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Effects of Greek-Letter Membership on the Moral Development of College Students

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The American college fraternity system has been in existence for more than 200 years. However, the needs of students that were met by the original fraternities may not be the same needs that exist today. This belief is held by many individuals, both inside and outside the realm of education, who question the relevance of the campus Greek-letter system to today's lifestyle (Shaffer, 1990). A great deal of controversy surrounds Greek-letter organizations, particularly regarding their influence on the moral development of the college student (Baier & Whipple, 1990; Marlowe & Auvenshine, 1982). As Scott (1965) stated, "Some observers praise Greek organizations for their contribution to individual development, training in interpersonal relationships, and service to the college and community. Others associate Greek membership with interpersonal superficiality, attitudes of social superiority, and the encouragement of excessive drinking norms" (cited in Marlowe & Auvenshine, 1982, p. 53). This controversy appropriately compels a review of literature addressing the effects of Greek-letter membership on the moral development of college students.

The study of moral development is particularly important due to the changing demographic profile of the college student. While fewer traditional 18-24-year-old students are attending college, institutions have been attracting older students. In addition, the declining white birth rate and an increase in the birth rates for African-Americans and Hispanics indicate that the majority of future college students will be from special populations. This will pressure higher education institutions, as well as Greek-letter organizations, to respond to the different lifestyles, social and emotional needs, and expectations of these students if they want to fill their institutions and organizations with new students and members (Garland, 1985). Greek-letter organizations must reexamine the benefits of membership, such as moral development, in order to attract new members. If they do not change and open the doors to this diverse population, they may soon find their membership dwindling to the point of extinction.

The purpose of this article is to provide a synopsis of the research investigating the influence of Greek-letter membership on the moral development of college students. First, an overview of moral development theories is presented, followed by a review of research that has addressed the effects of Greek-letter membership on the moral development of college students. Finally, implications of the research and recommendations for the campus Greek-letter system are presented.

Overview of Moral Development Theories

Moral development can be defined as the "growth of an individual's ability to distinguish right from wrong, to develop a system of ethical values, and to learn to act morally" (Rich & DeVitis, 1985, p. 7). Kohlberg explained that morality could not be defined by conformity to the prevailing societal or group norms, that assessment of an individual's morality could not be assessed without that person's point of view and intentions, and that moral behavior is a complex reflection of many configurations (cited in Rest, 1979). Rest cited Kohlberg's six stages of moral development:

- Stage 1. Punishment and obedience orientation
- Stage 2. Naive instrumental hedonism
- Stage 3. Good-boy or good-girl morality of maintaining good relations, approval of others
- Stage 4. Authority maintaining morality
- Stage 5. Morality of contract, of individual rights, and of democratically accepted law
- Stage 6. Morality of individual principles of conscience

Kohlberg had a significant influence on Rest, another major researcher in the study of moral development. Rest (1986) explained that moral development is not fostered by specific moral experiences but rather by increased awareness of the social world in general and one's place in it. Rest described people who develop in moral judgment as enthusiastic learners who seek new challenges, enjoy intellectually stimulating environments, and see themselves in the larger social contexts of history, institutions, and broad cultural trends. Primarily in response to the need for a practical valid tool for assessing moral development, Rest created the Defining Issues Test (DIT). The DIT assesses moral development through the use of six short social dilemma stories. Twelve statements follow each story that require the participants to evaluate the degree of importance each particular statement had in their decision process of what should be done in each dilemma.

Gilligan, a psychologist who worked with Kohlberg as a graduate student, researched gender differences in moral development and believed that men and women follow different paths of moral development (Gilligan, 1982). Her theory of moral development centers around the idea that men and women speak different languages. Women speak in a voice of care, the "... tie between relationship and responsibility. . .," whereas men speak in a voice of justice which is characterized by equality, independence, and understanding of fairness (Gilligan, 1982, p. 173). Gilligan's perspective on moral development provides

"... a changed understanding of human development and a more generative view of human life" (p. 174).

With these perspectives on moral development in mind, research undertaken to explore Greek-affiliates' levels of moral development is presented in the following section.

Related Research

Marlowe and Auvenshine (1982) explored the impact of Greek-letter membership on the moral development of first-year college students using the Defining Issues Test. Their findings indicated no significant differences in the development of moral reasoning between Greek-affiliated and non-affiliated students.

Cohen's (1982) study supported Marlowe & Auvenshine's (1982) results. Based on Kohlberg's theory of moral development, Cohen assessed a sample of Greek-letter affiliates to identify their stages of moral development. Cohen also used the DIT but did not compare Greek-affiliated to non-affiliated students. Instead, Cohen compared only Greek-affiliates to each other based upon three levels of involvement: presidents of Greek chapters, Panhellenic and Interfraternity Executive Council members, and individual Greek chapter members. Results indicated that different levels of involvement in Greek-letter organizations had no significant effect on Greek-affiliates' moral development, as no significant differences in the stages of moral development were found among the subjects. Cohen's interpretation of these results focused on the lack of cognitive disequilibrium (experiences that create dissonance in one's present stage of moral development) experienced in Greek life. Kohlberg asserted that disequilibrium is necessary to bring about the transition to a higher level of moral reasoning (cited in Cohen). Cohen concluded that intervention programs which create cognitive disequilibrium need to be designed in order to facilitate moral development in Greek-affiliated students.

Sanders (1990) investigated the differences between principled moral reasoning of Greek-affiliated and non-affiliated students using the DIT. Both sample groups consisted of male first-year students. The results indicated that neither group changed significantly in the level of moral reasoning during the nine-week pre-test/post-test period. However, non-affiliated students demonstrated a higher level of moral reasoning in both tests. Sanders suggested that male first-year students who chose not to affiliate with a fraternity possessed higher levels of principled moral reasoning than those men who chose to affiliate. Sanders concluded that fraternities attract male students who possess lower levels of moral reasoning.

Other researchers used the College Student Questionnaire (CSQ) rather than the DIT to examine the impact of Greek-letter membership on the moral development of college students (Wilder, Hoyt, Doren, Hauck, & Zettle, 1978;

Wilder, D. H.; Hoyt, Surbeck, Wilder, J. C.; & Carney, 1986). These studies concentrated on several values (e.g., family independence, peer independence, liberalism, social conscience, and cultural sophistication) of college students; one of these values--social conscience--is analogous to moral development. In these particular studies social conscience refers to the "...moral concern about perceived social injustice and institutional wrongdoing" (Wilder et al., 1986, p. 511).

Using the CSQ, each Wilder et al. research team conducted a longitudinal study in 1978 and 1986 in which they examined changes in moral development as a function of Greek-letter affiliation. In a commentary on these research studies, Strange (1986) stated that the evidence supported two conclusions: 1) students who affiliate with Greek-letter organizations differed from non-affiliates in value orientation (including moral) before joining, and 2) students who remained affiliated with Greek-letter organizations throughout their college years experienced fewer changes in their values (including moral) than non-affiliates or former members who discontinued their Greek-letter affiliations. In both studies, Greek-letter affiliates were found to be less sensitive to moral and social injustice and less socially conscientious than non-affiliates (Wilder et al., 1978; Wilder et al., 1986).

Baier and Whipple (1990) supported the Wilder et al. (1978, 1986) findings. Their research, using the CSQ, indicated statistically significant differences in moral reasoning between Greek-affiliates and non-affiliates; Greek-affiliates were found to be less aware of and less concerned with moral issues. The results indicated that Greek-affiliates entered the university with much lower scores on the social conscience scale than did non-affiliates. Although development occurred on the social conscience scale for both groups between the first and senior years, the Greek affiliates' senior year scores were still lower than the non-affiliates' first-year scores. Baier and Whipple concluded that during the course of college, Greek-letter members experience few or no developmental or cognitive experiences which increase moral development.

Implications and Recommendations

The studies discussed in this paper indicated either that Greek-affiliates did not differ from non-affiliates in levels of moral development during college or that Greek-affiliates' moral development was lower than that of non-affiliates during college. Although research articles may provide valuable insights for the particular institutions studied, the results must be viewed in the context of those institutions. Since local factors (e.g., size of the campus Greek system and extent of alumni support) are often significant in determining the quality and effects of the Greek-letter experience, researchers must avoid generalizing indiscriminately from one campus to another (Shaffer, 1983).

These studies imply that Greek-affiliates may need increased exposure to experiences which induce higher levels of moral reasoning. Programs should be designed in order to facilitate exposure to social and moral issues (Cohen, 1982; Jakobsen, 1986; Sanders, 1990). For example, instead of a Greek-letter organization donating money to a soup kitchen, they should staff the kitchen (Jakobsen, 1986), or instead of raising money for charities such as the Boys Club, they should volunteer their time to work with the boys as mentors. As Strange (1986) stated, "...the Greek system is one of the best educational and developmental environments available to the college students on campus today" (p. 522).

The purposes currently served by Greek-letter organizations vary from chapter to chapter and from campus to campus. Jolene Lessard Stiver (1992), International President of Gamma Phi Beta sorority, reflected on the purpose of Greek-letter membership as providing a growth experience as an individual, leader, and community member, and in life skills. However, as the research discussed in this paper indicated, members of the Greek-letter organizations are not living up to their potential. Greek-letter organizations have the potential to influence positively members' morals, goals, values, and experiences that will strongly affect affiliates' lives as well as their society.

Limitations of Research Studies

Since few studies directly address the effect of Greek-letter affiliation on the moral development of college students, it seems premature to generalize the results to all Greek-letter organizations. The evidence presented in these studies is only preliminary, and many researchers cited in this article indicated the need for more research in this area. In particular, longitudinal studies are needed that would compare the moral development between members of Greek-letter organizations and non-affiliated students over a four- to five-year period. Marlowe and Auvenshine (1982) stated that "the controversy [over the effects of Greek-letter membership on the moral development of college students] is magnified by the relative absence of longitudinal data and the prevalence of biases both for and against Greek organizations by parents, students, and faculty" (p. 53).

Even more necessary is the need for this research to be consistent in terms of methodologies, terminology, and perspectives. Most of the studies discussed were short-term studies (e.g., one semester) which focused on limited subjects (e.g., males, first-year students) and used varying methodologies. These inconsistencies make it difficult to compare results across different studies. Although the studies discussed in this article are important to understanding the effects of Greek-letter membership on the moral development of college students, they are only a beginning.

Summary

Based on the studies reviewed in this article, it is tempting to conclude that Greek-letter membership has a negative or no effect on the moral development of college students. However, that conclusion would be inaccurate because it does not consider the limitations inherent in the design of each study. In order to be truly responsive to the existing debate concerning the effect of Greek-letter membership on the moral development of college students, further research must be conducted to provide a more reliable perspective to this continual debate. As Schreck (1976) reflected:

... Whatever difference the fraternity makes during the college years and the later lives of its members can scarcely be regarded as insignificant, because it is intimately related to the central purposes of higher education itself. After two hundred years the fraternity is indeed here to stay and, as such, must be reckoned with (p. 2).

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