

The Exonerating “Guise of Brotherhood”: Intra-Fraternal Sexual Violence Survivors’ Accounts of Illegibility and Impunity

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Abstract

Greek life in American colleges and universities is characterized by white heterosexual masculine dominance. A large scholarship has documented Greek life’s association with women’s sexual violence, yet much less is known about how men—who are ostensibly privileged in these settings—experience sexual harassment and assault. Using 15 interviews with fraternity members attending an elite, midwestern university, we examine men’s experiences of intra-fraternal sexual violence. We describe fraternity members creating and deploying a white heterosexual masculine discourse of “brotherhood” that institutionalizes intra-fraternal sexual violence, makes it illegible, and gives its perpetrators impunity. We also show how the brotherhood discourse differentially deploys resources and power to fraternity brothers based on their intersectional location and relationship to intra-fraternal sexual violence. Future applications of the brotherhood discourse in fraternities and other institutional contexts can help us better understand how such organizations reinscribe intersectional power hierarchies.

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Introduction

John Landis's hit film *National Lampoon's Animal House* depicts Delta Tau Chi, a college fraternity known for participating in dangerous activities leading to outcomes like the accidental death of a horse during a prank and a member having sex with the mayor's underage daughter. The film chalked these men's behaviors up as normal, juvenile, and even comedic, and the Deltas were shown to go on and obtain prominent and respectable careers, shielded from the consequences of their actions. U.S. college fraternities today bear some similarities to *Animal House's* fictional Delta Tau Chi. Fraternities contribute to campus climates that are sexually risky for women, and accommodating to men, even men who do not perpetrate sexual violence (Hirsch and Khan 2020). Yet, how *men* experience sexual violence in fraternity settings, where they are seemingly privileged, remains unclear.

Although prevalence estimates vary considerably (Graham et al. 2017), between 25 and 35% of men report experiencing at least one sexually aggressive act between age 14 and the end of college (Swartout, Koss, and White 2015). Mellins et al.'s (2017) survey of 1671 college students reported that 3.8% of men experienced attempted penetrative sexual assault and 5.2% experienced penetrative sexual assault. Fraternity membership may heighten sexual violence risks. Luetke et al. (2021) surveyed 102 fraternity members, finding that 25.5% of men experienced attempted penetrative sexual assault, and 13.7% experienced penetrative sexual assault.

This article investigates men's experiences of intra-fraternal sexual violence at an elite, midwestern university. We interviewed fraternity members who reported being sexually harassed or assaulted by fellow brothers. Many instances of intra-fraternal sexual assault occurred within the context of fraternity activities such as rush, pledge term, and hell week. These activities instilled in participants the norms of a power hierarchy stratified by an intersectional matrix of domination—one in which men bargained for access to status and power (Collins, 1991, 2004). They also simultaneously fostered and shielded dangerous and sexually risky activities—an outcome one interviewee described as the “guise of brotherhood” (Frankie).

In our study's context, rush refers to a several-months-long recruitment process when fraternity brothers attract new members by hosting myriad activities, including weekly dinners, bar nights, mixers, and sports outings. At rush, alcohol and illegal drugs are ubiquitous, and partaking is implicitly required for potential members, or ‘rushees’ to participate in some activities like beer pong. Brothers not only showcase the fraternities' sociability at these events, but they also observe how attendees socialize in these settings; the impressions they form are critical at the end of rush when the fraternity selects new members. Once selected as pledges, rushees begin a term-long pledge process involving education on the fraternity's history through drill exercises

and “line-ups” (pop quizzes held in front of other members). In some fraternities, pledges who answer line-up questions incorrectly are punished by brothers who verbally and physically berate them. Pledge term culminates with an intensive week of activities known as “hell week” (also called “I-Week” and “Camp”). The practice differs across fraternities, and some have eliminated it altogether. Where it happens, hell week entails quarantining pledges in unsanitary living conditions on-campus for several days at a time.

In this article, we describe men’s experiences of intra-fraternal sexual assault that were partly facilitated by the admissions processes of fraternities—rush, pledge term and hell week. We define brotherhood as an intersectional and hegemonically masculine discourse that helps normalize and institutionalize intra-fraternal sexual violence. We show how, in one university, brotherhood supported and constrained fraternity members’ access to resources and power based on their social locations. While brotherhood cultivated close relationships among new members, it also fostered an atmosphere of secrecy and silence, especially around intra-fraternal sexual violence. Fraternity members mobilized the brotherhood discourse to evade accountability for intra-fraternal sexual violence through illegibility and impunity. Illegibility refers to the inability to be recognized as legitimate and worthy of resources within institutions (Sweet 2019). By impunity, we mean perpetrators’ protection from accountability.

Hegemonic Masculinity, Intersectionality, and Fraternities

Hegemonic masculinity theory has broadly influenced scholarship on fraternities and sexual violence. Hegemonic masculinities are hierarchical structures legitimized by their relationship to subordinated masculinities and femininities (Connell 1987, 1995). Because gender relations are historically specific, hegemonic masculinities are contextually dependent (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). Men’s positions in the gender hierarchy are not fixed, and their masculinity must be constantly validated by others (West and Zimmerman 1987). Men’s global dominance over women serves as the starting point of most hegemonic masculinity scholarship, though leading theorists acknowledge that gender is additively and mutually conditioned by other dimensions like race, class, age, and sexuality (Connell 1987, 1995).

Intersectionality scholars, in contrast, view identity dimensions as mutually constitutive and interlocking systems that reinforce social boundaries along lines of race, class, gender, sexuality, and other axes of oppression (Collins, 1991, 2004; Hamilton et al., 2019). Unlike the monocategorical approach of hegemonic masculinities theory, which foregrounds gender as the primary unit of analysis, intersectional analyses reference hegemonic masculinities as distinctive locations within a “matrix of domination” that create overlapping or interdependent systems of oppression (Collins, 1991, 2004). Just as men seek to gain status in the hierarchical order of hegemonic masculinities, they move within the matrix of domination by leveraging their intersectional location to exercise power over others (Hamilton et al. 2019). An individual’s proximity to power is ordered by a setting’s dominant structures of race/ethnicity, class,

and sexuality (Collins 2004). From this perspective, men negotiate power in different contexts, where their masculinity may be subordinated by certain salient structures and superordinated by others (Grundy 2021).

An intersectional approach to understanding how hegemonic masculinities shape intra-fraternal sexual violence lends itself to viewing fraternities as racialized and gendered organizations, especially when considering that fraternities are historically white and male dominated organizations. Acker (1990) and Ray (2019) argue that gender and racial inequalities are built into the fabric of organizations like fraternities. Ray (2019) explains that organizations are meso-level structures that facilitate interactions between inequalities like racism at the macro- and micro-levels. This view of organizations highlights how racism and other inequalities become taken-for-granted; material resources connected to organizational schemas concerning race, for example, legitimize racial structures like the racial pay gap and unequal access to leadership positions (Ray 2019). In the same vein, fraternity members' schemas concerning race, gender, sexuality, and class are all at play when determining how the organization's resources are deployed.

In fraternities, men must “do gender” (West and Zimmerman 1987)—as well as race, class, and sexuality—to establish group belonging, achieve status, and gain power (Allan, Joyce, & Perlow 2020). These impressionable, young men, who tend to lose their established identities during the transition from high school to college (DeSantis 2007), turn to fraternity brothers for role models (Ray and Rosow 2010). Organizations like fraternities are thus positioned to socialize college men around acceptable performances of gender, race, class, and sexuality (Collinson and Hearn 1994).

Hazing represents a gendered, raced, classed, and sexualized performance often required for admission to fraternities. Hazing refers to induction costs (Cimino 2011), symbolic violence (Sweet 1999), and initiation requirements that “humiliate, degrade, abuse, or endanger” new members (Hoover & Pollard 1999, 8). Ward (2015) considers hazing a performance of hetero-masculinity and whiteness that exhibits “white male entitlement, aggression, and grossness” and manufactures opportunities for homosexual activity. Yet, hazing rituals also compensate men with masculinity by aligning them with stereotypes like strength and endurance (Syrett 2009).

Hazing risks vary. Some commonly reported activities are rather mundane, like wearing t-shirts, assigning nicknames, and receiving manuals and decorative paddles (Allan, Joyce, & Perlow 2020). Others are riskier, such as performing (sometimes sexual) labor; wearing costumes; consuming dangerous amounts of alcohol; and experiencing verbal and physical assault (DeSantis 2007; Syrett 2009). Nuwer's (2022) database of hazing incidents reports that fraternities have contributed to at least one death per year since 1959.

Fraternity men are supported and constrained by the white hetero-masculine norms inculcated in hazing. Veteran fraternity members control access to resources and power in hazing, and they construct and enforce an intersectional and hegemonically masculine hierarchy—what Collins (1991, 2004) calls the matrix of domination—to which newcomers in their chapter must subscribe. They require that new members participate

in humiliating and oft-dangerous rituals, which reinforce group bonds and loyalty. Participation in these activities affirms members' social status, and non-participation threatens it. High status brothers in [DeSantis's \(2007\)](#) study, for example, chastised fraternities without hazing requirements for "going soft."

Hegemonic Masculinity and Rape Culture

Greek life fosters rape cultures in U.S college campuses ([Armstrong, Hamilton, and Sweeney 2006](#)). [Grundy \(2021\)](#) characterizes rape cultures as environments where sexual violence is made unavoidable, illegible, and shielded from accountability. Hegemonic masculinity in fraternity life helps sustain rape culture ([Boyle 2015](#)). [Martin and Hummer \(1989\)](#) elaborate that hetero-masculinity helps "create attitudes, norms, and practices that predispose fraternity men to coerce women sexually" (470). For instance, fraternity men consistently endorse rape myths and rape-supportive attitudes ([Boyle 2015](#); [Burt 1980](#); [Martinez et al. 2018](#); [Seabrook 2021](#)), which increases the likelihood they will perpetrate sexual violence ([Salazar et al. 2018](#)) and justify it ([Boyle and Walker 2016](#))

The social structure of fraternities enables sexual violence as well. Fraternities dominate U.S. college social scenes by providing venues where students can engage in recreational activities that university policies prohibit in residence halls, like partying and underage drinking ([Hirsch and Khan 2020](#)). These segregated Greek organizations subscribe to traditional gender norms ([Seabrook, Ward, & Giaccardi 2018](#)), wherein sororities are normally barred from hosting mixed-gender parties ([DeSantis 2007](#)). Men rule college social life by controlling the "themes, music, transportation, admission, and access to alcohol" at parties ([Jozkowski and Wierma-Mosley 2017](#), 92). Notably, fraternities construct sexualized party dynamics that facilitate what [Armstrong, Hamilton, and Sweeney \(2006\)](#) call "low-level sexual coercion" and normalize sexual violence.

Women's sexual violence experiences in fraternities are well documented ([Hirsch and Khan 2020](#)). Prevalence rates vary, but the most cited statistic is that one in five college women experience sexual assault ([Krebs et al. 2007](#)). While research has shown that women's experiences of sexual harassment and assault in fraternities are made illegible and their perpetrators are provided impunity ([Hirsch and Khan 2020](#)), much less is known about how men experience intra-fraternal sexual violence.

Some evidence suggests that illegibility and impunity may be enduring features across men's and women's experiences of sexual violence in fraternities. [Hlavka \(2017\)](#) illustrates how intersectional hegemonic masculinity contributes to the illegibility of male sexual violence. Young male sexual victimization survivors participating in forensic interviews she analyzed conceptualized their experiences by relying on the standards of hetero-masculinity. Stigma and shame made survivors reluctant to disclose sexual violence, and many attempted to save face during interviews by affirming their masculinity and heterosexuality ([Hlavka 2017](#)). [Small's \(2021\)](#) examination of a high school wrestling team's criminal sexual bullying case

clarifies how white hetero-masculinity normalized intra-fraternal sexual violence perpetrators. Prosecutors effectively excused the perpetrators by invoking discourses of comedy and friendship to normalize intra-fraternal sexual violence as ordinary, fraternal behavior (Small 2021).

Since fraternities engage in risky activities that sometimes involve sexual violence, and they create environments that instill loyalty and secrecy, it is likely that fraternities' hegemonically masculine cultures magnify the illegibility and impunity of intra-fraternal sexual violence. Research on this topic remains sparse. This study aims to fill that gap by investigating the role hegemonic masculinities play in college men's intra-fraternal sexual violence experiences.

Methods

We conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with fraternity members who attended a mid-sized university in a midwestern U.S. state. The university is private and highly selective, with a fall 2021 acceptance rate under 10%. Students of color made up less than 50% of the undergraduate student composition, and most students came from upper-class families. About one in five students received Pell Grants. Over 40% of the university's undergraduates participated in Greek life, but we were unable to obtain information on fraternity members' sociodemographic backgrounds.

Between October 2018 and February 2019, we sent e-mails to Greek-affiliated students and fraternity presidents, posted flyers around campus, and delivered in-person announcements at fraternity events to find men "who have experienced unwanted touching, groping, or penetration by another fraternity man." Students were instructed to contact the study team's secure email account and return a signed IRB-approved consent form. Interviews were conducted by the first author. Both the second author and a male sexual assault counselor were on-call during all interviews. Interviews were held face-to-face and lasted between 89 and 139 min. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. We asked questions about participants' fraternities (i.e. structure, culture, and activities), as well as about intra-fraternal sexual violence (i.e. experiencing and seeking help).

We recruited fifteen students—a modest sample, which we expected. Fraternity members who have experienced sexual violence are difficult to recruit for research due to the distinct barriers men face against disclosing sexual violence (Hlavka 2017), as well as the culture of secrecy around fraternity activities (Allan, Joyce, and Perlow 2020). We proceeded with our analysis without collecting additional interviews since this study was exploratory and intended to achieve a preliminary look at intra-fraternal sexual violence. More than half ($n = 9$) of the 15 participants we interviewed held a leadership position in the fraternity, and a similarly large share ($n = 8$) had deactivated or graduated by the time of the interview. Table 1 exhibits a wider range of participant characteristics.

We used the extended case method to analyze these data, constantly and reflexively examining the relationship between our data and theory throughout the study (Burawoy

Table 1. Sample Characteristics.

Participant	Fraternity Tier	Age	Race/Ethnicity	Sexuality
Alfred	Upper-middle	*	White	Heterosexual
Bobby	Middle	21	White	Gay
Charles	Lower-middle	22	White	Heterosexual
Chris	Upper	19	Asian American	Heterosexual
Daniel	Middle	22	White	Bisexual
Frankie	Upper-middle	24	White	Heterosexual
George	Upper-middle	21	White	Heterosexual
Harry	Lower	21	White	Heterosexual
Ian	Upper	21	White	Heterosexual
Josh	Upper	20	Asian American	Heterosexual
Karl	Lower-middle	21	Asian American	Gay
Lance	Lower	22	White	Gay
Matthew	Upper-middle	19	White	Gay
Mike	Middle	22	Asian American	Gay
Thomas	Upper-middle	21	White	Heterosexual

Note: *Age unreported.

1998). Additionally, our small sample permitted us to adopt a case-oriented analysis. Therefore, the findings highlight individual cases, cross-case comparisons, and the “idiographic generalizations” we can draw from them (Sandelowski 1996).

Results

Institutionalizing Brotherhood

Activities required for admission into fraternities, including rush, pledge term, and hell week, helped render a closely-knit, loyal group of young men who conformed to a shared set of standards. They also stratified newcomers, as well as younger and racially and sexually marginalized members, who were made keenly aware of their relative social status in the community. For men with access to power, the promise of scaling the hierarchy appeared to exist; someday, the first-year pledge could become a senior year pledge master, a chapter president, or at least an older brother. But that promise reinforced obedience and adhered to the limits of the fraternity hierarchy.

Interviewees noted the importance of social status and social interactions for acceptance into the brotherhood. Bobby told us, “The more members you meet and the more positive interactions you have, the more likely you are to get a bid.” The social identities and statuses of students involved in those interactions were critical to selection as well. Fraternity brothers held rushees’ interactions with women in especially high regard, and they assessed these relationships based on “how [rushees] talked to girls” and “whether [the girls] are well liked” (Harry). Attractiveness judged

against vague and idiosyncratic standards also weighed into these decisions. Matthew explained that:

Someone will say, “Man, you dress sharp” or like “Those shoes are super cool” or something! You know, I can’t even think of a particular brand. I mean, it’s not like you’re going down a checklist and making sure he’s wearing a new Patagonia vest and has his shoes and wearing his khakis. But it’s more about the total package. It’s very like... does he fit the mold?

Participants referenced numerous attributes that held currency in the rush selection process, such as lifestyle practices and daily habits, social media activity, degrees of alcohol and drug consumption, and social positions (i.e. race/ethnicity, sexuality, and class backgrounds, etc.). To gain membership in the fraternity, rushees conformed to an implicitly gendered, raced, classed, and sexualized order that constituted and reinforced the brotherhood’s values (Acker 1990; DeSantis 2007; Ray 2019). Veteran brothers defined these values in the selection process, and they rewarded those who conformed to them with invitations to parties and events. Ian explained:

There’s essentially a pitching process where the two kids bring up the kid and talk about him. And then there’s a comment process [...] I’ve seen a lot of how it works, of how you try to frame kids and how you try to tell stories about a kid and present him in a certain way to appeal to the brotherhood and to try to convince you that he’s a fun, cool kid who likes to party and is social and will help us get to a top tier position. And then they’re like, ‘Oh. But also, he’s respectful of women.’ And blah, blah, blah. It’s just very superficial, and you have to appeal and to frame it in a certain way. And it’s really hard to understand nuance and complexities of people in this. The process doesn’t really allow for a larger picture of a person. It’s more of like checking off boxes of: Is he cool? Does he drink? Is he fun to hang out with? Okay, great. Has he ever sexually assaulted anyone? No? Okay, awesome. He’s in. [...] Most of the kids voting probably won’t have had a long conversation with the kid, but if you see this good-looking man on screen and all your friends are saying that he’s a cool kid that you’ll like to hang out with, you’ll probably give him the benefit of the doubt.

Participants described exclusionary preferences expressed during deliberations held behind closed doors. George recalled that “Some people are pretty crass. They’ll literally say, ‘yeah, he’s ugly as fuck’ or ‘man, does that kid even clear five feet?’ That kind of thing. Since we’re in a safe space because we’re all brothers and it’s confidential, we can say whatever we want. And the reality is, it’s a social organization and looks matter. It’s definitely not the primary factor, but to say it doesn’t exist is lying.” When asked how brothers rationalized their preferences in deliberations, George clarified, “Well, it’s personal choice. It’s the same idea as who you want to date. If you like a certain type of person, that’s your choice, right? And our social group is our choice.”

Intersectionality scholars historically contextualize such social preferences by showing that cultural schemas about race, class, gender, and sexuality are built into organizations like fraternities (Collins 2004; Ray 2019). Under the banners of preference and taste, fraternities can pursue selection processes that reproduce institutional conventions around race, class, gender, and sexuality, even if that is not their intended outcome. Mears (2010) shows how cultural representations in the Western fashion modeling industry reproduce the structural order in the way clients evaluate models' performances of gender, race, sexuality, and class. In the face of market uncertainty, editorial producers deferred to marketable practices like using racial stereotypes and imitating competitors who did the same. Likewise, fraternity members in the present study described member selection processes that appeared vulnerable to members' cultural schemas.

Pledges proved their allegiance to the fraternity by participating in risky activities. Lance described one such activity called "don't fuck your brother." The activity was initiated by an older member who distributed alcohol to a circle of pledges. Each new member could decide how much to drink, but the last pledge in the circle would finish the bottle. In theory, pledges would equally share the bottle, but the final two pledges in Lance's pledge class drank to the point of becoming violently ill.

Collectively enduring activities such as "don't fuck your brother" enabled close relationships among members of new pledge classes. As Harry put it, "you feel this sense of community with your pledge class and that you're in this band, trying to stay alive." Friendships formed in the crucibles of pledge term made brotherhood appear incompatible with the perpetration of violence. Yet, fraternity brothers required that new members engage in unpleasant and even dangerous activities like "don't fuck your brother." That marginalized men were positioned on the bottom rung of a social and organizational hierarchy in which admission hinged on experiencing violence made intersectional domination an unproblematic component of fraternity membership.

Pledge term and hell week also reinforced conformity. Through activities that were nominally optional, but in practice required for membership, the fraternity brotherhood excluded newcomers who did not adhere to the fraternity's white hetero-masculine culture. Alfred described the process as a "test that shows you're worthy of brotherhood." He noted that "while fraternities *technically* let pledges opt out of activities, opting out makes them seem 'less legitimate' and 'not as worthy' as those who got hazed." Failure to participate in activities then "was sort of a mark of character against them that they were weak" (Daniel).

The way fraternity members evaluated new pledges during pledge term and hell week—judging observations of risky activities that involved underage drinking and illicit drug use—established an intersectional power hierarchy in which brothers coercively obtained compliance. Brothers relied on the fraternity hierarchy to enforce conformity. Lance underscored this point when reflecting on his participation in "don't fuck your brother":

There's so much aggression, I think, in these rooms. And upperclassmen, really—during pledging, they really try and be aggressive and intimidating for kicks. And I think it really comes down to masculinity. I think it's a huge part of it and feeling the need to show your masculinity in front of other people so you don't seem weak [...] Because they had to go through it the year before or two years before and it's fun to finally not be in that position and have the power. And as a student, you don't really get the opportunities to hold that much power over others. I think it's fun to watch people feel scared.

Allan, Joyce, & Perlow's (2020) review typologizes six functions of hazing: it is (1) a rite of passage; (2) a tool to align individual and group identity; (3) a mechanism for exerting power and dominance; (4) a tool to discourage freeloaders; (5) a tool to build group cohesion; and (6) a mechanism of moral disengagement. The rushing and pledging processes our interviewees experienced accord with these explanations. To gain membership in the fraternity brotherhood, aspiring members participated in an array of white hetero-masculine activities that involved alcohol and illicit drug use. Current brothers assessed potential members to ensure the brotherhood's norms were kept intact. They rewarded expressions of white hetero-masculinity that enhanced the fraternity's social status on campus and punished and/or excluded those that didn't.

The activities required for admission into the brotherhood instilled loyalty in new members, even if their allegiance came at the cost of emotional and physical violence. Brotherhood helped institutionalize the provision of kinship to those who could meet the fraternity's white hetero-masculine standards. As the following sections describe, brotherhood shrouds intra-fraternal sexual violence in secrecy and normalcy.

Brotherhood and the Illegibility of Intra-Fraternal Sexual Violence

While all interviewees confirmed experiencing unwanted touching, groping, and/or penetration by a fraternity member, a third ($n = 5$) notably did not consider these experiences to be sexual harassment or assault. Many made comments like "I'm the one who took the shots so I shouldn't have really made such a fuss" (Matthew) and "I know what happened to me could have been a lot worse." (Mike). Hlavka (2017) notes that such minimizing language in men's accounts of sexual violence implies attempts to reestablish masculinity by saving face.

The impetus to reassert masculinity in this way is warranted by the prevalence of rape myths (Martinez et al. 2018). Several interviewees attested to the influence of such misconceptions in their fraternities, and most named the pervasive belief that men are more capable of defending themselves than women (Turchik and Edwards 2012). These myths seemed to govern reportedly established norms about how fraternities expected brothers to treat women, but those norms did not equally apply to men, who felt their own experiences of intra-fraternal sexual violence did not warrant similar intervention. Josh recounted the reason he didn't report his experience as:

There are serious situations that occur at parties and mixers. I don't want to take that away. An actual sexual assault between a male in the fraternity and a female in the sorority, versus just two brothers in a fraternity, because I feel like, then it would have an implication—normalizing the sexual assault between a man and a woman. I don't wanna take away the focus from sexual assaults at parties between men and women, like there are different power dynamics that go into those relationships, compared to this, which I can really easily deal with on my own.

Brotherhood rendered sexual violence illegible by constraining fraternity members' abilities to recognize and name their experiences of sexual harassment and assault. Fraternity brothers contextualized sexual violence experiences against white hetero-masculine standards in which "guys are supposed to be all tough and that kind of stuff, and it's like when a guy says they've been sexually harassed or something, people are like, 'no, that can't really happen'" (Karl). When men are viewed as personally responsible for experiencing sexual victimization, it is expected that students like George would reduce an incident in which he was repeatedly kissed by a younger brother to "horse play."

Brotherhood also contributed to the illegibility of sexual violence by constraining fraternity members' abilities to recognize and name the transgressions they witnessed. Fraternity members described numerous accounts in which sexual harassment and assault were hidden in plain sight. One case involved an older brother who routinely "goes around and makes out with brothers without their consent [and] no one really intervenes. I think now it's just sort of become a part of the background. We're like, 'oh, he's doing that again.'" (George). In another case involving a senior member grabbing a freshman member's genitals at a party, members at the event were passive observers:

There were other people around. None of them saw what happened [...] But people had seen me react and were like 'What's going on?' I think he had actually said like, 'What's your problem?' or something like that. After, not immediately when it was happening, but after I'd gone away. It was at an open staircase, but I was one landing above where he was. And then yeah.. People believed me... like a few of them also talked about how they had also been grabbed by this person. And how they had, how this wasn't okay. Some people were agreeing with me, that this person needed to leave. But a lot of people were like, 'No, he doesn't need to leave it's... It's done.' Or not, it's done, but like it's... He's not gonna do anything else, because he's calmed down or something [...] Almost everyone had at least a drink, and people were not sort of in the mindset of 'Let's deal with this serious issue right now.' And enough people I think just felt like it didn't apply to them, and they didn't want to deal with it. (Daniel).

Rape myths that blame survivors can further deem sexual violence illegible by removing the burden of responsibility from the perpetrator (Boyle 2015; Seabrook 2021). This is especially likely in fraternities, where our interviewees reported illicit

substances were available in copious amounts. The implications of myths that link sexual violence to alcohol and illicit substance consumption were exhibited in Bobby's report of repeated assaults he experienced from an older brother:

James and I were walking back to our apartments in the snow after the party. When we began to get closer to the lake, James stopped and shoved me against the brick wall and kissed me, and I shoved him off. I said 'What are you doing?' And he was like, 'Oh, I just thought that would be really romantic.' And I said, 'Okay, well, no.' And he said, 'Oh, sorry.' Then, he said, 'We can find somewhere where it's darker.' I was like, 'No, I think I'm just ready to go home.' [...] So we started walking again and we got to a dark area. And he put his hands around my head, interlocked his fingers, and pulled my face onto his, and started making out with me. And I was not kissing back. And I ended up reaching my hand in between our two faces to push his hand off. I had a mark on my chin from how hard I had to... how hard he was holding me. And, I said, 'I really wanna go home. Please leave me alone.' And then he grabbed my jacket and said, 'No, no, I'm gonna walk you home and I'm gonna come in with you'.

The encounter ended when Bobby returned to his dorm without James, who walked away and "turns around, winks, and goes, 'I probably won't remember this in the morning.'" The association between alcohol and reduced inhibitions seemed to give Bobby's assailant plausible deniability, and alcohol rendered his sexual violence illegible when "I won't remember this in the morning" became code for "no one will know."

Gay and bisexual men's experiences of sexual harassment and assault were especially susceptible to becoming illegible since they represented marginalized masculinities. Mike speculated that fraternity men were trained to identify sexual violence among heterosexual individuals, but "they just wouldn't know how to spot it for us." He explained that "brothers don't think about queer people and violence as much of an issue because they think gay men are just more promiscuous. You know, since they're dudes, they can take care of themselves." Fraternity members receive substantial training on sexual violence and intimate partner violence, especially in comparison to nonmembers, but these trainings often concern heterosexual relationship violence (Seabrook 2021). Karl's account of experiencing unwanted touching in public showcases the implication of omitting gay and bisexual men's experiences from sexual violence trainings:

It was his senior week, and we were all in a hot tub, and I was the only sophomore with a group of seniors from my chapter. So, then he just started touching me and I wasn't really comfortable with that at first, so I kind of moved his hand and scooted to the other side of the tub. But he just kept doing it and it just got annoying, like super, super uncomfortable, to the point where he was touching me and groping me, so I just walked away [...] I didn't mention it to anyone after that because... I didn't wanna reflect poorly on him. He was like a graduating senior, he's a nice guy and all. You don't wanna yell at someone and be the

dude who's ruining the night, especially when the seniors were all kinda going away and it was one of their last moments to all be together.

Karl's relative status as a sophomore in a group of seniors made him reluctant to intervene, but his sexuality was nevertheless at play in rendering Karl's sexual violence experience illegible among a group of heterosexual fraternity men who were within the vicinity. Misconceptions about gay, bisexual, and queer men's sexuality and the general lack of access to resources make these men's experiences of intra-fraternal sexual violence especially illegible (Armstrong, Gleckman-Krut, and Johnson 2018; Kutateladze 2021). Hamilton et al. (2019) underscore that these inequalities are equally about class, race, and gender as they are about sexuality. Gay men of color like Karl, who deviate from the cultural ideals of hegemonic masculinity, are positioned to accrue fewer resources to gain status and protection in the matrix of domination.

The widespread absence of intervention shown across these narratives effectively normalized sexual violence in fraternity settings. Fraternity members' failure to intervene in these instances established ambiguous norms around what behaviors constitute sexual violence with which new, more suggestible brothers had to negotiate. The visibility of intra-fraternal sexual violence, combined with the lack of acknowledgement, appeared to make brothers take these behaviors for granted. The resulting normalization of intra-fraternal sexual violence was partly attributable to what one participant called the "guise of brotherhood":

In fraternities, there's an unspoken kind of silence about that sort of thing [intra-fraternal sexual violence] because it's all masked under the guise of brotherhood, which ultimately sometimes leads to the masking of issues because it might reflect poorly on the brotherhood, but ultimately just leads to problems not being addressed [...] it's just covering for people in situations where they really should be facing repercussions for it. It's kind of a no snitch mentality (Frankie).

Brotherhood, by these accounts, constructed intra-fraternal sexual violence as illegible by minimizing them as normal and expected of fraternity life. Sexual violence became inconceivable by fraternities' white hetero-masculine standards. Participants generally reported uncertainty about whether to label their experiences as injurious or to report grievances based on the norms and values of the fraternity. In other words, the brotherhood shaped fraternity members' situated consciousness around intra-fraternal sexual violence (Berrey et al. 2012; Nielsen 2000). The likelihood that men's experiences of intra-fraternal sexual violence are made illegible is mediated by their location in the matrix of domination (Collins 2004). Gay and bisexual members, for instance, reported bearing the brunt of stereotypes that invalidated their experiences of sexual violence.

Brotherhood and the Impunity of Intra-Fraternal Sexual Violence Perpetration

Six participants in our sample belonged to fraternities with internal reporting and adjudicating mechanisms. These disciplinary panels were termed “judicial councils” and “executive committees,” and they comprised five to seven brothers who addressed issues ranging from roommate disputes to sexual violence. Some disciplinary panels involved hearings in which opting out could adversely affect a claimant’s case. Participants had varying degrees of involvement with disciplinary panels; five interviewees had direct experiences as panel members and two as claimants, and all knew about case proceedings indirectly from peers. Unsurprisingly, interviewees characterized these panels as ineffective, citing numerous cases with unsuccessful resolutions. Thomas, for instance, referenced fraternities’ lack of institutional experience with handling sexual violence cases:

What would end up happening is you have a 18 to 22-year-old kid, who is the president of his fraternity, essentially leading this kind of investigation and trying to figure out what to do to largely protect the fraternity and not provide justice really or respect the wishes of the survivor or whoever. Because he’s the president of the fraternity, his interest is protecting his fraternity. So yeah, that is a disaster [...] And there’s no guidelines for him to follow. I’ve talked with our president a lot about this. It was like super hard for him to do, because he’s not prepared to do this [...] And how do you properly train a 20-year-old kid on how to manage the situation by himself when he has tons of other things going on.

The internal composition of disciplinary panels posed a damaging conflict of interest. Participants who did not pursue these channels cited the futility of reporting to fraternity leaders motivated to protect the organization. The fraternity’s interests were institutionalized by the bonds of the brotherhood, built on loyalty and conformity, and they accordingly shaped the lens through which brothers conceived of sexual violence.

Some interviewees who belonged to fraternities with disciplinary panels noted that their leaders actively discouraged members from reporting: “[My fraternity] keeps the process so secret that most of us didn’t even know it existed until recently [...] When it comes to stuff like this, [the president] usually just tells us something like ‘don’t be a bad person’” (Mike). The message “don’t be a bad person” bears a significant resemblance to the phrase “don’t fuck your brother.” Whereas “don’t fuck your brother” advances the fraternity organization’s interests by cultivating loyalty and conformity to the brotherhood, “don’t be a bad person” protects those interests by reminding brothers where their allegiances should lie.

In a brotherhood, as Lance described, “you take care of your brothers.” So, when Lance attended a fraternity party where an older brother pressured him to drink and groped him later that night, no one intervened because “you don’t want to call your brother out on doing something like that to another brother.” Lance’s experience illustrates how new and impressionable fraternity members may internalize messages

like “don’t fuck your brother” and “don’t be a bad person.” Even when brothers could recognize and name these instances, reporting sexual violence would undermine the brotherhood and betray their loyalty toward one another. This consequence was clarified by Harry’s decision to not report: “I didn’t want to let them know that I was in a really bad mental space [...] I never put pen to paper because it’s just easier not to. It’s embarrassing, and it’s your brother, so you prefer to shut your ears off.”

The deterrent effects of fraternity disciplinary panels are evidenced by the fact that only two participants reported using them, and both had unsatisfactory experiences. Fraternity members who told us about experiencing sexual violence were reluctant to report to disciplinary panels because students were reportedly widely aware that fraternities’ conflicting interests would prevent them from yielding substantively fair outcomes. Harry referred to disciplinary panels as “a token thing” because “members of the board would randomly deactivate from the fraternity and apparently no one noticed, and that kind of thing makes it a pretty bad idea to send your case there.”

Interviewees explained that when disciplinary panels yielded verdicts that formally sanctioned perpetrators of sexual violence, the punishments were perfunctory. Such was the case with Bobby who was forcibly kissed and groped by an older brother after a rush party. Another brother who witnessed the event brought it to the chapter’s attention:

The fraternity kicked him out and banned him, but there were still [fraternity] parties at the new house where he lived in off campus. The guys he lived with told him to stay upstairs when there were parties. That was the rule with the fraternity they decided on based on the council meeting. But obviously he never stayed upstairs and no one ever did anything. And the older brothers especially, they knew what happened with me. They just didn’t care about my feelings. Maybe there was a belief that [the perpetrator] had gone through the pledging process and had given himself to the fraternity, so he should be allowed to be there (Bobby).

In the one reported instance in which a disciplinary panel ruled on a formal sanction, the perpetrator was still given impunity when his new, off-campus apartment became a satellite for the fraternity itself. This punishment was symbolic. By being physically barred from the fraternity’s house on campus, Bobby’s assailant was ostracized by the same fraternity members who tolerated his presence in off campus spaces. While the fraternity nominally addressed Bobby’s case, the conditions that facilitated his sexual assault in the fraternity remained unchanged—only this time they had impunity.

Ineffective and self-interested disciplinary panels relieved responsibility from perpetrators of intra-fraternal sexual violence. Of course, extra-fraternal reporting systems (i.e. Title IX and Diversity and Inclusion offices, on- and off-campus police) existed. But as Thomas described, “Fraternity presidents don’t want to report to the school, because they don’t want to get in trouble. A lot of times, the victims don’t wanna report to the school, because they don’t wanna go through a Title IX process, which is often seen as very taxing and difficult, and very involved.” In fact, none of the

fraternity members we spoke with pursued university reporting channels. When we asked interviewees why they didn't formally report their experiences to the university, many confirmed Thomas's hypothesis. Mike, for instance, noted that "A kiss in the bar doesn't seem like an incredibly... worth the university's resources to me." Matthew described pressures beyond the university that prevented him from reporting:

That just makes it seem like a way bigger deal than I want it to be. That sounds like such a hassle and the university, as far as I can tell, doesn't do a very good job with sexual assault situations. And I also don't wanna be known as that guy who called someone else out on doing something. Obviously, that's problematic, but I don't. And, yeah, it's kind of embarrassing, because I also take responsibility for these things, which I know I shouldn't, but I do.

Matthew's reluctance to report his experience to the university and "make it seem like a way bigger deal than I want it to be" was shared by most participants we interviewed. But even in the absence of reliable university reporting procedures, the survivors of sexual violence we interviewed could not turn to their brothers for support because the fraternity brotherhood shielded perpetrators with impunity. Members of disciplinary panels had effectively pledged allegiance to the fraternity through the membership process. They had conflicting interests with the cases they reviewed, which threatened to undermine the fraternity's public image. Fraternity leaders had a stake in protecting the fraternity as well, and some leaders actively discouraged members from reporting. Even when a disciplinary panel sanctioned a perpetrator of sexual violence, the punishment was nominal. Through self-pardoning disciplinary systems, brotherhood gave impunity to perpetrators of intra-fraternal sexual violence.

Discussion

Rape cultures shape how college men negotiate power, and intersectional hegemonic masculinities in fraternities crucially sustain these cultures (Armstrong, Hamilton, and Sweeney 2006; Grundy 2021). The brotherhood discourse helps weave these masculinities into the fabric of fraternity life through initiation processes and membership activities that construct, enforce, and institutionalize acceptable performances of race, gender, class, and sexuality (Allan, Joyce, and Perlow 2020). Members are both supported and constrained by the brotherhood. Membership requirements cultivate intimate bonds among brothers who are fiercely loyal toward one another. But to receive continued social capital, members must adhere to white hetero-masculine norms, rendering the occurrence, illegibility, and impunity of intra-fraternal sexual violence likely.

Our interviews with 15 fraternity men in an elite, midwestern university explore the undertheorized intersection of fraternities and men's sexual violence. We show how fraternity brothers normalize intra-fraternal sexual violence by institutionalizing hegemonically masculine intersectional domination through a brotherhood discourse that

governed initiation and membership. New students participated a selection process that privileged a white hetero-masculine standard of sociability, lifestyle, and body physique DeSantis (2007) calls “the Greco-sexual.” This selection process rewarded members for persevering through risky activities and punished those who did not participate. Newcomers’ shared experiences facilitated strong relationships among their ranks, and they ensured new members would be loyal to the fraternity’s code of silence.

In this “guise of brotherhood,” which seemingly held men liable for their own victimization, the fraternity brothers we interviewed struggled to make sense of their own sexual harassment and assault experiences, as well as recognize and name instances of intra-fraternal sexual violence they witnessed. Participants relied heavily on their fraternity as a reference to conceptualize their experiences of sexual assault; brotherhood in this way informed their situated consciousness about intra-fraternal sexual violence (Berrey et al. 2012; Nielsen 2000). The quotidian lack of intervention in these incidents made intra-fraternal sexual violence illegible. Moreover, vulnerability to illegibility was shaped by members’ intersectional location in the matrix of domination. Gay and bisexual members described being susceptible to stereotypes about promiscuity, which made them less likely to come forward.

The social capital benefits of the fraternity brotherhood did not extend to brothers who reported intra-fraternal sexual violence. In the name of protecting the brotherhood, disciplinary panel members turned a blind eye to reports of sexual violence. Fraternity leaders extended the “don’t fuck your brother” discourse instilled in newcomers during hazing through the “don’t be a bad person” discourse during membership. The brotherhood discourse loomed large in fraternities’ internal disciplinary processes, where perpetrators of sexual violence were often, ultimately shielded from accountability.

There are several limitations to this study. Though we recruited “men who have experienced unwanted touching, groping, or penetration by another fraternity man,” men are unlikely to disclose these experiences (Hlavka 2017), especially fraternity men who are sworn to the secrecy of brotherhood (Allan, Joyce, and Perlow 2020). Future research should employ more expansive recruitment criteria that can draw larger, more diverse samples. More comparative research is needed in this area as well. Future studies of intra-fraternal sexual violence should examine how men experience sexual violence in fraternities across different institutions with distinct gendered climates, as well as how intersectional domination persists across settings. These limitations notwithstanding, this study’s findings can inform higher education sexual violence prevention efforts. Practitioners can look to the brotherhood discourse as a meaningful target area for intervening and preventing intra-fraternal sexual violence.

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