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Perceptions of cultural diversity within social fraternities and sororities

Abstract

Social fraternities and sororities have frequently been the targets of public criticism. One of the reasons for this criticism is the belief that social fraternities and sororities promote racism (Goettsch & Hayes, 1990). In this paper, perceptions of cultural diversity within social fraternities and sororities are examined. The focus is primarily on perceptions of sorority and fraternity members toward African-Americans. The first section will present an historical overview of social fraternities and sororities. Next, attitudes regarding racial prejudice in social fraternities and sororities is reviewed. The paper concludes with recommendations based on the research presented in the previous section.

PERCEPTIONS OF CULTURAL DIVERSITY WITHIN SOCIAL
FRATERNITIES AND SORORITIES

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Sarah L. McDonald
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Social fraternities and sororities have frequently been the targets of public criticism. One of the reasons for this criticism is the belief that social fraternities and sororities promote racism (Goettsch & Hayes, 1990). In this paper, perceptions of cultural diversity within social fraternities and sororities are examined. The focus is primarily on perceptions of sorority and fraternity members toward African-Americans.

The first section will present an historical overview of social fraternities and sororities. Next, attitudes regarding racial prejudice in social fraternities and sororities is reviewed. The paper concludes with recommendations based on the research presented in the previous section.

HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

The first fraternity, Phi Beta Kappa, was established by a small group of undergraduate men in the winter of 1776 at the College of William and Mary (Bryan and Schwartz, 1983). Phi Beta Kappa was established for both social and intellectual purposes and was based on the principles of debate. Debate focused on current issues, social interaction, and the advancement of member's learning, contrary to the classroom format which was primarily lecture (Rudolph, 1990).

Few colleges existed at the time. The colleges that did exist were modeled after the northern European universities in Germany and England (Bryan and Schwartz, 1983). Students at the time lived with many restrictions and social life was limited. Within these institutions, faculty held all of the power. Secret literary societies, the modern day fraternity of 18th century America, were created to meet the social and intellectual needs of students because learning was primarily by recitation. The literary societies gave students the opportunity to participate in intellectual discourse. Thus, 20th century Greek systems have their roots in these early literary societies which focused primarily on intellectual activities.

The first social fraternity traces back to 1825 when mysticism and secrecy were combined with social activities (Lee, 1955). Students were tired of the restrictions placed on them and of the boredom associated with academics. Some of these fraternities admitted women into their organizations, but it was not until later that the first sorority was formed (Lee, 1955). Pi Beta Phi sorority, established at Monmouth College in 1867 in Illinois, is considered the first women's fraternity (Bryan and Schwartz, 1983). Most of these organizations led an "underground life" and were not highly visible on

campus until after the Civil War. By 1900, there were 37 fraternities and 20 sororities in America's colleges and universities (Lee, 1955).

Social fraternities and sororities became more open with the spread of industry and the expansion of higher education in the beginning of this century. "This expanded role and recognition of men's and women's fraternities in many ways was a result of the increased use of higher education as a prestige requirement for technicians, engineers, and other specialists in a business society" (Lee, 1955). The exclusivity of the network and its propensity to perpetuate itself reflected a desire to gain more prestige in a capitalist, industrial society. At the beginning of the 20th century, fraternities and sororities slowly spread across the country.

By 1928, more than half of the social fraternities and sororities had written rules excluding people on the basis of racial and religious guidelines. Of the other 50%, many had the same guidelines, but did not put them into writing (Lee, 1955). Many fraternities and sororities, such as Phi Delta Theta fraternity, had requirements for members to possess "full Aryan blood" (Lee, 1955). Others limited their membership to white Christians because separation of the social classes in

the United States was deemed acceptable at the time.

After World War II, the GI bill marked the beginning of a prosperous period in the fraternity movement. Veterans joined fraternities in large numbers. During this time, there were 2,500 national fraternities and sororities in American colleges and universities. By 1955, there were over 4,200 national Greek organizations (Lee, 1955). Sometime after 1935, the movement to eliminate bias within social fraternities and sororities began. However, it was not until the 1950's that institutions of higher learning ordered fraternities and sororities to abolish discriminatory practices. The 1950 American public held the view that social fraternities and sororities were built upon snobbishness and discrimination. For this reason, many college campuses wanted to reform or eliminate these organizations (Lee, 1955).

In 1954, the executive committee of the National Interfraternity Conference (NIC) reported in its organization's meeting minutes a unanimous concern about pressure from institutions of higher education against discrimination. Executive board members of the NIC decided that they would rather withdraw fraternity chapters than to give into institutional pressures. Taking a more moral perspective, the boycott by the

National Interfraternity Conference at these institutions of higher education was later reversed (Lee, 1955).

The question then became whether fraternities and sororities would be able to avoid self-destruction. Some took a more laissez-fair attitude, as in 1955 when Henry Merritt Wriston, then retiring president of Brown University, expressed his belief that racial and religious restrictions in social fraternities and sororities would disappear if it were left to the students (Lee, 1955). At the opposite end of the spectrum, alumni leaders who governed fraternities and sororities, represented caricatures of the worst aspects of the Greek system by attempting the maintenance of the status quo. At one extreme, social fraternities and sororities were compared to Nazi Germany. It was speculated that the patterns and experiences of these organizations helped to promote the birth of the Ku Klux Klan (Lee, 1955). The survival of social fraternities and sororities seemed to depend on their willingness to eliminate discriminatory policies and practices.

By the 1950's, the climate in higher education had changed further. Many shared the belief that it was part of higher educations' responsibility to provide students with interracial, inter-religious, and inter-ethnic contacts. This was reflected in the public's desire to

make social fraternities and sororities adhere to this belief. For example, at a university in Minnesota in 1948, 58% of the total Greek members favored removing racial and religious restrictions. In 1949, the percentage rose to 74%. At the same time, 70% of the fraternities with restrictive clauses wanted the clauses abolished. Of the sororities with restrictive clauses, 56% wanted the clauses abolished. By 1951, 81% of all the fraternities wanted the restrictive clauses abolished (Lee, 1955). At the University of Vermont in 1955, a ballot distributed to the student body determined that 86% of the returned ballots supported an end to racial and religious restrictions within seven years (Lee, 1955).

On May 17, 1954 the United States Supreme Court outlawed racial segregation in public schools (Lee, 1955). The effect of the law brought social fraternities and sororities to change the technical requirements of membership in their organizations by removing racial and religious restrictions from written documents. Many wondered if the technical changes would be reflected in actual practice.

Despite this, the fraternity movement continued to develop until the mid 1960's. The Vietnam War turned many students away from the establishment and sent them

looking for new truths. Greek systems across the country suffered membership decline because of the Vietnam War; a decline which lasted until 1971 (Bryan and Schwartz, 1983). In 1983, fraternities could be found on 604 campuses in the United States. Fewer than four in 10 colleges had Greeks on their campus.

It is hard to predict the future of social fraternities and sororities. The racial and religious restrictions were removed from fraternity and sorority documents by the 1950's, but to what extent does bigotry still occur on a large scale in today's social fraternities and sororities?

CURRENT ATTITUDES

Very few specific generalizable findings on the impact of Greek membership on students have been reported. Research on the impact of membership in Greek organizations on the attitudes and behavior of individuals varies greatly and is inconclusive.

Many have tried to compare Greek and non-Greek organizations. Greek organizations on campus attract certain kinds of people, thus the organization is likely to reflect the characteristics of those individuals more than non-Greeks. Furthermore, it is difficult to measure concepts such as perceptions, beliefs, and values. Over-generalization of findings in the research should be

avoided.

Gross generalizations of Greeks are invalid because Greeks differ so greatly from house to house and from system to system. The best way to determine the quality of fraternal experience is to look at local factors and conditions (Bryan and Schwartz, 1983). These reasons make it difficult to determine the perceptions and beliefs of fraternity and sorority members. However, one cannot escape the fact that instances of white racism have occurred often enough in social fraternities and sororities to maintain negative stereotypes in the public mind.

Recently, The Chronicle of Higher Education reported that fraternities at two Texas campuses sponsored racially offensive parties (November 18, 1993). One fraternity, Sigma Alpha Epsilon at Texas A & M, sponsored a "jungle party" where pledges painted their faces black and wore grass skirts. The other fraternity, Pi Kappa Alpha at Texas Tech University, sponsored a "Party in the Projects" where members wore black faces and Afro wigs.

Since Greek systems vary so greatly, one campus may promote cultural diversity while another may not. Patti Kelly, the Greek advisor at the University of Northern Iowa believes that the fraternity and sorority members she advises "are not aware of the need to explore

diversity" (Kelly, personal communication, 1992). She stated that individual houses often do not realize the diversity within their own chapter.

According to Bryan and Schwartz(1983), "when Greek organizations were founded, they challenged the thinking of their day and were concerned with social issues ignored by colleges and universities" (Winston, Nettles, and Oppen, 1987). Fraternities and sororities today seem to be so bound to tradition that they are smothering themselves. Simply accepting tradition stops people from thinking. When traditions are ingrained, people are afraid to challenge them. Many fraternity and sorority members fear being ostracized. We know that "groups become stagnant when they let tradition instead of the needs of chapter members guide decisions" (Bryan and Schwartz, 1983).

It should be no surprise that fraternities and sororities are currently having such a difficult time with the issue of racial tolerance. Greek affiliated organizations at institutions of higher education have struggled for decades to correct racist traditions. Janice Hanish, Assistant Director of Student Activities at the University of Northern Iowa, believes that "Greek organizations are homogeneous by nature and they will need to work harder to address issues of diversity

because of their nature" (Hanish, personal communication, 1992).

Some fraternity and sorority members are afraid of people who are different from themselves. One unidentified sorority member from the University of Northern Iowa who indicated that she would avoid interactions with other cultures said, "I'm afraid to get to know them, we are so different." Another unidentified sorority member speaking on the same subject said, "Sometimes, I'm afraid my lack of knowledge about their culture will offend them." Yet, out of 13 sorority members at the University of Northern Iowa responding to a questionnaire on perceptions of cultural diversity, all indicated that they would be willing to take positive actions to interact with people of other cultures.

Many Greek organizations operate on tradition and feelings rather than current information about the students they serve. Researchers, such as Winston and Saunders(1987), have suggested that proactive instead of reactive measures by fraternities and sororities will enhance the development of members in a way that positively reflects the institution's mission and fraternal ideals. However, Greek organizations often purvey the status quo and react to issues like racism.

Pamela Reisinger, Scheduling and Reservations

Manager for Maucker Union at the University of Northern Iowa, and advisor to Delta Chi fraternity, believes "fraternities and sororities need to be proactive in their recruitment" and "cultural diversity can be better promoted in the rush process" (Reisinger, personal communication, 1992). Reisinger also believes "Greeks should recruit people representing many different backgrounds."

Social fraternities and sororities have not recognized that there are more under-represented population students on campus and fewer 18-year-olds than in the past. Greeks must attract these students in order to survive. Many "Involving Colleges", however, are becoming more inclusive by inviting non-members to Greek functions more often (Kuh and Lyons, 1990).

Contrary to this evidence, Baxter and Whipple's (1990) research suggests that fraternities and sororities nation-wide have no desire to seek cultural diversity and understanding. They found that fraternity and sorority members suffer from cultural isolation and ethnocentrism. Many students affiliated with Greek organizations have never been exposed to people of diverse races, religions, or ethnicities.

It is evident that research of Greek organizations varies greatly and is inconclusive. It is difficult to

generalize findings because Greek systems and houses vary so greatly. It is important to conduct research on individual campuses and use the findings to implement necessary change.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Fraternity and sorority members need exposure to people socially and culturally different from themselves. Some Greek members from Xavier University described positive learning experiences from contact with black women in leadership positions. These contacts were facilitated and sponsored by sororities at Xavier (Kuh and Lyons, 1990). It is quickly becoming apparent that the status quo will no longer be tolerated.

The negatives of social fraternity and sorority systems cannot be minimized, rather, original Greek ideals under which Greek organizations were first founded must be encouraged. Reform cannot be ignored any longer. The commitment to provide a quality Greek life needs to be reaffirmed. The unrealized potential of fraternities and sororities must be tapped into and Greek members must be exposed to different cultures. There are still, however, Greek organizations that are dangerously behind the times. A fraternity at Loyola University had membership restricted to white, Christian males as late as 1981 (Schroth, 1990).

Many Greek members come from backgrounds which have not afforded them the opportunity to interact with minorities. This is why interaction is so important. Ignorance will no longer be an acceptable excuse. Education will be essential to the survival of Greek organizations.

If Greeks do not change, they will no longer be on many campuses. A New York court case stated the following; "A state may adopt such measures including the outlawing of certain social organizations as it deems necessary to its duty of supervision and control of its educational institution" (Bryan and Schwartz, 1983).

Institutions must provide the support that fraternities and sororities need to contribute to the educational mission. "The hand-off approach adopted by many campuses following the departure of the *in loco parentis* philosophy left many campus Greek systems in disarray" (Winston, Nettles, and Opper, 1987). Social fraternities and sororities need to be conducive to the educational process. Greeks need to define a new identity.

One generalization that can be supported is that Greeks provide leadership on campus (Bryan and Schwartz, 1983). Fraternities and sororities should develop values consistent with the institution. Greek systems should not

be discredited based on unfounded stereotypes.

Astin's involvement theory (Bryan and Schwartz, 1983) suggests that development is effected by the quality and quantity of student involvement. Fraternities and sororities offer an accessible population to educate about cultural diversity.

Patterns of misbehavior in the Greek system may be symptoms of organizational weakness. Institutions of higher education should realize that this may be a cry for help. Institutions should use informal persuasion and education, not control, to change the beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors of fraternity and sorority members.

Fraternities and sororities can offer quality out-of-class experiences. Astin's involvement theory (Bryan and Schwartz, 1983) states that students who participate in the educational process persist in college and have satisfying experiences. Students learn by becoming involved. If institutions realize the potential that fraternities and sororities offer, they can capitalize on it.

Social fraternities and sororities must promote diversity and interaction among their members and the non-Greek population. Greek affairs professionals need to realize the importance of behavioral and psychological factors and not totally focus on structural aspects such

as programming. Greek affairs staffs should: (1) establish clear goals for the system and individual houses; (2) identify factors in achieving the goals; (3) assess the degree to which the goals are being met; and (4) program and set policies in response to current conditions (Bryan and Schwartz, 1983).

Many fraternity and sorority members who have merely accepted tradition have become puppets of the Greek system. Fraternity and sorority members must realize that change is inevitable and should continually and proactively seek and encourage continuous student development. Fraternities and sororities first need to differentiate between appropriate and inappropriate traditions. Individual Greek houses need to test traditions by writing them down and asking members to defend or oppose them each year. Many Greek leaders base their actions on what has been done in the past because they have no other frame of reference. Greek leaders should base their actions on goals, not traditions.

Second, a human relations board that is advisory to the Interfraternity and Panhellenic councils should also be established. This board would be made up of students, faculty, and staff and would make recommendations to the Greek advisor and councils for immediate and long-term programming thus, promoting awareness and tolerance for

diversity.

Third, educational approaches should be used as components of pledge programs. Educational programs could include sessions that would allow new members to interact with minority students or programs that address the issues of racism and cultural differences. These programs can be incorporated into pledge programs and continue throughout membership.

Fourth, student affairs administrators and those involved with Greek life on campus must know the organizational culture within each Greek house. Programs must be devised to promote healthy attitudes toward minorities within individual houses.

Finally, Greek affairs professionals can use Helms' Stages of Racial Consciousness Among Whites(1985), Costantino and Hanley's "Program aims"(1989), and Pasternak, Tiede, and Tiede's "Possible programs"(1979) to assist in planning programs to meet students' developmental needs (see Appendix A). Together, these provide a framework which includes three stages of development and program suggestions for each stage. Stage one is the "Contact Stage". In this stage, persons become aware of other cultures but are not concerned with them. Most traditional college students are at this stage. Programs aimed at students in this stage can include

cultural awareness activities or lectures on historical cultural differences. Stage two is the "Disintegration Stage". In this stage, persons feel part of the majority culture and decide to support or reject other cultures. Programs aimed at students in this stage can include discussions of other cultures and activities focused on the commonality of different cultures. Stage three is the "Reintegration Stage." In this stage, persons value their own culture and may feel too much time is spent on dealing with issues of cultural diversity. Programs aimed at students in this stage can include simulations and illustration of cultural differences.

These suggestions are only a beginning. It is obvious that something needs to be done. Greek organizations need to change or run the risk of becoming extinct. There is a positive approach to almost every situation, and this should be no exception. Even punishment can take the form of required programming.

The first step is education. If institutions are willing to work with Greek organizations, there is potential for great educational opportunities. I believe that this challenge is one that institutions of higher education would be unwise to disregard.

Appendix

Possible Programs

Stage 1 Contact Stage

Persons aware of other cultures. Do not view selves as cultural beings. Cultural differences are not seen as social or political, but rather, individual concerns. Most students at this stage.

Programs

Highly structured
Supportive
Avoid conflict and moralizing
Avoid premature discussion of cultural diversity

Possible Programs

Cultural awareness activities
Travelogues
Lectures on historical differences of cultural groups
Individual evaluation of cultural background
Discussion of music, games, TV shows, holidays, etc.

Stage 2 Disintegration Stage

Persons feel part of the majority culture. May feel responsible for racism in society. Desire to be viewed as individuals. Either become supportive of other cultures or reject other cultures.

Programs

Provide information on cross-cultural communication barriers
Expand students' ability to communicate cross-culturally
Role plays and simulations
Encourage the use of new communication skills

Possible Programs

Discussions of "good" aspects of own culture
Discussions of "good" aspects of other cultures
Activities emphasizing commonality of cultures

Stage 3 Reintegration Stage

Persons value own culture. May place blame on other cultures for creating own problems. May want to focus attention on problems in own culture. May feel too much time is being spent on diversity issues.

Programs

Encourage examination of attitudes and beliefs
 Explore impact of "color blind attitudes"
 Explore impact of behaviors on individuals of other cultures

Possible Programs

Simulations
 Reports of personal experiences
 Different illustrations of cultural differences
 Resource people representing other cultures

Helms' Stages of Racial Consciousness Among Whites(1985)
 Costantino and Hanley's "Program aims"(1989)
 Pasternak, Tiede, and Tiede's "Possible programs"(1979)

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