

Not Just a Few Bad Guys: Privilege and Power as Mediators of Sexual Violence in Fraternities

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Research Question

Why are fraternities hotspots for sexual violence on college campuses? What factors and mechanisms contribute to sexual violence within fraternities?

Theoretical Framework

Hookup culture on college campuses
Factors related to sexual violence on college campuses
Fraternity parties and sexual violence
Privilege, power, and rape culture

Methods

Recruited participants from fraternities, sororities, and sexual health or survivor advocacy based student groups through Facebook and personal knowledge
In-depth interviews with students
Qualitative coding for common themes

Data

9 fraternity brothers, 9 sorority sisters, 5 members of sexual violence prevention, sexual health, and survivor advocacy groups
6 fraternities, 3 sororities, 3 student sexual violence prevention organizations

Results

Three mechanisms through which privilege creates affordances for sexual violence:

- Sexual entitlement
- Monopolization of party space
- Lack of accountability, evasion of accountability

Discussion

On the college campus I studied, fraternity culture promotes entitlement, as being in a fraternity gives individual members access to opportunities that are denied to those with less privilege. This cultural entitlement bleeds into the sex lives of members, which also becomes highly competitive. Additionally, fraternities monopolize party spaces, and they hold immense power over guests in their role as simultaneously party host and safety monitor.

Discussion (continued)

This power imbalance both enables fraternity brothers to act sexually inappropriately towards guests and limits the ability of guests to control their own safety.

Finally, fraternity brothers are able to use their immense wealth and connections to evade accountability when called out for misconduct.

Overall, I found that the institutional inertia of fraternities creates affordances for sexual violence, even when individual fraternity brothers seek positive change.

Future Research

This research provides the basis for future research regarding Greek life abolition. Additionally, any studies that focus on the tension between institutional pressures and individual desires of those within the institutions could build off of this research.