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Lauren Chapman
University of Arkansas

Joan B. Hirt
Virginia Polytechnic Institute

Nicklaus R. Spruill
Virginia Polytechnic Institute

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THE EFFECTS OF SORORITY RECRUITMENT ON SELF-ESTEEM

Lauren Chapman, Joan B. Hirt, Ph.D., & Nicklaus R. Spruill

Mental health issues among college students are of increasing concern to administrators (Kitzrow, 2003). Self-esteem is a concept central to mental health (Kittleson, 1989) and can be linked to the social situations found in college settings, especially those that deal with rejection (Caunt, 2003; Eisenberger & Lieberman, 2004; Steffenhagen & Burns, 1987). Sorority recruitment is a process that can include rejection (National Panhellenic Conference, n.d.) and, thus, may negatively affect self-esteem. The purpose of this study was to determine how the sorority recruitment experience affects the self-esteem of participants. First, we explored whether self-esteem differed between two groups of potential members (PMs): those who completed recruitment (persistent PMs) and those who withdrew from the recruitment process (withdrawn PMs). Second, we examined how self-esteem differed at the start and the end of recruitment within these groups of PMs. Results revealed significant differences between groups and suggested a relationship between recruitment and self-esteem.

For a variety of reasons, including students' pre-college background and experiences as well as situations that affect them on the college campus, mental health issues have come to the forefront of issues impacting college students' experiences and success. Poor mental health can affect academic achievement, student retention, and graduation rates. As more students seek counseling, mental health issues are fast becoming a new focus of higher education administrators (Kitzrow, 2003). Students have many experiences and characteristics that result in poor mental health, prompting them to seek counseling. The first year of college, in particular, is a sensitive time for college students. First-year students are likely to experience a decline in mental health (Sax, Bryant, & Gilmartin, 2002). The mental anguish often experienced in the first year of college can also lead to poor coping skills in stressful situations (Arthur, 1998). Indeed, reported ratings of mental health among first-year students steadily declined from 1985 to 1995 (Sax, 1997).

Self-esteem is an integral part of overall mental health, and addressing self-esteem issues is a method to ensure mental wellness in students (Kittleson, 1989). In addition, elements that affect mental health can also affect self-esteem (Harter, 1993). For example, low self-esteem is specifically related to higher rates of attrition (Pritchard & Wilson, 2003) and binge drinking (Fortney, Geller, & Glindemann, 1999). Negative life events and stressful situations are associated with lower self-esteem among college students (Hudd et al., 2000; Pettit & Joiner, 2001). College-age women are particularly sensitive to experiences that can affect self-esteem, either positively or negatively. For instance, women who participate in gender-related activities, such as women's studies courses, report higher levels of self-esteem than females who do not participate in such activities (Macalister, 1999).

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As a dynamic construct, self-esteem "does not develop in a vacuum, but is created out of… the social milieu" (Steffenhagen & Burns, 1987, p. 23). As students mature from childhood through adolescence, the influence of peers on self-esteem becomes more important (Caunt, 2003). Consequently, perceptions of approval from others and/or social rejection can influence the self-esteem of college students.

Sorority recruitment, the method by which new members become affiliated with sororities, is an experience that may affect self-esteem in the aforementioned ways. Recruitment is a mutual selection process. That is, both chapters and potential members have a say in the process (National Panhellenic Conference, n.d.). As a result, sorority recruitment involves rejection of some potential members and rejection by a peer group. As Eisenberger and Lieberman (2004) noted, failure to be accepted by a peer group can lead to diminished self-esteem in young adults. Additionally, structured sorority recruitment is often characterized by long days and stressful situations. For the potential members involved in recruitment, the combination of stress and fear of not being accepted could have negative impacts on self-esteem. Research is needed to determine the role that sorority recruitment may have with respect to self-esteem. This study attempted to address this issue by measuring the self-esteem of potential members before and after recruitment.

The purpose of this study was to determine the relationship between sorority recruitment and the self-esteem of participants in two ways. First, we examined levels of self-esteem before and after recruitment for two groups of Potential Members (PMs): those who completed recruitment (persistent PMs) and those who withdrew from the recruitment process (withdrawn PMs). Second, we investigated how self-esteem differed at the start and the end of recruitment for these two groups of PMs. We posed two primary research questions:

1. Does self-esteem change among persistent and withdrawn PMs between the start and the conclusion of recruitment?
2. Does self-esteem differ between persistent and withdrawn PMs at the start or at the conclusion of recruitment?

Literature on Self-Esteem and Recruitment

The literature relevant to our study can be categorized into two groups. The first group includes studies on undergraduate fraternity and sorority members. The second group focuses on research associated with the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, the instrument employed in our study.

Research on Undergraduate Fraternity and Sorority Members
Fraternity and sorority membership may have discrepant social consequences for college students. On the upside, fraternity/sorority organizations positively affect campus involvement and cognitive development. Conversely, these organizations negatively affect academic performance and behavior (Pike, 2000). There is a higher level of critical thinking among students who participate in campus activities like fraternities and sororities (Gellin, 2003). Gellin also found that the increase in critical thinking is believed to be the result of students' ability to select how they will spend their time, which in turn produces a higher level of commitment to the activity. This cognitive effect of fraternal involvement, however, differs based on ethnicity

(Pascarella, Flowers, & Whitt, 2001; Sidanius, 2004). Caucasian men who are first year members of fraternities report lower cognitive levels than those of other racial groups, although these differences do not persist into the second and third years of membership in a fraternal organization (Pascarella, Flowers, & Whitt, 2001).

There are social issues associated with fraternity and sorority life as well. Racial insensitivity, hazing, and alcohol abuse have cast a negative shadow over fraternal organizations. Exhibitions of racial insensitivity in fraternity and sorority theme parties have caused unrest within campus communities and resulted in the suspension of members as well as chapters (Bartlett, 2001). Affiliated students report consuming greater quantities of alcohol and binge drinking more often than non-affiliated students. However, both affiliated and non-affiliated students exhibit similar negative behaviors associated with binge drinking. Researchers have also found that fraternity and sorority members are more likely to use a fake identification card to purchase alcohol than non-affiliated students (Durkin, Wolf, & Phillips, 1996; Pace & McGrath, 2002). Sorority members report drinking less than fraternity members, although both report higher usage of alcohol than non-affiliated students. The higher usage of alcohol may be due to the fact that members of fraternities and sororities report that alcohol augments social life, attractiveness, and bonding (Alva, 1998).

Fraternity/sorority membership can also affect the academic achievement of college students. Fraternity and sorority members are as involved as non-affiliated students within the academic community, but affiliated seniors report higher academic achievement than their non-affiliated counterparts. First-year women in sororities report higher levels of personal growth but lower gains regarding active learning than first-year men in fraternities (Pike, 2003). However, first-year fraternity/sorority members may find it difficult to successfully fulfill both their academic and social responsibilities because of time constraints (Hayek, Carini, Oday, & Kuh, 2002).

Interestingly, much of the research on this population includes both fraternity and sorority members. Studies on women in sororities are scarce, and explorations of women and the sorority recruitment process are even more rare, suggesting that our study would expand the knowledge base. In particular, we were interested in the relationship between self-esteem and sorority recruitment, so we examined studies that employed the instrument we used to collect data, the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES).

Research Using the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale

The RSES has been used in hundreds of prior studies on self-esteem and is touted as a reliable and valid measure of this relatively elusive construct. To better understand previous use of the RSES, we examined the samples that have completed the instrument over time. Research that employs the RSES often includes samples of children. Studies that involve children fall under a variety of topics typically involving family issues. These include parental relationships, parenting styles, and family relationships, all in regard to children's self-esteem (Axinn, Barber, & Thornton, 1999; Felson & Zielinksi, 1989).

Research involving adults and the RSES is more varied. One broad topic for which the RSES has been used with adult samples is the work experience, including issues such as social class, unemployment, and the receipt of federal aid (Elliot, 1996; Gecas & Seff, 1989; Shamir, 1986;

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Thomas & Perry-Jenkins, 1994). Other studies explore relationships between family issues and self-esteem, such as domestic violence and parental roles (Goldstein & Rosenbaum, 1985; Reitzes & Mutran, 1994). Traits such as immigrant status, sex, and ethnic identity and their impact on adult self-esteem have also been examined (Hoelter, 1983; Schnittker, 2002).

Finally, studies have been conducted in which the RSES has been administered to samples of adolescents and college-aged students. Some of these explore topics dealing with certain behaviors and their relationships to self-esteem, such as spiritual activity, Internet use, and drinking (Knox, Langehough, Walters, & Rowley, 1998; Luhtanen & Crocker, 2005; Niemz, Griffiths, & Banyard, 2005). Other studies explore relationships between self-esteem and characteristics like learning disabilities, attrition, stress, and body image (Lowery et al., 2005; Pritchard & Wilson, 2003; Shaw-Zirt et al., 2005; Wilburn & Smith, 2005).

In general, there is literature about self-esteem among college students (Hudd et al., 2000; Kitzrow, 2003; Pettit & Joiner, 2001; Sax, Bryant, & Gilmartin, 2002; Sax, 1997), and there is a body of work on fraternity and sorority recruitment (Alva, 1998; Durkin et al., 1996; Pace & McGrath, 2002). Missing from the literature is research that explores the intersection between fraternity and sorority recruitment and self-esteem. Atlas and Morier (1994) explored recruitment and depression, but depression is a different construct than self-esteem. Likewise, Keller and Hart (1982) explored fraternity and sorority recruitment and self-image, a concept associated with self-esteem, but their study is now 25 years old. Additionally, while studies using the RSES have included samples of college-aged populations (Knox et al., 1998; Lowery et al., 2005; Luhtanen & Crocker, 2005; Niemz, Griffiths, & Banyard, 2005; Pritchard & Wilson, 2003; Shaw-Zirt et al., 2005; Wilburn & Smith, 2005), no study has been found that utilizes the RSES with students participating in fraternity and sorority recruitment. Our study was designed to address these gaps in the literature.

The Recruitment Process at the Study Institution

Formal recruitment for the National Panhellenic Council (NPC) chapters at the institution where the study was conducted takes place annually over the course of six days prior to the start of classes for the spring semester (referred to as deferred recruitment). During the first two days, all PMs visit each of the 13 recognized NPC chapters. Each visit, or "event," occurs at a designated time and has a strictly enforced time limit. PMs receive an individualized schedule of which chapters they will visit during specific time slots. Subsequent rounds of recruitment take place over the next four nights. At the end of each recruitment round, chapters participate in a process to determine which PMs will be invited to the next round. At the same time, PMs prioritize the chapters they would most like to visit the next day. Once the chapters and PMs have made those decisions, a computer program uses that information to determine the PMs' event schedules for the next round.

The last night of recruitment is Preference Night. This event is designed for PMs to make a decision about which chapter they most want to join and for chapters to prioritize those PMs to whom they are interested in offering invitations to membership or "bids." If the PM signs the membership acceptance agreement at the conclusion of Preference Night, it serves as an agreement that she will accept the invitation to join the chapter that offers her membership. The

final day in the process is known as Bid Day. The PM learns which sorority has offered her a bid and has the opportunity to accept or to decline this bid. Each PM may receive only one bid at this time. If she declines the bid, she is not allowed to go through formal or informal recruitment for one calendar year.

Methodology

The study institution, a large, land-grant institution in a mid-Atlantic state, enrolls approximately 18,000 undergraduate students. There are 13 NPC sorority chapters and approximately 2,000 sorority members on campus. The formal recruitment process in January 2007 was normal in terms of the number of women who participated in some or all activities. Seven hundred thirty-two students registered to participate, and of those students, 607 attended one of the orientation sessions, a requirement for participants. Of the students at orientation, 591 students agreed to participate in the study.

Data were collected by administering the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) (Rosenberg, 1979) at two distinct times during the recruitment process: once before recruitment began, and again when the PM either withdrew from recruitment or completed the recruitment process. PMs were separated into two groups: those who completed the recruitment process (persistent PMs), and those who withdrew from the process on or before Bid Day, because they decided not to join or were not invited to join a sorority (withdrawn PMs). The final sample included 336 PMs who withdrew from formal recruitment. These 336 respondents represent a response rate of 55.35% of the 607 who attended orientation sessions.

Procedure

All women who wanted to participate in recruitment were required to register and to attend one of several orientation meetings held prior to the start of recruitment activities. Staff members of the Office of Fraternity and Sorority Life (OFSL) ensured that all attendees were registered to participate in recruitment. All PMs were invited to participate in the study at these meetings and, if they agreed, completed the RSES for the first time at the conclusion of that meeting.

For the second round of the RSES distribution, PMs were asked to complete the instrument at one of two times. A PM who formally withdrew from recruitment prior to the end of the six-day period was asked to complete the second round of the RSES when she notified staff of her decision to withdraw from the process. A PM who did not officially withdraw, or simply stopped attending events, was contacted via email and asked to complete the instrument electronically (within 24 hours). PMs who completed recruitment completed the RSES for a second time when submitting their membership acceptance agreements at the conclusion of Preference Night.

All PMs were assigned identification numbers for purposes of the recruitment process. Women who agreed to participate in the study listed their identification number on the RSES both times they completed it. PMs also listed their identification number on their paperwork to withdraw from recruitment or on their membership acceptance agreement. Hence, we were able to match identification numbers to determine which PMs withdrew and which PMs completed the recruitment process.

Instrumentation

The RSES consists of 10 items and is designed to measure self-esteem by asking respondents how they feel about themselves. For instance, one item asks respondents if they feel equally as worthwhile as others. Another item asks respondents if they feel worthless or useless. Participants respond to items using a Likert-type scale where 1 equals "Strongly Agree" and 4 equals "Strongly Disagree." The responses are assigned a value of 0, 1, 2, or 3, and are scored in one of two ways. For half the items, a response of 1 ("Strongly Agree") is assigned a score of 3. The remaining items are written in reverse format. These are included to ensure that respondents are reading items carefully and conscientiously deliberating their responses. For reverse-worded items, a response of 1 ("Strongly Agree") is assigned a score of 0. Total scores on the RSES, therefore, can range from 0 to 30.

The internal consistency reliability of the RSES has been scored between .77 and .88, and test-retest reliability correlations have ranged from .82 to .85 at 1- and 2-week intervals respectively (Blascovich & Tomaka, 1991). Also, the RSES has been used as a primary self-esteem instrument in various settings and projects for nearly three decades (Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, n.d.). These data suggest the RSES is both highly reliable and valid.

Data Analysis

The first research question asked whether self-esteem changed among persistent and withdrawn PMs between the start and the end of recruitment. To address this question, the mean scores on the RSES were calculated for each group (persistent PMs and withdrawn PMs) for each of the two rounds of administration of the instrument. *T*-tests were performed to determine if the mean scores from the two groups differed significantly on either round (p<.05).

Table 1
Results of T-tests

Measure	M	sd	t	F	df	p
Persistent PMs' Self-Esteem Pre- and Post-Recruitment (N=317)					316	0.00*
Pre-Recruitment SE	24.99	5.21	85.40			
Post-Recruitment SE	25.35	5.29	85.32			
Withdrawn PMs' Self-Esteem Pre- and Post-Recruitment (N=19)					18	0.00*
Pre-Recruitment SE	27.74	2.26	53.57			
Post-Recruitment SE	26.32	4.78	23.97			
Persistent & Withdrawn PMs' Self-Esteem Pre-Recruitment (N=336)				4.5	316	0.02**
Persistent PMs	24.99	5.21				
Withdrawn PMs	27.74	2.26				
Persistent & Withdrawn PMs' Self-Esteem Post-Recruitment (N=336)				0.05	334	0.44
Persistent PMs	25.35	5.29				
Withdrawn PMs	26.32	4.78				

*=significant at the .01 level
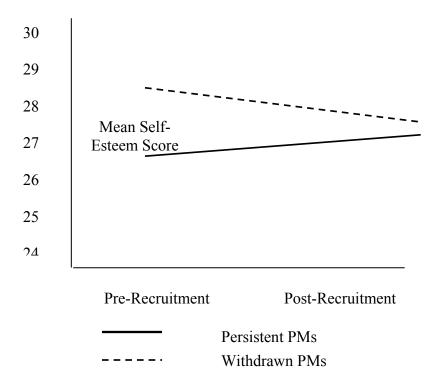***=significant at the .05 level*

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The second research question examined whether the level of self-esteem differed between persistent and withdrawn PMs at the start and at the end of recruitment. To determine any potential difference, the mean RSES scores for both groups were calculated for the pre- and post-recruitment administrations of the RSES. *T*-tests were performed to determine if the mean scores from the two groups differed significantly at either point in time (p<.05).

Results

Three of the four *t*-tests yielded significant differences. These are reported in Table 1. The first research question posed in the study examined whether there was a change in self-esteem between the beginning and the end of recruitment among the persistent and/or withdrawn PM groups. The persistent PMs experienced a significant increase in self-esteem, from a mean score of 24.99 to a mean score of 25.35. The withdrawn PM group experienced a significant drop in self-esteem, from a mean score of 27.74 to a mean score of 26.32.

The second research question examined any difference in the self-esteem levels between persistent and withdrawn PMs at the beginning and end of recruitment. One significant difference was found. The withdrawn PMs had significantly higher self-esteem (M=27.77) than the persistent PMs (M=24.99) at the start of recruitment. There was no significant difference found between withdrawn and persistent PM mean scores at the end of recruitment. The changes in pre-post scores from both groups are illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Change in Self-Esteem Among Withdrawn and Persistent PMs

Discussion and Implications

Those who withdraw from the recruitment process actually started the process with significantly higher levels of self-esteem than those who successfully completed the process. By the end of recruitment, however, persistent PMs' level of self-esteem increased significantly while the self-esteem of withdrawn PMs decreased significantly. Since recruitment occurs during a single week when classes are not in session, it is likely that recruitment is the predominant activity in PMs' lives during that time frame. Arguably, then, recruitment seems to have an effect on self-esteem. The change in self-esteem among potential members displayed during sorority recruitment has significant implications for practitioners and suggests the need for more research.

Fraternity and sorority professionals could use our findings to shape practices associated with sorority recruitment. The results suggest that those who are not successful in the recruitment process experience a significant decline in self-esteem. Anticipating this, those responsible for administering the recruitment process may want to offer a program as part of the orientation process that emphasizes other elements of university life in which all PMs can be involved after recruitment, regardless of whether they are successful in the recruitment process. Specifically, women could be encouraged to maintain their involvement with other campus activities and to sustain previous friendships. Such a program might encourage withdrawn PMs to find other opportunities for involvement and help persistent PMs to maintain a healthy balance of activities.

Given these results, professionals who work with sororities might want to enlist help from counselors on campus. Soliciting help might simply involve alerting counseling center staff as to when recruitment occurs, so counselors might be prepared to work with PMs. Alternatively, it might entail requesting that counseling staff be assigned to work with PMs throughout the recruitment process to address issues of self-esteem that might arise. Perhaps a counselor or other mental health professional could be "on call" during recruitment activities and available only for that purpose, so that a PM who experiences mental health issues related to recruitment has access to immediate assistance.

Because many potential fraternity and sorority members are first-year students who live on campus, resident assistants should know which residents are participating in recruitment and should be encouraged to monitor those who withdraw from the recruitment process. Because the withdrawn PM group experienced a significant drop in self-esteem, and lower self-esteem levels can lead to other mental health issues, resident assistants would be well served to speak with these students and to refer them to counseling or other campus services as necessary.

Finally, because the persistent group experienced an increase in self-esteem, this group may have high expectations for sorority membership. Fraternity and sorority life administrators may want to continue to monitor the persistent PMs in some way to ensure that they are not disappointed with sorority membership after recruitment, and that their expectations of sorority life are congruent with their experiences. Incongruencies between expectations and realities could lead to a subsequent drop in self-esteem that could affect new recruits' mental health. Further research should be conducted to explore this possibility.

Future Research

In this study, participants could indicate three reasons for withdrawing from the recruitment process: because they were not invited back to any chapters in which they were interested, because they decided sorority membership was not for them, or for other reasons. It is possible that the reason for withdrawing from recruitment influences self-esteem score. On a related note, PMs could withdraw from the recruitment process on any given day. We did not disaggregate the data to see if there was a relationship between either the reason for withdrawal or the day on which PMs withdrew and self-esteem. More research with larger samples is needed to investigate these potential correlations.

This study also found that persistent PMs had a lower self-esteem score than withdrawn PMs at the beginning of recruitment. The lower self-esteem score exhibited is somewhat counterintuitive. More research is needed to understand why this difference occurred and to predict relationships between self-esteem scores at the beginning of recruitment and likelihood of persisting through the recruitment process.

Additionally, this study addressed self-esteem within the context of deferred recruitment, after students had been enrolled at the university for at least one semester. Many campuses implement fall recruitment, either before or immediately after classes begin. Including new students participating in a fall recruitment process in the study may have led to very different results. Further research into the effects of recruitment timing during the academic year on PMs' self-esteem is needed.

Lastly, this study only examined women participating in recruitment activities for predominantly White sororities. More research is needed to examine fraternity recruitment and multicultural or African American intake processes, and how participating in those activities may affect self-esteem.

Limitations

While the implications of the study are important, there were some limitations associated with the collection and analysis of data that also merit mention. The first limitation is the sample. All the participants came from the same institution – a large, public, research university. It is possible that the women at this institution differed in some important manner from female undergraduates at other types of colleges or universities. If so, this might have skewed the findings in some unforeseen manner.

There was also a limitation related to the type of data we collected. PMs had a choice of listing either one or two preferences in terms of chapters they wished to join. We did not explore whether there were differences between those who opted for the Single Intentional Preference and those who listed two preferences. Omitting this information might have influenced our results.

The next limitation dealt with the environment during data collection. During the second round of data collection, the persistent PMs completed the instrument at the end of a long and

exhausting week, in large groups, inside sorority houses that were crowded. It is possible that the PMs were distracted or uncomfortable and completed the instrument quickly without fully considering their responses.

A related limitation was the amount of time that elapsed before some withdrawn PMs completed the instrument for the second time. Although some withdrawn PMs completed the instrument directly after recruitment activities, other withdrawn PMs had a window of 24 hours to complete the instrument online. This difference in time or format (paper v. electronic) could have impacted the PMs' self-esteem and how they completed the instrument, thus affecting the results. Likewise, it might be argued that the changes in self-esteem that occurred over the relatively short period of recruitment were not lasting changes and merely reflected short-term differences. Additional research measuring self-esteem one month, six months, and one year after recruitment should be conducted to explore this issue.

Conclusion

Despite these limitations, the findings of this study merit the attention of administrators and scholars alike. Sorority recruitment is a widespread process that takes place on hundreds of campuses nationwide. Administrators who manage this process should be aware of the effects that recruitment can have on levels of self-esteem and take reasonable measures to monitor the effects of recruitment among the women on their campuses. Recruitment is linked to self-esteem, which is linked to mental health. Campuses are concerned with mental health issues among their students. As such, attending to events that can positively influence self-esteem, like recruitment, would serve the best interests of both students and institutions alike.

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Lauren Chapman is a Resident Director for University Housing at the University of Arkansas, Fayetteville. She has a Master of Arts in Education from Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, a Bachelor of Arts in Spanish and International Studies from Southern Methodist University, and is an alumna member of Alpha Chi Omega fraternity for women.

Joan B. Hirt is Associate Professor in the Higher Education Administration program at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University.

Nicklaus R. Spruill is a doctoral student in the Higher Education Administration program at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University.