THE CONCEPTUALIZATION OF SISTERHOOD WITHIN THE COLLEGIATE SORORITY: AN EXPLORATION

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The term "sisterhood" is one that has been used in a variety of ways to describe relationships among and between groups of women. Scholars have devoted little to no attention to the manner in which modern sorority members define and conceptualize their sisterhood experience. This study seeks to understand the various ways that collegiate sorority members define and experience the concept of sisterhood. The present study closely mirrors and extends the methodology and focus of the research on brotherhood conducted by McCreary and Schutts (2015).

Since their founding in 1870, collegiate women's fraternal organizations (now referred to as sororities) offered a variety of benefits to their members. Sororities originally provided a source of solidarity and support for their members who found themselves as unwanted minorities on male-dominated college campuses in the late 19th Century (Turk, 2004). As the sorority movement expanded and grew, these initial concepts of solidarity and support gradually gave way to a sorority experience largely centered around social experiences and a sense of belonging (Turk, 2004).

Research on the sorority experience has been limited to a handful of studies focusing largely on educational outcomes. The body of existing research related to sorority involvement has shown both positive and negative outcomes, but has generally revealed that membership in sororities leads to more positive, and less negative, outcomes than membership in fraternities (Bureau, Ryan, Ahren, Shoup, & Torres, 2011; Hevel, Martin, Weeden, & Pascarella, 2014; Martin, Hevel, Asel & Pascarella, 2011; Pascarella, Flowers, & Whitt, 2001). Sorority women outperform non-affiliated women on campus specifically in science fields, and sorority membership is shown to have continued academic benefits for women during the second and third years of college (Pascarella, et al., 2001). Beyond academic benefits, Asel, Seifert, and Pascarella (2009) also found a strong relationship between membership in a Greek-letter organization and higher rates of involvement in social and co-curricular activities than non- affiliated students. The positive benefits of membership improve throughout a women's collegiate experience. Pike (2001) noted that senior members scored higher than non-affiliated students on gains in student engagement and gains in student learning between freshman and senior year.

The term "sisterhood" is one that has been used in a variety of ways to describe relationships among and between groups of women. Scholars have used the term with regards to the feminist movement (Cassel, 1977; Siegel & Baumgardner, 2007), to describe the bonds between women of color (Austin, 1991) and even to describe the relationships among prostitutes during the early Twentieth Century (Rosen, 1983). While the term has been used with some regularity in the feminist literature, we are left to guess how "sisterhood" is experienced by sorority members, as no scholarly attention has been paid to that topic. . While Turk (2004) has described the historic roots of sisterhood within the context of the collegiate sorority, scholars have devoted no attention to the manner in which modern sorority members define and conceptualize their sisterhood experience. This study seeks to fill the existing gap in the literature. Specifically, this study seeks to understand the various ways that

collegiate sorority members define and experience the concept of sisterhood.

In attempting to understand the concept of sisterhood within the collegiate sorority, this study closely mirrors the methodology and focus of the research conducted by McCreary and Schutts (2015) regarding how collegiate fraternity members define and construct the concept of brotherhood. Their research identified four unique but related schema employed by fraternity members to conceptualize brotherhood: brotherhood based on solidarity, brotherhood based on shared social experiences, brotherhood based on belonging, and brotherhood based on accountability (McCreary & Schutts, 2015). The research on brotherhood illustrated not only that the different schema of brotherhood can be identified and measured, but also that the dominant schema of brotherhood were strongly related to a variety of other important outcomes such as hazing tolerance, alcohol use, organizational attachment, and moral disengagement at both the individual and organizational levels (McCreary & Schutts, 2015). As fraternal brotherhood has provided a new lens through which to view these issues so common in fraternities, a similar study of sisterhood is a worthy undertaking. As noted by McCreary and Schutts (2015) "To understand the way that fraternity members define and conceptualize brotherhood is to understand the way they define the experience itself, and would provide valuable framework for understanding the behaviors and cognitions of fraternity members as a peer group" (p. 32). The same can be said for an understanding of sisterhood – as we seek to provide context to the outcomes of sorority membership, an understanding of how women define and conceptualize sisterhood provides a valuable framework and merits a more in-depth understanding than the current literature provides.

Methods

This study employed a qualitative, grounded-theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) approach to understanding how sorority women define and conceptualize sisterhood. As the current literature provides us with no explanation of the ways in which sorority members experience sisterhood, a grounded-theory approach is appropriate in developing a theory of fraternal sisterhood. The researchers partnered with an international sorority headquarters to conduct semi-structured focus group interviews of sorority members attending the sorority's convention during the summer of 2014. Focus groups were chosen over in-depth interviews for two reasons. First, as sisterhood is a group-relevant construct that involves social interaction and relationships, a group conversation (as opposed to individual interviews) seemed more appropriate (Liamputtong, 2011). Secondly, the researchers chose focus groups for convenience in that it provided an opportunity to hear broader and more diverse perspectives within a limited timeframe. In all, four separate focus groups were conducted, each lasting approximately 90 minutes, and each consisting of 12-16 sorority members. While this may be considered to be a large group for focus group research (Liamputtong, 2011), convenience dictated the inclusion of a larger number of participants per group in order to ensure diversity in terms of the participant's backgrounds and experiences within the sorority, as the researchers were only given one day in which to conduct the focus groups at the convention. The participants were selected via stratified random sampling, ensuring diversity in terms of age, geographic representation, university size/type, chapter size, level of chapter involvement and chapter culture. This sampling approach is consistent with the sampling procedures for grounded theory research suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1998) in that the researchers approached the project with some understanding of the of the phenomenon we intended to study and intentionally selected groups of individuals most representative of that phenomenon.

The focus group participants all ranged in age

from 19-22 years old, and were predominately White/Caucasian, although there were also a small number of Hispanic, Asian-American and African-American participants. The focus group involved partially-structured questioning – the students were asked to respond to the questions "What is sisterhood," "How do you think most of the members of your chapter think about sisterhood" and "How do you distinguish friendship from sisterhood." Follow up questions were asked in order to better understand responses, to clarify ideas presented, and to distinguish various themes from one another as they emerged. Following the recommendations of Strauss and Corbin (1998), emerging themes were analyzed as they were collected, and each subsequent focus group built upon the themes and categories emerging from previous focus groups. Those themes that repeatedly emerged in the conversations became the focus of the latter focus groups, as the researchers sought better understanding of the concepts that were discussed by participants. The researchers collected detailed notes in addition to audio recordings which were subsequently coded. Following the recommendations of both Strauss and Corbin (1998) and Tesch (1990), the data were summarized and reduced into broader themes, and patterns within the responses were identified, including frequencies and differences within the responses. Once coded, the data were categorized and the emerging themes were analyzed, described and labeled.

The data collected revealed five distinct themes that sorority members use to explain or define sisterhood. We describe these data in the following section based on the primary themes which were identified in the analysis, including *sisterhood based on shared social experiences, sisterhood based on support and encouragement, sisterhood based on belonging, sisterhood based on accountability, and sisterhood based on common purpose.*

Findings

Shared Social Experience—"Having pictures of my sorority sisters and me in letters is one of the best parts of being in a sorority…" The sorority as a social outlet and sisterhood as a primarily social construct was a clearly held viewpoint of a number of participants. These participants understood their membership in the organization to be primarily a social contract, as they joined the organization through a process emphasizing the social nature of the sorority, and these social ties remained important throughout their experience. One participant explained how the social nature of sisterhood was most important by stating "Right now it's all about making friends and having a good time" as those social ties were pivotal to cementing a deeper connection down the road. This same idea was expanded upon by another member who said that "most people join for the social aspect, because they just don't know what else is coming or what else to expect." Another participant expressed that "whenever I started, I thought of the image, because I was an only child, so I wanted the image of me being with all my sisters having all these pictures, showing everybody that I had all these friends and I was just so excited about it" explaining that what she originally sought out from her sorority experience was the publically visible social status of being able to post photos of all her new friends on social media.

Some participants explained that many of their sisters would consider sisterhood in terms of who they party with on the weekends. The phrases used to communicate what sisterhood is to those members were "the women that drive me home from the bar," "the person that holds my hair back when I drink too much," or "my wing-woman." Participants articulated that many of their chapter members found the pregaming and getting ready together before going out to be an important component of sisterhood. The overtly social nature of fraternities and sororities has been thoroughly examined in the

literature. Women in college have steadily increased their reported rates of binge drinking in social settings in the past decade. Nearly 40% of sorority women reported binge drinking once, and 20% report binge drinking three or more times when asked about their alcohol consumption in the previous 2 weeks (Wechsler, Lee, Kuo, Seibring, Nelson, & Lee, 2002). Smith and Berger (2010) explored how women interact and socialize within their peer groups. They found that alcohol consumption came after the primary relationships had been formed and was used as a method to deepen the bonds that women held with each other. Their study found that women in peer groups, including sororities, have a type of ritual related to their social interactions that includes pre-gaming together, going out together and then sharing stories together the next day. One of the most relevant pieces of this ritualistic social experience was that when members of the group shared their drinking escapades with others, the negative consequences were often rationalized as the inevitable byproducts of a good time (Smith & Berger, 2010). The storytelling part of the social experience highlights the positive aspects of drinking and partying, while downplaying the negative aspects, which together can have a reinforcing effect for members. As our research uncovered, this ritual is viewed by many sorority members as an important component to sisterhood that can serve to strengthen the relationships between members.

Some focus group members were hesitant to acknowledge the more social aspects of the sorority as being tied to sisterhood. One member explained that she initially did not want to categorize drinking and partying as part of sisterhood. When pressed to distinguish the difference between how she defined sisterhood and how she actually saw sisterhood displayed by members of her chapter, she resigned herself to the fact that attending parties together and drinking as a group was a part of her sorority's sisterhood. Others also described this version of sisterhood in a more negative light. As one student noted "People [who think about sisterhood in this way] are only thinking about themselves. They think sisterhood is about the girls I want to go party with. That's probably why we're [her chapter] on probation." Another participant described this version of sisterhood as a "sisterhood of selfishness. Girls only care about what's in it for them – whether or not they're having fun, and that's all they really care about." In this sense, it is easy to imagine rifts in chapters, with factions divided along the lines of those who see sisterhood as a primarily social experience, and those who view it in more altruistic ways.

Comparatively, the social nature of sisterhood was less tied to partying and alcohol consumption when compared to the shared social experience of brotherhood in fraternities, as observed by McCreary and Schutts (2015). Men describe the social aspects of brotherhood almost exclusively in relation to "the fun times – the parties." Rather, sorority members' conceptualizations of the social side of sisterhood revolved primarily around the social prestige and status that comes from membership. As a result, the image of the sorority is paramount in the minds of these members. This was brought to light by one participant who stated that "We are all one image, and it is important that members uphold that image." Another participant noted "There is a sense of pride in our exclusivity. We share a bond that nobody else can understand."

This emphasis on the importance of the perception of a social exclusivity could speak, at least in part, to the idea of sororities serving as gatekeeper related the social experience for female students on many college campuses. Stuber, Klugman, and Daniel (2011) studied the gender differences in social exclusion within the fraternity and sorority community and noted that men tended to join their organizations as a result of forming a social bond with current members, whereas women would join their sorority potentially for the perceived social status that group held (Stuber, Klugman, & Daniel, 2011). In other words, many women join their sorority

not because of a sense of connection or belonging to the individual members of that group, but because of their perception of that group's place in the social hierarchy of campus life. Based on this, one could hypothesize a strong relationship between viewing sisterhood as a primarily social construct and concern about the sorority's position in the social hierarchy.

The rise of the social nature of sisterhood was well-documented by Turk (2004) in her historical study of women's fraternal organizations. As she noted, the first generation of sorority members (circa 1870-1890) focused on mutual support and solidarity in the face of opposition to their mere presence on campus. Feeling pressure to justify their presence on campus, their efforts focused primarily on assisting and supporting one another in academic pursuits. As that opposition waned near the turn of the century, sorority members no longer found themselves struggling and isolated. As a result, sorority members of the 1890's and early 1900's de-emphasized the original intellectual mission of their organizations while emphasizing the social nature. Recitations and academic readings at chapter meetings were replaced by social critiques, teas, and parties with fraternities, as the sororities turned their attention largely away from their intellectual and scholarly pursuits and became focused instead on what could be described as social and largely superficial affairs (Turk, 2004).

Encouragement and Support—"My sorority sisters have my back and are there for me when I need them…" The most frequent theme to emerge from participants was the description of sisterhood as the presence of a constant source of encouragement and support. Participants were able to explain that the support and encouragement within the sorority holds a slightly deeper meaning than any support they may receive from their other friends. Participants described their sisters providing encouragement at all levels and supporting them in both positive times and negative times. This idea of mutual support was explained by one member as "they (sisters) are there to celebrate with you when something great happens or they're there to comfort you and just be with you when something bad happens." One woman expressed how the outpouring of support she received while preforming in a school theater production highlighted the support and encouragement she felt from her sisters:

> It's (sisterhood) that kind of love and support, having them be enthusiastic about whatever you do. That in turn makes me want to go do that for anything they have and support them as much as I can, because I feel loved and supported and valued for what I do.

Similarly, other participants noted sisterhood based on encouragement and support as a system of reciprocity, with one student noting "it is your role to encourage and support your sisters knowing you will receive that same commitment in return." Another member explained that she first understood this level of sisterhood when she had to go to the hospital and several of her sisters showed up to be there with her. As she stated "It was then that I began to understand what it [sisterhood] was all about. It's about being there for people in need." This sense of obligation applies even to members that are not considered close friends or acquaintances. As one member noted:

> I'm not necessarily going to be best friends with 150 people in my chapter, but if one of those people needed something from me, I would do it. Even if they're not my favorite person, I might not get along with them all the time- I would do it because they are in my sisterhood.

Participants often framed their comments about encouragement and support in absolute terms and indicated that they would always be there for each other regardless of the circumstances. For example, one participant stated "When you can't trust anyone else, you can find a sister to trust. I have a hard time trusting a lot of my friends outside of (the sorority)…You just always have someone you can confide in when

maybe you don't want to confide in anyone else." Another put it into even simpler terms: "Putting your sister's needs above your own, at the times when they most need it." There was also a common theme of being there to answer late night calls as a show of support. As one member explained:

> It's those calls you get at four in the morning and you still answer them even though you have to sleep because you feel that love for someone and respect to be like 'I don't care what time of the day it is, I don't care what the problem is I'm going to answer no matter what.' I feel like that's sisterhood.

This schema was similar, yet distinguishable, to brotherhood based on solidarity observed by McCreary and Schutts (2015) in their study of fraternity men. Both men and women used similar language was used to generally describe notions of "being there for one another" and "having one another's back." However, gender-specific differences emerged when asking about specific examples of how those notions of solidarity and support played out. For men, this more often involved physical support (*If my we were out at a bar and my brother got into a fight, I would have his back*) or group support (*If one of our guys got into trouble, it would be important that we rally around him and show our support*). This often manifested itself in behaviors that could best be described as a gang mentality. However, the support referred to most frequently by sorority members was emotional support (i.e. being there to listen, attending a pageant or theater production, talking through problems) and did not manifest itself in gang-like, negative behaviors that were observed by the men in McCreary and Schutts' (2015) study. In order to distinguish this difference, the term "support and encouragement" was used in place of the term "solidarity."

This finding is consistent with what we know about the different manners in which men and women conceptualize their relationships. Men tend to focus on the activities they partake in together as being the bedrock of the relationship, whereas women focus more on the shared feelings, closeness and intimacy of the relationship (Walker, 1994). Handler (1995) investigated sorority membership as a strategy for navigating gender relations, focusing on two key aspects of the sorority experience: the closeness of the bond that can only be attributed to the sorority and a sense that the expectations of sisters are greater than the expectations of friends. Social support was found to a key factor in predicting the success of a student's transition and adjustment to college. The increased social support from friends is predictive of increases in personal-emotional, social, and overall adjustment to the college/university environment (Friedlander, Reid, Shupak, & Cribbie, 2007). The sorority experience provides a structure in which collegiate women experience support and encouragement. Their perception of the level of support and encouragement that they receive from the group is a measuring stick for how strong they view the sisterhood within their sorority.

This schema of sisterhood is closely related to the concept of perceived organizational support. Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison, and Sowa (1989) explain this concept in terms of a work-place setting in which an individual is more committed to the organization when they feel that the organization is committed to them. This concept appears to be closely related to the sense of encouragement and support found in the interpersonal relationships that develop between sisters within the sorority. As one focus group participant noted "Sisterhood is about putting the needs of others above your own." Sentiments such as these were frequently shared, and indicated a commitment to the organization that came about as a result of receiving encouragement and support from others. Participants were able to articulate a stronger sense of commitment to their sisters when they felt that those supportive commitment levels were reciprocated by others. Based on the research of Eisenberger et al (1989), this feeling can create an environment in which members of the organization will be

more likely to be retained in the organization for longer periods of time, engage and participate at higher levels, and pay back those levels of support and encouragement to others on a consistent basis (Eisenberger et al, 1989).

The historic study of sisterhood by Turk (2004) reveals that this sisterhood based on support and encouragement was likely the most salient form of sisterhood to the founding members of sororities in the 1870's through the 1880's. As she noted, the women who founded and joined sororities during that time period did so to provide mutual aid and assistance to their fellow co-eds during a time in which their presence on campus was met with hostility from students, faculty and society writ large. Feeling a great deal of pressure to justify their existence on campus, these early sorority members supported and encouraged one another in a manner that would reflect positively on one another, the sorority, and the female sex (Turk, 2004). While the present findings show that the support and encouragement sorority members feel today are less along academic lines and more along the lines of emotional support, the feeling of the sorority as a place of receiving that support was and remains an important feature of sisterhood.

Belonging—"I feel very connected to my sorority sisters…" Focus group participants frequently made mention of the sorority being their "home away from home" or their "family while in college." This concept of a familial belonging was explained by one participant as:

> No matter disagreements your have, no matter how many fights you get in with your sorority sisters- you always have the same goal no matter what. So I think that's where I find more connectedness more acceptance, and less isolation than in my own family.

There was also a common thread of the sorority being a way to form your own community while in college. One member explained the importance of this by stating:

> (Sisterhood is) that transition from high school to college, everyone has their high school group of friends but when you go to college, it's kind of like restarting a little bit, so sisterhood to me is that group of girls I've grown up with, through my college years.

Other members explained this same idea by stating that their sisterhood "made their campus smaller." It was even explained that there was a sense of comfort for potential new members to know that on bid day they would instantly belong to a large group of friends. These initial ties are important to the concept of sisterhood and remain vital throughout a member's time in the chapter. When asked specifically why women stay in their chapter, the first response given was that there was a "sense of belonging." One participant went on to explain that it was scary to think about where she would be without her sisters and described a sense of "unconditional love" from her sisters which made her want to stay in the organization.

Women indicated that this sense of belonging was often developed from a deep level of trust they did not experience in their other friendships outside the sorority. One way this was explained was "you just always have someone you can confide in" which was central to their view on sisterhood. Another described her sorority as a "community of inclusion," indicating that it was a place where members felt accepted and could be comfortable being themselves.

This sense of belonging was often tied to sharing a bond they didn't share with others. One participant stated that:

> There's no reason for it (the bond), you're just there and you understand that no matter what happens, no matter if you're in a fight or anything, you're always connected to our values and what we really are as a sorority, and that's what made me realize these are my sisters not just my friends.

Beyond the belonging found within their local chapter, members expressed the importance of feeling connected to strangers that shared their affiliation, one participant told the following

story:

> We were on spring break on the beach, and this alum just comes running up to us because she saw us in our letter shirts and had to take a picture with us, had to talk to us about how recruitment went and everything. That connection I felt from a stranger that I've never met before in my entire life, had never spoke a word to, was not the same age- was just unreal. That made our whole trip.

Another member shared a similar story about her experience attending National Convention that further highlights the instant sense of belonging that is central to the concept of sisterhood:

> I think that the term sisterhood goes beyond just a friendship….It's something that I feel is stronger than just an average friendship because you automatically share the same love for something…This is my first time meeting these girls and I already know that we have something in common. So I would automatically think of them already as something more than just the average person off the street or a friend. I feel like I already share something with them.

Each of these stories highlight the idea that sorority membership provides an environment in which an individual has the instant ability to belong and feel connection to a group. Baumeister and Leary (1995) assert that belonging is a universal and innate human desire that goes beyond the need to feel attached to others. It is purposed that the sense of belonging has two main components: "(1) people need frequent personal contacts or interactions with the other person and (2) people need to perceive that there is an interpersonal bond or relationship marked by stability, affective concern, and continuation into the foreseeable future" (p. 497). Both of these features were evident in the comments made by participants in the present research.

The concept of belonging is central to membership within a group. As noted by Durkheim (1951), the need to belong is a fundamental human trait and can have a powerful influence on behavior. Expansion of Durkheim's original research on belonging shows that the ritual aspects of sorority life, both formal and informal, public and private, create a sense of belonging with the group. Marshall (2012) notes "organizations that require high degrees of belonging and belief from their members will exhibit and demand particularity high degrees of ritual behavior from those members, including initiation and significant ongoing feats of effort and/or abstinence" (p. 373). The sorority environment requires frequent engagement with ritual activities that help build a sense of belonging for members and also helps construct their view of sisterhood.

The language that participants used to describe their sense of belonging as it related to sisterhood within the sorority context were practically identical to the language used by fraternity members to describe brotherhood in the research conducted by McCreary and Schutts (2015), indicating that the human need to belong and connect within a group does not appear to vary by gender. As was noted in that research, sense of belonging has been studied within higher education (Hausmann, Ye, Schofield, & Woods, 2009), and has been shown to have a strong relationship with institutional commitment, intention to persist and actual persistence. It could be theorized from the present findings that increased rates of belonging within a sorority could lead to similar outcomes, particularly as comments related to belonging were often tied to comments about levels of commitment to the sorority and its members.

Accountability—"It bothers me when my sisters fail to uphold the sorority's high standards…" Participants expressed that accountability to one another and the organization were important features of sisterhood. This concept of accountability appeared as a sense of "owing" something to each other or the group as a whole that was not present in other relationships. This sense of "owing" something was explained by one

participant who stated "It (sisterhood) kind of comes as more of an obligation. Sometimes in my chapter sisterhood is more alerting people that we are all bonded together and it's all one image." Participants explained that joining a sorority is a choice, and a part of that choice is knowing you will be held accountable to a certain set of standards or rules that may not apply to other college students. This concept was communicated in a straightforward manner, as one participant put it "at the end of the day when you chose to join a sisterhood you chose to be held accountable for every single thing you do. So in that instance, sisterhood it just you know, holding each other accountable." One woman explained her personal revelation about accountability in the following way:

> I think that sisterhood, for me, was the first time I didn't want to go (to an event) I didn't want to do something and I realized that that doesn't matter and that I need to be there because I need to be accountable for it.

Accountability was also explained as the need to engage in difficult or uncomfortable conversations with sisters related to their behavior or performance. One participant elaborated on this idea:

> I think it (sisterhood) also goes back to accountability and commitment to that relationship-being like 'you probably shouldn't do that tonight' or 'that guy's not the best guy for you'. Just having their back in that aspect is also about accountability and holding them to the standards that they signed up for and they said they believe in.

Another participant explained how part of sisterhood is tied to trust in the following way "it's trusting that they will do what you ask them when it's really important and when it really matters. And trusting that they will take responsibility for their own actions if it influences the representation of the whole group."

Other participants discussed how chapter leaders are often the ones charged with holding members accountable and have a higher level of responsibility because:

> They see the bigger picture, they want the house (chapter) to excel, they care about the sisters, they will sacrifice going to formal to take care of a drunk girl or they will sacrifice going out to be with the girl that is upset.

The fraternity and sorority system creates a culture in which student are not only responsible for themselves as in individual, but are responsible to the group as a whole. The group structure expects individuals to ascribe to a set of shared expectations, and for all individuals to be accountable to those expectations (Beau & Buckley, 2001). The expectations members seek to uphold come from both formal and informal sources. The national organization may place certain expectations on chapters, and each chapter will create its own set of informal standards to which members are held accountable. Sorority members may be faced with situations in which they feel the need to be accountable to competing forces and, under those circumstances, they will act upon staying accountable to the strong personal relationship (Frink & Klimoski, 1998). Accountability within the sorority is tied to the perceived and varying levels of importance found in the relationships. Gelfand, Lim, and Raver (2004) conceptualize accountability as a system of webs which are "perceptions of the expectations and obligations that exist among entities, the direction of these connections, and their strength" (p. 154). The sorority allows for varying levels of accountability which in turn allows for members to experience accountability in multiple ways. This diversity of accountability appeared to manifest in two distinct ways in the present research. First, participants talked about accountability to the image of the sorority (i.e. "we are all accountable to the same image"), indicating that members were most often held accountable when their actions were perceived by others as harmful to the sorority's image on campus. Alternatively, participants also discussed ac-

countability to the espoused values of the sorority (i.e. "when you choose to join a sisterhood, you choose to hold yourself accountable to our values"). This distinction, while subtle, could be indicative of a situation in which other schema of sisterhood are reinforced through systems of accountability. For example, accountability to the image of the sorority would appear to reinforce notions of social status and a sisterhood based on social experiences, whereas accountability to shared or espoused values may reinforce more evolved, altruistic notions of sisterhood.

Common Purpose—"Sisterhood is about being a part of something bigger than yourself…" Focus group participants explained the concept of their sisterhood being shown through having a common purpose, or an understanding of the "big picture." Many of these statements focused on an understanding that the sorority was bigger than just the individuals in their chapter and were therefore a part of something larger. One participant explained this by stating "I feel like the transition (to sisterhood from friendship) would probably be when you do realize you're working towards a common goal and you want to help each other in more ways than just going out an having fun." Another participant echoed this idea by saying that "it's [the sorority] so much bigger than you, it's so much bigger than your chapter." In a group setting females have been shown to display higher levels of responsibility towards fellow group members compared to males (Beutel & Marini, 1995). One woman explained this concept in the following manner:

> We have that bond as women, we have that bond as sisters too, so it's just like that unbreakable thing where every value you have, someone else shares it and any experience you have they understand it, whether they've been through it or not-they know someone who has - and that's just really empowering to see where you can take the hard things you've been through and build each other up and spread that strength.

Some women expressed this sense of common purpose as being able to see beyond small issues, as ultimately members have the same goals in mind and are working towards the same ideals. One member explained how she viewed this idea by explaining "you're fighting to build strong girls and you're fighting for a bigger reason and you have a more important role than a ridiculous argument." This highlights the idea that the common purpose of the sisterhood can serve as a rallying point for the chapter. Sorority members viewing sisterhood in this way are able to see beyond personal disagreements in order to advance towards the greater good of the organization and the individuals in it. One participant stated that "I think that there's a sense that we're doing something bigger when we're together" to illustrate the feeling of common purpose found in her sisterhood.

It was suggested that this schema of sisterhood may be easier to grasp by attending a conference in which you see women from your organization that attend different schools, or by interacting with alumnae or national volunteers. One woman shared the following story about meeting members of the National Council for her sorority:

> They are people, and not only are they people, they are sisters, they are my family and they have the same exact ideals and purposes that I do. And it's crazy that we're on the same playing field in the sorority overall because we're all here for the same love and standards.

Participants expressed the benefit to being exposed to sisters outside their chapter in that it allowed members to see this common purpose was not just a local chapter common purpose, but a common purpose shared by all members of the organization.

The idea of a sisterhood based on common purpose was communicated in ways related to the organization itself, as well as to the individual women making up the organization. Some participants discussed sisterhood in terms of supporting one another, making one another

better, and helping one another achieve goals. One participant explained this concept in stating that "sisterhood is like being a part of a team, you're all players and all working towards the same goal. So, the game is life, and you all want to win." This sentiment was shared by another member who stated that "it's about believing in one another and wanting to better one another." Another woman stated that "it's more than just having fun it's more about believing in each other and wanting to better someone else in more ways than just having fun with them." Others described the notion of improvement and success less in individual terms, but in terms of the organization's success. One woman stated "sisterhood is about those moments of success and achievement. There is a sense of pride in carrying on the sorority's legacy of success." Others talked of celebrating the accomplishments of the group, both locally and nationally, and the sense of achievement that comes from sorority's accomplishments and accolades.

The roots of common purpose can be seen in the concepts of reciprocity and human cooperation. The idea that sometimes one must act to benefit the group in a matter that may be detrimental to themselves is central to the structure of sisterhood. Indirect reciprocity models can be used to help explain behavior that creates an environment in which long term gains are made for short-term prosocial acts on behalf of an individual. Nowak (2006) explains indirect reciprocity in a way that is easily applicable to the sorority dynamic:

> Helping someone establishes a good relationship, which will be rewarded by others. When deciding how to act, we take into account the possible consequences of our reputation. We feel strongly about events that affect us directly, but we also take a keen interest in the affairs of others, as demonstrated by the contents of gossip (p. 1561).

Simpson and Willer (2009) categorize two types of individuals that emerge in groups. Egotists, who behave in a prosocial manner when reputational incentives encourage their behavior; and altruists, who do not need reward to engage in prosocial group behavior. Both sets of individuals may view common purpose as an important component of sisterhood but may have a different source of motivation to work towards that purpose. The altruists in the sorority could be viewed as having a higher level of dedication of commitment to the group as they could be motivated to increase the welfare of others at their own expense, whereas the egoists may only sacrifice their own needs when they see some other incentive (social status, a chapter office, etc.) as a possible prize down the road. Sisterhood based on common purpose serves as a way to conceptualize the abstract bond that members feel when they are working towards a greater good that may be absent in their relationships with family and friends.

Another concept that can be used to understand sisterhood based on common purpose is Organizational Citizenship Behavior (OCB), which has been defined as the manifestation of a disposition towards prosocial behavior within a group setting (LeBlanc, 2014). Research at the organizational level has shown that, in organizations with more individuals measuring high on OCB, there is a stronger sense of community, culture and organizational performance. Research has also shown that women consistently measure significantly higher in this attribute than men (LeBlanc, 2014), which could explain why this schema of sisterhood was salient in females in sororities in the present study, but was not observed by McCreary and Schutts (2015) in their study of brotherhood among fraternity members. This distinction is noted in other studies related to gender differences in organizational culture, showing that women tend to be more cooperative, whereas men tend to be more competitive, jockeying with one another for status within the organization, working towards primarily self-serving goals (Sanelands, 2002).

Transcendent Sisterhood – The five hypothesized schema of sisterhood, as described above, shared both similarities and differences between the four schema of fraternal brotherhood discussed by McCreary and Schutts (2015). Similarly, men and women conceptualize feelings of belonging and accountability in much the same way. Distinctly, women's solidarity embodies less negative behaviors when compared to men, women's social experiences appear to revolve less around alcohol, and women appear to experience a sisterhood based on common purpose that is not experienced by men in fraternities.

The most significant difference observed between men and women, however, was not in the schema themselves, but in the manner in which participants described those schema. In particular, fraternity members in McCreary and Schutts (2015) research described brotherhood in a very static way. Participants described a well-established, firmly entrenched culture of brotherhood, and prospective members are recruited based on that culture, new members indoctrinated into that culture, and older members serve as guardians of that culture. Very little variation was observed between freshmen and seniors, as the manner in which someone was indoctrinated to think about brotherhood was likely to be the way they thought about brotherhood upon graduation (McCreary & Schutts, 2015).

Women in the present research, however, described sisterhood as a developmental process, indicating that most members come into the sorority expecting and experiencing the social nature of sisterhood but, over time, begin to understand and experience the more advanced notions of sisterhood. One participant described this process as the "transcendence from a sisterhood of selfishness to a sisterhood of selflessness." As she stated, and as was reinforced by several other members, younger members tend to think of sisterhood in terms of whether or not they are experiencing fun things, and as they get older and gain experiences within the sorority, begin to understand that sisterhood is also about serving others, and sacrificing your own needs for the good of the whole. Some described this as a transition from friendship to sisterhood, where early on you think of the sorority as a group of friends to do fun things with but, over time, come to appreciate them as a sense of mutual support and betterment. Participants were also quick to point out that not all members transcend to these higher levels of sisterhood. To the contrary, they suggest that some women become "stuck" in the social nature of sisterhood, never seeing the sorority as more than a place to socialize with peers.

Limitations

The results of any study should be viewed within the context of their limitations. The present study includes a number of limitations that may have influenced the findings, foremost among them being the sampling procedure. Despite our efforts at stratification, the women participating in the focus groups were a largely homogeneous group. They were mostly White, many of them held leadership positions within their chapters, and the focus groups took place at a national convention. In fact, in one of the focus groups, the members had just completed a ritual session. It is quite possible that the experience at the national convention primed the participants in a way that may have altered or influenced their actual attitudes towards sisterhood. In seeking to overcome this limitation, the researchers asked questions such as "how did you think about sisterhood upon joining the sorority" and "how do you think most of your members back home in the chapter define sisterhood." Answers to these questions often provided key insights to the researchers.

The participants also all represented the same organization. While the authors went to great lengths to ensure that questions were asked in a general way, it is possible that certain cultural fixtures or rituals of this particular organization could have created certain notions about sister-

hood in the focus group participants that may not be present in women from other organizations. For example, if a key component of this organization's ritual were mutual support, then a notion of support as a key element of sisterhood may have been more salient with women in this organization that it might be for women in a different organization whose ritual focuses on things other than mutual assistance. Future research should target women from multiple organizations in order to determine if these findings are generalizable to a broader population, and should also specifically target women from culturally-based sororities.

Discussion and Implications for Research and Practice

This study has demonstrated that sorority members have distinct ways of conceptualizing the notion of sisterhood. This study should have strong practical application to scholars seeking to better understand the experiences of sorority members, as well as practitioners working with this student population.

Sisterhood based on shared social experiences is likely the only theorized schema that could be viewed as problematic. Women thinking of sisterhood in this way are likely to be more inclined to pursue primarily social interests within the sorority. It could be expected that these members are more likely to binge drink regularly when compared to members who place less emphasis on the social nature of sisterhood, and as a result may be less likely to succeed academically and less likely to persist within the sorority or within their institution of higher learning, as these outcomes have both been tied to increased alcohol consumption (CASA, 2007). Future research should investigate the relationship between these variables.

Sisterhood based on common purpose, in contrast to brotherhood based on solidarity observed in men by McCreary and Schutts (2015), appears to be a largely positive construct. As McCreary and Schutts (2015) found a strong relationship between solidarity and increased support of hazing behaviors, future research should investigate whether feelings related to support and encouragement within sororities can be too high. While generally, sorority members are less supportive of hazing than fraternity men (Ellsworth, 2006), and the new member education process within sororities tends to be less focused on building a bonded unified group of new members, future research should investigate, particularly in sorority populations that have experienced with hazing, whether this form of sisterhood has any relationship with hazing attitudes or behaviors.

While the descriptions of belonging between women in this study and men in the McCreary and Schutts (2015) study were nearly identical, the frequency with which these notions were mentioned was significantly less in the present study. The present research would indicate that sisterhood based on belonging, while certainly present and clearly communicated within the focus groups, was much less salient within the sorority population. Future research should seek to confirm whether belonging is, in fact, less salient in women's groups and, if so, why.

As noted by Gelfand et al. (2004), accountability involves being answerable for actions and decisions within certain cultural contexts. The research by McCreary and Schutts (2015) found strong negative relationships between brotherhood based on accountability and unethical, pro-organizational behavior (Umphress & Bingham, 2011), which is of importance in this study. A strong sense of accountability within an organization could be the mechanism by which anti-social behaviors are prevented, and pro-social behaviors promoted. This may be of significance to practitioners seeking to align sorority members' behaviors with espoused organizational values – by fostering increased levels of accountability within a sorority, one may be able to reduce the unethical behavior within that organization. In addition, as noted earlier, the method and tar-

get of chapter accountability (i.e. accountability to the projected image or accountability to espoused values) should be disentangled to better understand how various cultures of accountability contribute to or inhibit other forms of sisterhood.

Sisterhood based on common purpose appears from this research to have many positive and altruistic qualities. However, when pressed, many focus group participants struggled to articulate the ends of that purpose (i.e. to what end are you working towards? What is the common purpose of the organization?). While the schema appears to be most closely related to a general notion of self-sacrifice and organizational citizenship behavior (LeBlanc, 2014), future research should seek to investigate, within the context of the local chapter, both the means and ends of this schema and its potential utility to practitioners working with these populations.

Future research should also investigate whether the schema of sisterhood can be quantitatively measured. The authors suggest the use of sequential exploratory strategy in taking these qualitative data and using them to build and test an instrument aimed at measuring the hypothesized schema of sisterhood. Once developed, such an instrument could be used to correlate the various schema with other variables of importance to the sorority experience.

Understanding how women conceptualize sisterhood should prove useful for practitioners working with sorority members. Educational programming can be crafted around each of these schema and used to promote fluid movement towards a transcendent experience. At a group level, there is potential to use this research to assess the overall state of a chapter. For example, if the majority of a group conceptualized sisterhood as a purely shared social experience, it could serve as a call to work closely to provide supportive measures that will allow member to experience deeper levels of sisterhood.

Acknowledging that women have the potential to grasp deep levels of organizational commitment, or common purpose, can help professionals create more developmental opportunities to cultivate a transcendent sorority experience. This can help foster a better sense of life-long membership within collegiate women. The difficulty that some participants had with communicating the intricacies of common purpose serves as a strong reminder that professionals can assist members by engaging them in meaningful conversations about the purpose of their organization and their role as a part of a larger entity. Being able to identify members that can conceptualize and articulate the common purpose of the sorority experience can serve as a valuable tool for professionals. Those women can benefit the overall community by engaging fellow students in peer-to-peer conversations about membership which can promote growth and development for all members. Learning about the journey women go through during their membership positions practitioners to help women clarify and conceptualize the "bigger picture" of the sorority experience.

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