

The Conceptualization of Justice in the Student Development of Fraternity/Sorority Members: Implications for Practice

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To fully understand the psychology of justice, it is important to understand the underpinning of the college student development base with regard to their cognitive development. The original progenitor of the concept of justice can be related to Lawrence Kohlberg. Kohlberg conceptualized justice in terms of morality and engaging our students in making ethical decisions (Power, Higgins, & Kohlberg, 1989). While it is commonly criticized that his student development theory is based on a sample entirely of White males, which sparked the development of others such as Gilligan's moral development theory (1982) for women, for the purposes of this essay, Kohlberg will be discussed in regards to his connection to justice. Lawrence Kohlberg originally posited that moral judgment advancement is the entirety of moral development (Rest, Thoma, & Edwards, 1997). Kohlberg identified six stages of moral reasoning grouped into three major levels. Each developmental level represented a fundamental shift in the social-moral perspective of the individual. According to Kohlberg's research "how people make moral judgments" (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 2008, p. 173), moral development is how students determine what is right and wrong in a situation. Kohlberg felt that the major principle for this development was one of *justice*.

Supporting Literature

Kohlberg's theory of moral development is based on a justice perspective, that: "(a) focuses on individual rights; (b) stresses separation, detachment, and autonomy; and (c) emphasizes impartial analysis using rules and principles of fairness" (Jones & Watt, 1999, p. 126). Evans et al. (1998) purported that, "Kohlberg's theory is a helpful framework for understanding how moral development takes place and provides direction for fostering the development of moral judgment" (p. 185). Since the application of Kohlberg's moral development theory, his model has been furthered.

Neo-Kohlbergian are those researchers who have furthered Kohlberg's concepts of justice and morality. However, they have furthered his limited sample based on undergraduate college students and fixed cognitive stages based on the underlying notion that individuals engage in ethical decision making rooted in individual schemata. Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau, & Thoma (1999) found that college students operate from their different moral schemata. These are: (1) the *personal interest schema* (Kohlberg's stages two and three where moral judgments are based on personal and self-serving interests and associations); (2) the *maintaining norms schema* (Kohlberg's stage four where moral decisions revolve around the convention of the social system); and (3) the *postconventional schema* (Kohlberg's stages five and six where a social contract resulting in moral judgments are based on universal principles of justice and fairness). These schemata are constructed through cognitive, behavioral, and affective forces that can be represented in four component methods: moral sensitivity, moral judgment, moral motivation, and moral character.

Therefore, one can assume justice is inextricably synonymous with concepts of morality. Supporting this notion is recent psychology literature in the form of psychometric tests such as the Defining Issues Test (DIT; Rest et al., 1999) in measuring this construct. Additionally, the Values in Action (VIA) Classification of Strengths Manual (Peterson & Seligman, 2003) and Positive Psychological Assessment: A Handbook of Models and Measures (Lopez & Snyder, 2003) also measure morality. Embedded within these tests is justice, as it is included within a spectrum of values. These tests have identified the core virtues that are consistently valued across cultures which include: (1) wisdom, (2) courage, (3) humanity, (4) justice, (5) temperance, and (6)

transcendence (Pawelski, 2003). For positive psychologists, justice is included in a good character which is the overall function of these six virtues. However, therein the question remains of how this can be applied to fraternity and sorority members.

Justice as Moral Development in Fraternities & Sororities

Early (1998) argued, “Greek letter organizations can be ideal settings for examining the moral implications of behavior” (p. 40). However, the research supports the notion that morality is not practiced by our students. McCabe and Bowers (1996) found that fraternity and sorority members admitted to cheating on exams more than non-affiliated students by a significant difference. Further research suggests fraternity/sorority members also demonstrated lower levels of moral judgment and scored higher on measures of moral disengagement on measures measuring ethical scenario responses and social norms (Carroll, 2009; Kilgannon & Erwin, 1992; Derryberry & Thoma, 2000; McCreary, 2012). Additional research suggests that being affiliated with a fraternity or sorority inhibits moral development (Storch & Storch, 2007; Phillips, 2010; Mathiasen, 2003; Tripp, 1997). Pike (2006) suggested students have a significant external pressure to conform to in-group norms and group think which may serve a factor influencing lower moral judgment.

Early (1998) also argued that the implementation of service projects for fraternity/sorority members had a positive effect on their moral development but demonstrated significant dissonance in discussing the concepts of its impact in their development. King and Mayhew (2002) found that students are responsive to moral interventions. Their study found that the greatest efficacy in increasing moral development appear to be positively associated with classroom experiences related to social justice training and extracurricular experiences incorporating service learning.

Suggestions for Practice

Fraternity and sorority members should be exposed to a diversity of experience outside of their chapter to reduce the insularity and low-density friendships that McCreary (2012) discusses. A response should be comprehensive and should be a sustainable and continuous strategy to connect social justice concepts to notions of justice. Herein are some suggestions for practice.

Engage Fraternity Members beyond Values-Congruence

Have an impact on the moral and ethical development of fraternity/sorority members by promoting the values they set out to promote.

The conceptualization of justice as applied to the fraternal movement is rooted in its historical narrative. The Phi Beta Kappa of the late 18th century had all the earmarks of our present-day social fraternities with its high ideals of morality (Horowitz, 1987). Their founding as the first Greek-letter society provided the foundation for the proliferation of the college fraternity (Bailey, 1949). This was true for women’s fraternities as well (Caple, 1998).

As young women were gradually admitted to colleges across the United States after the Civil War ended, women craved the same type of outside-the-classroom fraternal experience that men were creating through Greek-lettered organizations (Caple, 1998). Thus, the women established their own fraternities that were solely for the purpose of advancing women within institutions of higher education (Caple, 1998). The first women’s fraternity was formed at Monmouth College in Illinois in 1867 and was named I. C. Sorosis (later Pi Beta Phi) and was patterned after Phi Beta Kappa and other men’s fraternities (Anson & Marchesani, 1991). All these women’s groups were established

and founded as “women’s fraternities” (Anson & Marchesani; Bailey, 1949; Caple, 1998; Horowitz, 1987). Women’s fraternities are known today as “sororities;” however, the word sorority did not exist at this time (Caple, 1998). This term was created for Gamma Phi Beta which was established in 1874 and wished to distinguish themselves from Alpha Phi Fraternity which was also formed at Syracuse University two years earlier (Anson & Marchesani, 1972). When one considers these were the first progenitors of the fraternal movement, we also need to consider the Jewish fraternal organizations founded in the early 20th century as well as the NPHC, NALFO, NAPA, and MGC organizations founded later during this same century. The common thread of these organizations was that when viewed aggregately or collectively, these student organizations were attempting to seek justice for their lack of inclusivity into the traditional fraternity/sorority community. Ensure that your students as members of a fraternity/sorority seek more than values-congruence. They should conceptualize a true understanding of the history of their organization and its possible connection to social justice.

Examine the Trend of Total Member Development

It is time you consider engaging your chapters in the difficult dialogues of new member education programs, even if you are afraid of the liability.

The crux of the challenge to fraternities and sororities is that, as found by this Sasso (2015), alcohol use is strongly tied to notions of socialization. This socialization through alcohol use is rooted in the pledge system as demonstrated by the statistically significant between-group differences in this study. This is consistent with the findings of Larimer et al. (2004) and Allan and Madden (2008) with regards to alcohol use by pledges as a rite-of-passage into membership or for hazing practices. This system of new member education has become a burden on the fraternity/sorority community and faces many challenges that include hazing and alcohol misuse (Campo, Poulos, & Sipple, 2005).

In all the studies on alcohol and fraternity/sorority membership, not one of those studies contained a sample comprised of non-pledging chapters. Therefore, the research has demonstrated since the 1980s that fraternities and alcohol are strongly connected in fraternity and sorority chapters that operate on a pledge model. This study had similar findings. Based on these findings, senior student affairs officers should strongly consider eliminating the pledge system at their institutions.

At the time of the authorship of this essay, after the death of a pledge from a fraternity hazing incident, Cornell University banned pledging at the institution under a decree from President David Skorton. Cornell has become the first institution to formally ban the pledge system for both fraternities and sororities. In its wake, several alternative constructs have emerged for fraternities that have done the same in eliminating the pledge system.

Alternative constructs exist for educating new members into fraternities. One such program is the Balanced Man Program as developed by Sigma Phi Epsilon. In this system, new members receive full and equal rights and must engage in multi-step developmental experience over that collegiate tenure as an undergraduate to earn rights to serve as an officer and a full-member. This is a self-initiated, individually oriented process as members interface with rites-of-passage through each stage. They receive a mentor as well as leadership programming and learn the history and ethos of the fraternity through the duration of membership into their senior year.

While formal program evaluation has yet to occur regarding the Balanced Man Program, outcomes that have been established including a minimum 3.0 composite grade point average for program participants, momentous reductions in hazing, significant decreases in risk management issues by chapters, and lower insurance costs for individual members (Eberly, 2009). Similar efforts to

replicate these outcomes have been initiated by large fraternities such as Lambda Chi Alpha and Theta Chi as well as smaller fraternal organizations such as Tau Delta Phi. If there are alternative constructs to recruit and initiate new members into a collegiate fraternal organization, then senior student affairs officers should consider these a method as Cornell University has to reduce conformity and distorted expectations of alcohol use which can lead to many institutional liabilities.

Social Justice Intervention

As a fraternity/sorority or international headquarters staff one should consider the education of your members with regard to social justice issues.

The preference issues of skin tone known as *colorism* among sororities presents significant issues (Wilder, 2010). Additionally, females of color encounter a social identity phenomenon of one-up/one-down. In this social constructed identity, college women of color as they develop must address their white counterparts who have one identity that is privileged (being white) and another that is oppressed (being female). Accapadi (2007) suggests how white women can “toggle” their identities due to their assumed privilege whereas their minority peers do not have this privilege and must code switch between their own culture and white female culture which has become the standard of humanity (p. 210). It has been termed that students of color who identify within the LGBTQIAA spectrum are multiply marginalized whereas they combat assumptions about gender expression, gender preference, and ethnicity (Balsam, Molina, Beadnell, Simoni, & Walters, 2011). African-American students who identify within the LGBTQIAA spectrum report the highest levels of racism and micro-aggressions, often based on race rather than on gender expression or sexual preference (Szymanski & Gupta, 2009). Understanding the social justice context and the intersectionality of such issues of gender, socioeconomic status, gender expression, and gender preference are essential to educating students. Therefore, social justice intervention based on the suggestions of King and Mayhew (2002) may further reduce systemic issues related to morality and justice. King and Mayhew (2002) suggest programming should be situated both inside and outside the classroom through service learning experiences. Therefore, possible academic partnerships should be established with faculty and staff inside the classroom or within formal learning spaces. For example, a service-learning course could easily connect with many local or inter/national fraternity/sorority philanthropic causes. The creation of a fraternity/sorority leadership course connecting significant social justice education and service-learning experiences would be the greatest direct, measurable method to facilitate moral development in fraternity/sorority community members.

Assessment

Assessment is essential in understanding the development of your interventions and programming.

With assessment, there is a significant concern associated with administrative encumbrance and the response burden on students may be equally taxing; one may need to consider the notion of administrative efficiency. Based on the research of the typology of fraternity/sorority standards programs by Sasso (2012), campus-based professionals can simply select a type of program and gather data through the rolling submission of forms and assessments that comprise the basis of overall chapter evaluation.

Inter/national organizations and campus practitioners have devoted a considerable amount of time and human capital educating new members regarding issues related to alcohol misuse and behavior. This sort of preventative intervention along with others such as other educational

programs, alcohol misuse campaigns, alcohol-free alternative programming, policy frameworks, and community awareness efforts have all not been as successful as originally intended in addressing overall alcohol use and in reducing negative consequences (Wechsler, Seibring, Lui, & Ahl, 2004). The results are inconclusive because we do not have much assessment data on their effectiveness. In fulfilling a duty to care, with most efforts confounded, administrators and other stakeholders have continually reconsidered their efforts to address such issues due to the human capital costs and the lack of significant results. Therefore, having assessment data will strengthen the argument and advocacy of your efforts in social justice and moral development programming.

Conclusion: Students Using a Critical Lens for Justice

The future of fraternities is one that is undeniable. Collegiate fraternal organizations are enduring and pervasive organizations that have yet to falter despite wide-spread criticism. However, whether our continued existence is relevant depends on our capacity to change and end the enabling of a *cocooning syndrome*. This is where developmentally we enable the stunting of members' development by insulating them from outside experiences such as accountability. What is truly "just" is to begin to reconsider our approach to our fraternity/sorority community members as students and remember that we are educators. It is imperative we challenge our students to understand their moral development in the context of their emerging adulthood. We must help our students be critical of their own fraternity/sorority and enact ownership of their experience. This will develop students' critical lens which is essential to furthering the analytical skills necessary to facilitate moral reasoning as found by Kohlberg.

The conceptualization of a critical lens is a didactic dialogue and continuing conversation facilitates meaning-making about the subject matter. This discourse is not simply the perceptions of a curmudgeon. A critical lens seeks to employ an analytic lens that challenges current assumptions and pursues redefinition of the agreed paradigm amongst the community of scholars. While this notion may seem that a critical lens simply seeks to disrupt the current agenda of research to generate an academic dystopia, it merely seeks to construct reciprocal learning amongst a community of students who all collegially agree to advance a sustained discussion that progressively challenges and critiques with each individual piece of dialogue.

A critical lens, when viewed through a social constructivist lens, holds that experiences are essential to learning. In particular, concrete experiences and what meaning is formed by the individual helps shape learning. The situated approach to experiential learning stresses community involvement, in that learners should participate in a community of learners. Learning is established through "doing" and through dialogue between a community of learners. The psychoanalytic perspective states that learners must get in touch with their unconscious and fears so that experiences can become more meaningful through this community. The critical lens emphasizes that learners must resist dominant social norms and the complexity theory recognizes relationships as central to experiences.

If fraternities and sororities are to become relevant again within higher education, the focus needs to be removed from programming to again become the development of its members in learning to become critical of their own experiences; to take ownership to facilitate their own self-authorship. As inter/national headquarters staff and campus-based professionals, as a fraternal movement, there is a strong need to rededicate ourselves to committing to facilitating interventions that support notions of justice and moral reasoning, which are tethered to our own historical narrative as fraternal organizations.

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