

"I'M NOT YOUR MOM, I'M YOUR SISTER": A NORMATIVE APPROACH TO UNDERSTAND HOW NATIONAL PANHELLENIC COUNCIL SORORITY LEADERS HANDLE HONEST CONVERSATIONS

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This study used Goldsmith's normative rhetorical theory to explore dilemmas in honest conversations between National Panhellenic Council (NPC) sorority members. Researchers interviewed 16 leaders from one NPC sorority across 14 chapters in the United States. A phronetic iterative analytic approach revealed two communication dilemmas: I have to have this honest conversation with you, but I do not want to and I have power, but I am your equal. To manage these dilemmas, two communicative strategies were identified: intentional planning and message delivery. Findings offer guidance on navigating honest conversations to foster belonging and maintaining a supportive social network.

Keywords: sorority, honesty, communication, leaders, dilemmas, NPC

Since their founding in 1851, National Panhellenic Conference (NPC) member organizations (i.e., sororities) provide their members with a source of solidarity and support. The NPC sorority experience centers around the "sisterhood," which consists of social experiences and a sense of belonging (Turk, 2004). The sisterhood is a developmental process, meaning that over time, members learn that the NPC sorority experience is more than participating in the "fun things," but is also about "serving others and sacrificing your own needs for the good of the whole" (Cohen et al., 2017, p. 43). This sense of ownership to others is an important feature of sisterhood. To uphold sisterhood and shape the chapter's culture, members are held accountable to their NPC sorority's standards. Sorority leaders are responsible for ensuring accountability is maintained.

Sorority leaders often gravitate towards relational leadership because they value sharing power with, rather than over, their peers (Pearlman et al., 2023). Dugan (2017) stated that relational leadership has four guiding principles: (a) exists both in and outside of formal leader roles, (b) is enacted through relationships across the organization, (c) plays a role in creating and/or influencing social order and social action, and (d) influences relationships by the contexts in which they are nested. Sisterhood relies on supporting and learning from others; thus, relational leadership can be viewed as fluid, co-constructed, and contextual. Selznick et al. (2024) found that a supportive sisterhood greatly influences a sorority member's ability to develop relational

leadership skills. Moreover, sorority leaders' social identities become increasingly important because the relational process requires an understanding of self and others in the NPC sorority and society (Owen et al., 2017). Although there are benefits of being a sorority leader (Long & Snowden, 2011), members' skills and identities can be at risk when navigating challenging interpersonal interactions with others.

Addressing Difficult Conversations Within Organizations

Facing difficult conversations is not uncommon within organizations because members have diverse backgrounds and perspectives. Each organizational member has their own experiences, beliefs, and values, which may conflict with others' experiences, beliefs, and values. This is especially true on a college campus, where students are often exposed to notable differences; thus, part of the educational experience is to learn how to engage in difficult dialogue (Cullen, 2010).

"Tough, honest conversations are critical" throughout one's academic and professional career, especially when the organizational culture needs to be addressed, team conflicts need to be managed, disagreements need to be expressed, honest feedback needs to be given, or apologies need to be rendered (Hackley, 2005, p. 7). These conversations are not always easy. Cullen (2010) stated that fear is the most common barrier to engaging in honest, meaningful conversations. Individuals fear saying the wrong thing, being perceived in a certain way, or bringing attention to something that they think will not be addressed and therefore will only make situations worse. However, Cullen (2010) argued that individuals need to know that no one has to be perfect during difficult conversations and admits that making mistakes is one of the first ways to overcome fear. This is important because although it may be tempting to avoid difficult conversations, not engaging in honest conversations may create more problems. Hackley (2005) recommended that individuals be open to communicating as a way to gather and/or provide information to others.

Cullen (2010) suggested a three-part process to assist individuals in having difficult conversations: awareness, knowledge, and skills. First, individuals need to be made aware of the issues that need to be discussed. Then, they can gather information to help make decisions for having the difficult conversation. Finally, individuals can learn the necessary skills for effective communication strategies for engaging in difficult dialogue (Cullen, 2010). For example, scholars have encouraged active listening behaviors (e.g., affirmations, eye contact), authenticity (i.e., communicating because you care and are curious), and open-ended questions (Hackley, 2005; Stone et al., 2023). These are critical skills because everyone responds to challenging conversations differently; thus, one should also consider the context and relationship when assessing the conversation (Hackley, 2005).

Additionally, Stone et al. (2023) argued that difficult conversations involve three levels of conversation: what happened, feelings, and identity. When assessing what happened, one must determine the

intention, which may alter the conversation's impact. Moreover, participants' emotional involvement in the conversation is an influential factor to consider. Addressing each other's feelings is critical because it may influence one's own motives and communicative strategies. Individuals may have various and potentially conflicting communicative goals during a difficult conversation; thus, navigating individuals' feelings and desires may assist in fostering interpersonal relationships. Lastly, identity issues often underlie most concerns during difficult conversations. People want to be viewed in a certain way, and honest conversations may question that identity.

Employing Normative Rhetorical Theory to Examine Difficult Conversations

Communication is a goal-oriented process (Clark & Delia, 1979) often containing numerous competing goals (Caughlin, 2010). More specifically, Clark and Delia (1979) highlighted instrumental, identity, and relationship goals as objectives people seek to achieve in communicative interactions. Derived from communicating social support, Goldsmith's (2001, 2004) normative rhetorical theory (NRT) provides a lens through which to consider how goals, and the interactants' perceptions of them, shape meaning within social contexts. NRT posits that people often have multiple, potentially conflicting objectives within a given context. This can create a complex communication situation (O'Keefe, 1998). Thus, NRT encourages scholars to "examine not just the frequency of talk, but also what is said, how it is said, and the meanings participants typically attribute to particular ways of saying things" (Goldsmith et al., 2006, p. 2080). All conversations are not equally successful at accomplishing the conversational outcome; therefore, attaining various goals without undermining others requires skillful communication (Goldsmith, 2001, 2004; Goldsmith et al., 2006).

Of the three possible interaction goals, in the context of NPC sorority members having difficult conversations, instrumental and relational goals could be objectives of a conversation (e.g., taking accountability, making apologies, gathering information about a member's behavior before having a conversation). Identity goals relate to valued identities people may bring to the interactions (Clark & Delia, 1979). Sorority members embody individual identities such as woman, college student, and/or friend; however, due to the social nature of the NPC sorority experience on college campuses, they also bring identities related to their organization, including formal leadership roles (e.g., President, Vice President of Standards) and being a "sister." A sister identity could also shape relational goals in difficult conversations, focusing on interactants' roles and relationships (Clark & Delia, 1979). Therefore, with the expectation of sisterhood, honest conversations may pose a threat to the relational qualities salient to being a "good sister."

These competing goals present dilemmas for communicators because pursuing one goal may impede and/or threaten other goals a person may have in an interaction (Goldsmith, 2001, 2004). Thus, people must attend to the interaction's specific purpose(s) when choosing communicative strategies to pursue their goals and manage dilemmas

(Caughlin et al., 2011; Goldsmith 2001, 2004). For example, providing support or confronting a person about their actions may require behaviors that seem appropriate for that context. However, enacting them may also have negative consequences if the recipient perceives it as a threat to their identity or power differential (Goldsmith et al., 2012). Identifying strategic choices in how individuals manage dilemmas can help foster the dynamic relationship between the interactants and ensure goals are met productively.

Study Rationale

Since 2022, a sorority within the NPC (referred to hereafter as NPC sorority) disseminates an annual survey to its active members to better understand the collegiate experience and to establish opportunities for chapter development and organizational support. The survey asks about the members' sisterhood experience, educational programming, drinking behaviors, hazing tolerance, housing experience, demographics, and overall satisfaction. Under the sisterhood experience section, the survey assesses member development outcomes (e.g., confidence, leadership). This study only examined the "honest conversations with others" outcome, which was defined as "the ability to elicit and share genuine perspectives with others regarding the most difficult conversation topics." In this study, we deferred to this definition. Between 2022 and 2023, the NPC sorority found a decrease in this outcome's scores, making it the lowest rated of all six outcomes across its chapters. To better understand why this outcome was a challenge for its members, we posed the following research question:

RQ1: What dilemmas are present in honest conversations between NPC sorority members?

Acknowledging that communication influences the ways in which individuals navigate dilemmas, we also asked the following research question:

RQ2: What communication strategies do NPC sorority members use in an honest conversation?

Method

We employed a qualitative interview approach to elicit information about NPC sorority members' experiences handling challenging conversations with their sisters.

Positionality

The first author is an alumna and a collegiate advisor for this study's NPC sorority partner. Her collegiate and volunteer experience provided context to the NPC sorority's social norms and membership expectations. Thus, she conducted all interviews as she was well-positioned to ask follow-up questions and use terminology familiar to the interviewees. She disclosed her affiliation to participants to build rapport and trust prior to the interview, and she did not interview sorority members who she knew through her volunteer role. The co-authors

do not have an NPC sorority affiliation; thus, they presented alternative perspectives and reasoning to address the research questions.

Participants

Participants included 16 cis-gender women who were affiliated with the same NPC sorority from 14 different chapters across the United States. See Table 1 for demographics.

Recruitment

We recruited eligible individuals between November 2023 and April 2024 to participate in a virtual, semi-structured interview. To be eligible, an individual had to be a full-time college/university student, an active member in the partnering NPC sorority, and have experience managing honest conversations with members in their chapter.

The partnering NPC sorority emailed the first author a list of eligible individuals from 15 chapters to contact for an interview. These chapters received various “honest conversation” scores from the annual survey. To ensure the eligible individual had experience navigating honest conversations, the partnering NPC sorority selected members who held a specific leadership position. These positions were President; Vice President (VP) Standards; VP Diversity, Equity and Inclusion; and VP Risk Management.

The first author emailed 58 eligible individuals inviting them to participate in the study. The email included the first author’s contact information, a study summary, and an IRB-approved study information sheet. Eleven eligible individuals (18.9%) emailed the first author indicating their interest in participating.; then, the first author scheduled a mutually convenient interview time. For those who did not respond ($n = 47$, 81.0%) to the initial request, the first author emailed a reminder two months later. In total, the first author interviewed 10 participants (17.2%) from the eligible participant list. Due to the limited responses, the partnering NPC sorority emailed the first author another list of 33 eligible members from eight additional chapters to contact. Six eligible individuals (18.2%) reached out indicating their interest in participating. The first author arranged a mutually convenient time for the interviews and conducted interviews with all six members individually, resulting in a final sample of 16 members.

Procedure

The first author conducted virtual interviews using a semi-structured interview guide, which included sections about the NPC sorority experience, recollections of previous honest conversations, and comfort and skill level on navigating honest conversations. We audio- and video-recorded the interviews, which lasted between 28 to 60 minutes, yielding 670 minutes of audio-recording ($M = 41.9$, $SD = 8.24$). We used Otter Ai., Inc., an automatic transcription program, for the initial transcription. The first author reviewed the transcripts and revised any mistakes to ensure accuracy and completeness;

then, she de-identified the data and added pseudonyms to ensure anonymity. See Table 2 for participants’ pseudonyms and respective leadership roles.

Table 1
Demographics of Study Sample

Characteristic	Number (%)
Mean age	20.5 (SD = 0.7)
Gender and sex	
Cisgender female	16 (100.0)
Sexuality	
Bi-sexual	2 (12.5)
Heterosexual/straight	12 (75.0)
Homosexual/gay/lesbian	2 (12.5)
Race	
Caucasian/White	14 (87.5)
More than one race	2 (12.5)
Ethnicity	
Hispanic or Latino	3 (18.7)
Not Hispanic or Latino	13 (81.3)
Year in School	
Sophomore	5 (31.3)
Junior	3 (18.7)
Senior	8 (50.0)
Leadership (Officer) Position^a	
Academics	1 (4.2)
Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion	3 (12.5)
Events	2 (8.3)
President	5 (20.8)
Public Relations	1 (4.2)
Recruitment	1 (4.2)
Risk Management	2 (8.3)
Ritual	1 (4.2)
Standards	8 (33.3)
Chapter size	
Small (70 or less)	8 (50.0)
Medium (71-150)	4 (25.0)
Large (151-239)	2 (12.5)
Mega (240 or more)	2 (12.5)
Type of Institution	
Public	11 (68.7)
Private	5 (31.3)
U.S. Region	
Midwest	7 (43.9)
Northeast	3 (18.7)
South	3 (18.7)
West	3 (18.7)

^aParticipants held multiple officer positions (n = 24) while a sorority member.

Table 2
Participants' Leadership Positions

Pseudonym	Leadership (Officer) Position
Allison	Risk Management
Cassidy	Events; Risk Management
Elena	Academics; President
Emma	Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion; Standards
Erica	Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion
Evelyn	President; Public Relations
Iris	Standards
Ivanna	Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion
Jennifer	Standards
Kayla	Standards
Kaitlyn	Events; Standards
Kimberly	President; Standards
Maeve	Ritual; Standards
Sarah	Recruitment; Standards
Serena	President
Viviana	President

Data Analysis

We used a phronetic iterative analytic approach to pinpoint a “specific issue, dilemma, or concern” rather than “a general topic, theory, or subject” (Tracy, 2018, p. 62). This study’s specific dilemma was NPC sorority members navigating honest conversations with their sisters. Additionally, in line with this approach, we used existing literature to inform our coding and interpretation of data; thus, the NRT concepts guided the analysis.

To begin, we familiarized ourselves with the data by reading three transcripts; then, we completed initial coding by identifying relevant words or phrases related to the research questions. After completing initial coding of three transcripts, we met to discuss our impressions of the data. At that meeting, we noted that participants were fearful to initiate and engage in honest conversations with their sisters because they perceived them as uncomfortable and were unsure of the conversation’s aftereffects. To fully understand participants’ dilemmas and perceptions about honest conversations with their sisters, we narrowed and refined our analysis based on themes that emerged during the

initial analysis: (a) relational communication strategies, (b) communicative tasks, and (c) social norms and customs. Moreover, we were interested in how these communicative behaviors were performed during an honest conversation, which provided us with greater context for the communication dynamics. Thus, we created a codebook that included definitions and examples of themes and used it to analyze the 13 remaining transcripts. We divided the remaining transcripts and coded them independently, identifying exemplars for each theme throughout the process. We met weekly to discuss our findings and resolve any discrepancies in coding.

Findings

We identified two dilemmas that NPC sorority leaders faced when engaging in honest conversations: I have to have this honest conversation with you, but I do not want to and I have power, but I am your equal. To overcome these dilemmas, the NPC sorority leaders used specific communication strategies when planning and delivering honest conversations.

Dilemma 1: I Have to Have This Honest Conversation With You, but I Don't Want to

Participants expressed apprehension in having honest conversations because they had to confront and address their peers' relational issues. As undergraduate students, participants perceived that they were unequipped to deal with challenging interpersonal situations because they lacked experience in addressing sensitive issues. Cassidy shared that she avoided a conversation because she did not feel like she had the necessary communication skills to initiate the conversation. Serena experienced similar concerns, saying, "I just didn't take action on it because I was like, 'this is too big. I literally don't know what to do with this.'" Both participants acknowledged that not initiating an honest conversation had its own unique consequences, which were equally difficult to navigate. Participants' avoidance facilitated negative behaviors and complicated existing situations, often resulting in a larger confrontation, additional concerns, and/or gossip. For example, Elena expressed a significant concern that "people [are] worried that their vulnerability or the things they shared in a vulnerable moment will be weaponized later on."

Additionally, participants found that the lack of honest conversations did not prevent sisters from talking about sensitive situations informally. To exemplify, Kayla shared that NPC sorority members do not want to talk about someone's behavior with that person; however, "it's something that they will gossip about." Erica said, "everybody was talking about it [sensitive situation] [with] their own individual friend groups... but nobody was actually addressing it." Similarly, Viviana shared,

Instead of talking to the person directly about any issue... there will be a lot of small talk on the side...the conversation will stay with their friends instead of talking directly to

the person and then that person doesn't know that they've done something wrong, so they continue to do that thing. And then the other person continues to get upset and talk to their friends about it.

Furthermore, participants were concerned about how their sister might react to the conversation. "You have no idea how the person is going to respond," Kaitlyn said, "so if it takes you back, you need to be able to, you know, not have a reaction." This fear stemmed from the possibility of encountering sisters who might become defensive or dismissive. Kayla shared, "I'm nervous for [the conversation] because I do feel like she's probably going to get defensive." In addition to defensiveness, Sarah expressed concern that sisters might perceive an honest conversation as being viewed differently by other members:

People are afraid to be completely upfront with how they feel for fear of retaliation or being judged by other members...fear of disappointing someone else or creating more issues. People tend to censor themselves or kind of hold back on how they feel.

NPC sorority members censored what they shared because, as Kayla mentioned, they had concerns about "gossip behind their back, getting in trouble, being judged, or viewed as weak." Participants acknowledged that honest conversations might provoke undesirable responses, and they did not want to be the cause; therefore, they were reluctant to initiate these conversations even though they understood their importance.

Dilemma 2: I Have Power, but I'm Still Your Equal

The second dilemma participants faced was that the hierarchies established by the NPC sorority and their individual chapters impeded members' ability and willingness to engage in honest conversations. Even though participants had legitimate "power," they wanted to be perceived as equal. Participants experienced division due to power differentials related to leadership roles, age, and experience. For example, Sarah said,

Sometimes members...[are] nervous to approach someone who is either more of an upperclassmen or on the board and leadership with concerns they might have just because of assumed power dynamics...which leads to people often kind of holding things in or maybe expressing it to one person, but not really bringing it up to someone that can make an impact.

Cassidy also shared, "Sometimes there's that like, underlying, 'oh, like, she's an [executive board member] authoritative figure.'" Participants felt that the perceived power in leadership prevented sorority sisters from having a safe space to address concerns; therefore, their chapter was negatively affected. This was especially true if the sorority leaders did not manage the dilemma in a way that communicated equality to

other members. Evelyn said, "Exec definitely plays a part in the culture of the chapter. When exec was really positive and inclusive to everyone, everybody felt included, but when exec was very like, 'no, we're gonna do it our way,' then it was like [there was] no sisterhood."

To address the perception of power, participants emphasized their equal status and clarified the intent of the honest conversation to reassure their sister. For example, Kaitlyn told members, "We're on the same level. I'm your peer. I took an exec position in the sorority. That doesn't mean that I have any real power...I'm no different than you are, and I could be sitting in your exact same shoes." And Allison clarified the conversation's purpose by saying, "This is not me being a bad friend. This is not me being a snitch or anything. This is just me looking out for my friend and for her future."

Furthermore, participants navigated this dilemma by telling their sister that, although they needed to hold them accountable, they were still a good friend and sister. For Maeve, an honest conversation demonstrated care because sisters provide support to one another. She said, "I can ask people how they're doing and if they need support as a friend, not just coming across as like, 'I'm doing this because it's my job.' I want to do this because I care about you." Beyond personal concerns, participants perceived that their leadership position significantly influenced their level of care, as accountability fell under their purview. At times, these differing roles created tensions. Elena shared, "I feel like I'm in a mother role talking to a child." Despite closeness in age and life experience, participants felt like their leadership roles required them to act in ways that they deemed different from a sister or friend role, and this dilemma affected relationships.

Additionally, participants felt constrained from having honest conversations due to existing hierarchies beyond their individual chapters. Cassidy said, "you can't even have that honest conversation with the girls around you...they shut it down because it's not like headquarters approved...we've tried but we were not allowed." In contrast, Iris relied on the NPC sorority's organizational structure to have honest conversations, saying, "we have people watching over us. We have rules; we have advisors. We have a code of conduct...there are actual things saying that we cannot be doing these things." Iris found that relying on the NPC sorority's expectations provided an opportunity to find common ground. The NPC sorority's organizational structure and expectations became her rationale for why honest conversations were necessary.

Finally, participants expressed the challenge of confronting sisters, noting the dilemma involved equality as much as power. Elena said, "If it's one of my closest friends, I'm very bad at it [having an honest conversation]. Like I just can't." Participants were more likely to avoid these conversations with close friends due to the fear of negatively impacting the friendship. Vivian said, "If they're my friend, I don't want to be too honest in comparison to maybe someone that I'm not close to in the chapter...I would hesitate to reach out to them." When Kaitlyn experi-

enced this dilemma, she relied on other chapter leaders to have honest conversations with her close friends. As a result, these conversations posed less of a threat to her friendships. Kaitlyn said,

It's especially difficult because all of these girls are friends... if I have a friend going to standards that I have to say something I don't want to say, sometimes I'll lean on my president and they're more than willing [to have the conversation].

Participants desired to protect their friendships; thus, they depended on their peers to have the conversations.

Communication Strategy 1: Intentional Planning

Participants emphasized that honest conversations required intentional planning, which included gathering information and preparing sisters for the discussion.

Information Gathering

The first act of intentional planning was to gather information prior to the conversation, which involved researching the issue, seeking advice, writing notes or talking points, and/or role playing what one might say. These communicative strategies helped the participant fully understand the issue being discussed. As Allison shared, "To start off, I would just want to know, make sure I know everything that we know." Other participants also recognized the importance of being fully informed before initiating a conversation. For example, Erica said, "I try to make sure I have all the facts straight about what's going on, or what I'm going into talking about. And if I can do research, I'll try and do research." Research often involved talking to others who had knowledge about the issue. Iris said, "I have this giant document of bullet points, like everything I heard she did; I got the accounts from all the members." When sharing an example of a necessary conversation, Vivianne said, "[I] talked to my two friends about what actually happened." Participants found that gathering information about the issue from trusted individuals assisted in learning details, which helped outline the upcoming honest conversation.

Not only did participants seek out information from trusted sources, but they also sought advice from others on how to navigate the honest conversation. Participants explained that discussing the situation with individuals (e.g., advisor, NPC sorority staff member, sorority and fraternity professional) outside of their chapter provided an objective perspective. Moreover, they found that these trusted and knowledgeable individuals were often experienced in effectively engaging in interpersonal conversations. To illustrate, Kimberly said, "Every time that we had a conversation with anybody, I always talk to my chapter advisor, my advisor for standards." Elena shared that she received advice from a chapter consultant, which she found to be particularly beneficial: "She was helpful. ... It definitely was nice to get validation on, like, know your plan to have this conversation is correct."

Once the information was collected, participants shared that they wrote notes to help clearly articulate what needed to be communicated to the member. Elena shared that she “writes out what I’m going to say.” Similarly, Emma kept a notebook with the information she gathered. Participants also explained that it was important to identify and write down the resources that may be needed during the conversation. Evelyn shared, “I had prepared a list of like mental health and sexual assault resources that the campus provides” so that she could offer those to a member. Allison explained that sometimes sisters were not aware of what resources were available; therefore, this preparation was warranted. Allison shared that this preparation “makes sure that people know that you [sister] have the capability to do this [address behavior]...it is just, you know, utilizing the resources.” Explaining the available resources communicated confidence and reassurance to the sister.

Finally, participants practiced their communication skills through role play to provide both comfort and confidence before the actual conversation. Maeve said, “It’s just good to practice.” Even if they could not role play situations with others, participants expressed that it was critical to visualize the conversation. Sarah shared,

I like having a little bit of an understanding of what I’m getting myself into, so I can prepare questions...kind of mentally, like, put myself in the right mindset to be dealing with whatever issue or conversation is at hand.

Participants found this kind of preparation reduced their anxiety and improved their confidence.

Member Preparation

Participants noted the importance of preparing both themselves and others for the honest conversation. Intentional preparation required engaging in informal meetings before the formal conversation (i.e., a structured meeting at a set date and time, involving NPC sorority leadership and the member in question) and setting the goals or expectations for the discussion.

Participants found informal meetings to be beneficial in either avoiding or preparing for formal conversations. Maeve shared,

I do try to talk to people when I can outside of the formal setting. If it’s something that doesn’t require, I’d say like a formal resolution, like if it’s like, I need to just check in on somebody, I’d rather not call them into standards and just meet up with them and get coffee. And talk to them before deciding the next step. Because I feel like that is easier and kind of sometimes yields better results. Like if I think I can get a more honest answer out of someone between the two of us, that is definitely, you know, I’m more inclined to do that.

As noted by Allison and other participants, “These informal meetings with people act as kind of more like a warning.” Informal conversations

often fostered more honesty when participants spoke to their sisters one-on-one. They also reduced sisters' fear of formal repercussions. However, participants expressed that their warning had to be explicit as many sisters dismissed the notification. If the warning was elevated to a formal meeting, participants shared that it was critical to prepare the sister for that conversation too. Kaitlyn said that she sends a standard email to a sister whenever a formal meeting is necessary. Further, she shared that the first line in her email is "This isn't to cause you any anxiety;" then, she tells the sister about the formal meeting process. Similarly, Serena shared, "I remember just like emailing her being like, 'hey, I would love for you to come into standards on this Thursday or the following. So kind of just giving her like two choices.'" Serena felt that this allowed her sister to prepare and also feel a sense of control and ownership of the conversation.

Leading up to and/or during the honest conversation in formal and informal situations, participants explained that setting goals or expectations of what each party would like to happen during the discussion was important. Participants shared that sisters were often intimidated by the "call-in" process; therefore, communicating clear expectations was critical in reducing the sister's potential stress, anxiety, and confusion. Maeve shared, "I think having like a clear plan, basically, knowing what I want to tell the person and what the end goal is, before they even come to standards [is important]." Similarly, Emma noted, "I was very upfront about, you know, the expectations." Sharing the conversation's goals or expectations prior to the honest conversation allowed the sister some time to prepare, which made the conversation efficient and effective. Moreover, participants shared that if sisters were confused about the reasoning behind the honest conversation, then they were more likely to be met with resistance or dismissal. Although it took additional time to prepare the sister for the honest conversation, participants found the conversation to be more favorable and result in a positive outcome for all parties.

Communication Strategy 2: Message Delivery

Participants found the delivery of the message in an honest conversation was as important as the words themselves; thus, establishing psychological safety and communicating in a compassionate manner were found to be effective communicative strategies.

Psychological Safety

Participants explained that honest conversations can be intimidating for all those involved; thus, to reduce the anxiety and stress, participants shared that "just leveling the playing field" (Kaitlyn) can allow for a transparent conversation. Serena described that this type of interaction was "usually more vulnerable; so, you have to create a safe space for it or else it can shift from an honest conversation to an unproductive one." To communicate psychological safety, participants used the word "we," engaged in active listening, asked open-ended questions, provided reassurance, and reaffirmed their commitment to the sister's

well-being.

Furthermore, participants explained that establishing psychological safety often began before the conversation. For example, Emma would send an email using exclamation points in her message. She said, "It's simple but it sounds more inviting than 'Hi Jane' period. 'Standards would like to meet with you' period. It just sounds very monotone. It's about creating yourself a safe and welcoming environment." Additionally, participants selected a welcoming location. For instance, Iris chose to have honest conversations with sisters on the chapter's couches because "it's a chill environment." Likewise, Cassidy shared, "My big thing first is to make sure that they feel comfortable, and like they're in a good environment that they feel comfortable in." Many participants chose public locations, like a coffee shop, because these venues are designed to facilitate conversation. Additionally, participants shared that these locations would not typically have other members present, thus ensuring the sister some confidentiality.

Then, once the honest conversation began, participants stressed that it was important to immediately acknowledge the sister and her contributions to the chapter. Kayla stated,

I try and like, note the positive things that the member has done for our (NPC) sorority. And I always start out with saying, like, "we really appreciate you and you do well in what you do," and then kind of move into what we need to actually talk about, because I don't want it to just start out as like an attack like, "hey, fix this."

Other participants frequently asked open-ended questions to help understand the sister's feelings and perspectives. For example, Viviana shared that she would phrase questions like, "How do you feel about it?" or "How does this sound to you?" Then, towards the end of the conversation, participants emphasized the importance of reiterating their commitment to supporting the sister to maintain psychological safety. Upholding this pledge was communicated through providing resources and/or scheduling a follow-up conversation.

Lastly, participants explained that psychological safety was created and maintained if everyone involved felt heard and valued. Participants believed that lecturing about the sister's behavior or actions was not a useful approach in fostering psychological safety. Allison described honest conversations as "I will say something and then you say something...it is genuinely a back and forth." Likewise, Serena said, "it's more so just like, 'okay, let's sit down. Like, we know what happened, but let's just like talk it through, like, I'll hear your side'...overall, we will just like come to the same conclusion." This bi-directionality occurred because participants engaged in active listening. Maeve stated,

saying back to people what they said to you is really help-

ful...like "oh wow, thanks for sharing with me...this is a hard time for you for X, but I appreciate that you said that." Because then it really makes them feel like you're listening.

This communicative strategy enabled participants to foster psychological safety, express differing opinions, and demonstrate care, which lead to productive conversations and favorable outcomes.

Communication Style

Participants acknowledged that their verbal and nonverbal communication influenced the honest conversation's delivery and interpretation. Although participants found honest conversations challenging, they agreed that being direct was an optimal communication strategy. Participants further stressed that directness should be coupled with kindness and care. For example, Ellie shared, "you can be honest and talk about really difficult things but also deliver that in a nice way...not sounding too confrontational, just approaching it in a gentle fashion...without sugarcoating it." Similarly, Elizabeth explained that "being able to be honest and share what's on your heart, combined with diplomacy is...the most valuable thing." Participants found directness reduced the ambiguity of the conversation's purpose and allowed them to solicit information, which resulted in supporting the member appropriately. Sarah stated, "in certain scenarios, it's really important to be fully upfront with the person you're speaking with, so that they can best understand where you're coming from, understand your needs, and help you." Participants perceived directness not as an aggressive communication strategy but as an informative one to best address sisters' concerns.

Moreover, participants expressed that communicating in an unbiased manner was critical. Participants acknowledged that it was impossible not to have preconceived notions; however, communicating in an impartial way demonstrated care and respect. Sabrina shared that "being impartial requires being open to hearing to all sides...it's important to like, make sure you are taking a step back and kind of seeing the whole picture." Participants explained that by being aware of their biases, they felt confident in understanding the sister's issue, knowing how to move forward, and ensuring the sister did not feel judged.

Discussion

This study's results provide insights into the dilemmas NPC sorority leaders encounter when engaging in honest conversations with members, as well as the communicative strategies they use to overcome these obstacles. This research extends Goldsmith's (2001, 2004) theoretical framework and adds to the literature describing NPC sorority members' experiences. Additionally, this study offers practical recommendations for NPC sorority members and campus-based professionals on how to approach honest conversations.

Theoretical Implications

This study addresses Goldsmith's (2016) call for further research exploring the interconnected relationship of environmental resources, dilemmas, and strategies. Goldsmith (2016) stated that environmental resources include existing habits, routines, and interactions with social network members. In the context of NPC sorority members engaging in honest conversations, one environmental resource is present: consulting with advisors and other NPC sorority leaders. This resource functions as a communication strategy but also as a dilemma. Receiving advice from others is appreciated because of NPC sorority leaders' lack of skills and experience in navigating honest conversations; however, if the recommendations conflict with or complicate their goals or expectations, this creates dilemmas. Furthermore, organizational hierarchies, role confusion, and unsupportive advisors contribute to additional dilemmas and problematic behaviors. The division between NPC sorority leadership and members, the misuse of authority, and the dismissal of honest conversations make the environmental resource a double-edged sword.

Furthermore, interactions with others in their social networks contribute to the dilemmas. Although these interactions create close-knit relationships, NPC sorority members experience fear (Cullen, 2010) due to gossip and a lack of confidentiality. As a result, NPC sorority members are less honest in conversations and/or avoid them. Engaging with others can create support for having honest conversations; however, the organizational structure and concerns about identity (personal and organizational) facilitate and create communication barriers.

Lastly, the study's findings suggest that both relative age and social standing may influence the range of communication strategies available and their effective implementation. The close age gap between the NPC sorority leaders and non-leaders intensifies the tension between utilizing environmental resources and navigating constraints of organizational structures. Closeness fosters a sense of sisterhood yet blurs the lines of authority. Thus, to preserve relationships, identities, and leadership roles, participants frame honest conversations through preparation and psychological safety, which help manage sorority leaders' dilemmas.

Practical Implications

Considering the study's findings, we offer four practical implications. First, the study's results validate the use of the three-part process (i.e., awareness, knowledge, skills) of having honest conversations (Cullen, 2010), and the findings provide specific recommendations for preparing others (i.e., raising awareness), gathering information (i.e., increasing knowledge), and utilizing existing resources (i.e., enhancing skills) for these discussions. These communication skills are relevant to any NPC sorority member; thus, campus-based professionals should consider creating partnerships with college/university's departments/schools (e.g., communication, business, law) who can deliver programming (e.g., workshops) to develop and improve these particular skills

for members. Recognizing that specific skills are essential for honest conversations may help NPC sorority members to feel more confident communicating with their sisters; thus, the quality of future conversations may improve.

Second, acknowledging that the perception of hierarchy, power, and social status influences honest conversations, sorority and fraternity professionals should consider encouraging NPC sorority leaders to embody the relational leadership model (Komives et al., 1998). Relationships are heavily influenced by context (e.g., sorority, members); therefore, relationships function as the medium through which individuals enact leadership (Dugan, 2017). Thus, organizational hierarchies are not the only modes through which leadership occurs. This conceptualization of leadership as relational is essential to navigating dilemmas because having honest conversations poses a threat to sorority members' identities as well as their relationships with their sisters (Dugan, 2017; Owen et al., 2017). If NPC sorority leaders embody the tenets of the relational leadership model (i.e., empowering, purposeful, process-oriented, inclusive, and ethical; Komives et al., 1998) then they may be able to preserve their relationships and identities because "good sisters" have honest conversations.

Third, in addition to embodying relational leadership qualities, NPC sorority leaders should consider documenting best practices for how to address honest conversations with their sisters. Because each leadership role has distinct responsibilities to its members, NPC sorority leaders should collectively brainstorm best practices. These best practices can potentially inform a standardized process. Moreover, these guidelines could be passed down to future leadership boards, helping the NPC sorority build and maintain a community of care that encourages honest conversations rather than avoiding them. With a more transparent culture, NPC sorority members may not perceive leaders as "authoritative figures," but rather as relational leaders (Dugan, 2017).

Fourth, college students face challenging campus issues, like substance use, mental health concerns, and sexual violence, making it essential to handle conversations about these sensitive topics with care. When an individual feels cared for, they are more likely to feel safe and willing to be honest in their communication (Stone et al., 2023). Explicitly communicating care may be necessary for some individuals to be honest in their disclosure. Sorority and fraternity professionals on college campuses should consider integrating lessons and/or workshops about compassionate communication (Julia et al., 2024) into their existing educational programming around substance use, mental health, sexual violence, and hazing.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study must be interpreted considering some limitations. First, the study's participants are members of one NPC sorority. Each NPC sorority has its own set of policies and procedures about how to manage difficult situations, which may guide the way members approach

having honest conversations with one another. NPC sorority members with more lenient or strict guidelines may perceive and approach honest conversations differently. To explore how NPC sororities educate their members about navigating honest conversations, future research should conduct a content analysis of their educational program offerings (e.g., communication trainings) and bylaws (e.g., formal processes). Results could lead to a standardized communication training.

Additionally, this study's sample includes only leaders at one NPC sorority. More specifically, 53% of participants hold a President or VP Standards position, granting them access to sorority members' confidential matters. Therefore, these participants may have conceptualized and/or navigated honest conversations differently from members not in leadership positions. Future research should sample NPC sorority members who do not hold a leadership position to learn if they use similar or different communicative strategies in honest conversations with sisters.

Conclusion

Honest conversations often originate because a member needs to be held accountable for previous action(s) or behavior(s); thus, that responsibility falls under an NPC sorority leader's purview. NPC sorority leaders often refrain from engaging in these discussions because they are fearful, avoidant, and uncertain. These emotions stem from the lack of training, knowledge, experience, and maturity. Initiating an honest conversation can be a daunting task and present NPC sorority leaders with dilemmas. By uncovering these dilemmas, this study extends Goldsmith's (2016) theoretical framework within a novel context and provides practical implications about the NPC sorority experience. These implications can improve the sisterhood experience as well as uphold values of friendship, leadership, service, and knowledge.

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