (I have examples of both sexist and homophobic banter where I'm certain that what some speakers say is not what they really think, because they're gay and everyone involved knows that.) It's more a case of 'all that's needed for evil to flourish is for good men to go along with it for the lolz'.

You might think that in Trump's case a lot of men have chosen to do the decent thing. Since the tape became public, male politicians have been lining up to condemn it. A formula quickly emerged: after Jeb Bush tweeted that, as a grandfather to girls, he could not condone such degrading talk about women, there followed a steady stream of similar comments from other men proclaiming their respect for their daughters, sisters, wives and mothers.

But to me this rings hollow. Some of it is obvious political score-settling, and far too much of it is tainted by what some theorists call 'benevolent sexism' (no, Paul Ryan, women should not be 'revered', they should be respected as equal and autonomous human beings; and no, they aren't just deserving of respect because they're ['your' women](#)). But in addition, I'd bet good money that all the men uttering these pious sentiments have at some point participated in similar conversations themselves. When Trump protested that Bill Clinton had said worse things to him on the golf course, I found that entirely plausible (though also irrelevant: Trump can't seem to grasp that Bill's behaviour reflects on Bill rather than Hillary). Whatever their actual attitudes to women, as members of the US political elite these men have had to be assiduous in forging fraternal bonds with other powerful men. And wherever there are fraternal bonds there will also be banter.

Feminists generally refer to the social system in which men dominate women as 'patriarchy', the rule of the fathers, but some theorists have suggested that in its modern (post-feudal) forms it might more aptly be called 'fratriarchy', the rule of the brothers, or [in Carole Pateman's term, 'fraternal patriarchy'](#). Banter is fraternal patriarchy's verbal glue. It strengthens the bonds of solidarity among male peers by excluding, Othering and dehumanising women; and in doing those things it also facilitates sexual violence.

Male peer networks based on fraternal solidarity are a common and effective mechanism for informally excluding women, or consigning them to second-class 'interloper' status, in professions and institutions which no longer bar them formally. Whether it's city bankers socialising with clients in strip clubs, or construction workers adorning the site office with pictures of topless models, men use expressions of heterosexual masculinity—verbal as well as non-verbal, the two generally go together—to claim common ground with one another, while differentiating themselves from women. Sometimes they engage in sexual talk to embarrass and humiliate women who are present; sometimes they spread damaging rumours behind women's backs. These tactics prevent women from participating on equal terms.

I said earlier that when Trump and his companions on the bus talked about women, the women were not the real point: they were like the fish in a fishing story or the faceless enemy in a war story. But that wasn't meant to be a consoling thought ('don't worry, women, it's nothing personal, they're just bonding with each other by talking trash about you'). When you talk about people it *should* be personal—it should involve the recognition of the other as a human being with human feelings like your own. Heterosexual banter is one of the practices that teach men to withhold that recognition from women, treating them as objects rather than persons.

When you objectify and dehumanise a class of people, it becomes easier to mistreat them without guilt. And when you are part of a tight-knit peer group, it becomes more difficult to resist the collective will. According to the

anthropologist Peggy Reeves Sanday, rape culture arises where both these conditions are fulfilled—where men have strong fraternal loyalties to each other, and at the same time dehumanise women. In her [classic study of fraternity gang-rape](#), Sanday argues that what motivates fraternity brothers or college athletes to commit rape in groups is the desire of the men involved both to prove their manhood and to feel close to one another. These are typically men whose conception of masculinity will not permit them to express their feelings for other men in any way that might raise the spectre of homosexuality, which they equate with effeminacy and unmanliness. Instead they bond through violence against someone who represents the despised feminine Other.

Heterosexual banter is a regular feature of life in many fraternities, and Sanday identifies it (along with homophobia, heavy use of pornography and alcohol) as a factor producing ‘rape-prone’ [campus cultures](#). One man who was interviewed for her study recalled the way it worked in his fraternity, and how it made him feel:

By including me in this perpetual, hysterical banter and sharing laughter with me, they [the fraternity brothers] showed their affection for me. I felt happy, confident, and loved. This really helped my feelings of loneliness and my fear of being sexually unappealing. We managed to give ourselves a satisfying substitute for sexual relations. We acted out all of the sexual tensions between us as brothers on a verbal level. Women, women everywhere, feminists, homosexuality, etc., all provided the material for the jokes.

Of course there’s a difference between ‘acting out on a verbal level’ and committing gang rape. It’s not inevitable that one will lead to the other. But Sanday suggests that one can help to make the other more acceptable, or less unthinkable. What the man quoted above says about the social and psychological rewards of fraternal bonding also helps to explain why men may be prevailed on to join in with a group assault, even if they wouldn’t have initiated it alone; and why they don’t intervene to stop it.

Whenever I talk or write about male sexual banter, I always hear from some men who tell me they’re deeply uncomfortable with it. I believe them. But my response is, ‘it’s not me you need to tell’. They risk nothing by expressing their discomfort to me. What would be risky, and potentially costly, would be for them to put their principles above their fraternal loyalties, stop engaging in banter and challenge their peers to do the same.

Similarly, it’s pretty easy—assuming your politics lean left of fascism—to criticise the behaviour of Donald Trump. But as necessary as that may be in current circumstances, on its own it is not sufficient. We need to acknowledge that the kind of banter Trump has been condemned for is more than just an individual vice: it is a social practice supporting a form of fraternity that stands in the way of women’s liberty and equality.

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