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Craig Tollini
Western Illinois University

Beate Wilson
Western Illinois University

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FRATERNITY MEMBERS' VIEWS OF NEGATIVE STEREOTYPES

Craig Tollini and Beate Wilson

The purpose of this study was to have fraternity members identify the negative stereotypes they believed other members of the university community had of them and the extent to which these stereotypes were both accurate and/or damaging to their chapters. To gather these perspectives, which provide administrators, faculty, and staff members with a better understanding of how fraternity members view themselves and why they act as they do, a qualitative study consisting of five focus groups was conducted with 30 men from five Interfraternity Council (IFC) member fraternities at a medium-sized, Midwestern, public university. The seven most common negative stereotypes discussed among participants were drinking, womanizing, hazing, poor academic performance, paying for friends, being arrogant, and not performing community service. Each group held slightly different views on which stereotypes were true, untrue, or most damaging. Implications of these findings along with recommendations for practitioners and researchers are provided.

Researchers in both academic and professional journals have pointed out various issues or problems attached to fraternity membership. In a direct analysis of two professional journals, Molasso (2005) found the majority of articles addressing fraternal organizations addressed drinking, hazing, or sexual assault. Other recently studied problems include cheating (Storch & Storch, 2002), poor academic performance (Pike, 2003), low cognitive and emotional development (Pascarella, Flowers, & Whitt, 2001), racism (Rubin, Ainsworth, Cho, Turk, & Winn, 1999), alcohol abuse (Caron, Moskey, & Hovey, 2004), and misogyny (Bleeker, 2005). In short, research provides a predominantly negative view of fraternity membership, one reminiscent of the glorified misbehavior portrayed in such popular films as *American Pie: Beta House* (2007) and *Old School* (2003).

Two topics that have been largely neglected by researchers are how fraternity members view these issues and the generally negative stereotypes of fraternities. Information on these topics may help explain members' resistance to certain policies, as well as identify potential ways to overcome this resistance and work with members to address these issues. The current study begins to address this gap by having members of social fraternities identify the negative stereotypes they believe other members of the university community have of them, as well as the extent to which these stereotypes are both accurate and harmful to their chapters.

Review of Literature

When presenting the results of her research on a rape culture in fraternities, Sanday (1996) found some fraternity members argued that her results did not reflect their individual chapter experiences. Similarly in a study of hazing behaviors, Baier and Williams (1983) found fraternities believed hazing was a problem, though few of the respondents believed it was a problem for their particular chapter. The idea that chapters differ has some empirical support; members of different chapters have been found to vary in their level of alcohol abuse (Larimer, Irvine, Kilmer, & Marlatt, 1997), sexual assault (Boswell & Spade, 1996; Humphrey & Kahn,

2000), and academic performance and moral development (Winston, Hutson, & McCaffrey, 1980).

Such differences may impact fraternity members' acceptance of their portrayal in research and the media. For example, members of a chapter with low levels of alcohol abuse may not believe research findings that fraternity men have higher levels of binge drinking than non-affiliated college men. Variation by chapter may also affect members' support for programs and regulations. One implication from Baier and Williams' (1983) findings is that the fraternity members who viewed hazing as a problem indicated they are likely to support anti-hazing policies. Goodwin (1989) provided more direct evidence for this idea when he found a negative correlation between the amount of alcohol fraternity members drank and their support for policies intended to curb alcohol abuse.

Gaining a better understanding of how members perceive themselves and the issues they face (or are believed to face) will allow student affairs professionals to better understand fraternity member behavior. It may also reveal issues of which administrators, faculty and staff members, and non-affiliated students are unaware, but which fraternity members believe are particularly pressing. This information may be particularly useful to both campus- and organization-based fraternity/sorority professionals and volunteers and consultants working to help members address perceptions and highlight the positive aspects of affiliation. This project was an initial attempt to address the gap in the literature.

Method

Sample and Procedure

Focus groups were conducted with members of five Interfraternity Council (IFC) member fraternities at Western Illinois University (WIU), a medium-sized, Midwestern, public university (spring 2009 full-time enrollment = 13,400) with an affiliated population of approximately 6.6 percent of students. Following IRB approval, chapter presidents from 11 chapters were sent an email soliciting participation. Five chapter presidents agreed to allow the researchers to attend a chapter meeting to explain the goals of the study and request focus group participation.

Table 1

Focus Group Demographics

Name	Spring 2009 Chapter Size ¹	Total Participants	Participants who were Initiated Members	Participants who were Chapter Leaders
Beta	Small	7	5	3
Lambda	Medium	4	4	4
Mu	Small	9	7	8
Omicron	Large	7	7	6
Phi	Small	3	2	3

¹Chapter size is categorized generally to maintain confidentiality.

Separate focus groups were conducted with each of the participating chapters. Each focus group lasted approximately two hours. Two research assistants recorded and took notes at each focus

group. To protect confidentiality, each chapter was assigned a Greek letter that was not used by any of the IFC chapters. Chapter focus group demographics are summarized in Table 1. Chapter size is categorized generally to maintain confidentiality.

Data Collection

Focus groups were semi-structured to allow for additional questions to be asked based on the participants' comments. The first question for every group was "What do you believe is the most commonly held negative stereotype of the fraternities at WIU?" Participants were then asked to define and describe each stereotype, to discuss the accuracy of each stereotype, and to discuss whether each stereotype was more applicable to some chapters than to others. Toward the end of each focus group, participants were asked which stereotype they believed was most damaging to the fraternities at WIU.

Data Analysis

Recordings were transcribed, and any information that could potentially identify a person or chapter was removed or substituted with more general language to protect confidentiality. The assistants' notes were used to check and clarify the recordings, and the recordings and notes were destroyed once the transcription process ended.

Each focus group was analyzed separately using an approach suggested by Maxwell (1998), whereby responses were organized first by the major topic they addressed and then by the content of the responses. A summary was created for each focus group, and participants were asked to check the summary for errors and to provide any additional comments. Four participants (two from Beta and one each from Lambda and Mu) stated the summary of their group was satisfactory, while a participant from Phi removed one word from and added another word to a sentence. The reviewed summaries were combined to create the outline for this paper.

Since there did not appear to be any systematic differences in the opinions of the non-initiated and initiated members, their statements were presented together. The results section does not designate how many participants made or agreed with a given statement; this number could not always be determined, in part because there was no systematic recording of body language. In general, at least one other participant echoed each statement, and the few disagreements occurred were noted.

Limitations

The participants could have provided socially desirable results given the sensitive nature of the topic. For instance, it is possible that a participant might feel pressured by the other members of his chapter to state that a particular stereotype is not true or does not apply to his chapter. In addition, at least one participant appeared to be self-conscious because of the recorders. Furthermore, some of the participants spoke often and at length, while others were largely silent. Each participant interacted, even if only by nodding. Each was also asked for input at multiple times during the focus groups and all provided at least a few substantive comments. The participants also disagreed with and contradicted each other and referred to specific negative behaviors in their chapter. Therefore, it would appear that the participants largely felt free to express themselves and contributed as they saw appropriate.

Results

Results are presented in narrative format, differentiated by which stereotypes members believed were most common, which they believed were most accurate, and which they believed were most damaging. Readers are referred back to Table 1 to aid in interpretation of member comments.

Most Commonly Held Negative Stereotypes Members Perceived

Alcohol abuse. Participants from all five focus groups said alcohol abuse was one of the most commonly held stereotypes. A new member from Beta stated, “People anticipate us to drink heavily all the time.” Participants from Lambda, Omicron, and Phi added that people believed fraternity members did not engage in other activities (e.g., community service and attending classes) because of their alcohol consumption. Participants from Beta said underage drinking was another part of this stereotype, and an initiated member from Omicron also mentioned the belief that fraternity parties were, “...your wild and crazy parties where you’re doing all these crazy things [...like] hanging from a balcony.”

Womanizing. Participants from every chapter except Omicron, the largest fraternity in the study, mentioned a stereotype that centered on fraternity members’ attitudes toward and treatment of women. At least one participant from each of the four chapters stated mistreating women (i.e., treating them as objects or taking advantage of them sexually) and using Rohypnol in women’s drinks were the most common characterizations. Participants from Mu, one of the smaller fraternities in the study, described two aspects of this stereotype that support the perception of sexual conquest. The first, as stated by a new member, is that a fraternity man “move[s] through one sorority or one organization or just a group of women just as fast as he can, as many as he can.” He similarly described the second as the perception that “fraternities share people, that they just say, ‘OK, it’s your turn with this person’.” Participants from Beta and Lambda said date rape was another aspect of this stereotype, and participants from Beta also mentioned the belief that members had sexually transmitted diseases.

Paying for friends. Participants from four chapters discussed the stereotype that fraternity members pay for their friends. Phi, one of the smaller fraternities in the study, was the exception. Participants from each of the other chapters said that fraternity members were viewed as “paying for their friends” or “paying to hang out.” Participants from Beta and some of the participants from Lambda agreed that this stereotype also included the belief that members were too pathetic to make friends on their own. According to participants from Beta, Lambda, and Mu, another aspect of this stereotype was the belief a new member from Mu articulated as, “you’re not going to associate with anyone else because they’re not paying to be with you.”

Arrogance. Participants from Mu, Omicron, and Phi said arrogance was another commonly held stereotype. According to participants from Mu and Omicron, people viewed fraternity members as mean, rude, unapproachable, and uninterested in or incapable of interacting with other students. Participants from Mu added the terms “elitist” and “judgmental” to their description of this stereotype. An initiated member from Omicron echoed this statement, expressing, “just because you’re in one chapter, you think you’re better than somebody else or better than all the other chapters.” The participants from Omicron also included the perception

that members were rich and did not have to work. Phi participants repeated this last idea, and also included the beliefs that fraternity members were “macho,” lifted weights, and had been the “popular kids” in high school.

Hazing, poor academic performance, and community service. Only participants from two of the smaller fraternities, Beta and Mu, mentioned hazing as a prevalent, negative stereotype. Participants from both Beta and Mu defined hazing as a ritual or activity involving elements of pain and/or humiliation. An initiated member from Beta added hazing was “anything that a new [uninitiated] member would have to go through [that] an active [initiated] member would not.” Poor academic performance was only mentioned by Mu and Lambda, a medium-sized fraternity. Participants from Lambda defined this belief as members having low grades and not going to class, while the participants from Mu agreed that it included not being interested in grades, cheating, and having academic problems due lack of focus or persistence. Only participants from Omicron, the largest fraternity, listed the stereotype that fraternity members did not perform community service. Participants described this stereotype as the belief that fraternity members either did not perform community service or only did so out of obligation.

Accuracy of the Perceived Stereotypes

Overall, the participants indicated that the stereotypes were false or only reflected a minority of fraternity members or activities. In most cases, members expressed beliefs that other fraternities, not their own, exhibited the stereotypical behaviors. With regard to the womanizing stereotype, participants from Beta contended that members of other fraternities were disrespectful to women. Participants from Mu accused members of other fraternities of using the promise of sexual access to women as a recruitment tool. Participants from Omicron said most fraternities have members who believed they are better than the members of other chapters. Finally, participants from both Beta and Mu stated that the hazing stereotype accurately described other chapters. An initiated member from Mu stated, “I don’t even know if you could call it a negative stereotype because it’s true.” The participants from Mu added that members of other chapters made it known that that they haze and that there has been an escalation in the number and potential danger of hazing activities.

At least some of the participants indicated at least parts of the stereotypes were accurate, however. While some participants from Beta agreed that fraternity members did consume more alcohol than non-affiliated students, others from this group challenged this claim. In addition, at least one participant from Beta, Lambda, and Omicron admitted that joining a fraternal organization provided him with friends. An initiated member from Omicron contended that, “I’ve probably met more people because I’m Greek [sic] than I would have if I wasn’t.” Participants from Phi believed the alcohol consumption stereotype was common to all chapters, and the participants from Omicron had the same belief in regards to the “paying for friends” stereotype.

The participants from Omicron stated they could not determine if the community service stereotype was truer for certain chapters, because they did not know enough about other chapters’ service activities. At least one participant from Mu made similar arguments regarding the academic and “paying for friends” stereotypes, as did at least one participant from Beta

regarding the alcohol consumption stereotype. The other members of both groups believed they could make a determination, however.

Most Damaging Negative Stereotypes Members Perceived

Alcohol abuse. When asked which stereotype was the most damaging, participants from Beta, Mu, and Omicron noted alcohol abuse. An initiated member of Omicron, supported by his chapter brothers, stated, “no matter what, people are still gonna [sic] see [drinking] as being a negative thing.” Participants from both Omicron and Mu contended that this stereotype was the most damaging because it negatively affected recruitment. For example, an initiated member of Mu, mimicking a potential recruit’s parents said, “No, we’re not gonna [sic] give you money for that cuz [sic] all you’re gonna do is drink.” Participants from Beta believed this stereotype was damaging, because alcohol abuse is seen as a “gateway” to the other stereotypical behaviors. Although the participants from Lambda did not select this stereotype as the most damaging, they echoed the last two arguments when asked if this stereotype could be damaging in any way.

Participants from Beta and Mu believed having a reputation for drinking could actually increase the number of recruits. Further, participants from both groups stated that alcohol abuse did not damage fraternities because it was a common behavior for college students. Participants from both Lambda and Phi echoed this argument and added that a reputation for drinking could be beneficial because it made the chapter seem “more fun.” Lambda members agreed with one initiated member’s comment that a negative reputation for alcohol abuse was only mildly damaging because “you could lose [it] in a year or two. Just stop having parties.”

Womanizing. Of the four groups whose participants said womanizing was a commonly held stereotype, Lambda and Mu members listed this stereotype as the most damaging. Participants from Lambda said they selected this stereotype because sexual assault and the use of date rape drugs, common characteristics of this stereotype, were criminal acts. Participants from both Lambda and Mu also said this stereotype was damaging because it created a reputation that was difficult to overcome. Participants from Phi, who ranked womanizing as the second most damaging stereotype, echoed this justification. That said, the members of Phi also stated that womanizing wasn’t as prevalent a negative stereotype as the other negative behaviors and that some aspects of the stereotype, namely perceived sexual access to women, may actually be the reason why some men join a fraternity.

Arrogance. Participants from Omicron and Phi selected arrogance as the most damaging stereotype. Participants from both groups said this stereotype was damaging because it negatively affected recruitment. For instance, a Phi new member stated, “you’re not even gonna [sic] consider Greek life if you’re like, ‘Man, all these guys are assholes or cocky.’” The participants from Phi also contended that this stereotype was damaging because people will believe arrogant members will engage in other stereotypical behaviors.

Hazing. Participants from Beta and Mu believed hazing was among the most damaging stereotypes because of its negative effect on recruitment. More specifically, an initiated member of Beta said, “I think we would have the possibility of getting. . . more possible pledges [sic] that are of higher quality if they weren’t afraid of hazing.” A participant from Mu mentioned the results of a research project discussed in one of his classes that indicated both affiliated and

independent students believed hazing discourages men from joining a fraternity. Participants from both groups indicated they were initially personally wary about joining a fraternity because of this stereotype.

Multiple Stereotypes. As the aforementioned results indicated, participants from Beta, Mu, and Omicron selected more than one stereotype as most damaging. More specifically, participants from Mu named three stereotypes as the most damaging, while the participants from Beta, Omicron, and Phi each selected two stereotypes. In addition, participants from Beta and Mu asked if they could select more than one stereotype, and participants from Mu and Omicron asked to select all of the stereotypes they listed. Lambda participants only discussed one stereotype as most harmful.

Perceived Characteristics of Fraternities Who Exhibited Negative Stereotypes

When the participants agreed that a given stereotype was truer for certain chapters, they were also asked to describe characteristics of the fraternities whose members were more likely to engage in these stereotypical behaviors. The participants from multiple groups separately described three common characteristics that fit certain stereotypes, though they often referred to those related to alcohol consumption.

Having a fraternity house. Among the most prominent characteristics was having a fraternity house, which participants from all groups correlated with alcohol consumption. Not all fraternities at WIU have chapter-owned or managed houses, though all had “unofficial” houses, rented by individual members, where several chapter brothers lived together. Regarding the latter, a Lambda initiated member stated, “you don’t need a fraternity house to have a party, but you need [a] satellite house to have a party and be social and stuff.” A Beta initiated member believed that the condition of the fraternity house was related to the way members treated it. He remarked that “nicer” houses “probably don’t have as many problems with their members.”

Another initiated member from the Beta focus group discussed campus policies governing chapter house occupation that may indirectly contribute to behavioral issues. He reasoned that the pressure to fill a house caused chapters to “lower their standards” during recruitment to bring in members who would be willing to live in the facility. He noted, “it becomes less of a selection [process]. . . You just want to get the numbers. So that’s when you start to let the partiers and the people who really aren’t in it for the right thing.” The other participants in the Beta group agreed with this conclusion.

Fraternity size. The second characteristic participants used to describe fraternities who exhibited negative behaviors related to the size of the chapter. Most focus group participants shared the sentiment summarized by an initiated member of Lambda (a medium-sized fraternity), who stated, “if you have more people, a [larger] percentage would drink and party.” Some members of Beta (a smaller fraternity) disagreed.

Fraternity age/resources. The final characteristic related to how long a fraternity had existed at WIU. Participants in the Beta focus group agreed with one initiated member who stated, “the newer chapters. . . really adhere to the core values of the fraternity and stick closer to the rules.” In contrast, the participants from Omicron agreed with an initiated member of their

group who argued that “if [a chapter’s] been on the campus for 40-60 years, there’s a good chance that it’s got a stronger foundation to be a better chapter” since it is “well established” and has “more resources from alumni.” Related to the resources mentioned in the previous quotation, participants from Beta, Lambda, and Mu all emphatically believed that chapters with more resources were more likely to drink.

Summary

Fraternity Members Perceived Seven Negative Stereotypes

The participants listed the following as commonly held negative stereotypes of fraternities: drinking, womanizing, hazing, having poor academics, paying for friends, being arrogant, and not performing community service. The groups varied in how many and which stereotypes were mentioned. These differences, which cannot be fully tied to the size of each group, indicated that chapters differed in their views of which stereotypes were the most commonly held. In addition, three of the listed stereotypes (arrogance, community service, and paying for friends) have not been the focus of previous research.

Fraternity Members Believed Stereotypes were Untrue or Only True for Other Chapters

The participants from each focus group generally argued that the commonly held stereotypes they listed were untrue or exaggerated, with the exception of hazing. Participants were divided over the paying for friends stereotype, and some participants indicated that specific aspects of the drinking, womanizing, and arrogance stereotypes were true. In addition, the majority of the participants believed the stereotypes were more descriptive of some chapters than others. The participants described the traits of the chapters they believed were more likely to match the stereotypes.

Fraternity Members Viewed Four Stereotypes as the Most Damaging

At least some participants believed the drinking, womanizing, hazing, and arrogance stereotypes were damaging for all fraternities at WIU. In general, the participants (even those who did not rank these stereotypes as the most damaging) believed these stereotypes negatively affected recruitment by giving fraternities a bad reputation, though other members argued that a given stereotype could benefit a chapter and its reputation. The hazing and arrogance stereotypes were selected as the most damaging in all or almost all of the groups that listed these stereotypes, while the drinking and womanizing stereotypes were selected in about half of the groups that listed them. Finally, the participants from three focus groups selected more than one stereotype as the most damaging. The participants from two of these groups selected all of the stereotypes they listed, because they believed these stereotypes were all interrelated and thus affected each other.

Implications

Campus- and organization-based fraternity/sorority professionals and volunteers should seek the perspectives of fraternity members on their campus, perhaps by replicating the present study and/or holding public forums and online discussions. One benefit of obtaining this information is that programming could be designed based on whether members would classify a concern as major or minor. For instance, educational programs could be created to inform members about

the concerns they do not seem to view as major concerns (e.g., hazing), while programs regarding the issues about which they are aware (e.g., drinking) could focus on strategies for addressing these concerns.

Another benefit is that practitioners may learn that members believe they face issues of which the practitioners are unaware. As noted above, the participants listed three stereotypes, one of which was ranked as the most damaging by the members of one group, which have not been the focus of previous research. Gaining this knowledge may lead professionals to develop new programming and to work with members to address these “new” concerns, which may encourage additional positive interactions between fraternities and university personnel.

Insight as to members’ beliefs about the accuracy of negative stereotypes enables fraternity/sorority professionals to (1) identify those concerns about which members need more information in order to perceive them as legitimate (for all chapters and/or for their chapter specifically) and (2) work with members to formulate policy to address the concerns (or the specific aspects of these concerns) they already believe are legitimate. Members may also be likely to address the concerns they believe are the most damaging to them, so having this information would also be beneficial. Determining why members believe a particular stereotype is damaging can also be useful in that fraternity/sorority professionals could incorporate this reasoning into policies and discussions with members.

During the focus groups, participants found the stereotypes damaging predominantly because they affected recruitment. If fraternity/sorority professionals focus on how certain actions may negatively impact recruitment results and/or provide evidence regarding how sharp the decline in numbers may be, fraternity members may be particularly likely to change their behaviors. In addition, knowing that some members view concerns as interrelated, as was the case in the focus groups, could also be useful as these members would be more likely to support more systemic changes.

Campus- and organization-based fraternity advisors and volunteers should also be aware of differences between chapters. The participants in each focus group did not list the same stereotypes. In addition, participants in some groups ranked a single stereotype as the most damaging, while other groups put forth two or three. Furthermore, the participants from each group that mentioned a given stereotype did not necessarily agree on why the stereotype was damaging or even if it was damaging. Participants from some groups even provided reasons to believe that a stereotype could have positive consequences. All of this indicates that there is variation between and within chapters. As a result, a “one-size-fits-all” approach is unlikely to be well received. This is particularly true since members may be likely to view other chapters as problematic, which was the case with the sample.

Suggestions for Future Research

Additional research on how fraternity members view the negative stereotypes of them is needed, in no small part because the research described above is preliminary. This study needs to be replicated at other universities, from which a larger percentage of the chapters are sampled. Future research should also address each commonly held stereotype in more detail and determine

the extent to which fraternity members (1) are aware of the various stereotypes of them, (2) would rank the same stereotypes as damaging, and (3) have the same definition of the stereotypes.

Additional research is also needed to determine the extent to which the participants' beliefs regarding which fraternities are most likely to match the stereotypes reflect reality or are simply stereotypes held by the members themselves, as well as how widespread these views are among fraternity members. It would also be beneficial for more research to be conducted regarding the stereotypes mentioned by the focus groups but that have not been the focus of previous research (arrogance, paying for friends, and community service).

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Craig Tollini is faculty advisor to Theta Xi fraternity and an Assistant Professor in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Western Illinois University. Beate Wilson is an Instructor in the Department of Sociology and Anthropology.