

Transcending to Sisterhood

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Many young adults are familiar with Mindy Kaling and at least one of the television programs she has been in: *The Office* or *The Mindy Project*. Many have also read her widely popular book *Is Everyone Hanging Out Without Me?* People who do not know who she is have likely still heard one of her most popular quotes: “Best friend isn’t a person, it’s a tier.” This quip explains how she is able to have more than one best friend. It is very common for men and women to differentiate various levels of connectivity in their relationships in this way. People have casual acquaintances, work buddies, drinking pals, friends, close friends, best friends, and any number of other categories used to label the people in their lives. Kaling’s humorous quote points to the idea that women may make slightly more meaning from these categories. There seems to be a higher level of connectivity that exists beyond the realm of friendship within the context of a sorority. A level of bonding that is deep enough to be considered familial in nature to the point of feeling they are sisters.

The close knit environment of a sorority or fraternity chapter creates a unique atmosphere for students. Bronfenbrenner’s (1993) Ecology Model serves as a framework for examining peer culture and the systems student create for themselves. A sorority or fraternity chapter can serve as an ecological niche or microsystem within Bronfenbrenner’s model in that it creates a “specified region in the environment that is especially favorable or unfavorable to the development of individuals with particular personal characteristics” (Bronfenbrenner, 1993, p.22). This microsystem allows for the possibility of deep bonds but does not guarantee they will occur for all members.

Sisterhood is a fluid process, one that starts at a very surface level and transcends to a higher place of interconnectivity and common purpose. Sisterhood is a state that exists beyond the “best friend tier.” What then causes this shift to occur that allows friendship to transcend to a state of sisterhood within the sorority atmosphere?

Research by McCreary and Schutts (2013) has begun to look into the concept of how fraternity men define and conceptualize brotherhood. Their research indicated four schema that are relevant to understanding brotherhood. The primary themes that emerged in their analysis included, “brotherhood based on solidarity, brotherhood based on shared social experiences, brotherhood based on belonging, and brotherhood based on accountability” (p. 6).

Extending their research into the sorority context, initial findings from focus group conversations conducted by Schutts, Cohen, and McCreary suggest members must transcend beyond simply holding each other accountable to the shared standards and expectations of the chapter. Many of the participants expressed sisterhood in the context of an even more altruistic state—one that describes women as willing to commit to each other, and the broader inter/national organization, on a much deeper level.

Members were able to explain concretely some aspects of their sorority experience that allowed them to attain this transcendent “sisterhood based on a common purpose.” For example, holding a leadership position was mentioned as a method in which a member must take a higher level of

accountability within the group, and therefore to their fellow members. As a result, the bonds that tie these sisters together become strengthened as they cooperate toward a common goal or purpose. Another pathway to transcendence was described through effective officer transitioning. When done effectively, older sisters mentor the younger sisters through their transition into the new role. Participants in the focus groups indicated that transcendence is felt in that respect because the older sisters outwardly demonstrate an investment in the younger member and a genuine desire to want to see them be successful.

Women from newly established chapters indicated their ties to the inter/national organization at the early stages of colonization were pivotal in helping them reach a point of comfortably calling their experience a sisterhood. The trust provided to the young chapter by the inter/national organization with respect to the sharing of their ritual and empowerment to self-govern gave the members a deep sense of investment.

Sorority women expressed in order to transcend from friendship to sisterhood members needed to engage with the organization on a level with heightened dedication beyond what might be considered surface-level participatory membership. One key depiction of this heightened dedication was described by living in the chapter house, residence hall, or chapter suite. Deeper levels of bonding were described as the point in which members attend events because they are arriving at the point when sisters attend chapter because they are invested in each other, not because they are required. The role of being exposed to fraternity or sorority life by a family member also created an easier pathway to transcendence. Participants described that aspect as having been a result of witnessing firsthand the lifelong bonds a fraternity or sorority provided their close relative. In as much, the woman was personally more willing to invest in others and form deeper bonds of friendship.

It would be valuable to further explore and understand the process of transcendence in the context of sisterhood. Further knowledge on the subject may illuminate to practitioners and inter/national organizations a greater sense of how women form bonds with each other from an organizational perspective. More importantly, if learning is expended with regard to how women transcend to this higher state of relational interaction, campus professionals, headquarters personnel, and volunteers can become more equipped to foster and cultivate environments in which more women will be able to make the leap from friendship to purpose-based sisterhood. As students find their niche in a sorority, supportive environments serve to honor that choice through the furtherance of bonding and cooperation that elevates sisterhood beyond the mere trappings of transitory friendship.

References

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