

Is This 1920 or 2020: The Effects of Hegemonic Femininity on Diversity & Inclusion within the Panhellenic Community

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Hegemonic masculinity (or more commonly known as toxic masculinity) has been examined as it relates to hazing, violence, and the masculine predilection for dominance. However, what about hegemonic femininity? This phenomenon, the feminine counterpart to toxic masculinity, presents important schema which may explain some cultural, hive-think aspects of the Panhellenic experience (Budgeon, 2014). A close examination of hegemonic femininity within Panhellenic sororities creates insight into how to best establish diversity and inclusion initiatives within these organizations and the Panhellenic community as a whole.

So, What is Hegemonic Femininity?

Hegemonic femininity is the concept that an ideal, dominant picture of womanhood exists (Schippers, 2007). It is the buy in of “traditional” feminine gender norms such as a sweet disposition and modesty, as well as an investment in physical appearance and sexual attractiveness that privileges thinness. The conceptualization of this ideal womanhood is highly pervasive and exclusionary. It works to maintain the status quo and functions as highly structured, normalized group behavior (Schippers, 2007). As fraternity/sorority life professionals, we should draw attention to how gender operates throughout the social structures of our organizations, from the level of individual gendered selves to the cultural norms and expectations which shape interaction, and even further to the organization of various institutional domains. Gender is embedded simultaneously within these layers in complex and dynamic ways. Further, Budgeon (2014) found:

Interrogating power dynamics associated with these complications involves examining the positioning of femininities in relation to hegemonic masculinity and the workings of internal processes within the category of femininity which devalue and marginalize specific kinds of femininities while assigning privileged status to others. Despite a proliferation of modern femininities, a privileged construction taking the form of a white, western, heterosexual femininity continues to circulate (p. 321).

As historically white organizations, Panhellenic sororities continue to uphold and privilege this particular package of femininity resulting in an overarching hegemonic structure, often leaving very little room for diversity.

Panhellenic Sororities at the University of South Carolina

When looking at the effects and implications of hegemonic femininity on University of South Carolina Panhellenic sororities, I found it was important to examine the racial history of South

Carolina as a whole. Time for a quick history lesson: in December 1860, South Carolina set the precedent and seceded from the United States. Two months later, under the leadership of former U.S. Senator Jefferson Davis, the Confederate States of America was formed (History, Art & Archives, U.S. House of Representatives, 2020). Fast forward through the Civil War and into the Reconstruction period; black students were first admitted into the University of South Carolina, tuition-free, from 1873 to 1877. However, white southerners quickly pushed back and severe Jim Crow was soon to follow. One of the key components of upholding white supremacy was segregation. Well into the 1950s, maintaining a segregated society was the main focus of the white community, which caused an intensification in their commitment to racism and Jim Crow (Sellers, Jr., 2016). The University of South Carolina finally desegregated in 1963, but widespread desegregation in South Carolina did not take place until the 1970s. When looking at the history of the University of South Carolina, one cannot help but question its effect on the students. If the multi-million-dollar recreation and wellness center on campus is named after Strom Thurmond, an ardent segregationist who attempted to thwart the passage of the Civil Rights Act and co-authored the “Southern Manifesto” which declared *Brown vs. the Board of Education* to be unconstitutional (Sellers, Jr., 2016), how welcome and safe do administrators think students of color feel?

The history of segregation has had a ripple effect on practices in the fraternity/sorority community at the university. While there are no longer any laws segregating students, the invisible line drawn between NPC sororities and NPHC sororities can be felt. For example, the Greek Village at the University of South Carolina currently only houses historically white organizations and students of color have mentioned they sometimes do not feel welcomed or safe walking through the property. Additionally, the first black, Panhellenic chapter president was only just elected in November 2018. Tying this history back into hegemonic femininity, the effects of this standardized view of whitewashed womanhood can explicitly be observed through displays of femininity within the Panhellenic community. Taking a look at the social media accounts of the Panhellenic sororities at the University of South Carolina, it becomes clear what ideal womanhood these individuals are broadcasting en masse. Potential new members, and even members of the community, are blasted, to the point of indoctrination, with pictures of blonde, skinny, white women posing on the beach or in their game day crop tops. Sometimes it becomes difficult to distinguish between the women pictured as the brand these Panhellenic women are unfortunately representing is one of uniformity. Across the board, it appears that in order to be a Panhellenic woman at the University of South Carolina, one must be conventionally (read as Eurocentric) pretty, and thin. There is one, overwhelmingly white packaging that is perpetuated throughout the community and sought after. This can seriously negate any diversity and inclusion efforts being done at the inter/national headquarters or campus level.

When Panhellenic members prescribe to this ideal packaging it creates invisible, but very real and imposing, barriers for potential new members who do not look like this advertised and "acceptable" form of womanhood, particularly in terms of race, religion, sexuality, and ability. Nationally when you look at the Panhellenic community, there is more of a three-dimensional view into what it means to identify as a woman and a member of this community. Fraternity and sorority life professionals must ask themselves: are we truly creating inclusive spaces? And even further, is the sorority experience a place where individuality can shine? The social media posts from the University of South Carolina do not provide the whole picture of the Panhellenic community. Even at the University of South Carolina, there are women in the community that are scholars, athletes, scientists, armed service members, and women of color, but they are not being adequately represented because they do not fit their organization's "brand." I strongly urge you to take a look at your campus organizations' social media and then compare it to more diverse campuses or even the social media of Panhellenic inter/national headquarters. You will find examples of sisterhood that ascends tokenism. Organizations who encourage and celebrate authenticity and difference will have more congruence with their values leading to success throughout various layers of membership and engagement. However, when Panhellenic organizations desire to outwardly display only the two-dimensional view of their membership, because it is more aesthetically pleasing and propped up by hegemonic femininity, ultimately the chapter members and the community suffer.

Why does this matter?

Many campuses have histories rooted in racism, so every campus professional can learn something about ensuring there is a safe and positive campus climate for all of their students regardless of race, gender, sexuality, or ability. Part of this action involves understanding hegemonic femininity and how it plays out on each individual campus. Any student should be able to join, and feel like they belong in, a fraternity or sorority if that is what they are interested in doing. Additionally, outside of creating an unwelcoming atmosphere to those who do not look like them and potentially deterring women of color, hegemonic femininity can lead to extreme competition amongst sorority groups. It can become a huge contest for which sorority can practice hegemonic femininity best in order to pair off with the "best hegemonically male mate" and in the same vein, can create unhealthy levels of competition during primary recruitment. I also posit that the dreaded "tier-system" is rooted in hegemonic femininity and can lead to heavy use of websites such as GreekRank.com to insult and tear down other individuals. From a health and wellness perspective, hegemonic femininity can also lead to high risks of eating disorders within the community, as well as low self-esteem and negative body image. Finally, it can create rifts within individual chapters, which can cause in-fighting or loss of sisterhood. If Panhellenic sororities are not structurally sound, nor welcoming to difference, it will become increasingly difficult to lobby for diversity and inclusion practices.

Opportunities and Threats for Professionals

There are certain opportunities present which student affairs professionals should be aware of in order to establish and maintain a healthy, diverse, and inclusive community. Not only is Gen Z a more diverse generation, but they are also looking to push against the status quo and desire to invest their time and money into authentic experiences. As such, some opportunities to explore include refocusing recruitment topics on specific storytelling such as individuals' unique membership experience, personal success stories, as well as personal and professional development offered by the organizations. Chapter members can use authentic stories to welcome difference and combat conformity. As professionals, we can work to better align our actions, and the actions of our member organizations, with our personal, organizational, and institutional values and missions. Moving forward, fraternity/sorority professionals need to ask: is this a place where individuality can shine and where members of all backgrounds will be supported?

Carly Walter began her role as program coordinator for the Greek Village at the University of South Carolina in July 2019. In this role, she serves as a live-in advisor and is responsible for the quality of living for Panhellenic communities — developing and implementing residential programming to ensure effective crisis management procedures are in place, reviewed, and practiced while promoting a welcoming environment which celebrates an appreciation for diversity and inclusion within the house. She graduated with a B.A. in English from Bowling Green State University and received a M. Ed. in higher education and student affairs administration from the University of North Texas. She is a passionately curious and hardworking individual who is skilled in relationship-building and leadership development. She strives to cultivate spaces where students can thrive authentically and to further impact the lives of students by concentrating particularly on values congruence. She also volunteers for her own sorority, Sigma Kappa.

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