Living in Your Letters: Assessing Congruence Between Espoused and Enacted Values of One Fraternity/Sorority Community

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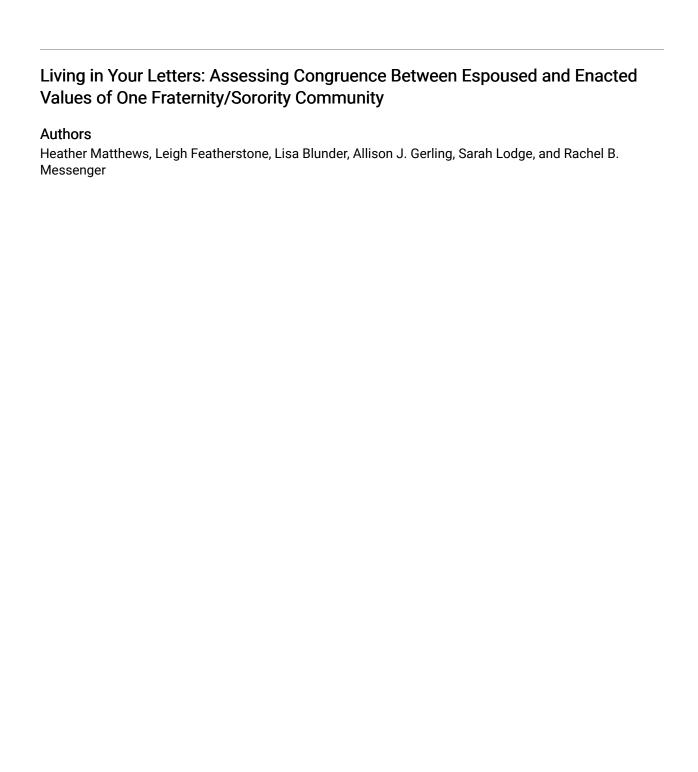
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LIVING IN YOUR LETTERS: ASSESSING CONGRUENCE BETWEEN ESPOUSED AND ENACTED VALUES OF ONE FRATERNITY/SORORITY COMMUNITY

Heather Matthews, Leigh Featherstone, Lisa Bluder, Allison J. Gerling, Sarah Loge, and Rachel B. Messenger

Fraternity and sorority members have long been charged with fulfilling the espoused values of their organizations. Although several studies have explored the gap between the actions and values of undergraduate fraternal members and their institutions, few have examined the degree to which the publicly stated values of fraternal organizations are enacted by members. Using qualitative methodology, researchers compared the creeds and mission statements of undergraduate fraternal organizations to member actions observed on the campus transit system. Results indicated that while there is some congruence between organizational and institutional values and member actions, there are also areas of disconnect for members related to their values.

In publicly accessible creeds and mission statements, the values of fraternities and sororities align with university values (Bureau, 2007; Franklin Square Group, 2003; Wall, 2006). However, some researchers have questioned the application of values within fraternities and sororities (Kuh, Pascarella, & Weschler, 1996; Pike, 2000; Whipple & Sullivan, 1998), and university administrators have noted a widening gap between the rhetoric of these organizations and the realities of members' behaviors (Franklin Square Group, 2003; Kuh, Pascarella, & Weschler, 1996). Examining the consistency between actions and espoused values provides professionals the knowledge base to create "a Greek community [that] can enhance student learning and leadership, build strong ties between the institution and its future alumni, and develop well-rounded students who value community and citizenship" (Franklin Square Group, 2003, p. 4).

This study examined the level of congruence between espoused and enacted values (Kuh & Hall, 1993) of fraternity and sorority members at a large, Midwestern, public university. The researchers sought to answer the question: to what extent are the espoused values of fraternities and sororities congruent with the enacted values of their members? To situate this study in the current research, a review of literature on fraternal affiliation as a student subculture and espoused and enacted values of fraternal organizations was conducted.

Literature Review

Student Culture
Student culture emerges from the ways in which students adapt to the college environment (Feldman & Newcomb, 1969). Each such group has distinct group norms for behavior and for responding to issues. Social fraternities and sororities are considered student subcultures for several reasons: members are in constant contact, loyalty makes them susceptible to group influence, a clear distinction arises between members and non-members, and members share values (Kuh & Whitt, 1988). Specifically, members instruct newcomers on organizational norms and behaviors by passing down values from one student generation to the next (DeBard, Lake, & Binder, 2006; Kuh & Arnold, 1993).

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Espoused Versus Enacted Values

Values are the "espoused as well as the enacted ideals of an institution or group and serve as the basis on which members of a culture or subculture judge situations, acts, objects, and people" (p. 6). Espoused values are "…assertions about such institutional aspirations as expecting students to be responsible for their own behavior or embracing diversity.… Enacted values are those that guide policy, decision making [*sic*], and other practices" (p. 7). Both espoused and enacted values inform student behavior, but espoused values may not be reflected in the actions of everyone in the group (Kuh & Whitt, 1988). To inform professional practice, it is important to assess how the espoused and enacted values of a student subculture align. The results of this study identify traditions, customs, or behaviors that conflict with espoused values of fraternities and sororities.

The enacted values of a group can be communicated through statements made by people within the group, if they are repeated often and accompanied by behavior that reinforces their authenticity (Kuh & Whitt, 1988). To examine enacted values, one may study verbal artifacts that include organization-specific words and phrases commonly used and understood by a group's members (Kuh & Hall, 1993).

Enacted and Espoused Values in Fraternities and Sororities on College Campuses

A growing body of research illustrates how fraternity and sorority membership promoted practices and traditions inconsistent with espoused institutional values (Kuh, Pascarella, & Weschler, 1996; Pike, 2000; Whipple & Sullivan, 1998), but few studies identified whether the actions of fraternity and sorority members were consistent with their organizations' values. For institutions to value these organizations, Callais (2005) noted, "fraternities and sororities must have congruence between their actions and their stated purpose and mission" (p. 33).

Inconsistencies are exhibited through socially disruptive, "self-destructive" behavior (Owen & Owen, 1995), which erodes the academic purpose of the university. Research showed how high-risk drinking could inhibit intellectual progress for members of fraternities and sororities (Alva, 1998; Carton, Hovey, & Moskey, 2004; Kuh, Pascarella, & Wechsler, 1996; Wall, 2006). Foubert, Garner, and Thaxter (2006) found fraternity men more likely to be sexually coercive and to use alcohol to lure women into sex; behaviors often reinforced by fraternity culture. Multi-institutional studies have shown fraternity and sorority members have a decreased level of cognitive development compared to students who don't participate in a new member process (Pascarella et al., 1996; Pascarella, Flowers, & Whitt, 2006).

Fraternity or sorority membership can have a negative effect on openness to diversity, as some students remain unaware of their privilege, which results in incidents of outward discrimination (Pascarella et al., 1996; Pettitt, 2008). Researchers stress that organizations must address this problem quickly through recruitment and educational efforts, because perpetuating homogeneous culture is incompatible with university values (Pascarella et al., 1996). They suggested that professionals should review activities, traditions, and expectations of fraternities and sororities to determine whether members' actions are inconsistent with institutional values. If "fraternities are indifferent to academic values," the experience could "short-change the education of many members" (Kuh, Pascarella, & Weschler, 1996, p. 68).

Although research illustrated how behavioral trends of fraternity and sorority members compared with institutional values, there is little data about how student behavior compares to espoused organizational values. This study sought to fill this gap, focusing on the question: to what extent are the espoused values of fraternities and sororities congruent with the enacted values of their members?

Method

This study followed a qualitative research design, using document analysis and observation techniques (Creswell, 2005). Data collection took place in two phases. The first phase was aimed at assessing espoused values and involved a study of fraternal creeds and mission statements. The second phase was aimed at assessing enacted values, and involved an observation of fraternity/sorority members in a public setting, specifically, the campus transit system. Based on data collection procedures, this study was not submitted for Office of Human Subjects (OHS) review. Observations were collected in a public place and recorded in such a way that participants could not be individually identified, meeting OHS guidelines for non-reviewable research at the study institution. A description of procedures follows.

Site
The present fraternity/sorority community at the host institution reflects the realities outlined in the referenced literature. The Greek Life Coordinator at the host institution stated that members value social interactions defined by "alcohol abuse, drug use, parties and events" (personal communication, September 19, 2007). However, many students have an interest in philanthropic causes, exemplified through the events they host and in which they participate. Campus involvement and leadership are important to fraternity and sorority members, as seen through their participation in other campus activities and organizations. The Greek Life Coordinator noticed recent increases in hands-on community service, as more groups partnered with civic entities for service programs, in addition to their customary philanthropic programs. The fraternal community's grade point average has been consistently above the all undergraduate average, showing academic success. For example, in fall 2007, when this study was conducted, the all-fraternity-and-sorority-average was .0412 above the all-undergraduate GPA.

Assessing Espoused Values
Data sources. Developing rules for the analysis process includes determining what to analyze and how to select content (Whitt, 1992). The researchers reviewed mission statements, purpose statements, and/or creeds of 38 fraternities and sororities at the host institution. The documents chosen define the values members pledge to incorporate into their lives when they accept membership. Creeds, mission statements, and purpose statements of the inter/national organizations are a public, concentrated source of an organization's espoused values. The 38 participating groups are housed along the bus route that was designed to transport students from fraternal housing to campus buildings. Members of these organizations represent more than 89 percent of the fraternity/sorority community at this institution. This study excludes the 16 historically African American and multicultural chapters and 10 NPC or NIC chapters without houses along the transit route.

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Data collection. The researchers collected mission statements, purpose statements, and/or creeds from Web sites of the participating fraternities and sororities. While each organization utilized its own terminology for identifying a mission, the researchers selected the document(s) that most resembled a declaration of values.

Data analysis. To determine espoused values, the researchers used document analysis, which includes four basic steps: developing rules for the analysis process, coding data, interpreting data, and drawing conclusions about the meaning of themes or patterns (Whitt, 1992). Words and phrases that represented values were coded and then classified into similar groupings. For example, wisdom, knowledge, and academic achievement fit into the same group: pursuit of knowledge. To draw conclusions, all categorical themes were assessed to determine what values were most prevalent among the organizations. The themes that arose most frequently were inferred to be the core set of espoused values of the 38 fraternities and sororities.

Assessing Enacted Values
Data sources. To determine enacted values, the primary technique used was observation, which enabled the researchers to better understand a particular place, group, or organization (Gerson & Horowitz, 2002). The purpose of the bus route observations was to understand the values-based aspect of the culture of fraternities and sororities. Observational techniques were the most effective, because the researchers wanted to study student interactions in a specific social setting to observe ongoing daily patterns." This technique enabled the observation of fraternity and sorority members in an informal and non-organizational environment of this subculture to evaluate how the behaviors and conversations between members corresponded to their espoused organizational values (Glesne, 1992).

The bus is known to serve fraternities and sororities and has an identity associated with this community (Kase, 2007). According to the head of the student bus advisory committee, the B route was created in 1967 to serve the fraternity/sorority community, and now makes about 5,000 unique trips a week (personal communication, September 18, 2007). The 38 organizations whose values statements were analyzed are those that have houses on the bus route. Therefore, the students observed were most likely members of these fraternities and sororities. The bus was ideal for this study because a sizable group of fraternity and sorority members use it to move about campus. It is an unstructured, daily environment that does not contain an obvious authority figure, increasing the likelihood that the researchers, as non-participant observers, could study undisturbed, natural interactions and behaviors.

Data collection. Four members from the research team rode the bus in pairs twice each week during a five-week period in the fall. The researchers wore casual clothing, without intending to fit in or stand out. No effort was made to dress like the students on the bus. Each observational period was defined as one full loop of the route. Bus ridership varied from a few students to more than 30 students. When choosing a position in the environment, one observer sat in the front half of the bus and the other sat in the back, providing unique observation points within the same environment. Researchers compared their observations after the rides, detailing a more complete picture of occurrences.

Researchers began observations by noting natural occurrences to situate the environment. Also noted were details that might connote values, including student behaviors, conversation topics, and articles of clothing or other accoutrements. Researchers took field notes during and after the bus rides, with each observer taking time to expand his/her individual notes, providing additional, accurate descriptions but avoiding making judgments (Glesne, 1992). Researchers then reviewed each set of notes together between observations, adding reflections and discussing what values emerged.

As non-participant observers in the environment, the researchers did not engage in conversation with riders to prevent unduly impacting the environment. As riders were observed, the researchers concentrated on the "events as they unfolded and relationships as they naturally occurred" (Gerson & Horowitz, 2002, p. 212).

Data analysis. Since the research design was ethnographic, the research team believed it was crucial to allow themes to emerge from the collected data rather than attempt to fit data into predetermined categories (Creswell, 2005; Gerson & Horowitz, 2002). After the first round of data collection, the data was organized into broad categories of enacted values based on relationships between them. As data was continuously collected, the researchers reevaluated the categories initially conceptualized after each round. The categories were analyzed to understand what values were represented. After five rounds of observation, the categories were saturated, providing thick descriptions of the values consistently expressed.

Trustworthiness. The observational research team consisted of four women: two sorority alumnae and two unaffiliated women. The researchers worked in pairs, coupling a sorority alumna with an unaffiliated woman. Rounds of coding were conducted collaboratively by the four observers. While it is impossible to guarantee that researchers were able to note every detail and action, the way in which observers sat separately in different areas on each bus ensured a representative sample. Approaching observation from the perspective of an insider and an outsider to this campus subculture balanced the researchers' comprehensive outlook (Glesne, 1992). The alumnae identified trends and themes not readily apparent to the unaffiliated researchers.

Congruence Between Enacted and Espoused Values

Using the values that emerged from observational research and document analysis, the researchers analyzed the extent of congruence between the enacted and espoused values of the studied fraternity/sorority community. By understanding what each value entailed, the espoused and enacted values were able to be compared and contrasted.

Results

The results of this study address the extent to which the espoused values of fraternities and sororities are congruent with the enacted values of their members by defining the values that emerged in this study and exploring the correlation between them. Twelve espoused and enacted values of the fraternity/sorority community were clearly identified in our analyses. Five espoused values emerged from the document analysis: *civic engagement, commitment to organization, fostering community, integrity,* and *pursuit of knowledge.* From observations of riders on the bus,

seven enacted values emerged: *academic excellence, alcohol use, commitment to organization, connectedness, homogeneity*, *pride in alma mater,* and *wellness*. In this section the researchers define and provide examples of each value.

Espoused Values Defined

Civic engagement*.* Engagement in and commitment to society define this value. Contributions to *community, organization, God, mankind, country,* and *alma mater* all qualify as ways for an individual to be a good citizen.

Commitment to organization. This value encompasses the statements in the documents that pertain to one's loyalty to and involvement in a fraternity or sorority. Examples of words used by organizations to convey this value include *brotherhood, sisterhood,* and *lifetime commitment*.

Fostering community. This value encompasses one's participation in *tradition, mission,* and *relationships.* These organizations detail a commitment to creating ties beyond the chapter.

Integrity. Fraternities and sororities include references to being true to the ethic of one's organization and the shape of one's moral character. This value emerged from consistent references to *faith, strengthening character,* and *morality.*

Pursuit of knowledge. Many of the values statements affirmed that members should commit to *lifelong learning* and *scholarship*. Beyond academic achievement, this value encompasses *wisdom, intellectual integrity,* and *knowledge.*

Enacted Values Defined

Academic excellence. Students frequently discussed their academic endeavors or studies. Discussion topics included grade competition, schedules, dissatisfaction with academic advising, and cheating. Most students expressed resistance to academic dishonesty because of the threat of reprimand or sanction. Not one student was heard to mention anything related to the value of learning, scholarship, or desire for knowledge.

Alcohol abuse. Although this term is not typically recognized as a value-laden phrase, it is clearly considered a social norm within the community and meets our definition of *value*. This value emerged from in-depth discussions about going to bars or parties for the purpose of consuming alcohol. Students told stories about "being drunk in a frat house," "blacking out," vomiting, taking shots, and obtaining fake identification.

Commitment to organization. Through their discussions of chapter events and activities, many students exhibited commitment to their organizations. Topics included housing, recruitment, and leadership roles. Though some students referred to required activities with resistance, they sought to fulfill the requirements of their organizations.

Connectedness. This value emerged from students' needs to have friendships, relationships, and other connections to fellow individuals and organizations. Many boarded and rode the bus with brothers or sisters and talked with members of different chapters. Making

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phone calls or text messaging was popular with those not otherwise engaged. Finally, behaviors associated with politeness, like speaking to the bus driver or greeting others, indicated awareness of the importance of making connections.

Homogeneity. This value emerged in large part from the lack of diversity among the riders, who seemed to lack an understanding of those different from the students within fraternities and sororities. Nearly all riders were White, a higher concentration than the overall student body, which had a minority student enrollment of 10.65 percent in fall 2007. Virtually everyone wore expensive, name-brand clothing in similar styles and brands. Nearly all carried technological devices including cell phones and mp3 players, and students articulated the need to have up-to-date or "cool" cell phones. Most female students wore makeup, expensive jewelry, and had their hair styled. In seven out of 10 observation periods, a student was heard mocking or disparaging another person for being visibly different from others on the bus, including derogatory statements about Asians, people viewed as overweight, those with non-Midwestern accents, and a student dressed in athletic attire.

Pride in alma mater. Many students exhibited pride in the university through wearing university apparel. Some students read the campus newspaper or referenced involvement in campus activities, such as athletic events and major traditions.

Wellness. Students enacted the value of wellness by making time to workout, eat, sleep, or relax. Students dressed in athletic attire exited at the student recreational center, while others discussed going to play group sports. Students often brought food and drink onto the bus, including bagels, grapefruit, and water bottles. Eating meals at chapter houses or restaurants were a common conversation topic. Finally, the importance of rest emerged through discussions about "recharging," scheduling nap time, and avoiding illness. Students were aware of the need to sustain and to support their physical well-being.

Congruence Between Espouse and Enacted Values

The espoused values that emerged were partially congruent with the enacted values. Some values were closely related. *Pursuit of knowledge* (espoused) and *academic excellence* (enacted) showed a commitment to educational endeavors, but the espoused value sought additional critical thinking and the quest for new knowledge. *Fostering community* (espoused) related to *connectedness* (enacted) as both focus on relationship-building; however, the organizations also espoused a commitment to connect beyond the organization, which was where the enacted value fell short. *Fostering community* (espoused) also could have been influenced by a second related enacted value, *pride in alma mater*, which prompted participation in the larger university community.

Other enacted values proved to be incongruent to the espoused values and worked against their intentions. The enacted values of *alcohol abuse* and *homogeneity* negatively impacted the involvement sought in *commitment to organization* (espoused). Some of the behaviors observed were in sharp conflict with the espoused value of *integrity*. Additionally, *homogeneity* (enacted) was incongruent to *civic engagement* (espoused) because enacting it provided a visible and behavioral exclusion of the society beyond fraternities and sororities.

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Discussion and Implications

The varying levels of congruence between the espoused and enacted values lead to implications for student leaders and professionals, as well as suggested avenues for future research. While students engaged in worthwhile involvement and relationships through their fraternities and sororities, some behaviors observed were counter to the values that the organizations espouse. By utilizing the connections between the espoused and enacted values, professionals can create opportunities to address incongruence, highlighting a realistic view of what students' behaviors show they value. Discussion and implications for each enacted value follow.

Academic Excellence
While fraternity and sorority members seemed concerned about succeeding academically, they placed little importance on learning as encompassed in the value of pursuit of knowledge. Community recognition programs should be designed to recognize and promote scholarship programs that also highlight the development of critical thinking. Such programs would facilitate active learning and cognitive development for fraternity and sorority members, bringing a greater level of congruence.

Alcohol Abuse
Students were comfortable talking about their experiences with alcohol, revealing that it is socially acceptable to "black out," vomit, and consume large quantities. They focused on how much and how often they drank, but never on why. The pattern of usage confirms conclusions reached through others' research as outlined in the literature (Kuh, Pascarella, & Wechsler, 1996; Caron, Hovey, & Moskey, 2004; Caudill et al., 2006), but the determination of causal factors is an area for future research. If professionals know why alcohol abuse is valued, they can concretely address how it is inconsistent with espoused values of the fraternity and sorority community as well as the enacted value of wellness.

Commitment to Organization
While fraternity and sorority members demonstrated commitment to organization, other enacted values like alcohol abuse and homogeneity encompassed behaviors which contradicted this obligation, as they would result in a poor representation of the organization. Professionals should work to challenge students on how their behaviors conflict with the espoused values and diminish the significance of their commitment.

Connectedness
Connectedness correlates with the espoused value of fostering community, as students keep in constant contact with each other; yet some of the relationships observed on the bus appeared superficial. Students did not engage beyond acknowledging each other and ignored those they saw as outsiders -- those who were not wearing fraternity/sorority letters, had dissimilar clothing, or who were not White -- which relates to homogeneity. Building deeper relationships is important to advancing the espoused value of civic engagement and can be furthered through developing opportunities for fraternity and sorority members to engage both with each other and those outside the community.

Homogeneity

Subcultures socialize members to conform to a set of values and norms (Kuh & Whitt, 1988), and fraternity and sorority members have embraced this conformity. Through seeking to be with like-minded individuals, students do not grasp the benefits of diverse perspectives. Professionals could use the espoused value of civic engagement as an avenue to educate members about diversity issues facing the greater community, (Pettitt, 2008). Opportunities for learning could include partnering with cultural organizations and including diverse chapters in university-facilitated fraternity and sorority programming. Education and exploration of privilege, as well as performing service in the local community, could help students to gain a greater understanding of the benefits of diversification.

Pride in Alma Mater

Fraternity and sorority members show pride in the university, from their apparel to their activities. This enacted value would provide a foundation to encourage the practice of their espoused value of fostering community. One method of increasing congruence between these values could be encouraging chapters to incorporate education on the institution's mission, history, and traditions into member development programs. Further interest in the broader community may cultivate interactions and bonds with students outside fraternity and sorority life.

Wellness

Students exhibited inconsistencies in how they valued wellness in their lifestyles. While they articulated the need for positive mental health, they did not connect how alcohol abuse could sabotage their well-being. This shows that when professionals create programs about alcohol use, they should also focus on how it affects wellness. Fraternity and sorority members need to understand how to maintain a healthy lifestyle if they choose to use alcohol. Focusing on wellness as a value could be an avenue for professionals to address unhealthy behavior, like alcohol abuse or risky sexual practices (Foubert, Garner, & Thaxter, 2006).

Conclusion

The enacted values of the fraternity/sorority community members riding the bus are only partially congruent with those espoused by their organizations. This disconnect is significant and alarming, because students are enacting values through behaviors that put themselves and their organizations at risk. It is evident that although chapters build community and friendships through their activities, they still foster destructive values like alcohol abuse, homogeneity, and poor cognitive development, as found in the literature. Professionals, both campus-based and organizational, should capitalize on opportunities to address incongruence. By knowing what fraternity and sorority members value, one can move past conversation confined to organizational creeds into an action-based approach by helping develop programs, activities, and behaviors that connect the enacted and espoused values.

Further research should investigate why fraternity and sorority members engage in destructive behaviors and whether they connect their actions with organization and community values. Research on how members make sense of organizational mission and values also merits interrogation, including the role these principles have in the recruitment process. Along with this

study, such research would provide a strong foundation for professionals to empower fraternity and sorority members to elevate their communities through living the espoused values of their organizations.

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