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Is Conformity a Mediating Variable on Increased Risk-Taking Behavior Across Years of Membership in the Greek System?

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Abstract

In the college subculture of Greek Life, members adhere to specific rules and norms in order to remain accepted, which could be indicative of conformity. This notion raises the question: what is the role of conformity on the risk taking behaviors of alcohol usage and sexual promiscuity as well as on the academic performance across years of membership? The article examines conformity in 31 fraternity members, cross-sectionally, using a compressed longitudinal design and hypothesizes members develop lower levels of conformity after initiation, making them less susceptible to risk taking behaviors such as binge drinking, sexual promiscuity and decreased academic performance. Surveys were administered in paper format, and results were evaluated using a series of analysis of variance equations. The results indicated an interaction effect between peer conformity (high, low) and alcoholic beverages consumed as well as a main effects for between peer involvement (high, low) and time on college GPA.

Keywords: Greek Life, Conformity, College, Alcohol, GPA

Introduction

Greek Life (fraternities and sororities) flourish in colleges across the United States, with some schools having up to 60 chapters on one campus. These organizations often entice young students during recruitment with promises of social events, immediate friendships, and the benefit of affiliation. This can be an exciting opportunity to incoming freshman, and thousands of new members join Greek Life each year.

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Although many incoming students are drawn into membership each year, there are some lesser known negative effects of fraternity life. As a group, Greeks are more likely than non-members to participate in heavy drinking, and drug use with an increase in adverse consequences. (Turrisi et al., 2006) One potential explanation for this discrepancy could stem from conformity, which causes members to overlook the potential risks and problems associated with certain behaviors. In addition to Greek membership, there are additional factors which increase susceptibility to conformity.

Conformity

Research has demonstrated that conformity decreases with age making younger people more prone to this experience (Pasupathi, 1999). Newman and Newman, 1976, suggest that for younger people, substance use, risk-taking behavior, and sexual activity may indicate efforts to “conform to the norms of the group and to demonstrate commitment and loyalty to other group members” (p. 276). It is essential to consider the developmental stage of college students, and how this might affect their susceptibility to group think and conformity (Pasupathi, 1999).

Viewing conformity as a result of developmental processes, Costanzo and Shaw’s (1966) evaluation demonstrated an increase in conformity during adolescents and a decrease as they reached adulthood. The basic premise is that compared to adults, younger college students worry more about what other people think about them, maintain a less stable value system, have an increased interest in seeking out new opportunities and acquaintances, and are less self-assured in their own knowledge base (Pasupathi, 1999). This research supports the hypothesis that conformity will decrease with time of membership in the fraternity, as the average member enters the house during adolescence and reaches adulthood by the time of graduation.

Another factor that contributes to college students’ vulnerability for conformity is the natural human desire for affiliation and a sense of belonging. “The chain of motivational, cognitive, and social processes that bind individuals to collections of others (groups) is forged early in life. Infants and young children inherently form affectionate bonds and seek closeness with those who become familiar to them” (Ainsworth, 1979 p. 933). This innate desire for interpersonal connections may make someone more susceptible to adopting a group’s values that are contradictory to one’s own belief system. For example, immersing an adolescent in a new environment will likely cause them to gravitate towards perceived interpersonal connection with a group, such as in Greek Life. Therefore, as a result of their need for attachment, college students involved in Greek Life are vulnerable to conformity in group situations.

Greek Life

An example of a group environment with a culture defined by specific norms is Greek Life on college campuses. This subculture is based upon unity and adherence to one’s selected house. Often people choose their Greek Chapter based on perceived personality similarities to current members. Baron, Monson & Baron, (1965) suggested that it is important to consider that Greek Life may naturally attract extroverted people who have a higher need for sensation seeking activities including partying, dating and athletic activities. They also note that within this personality type, there may be a lower motivation for learning alternative behaviors, making it easier to attach to the identity of Greek Life. So how does this identity that attracts extroverted, sensation seeking individuals who enjoy engaging in partying, dating and athletic activities manifest itself?

In research conducted by Kahler, Read, Wood & Palfai (2006), membership in a Greek house (fraternity or a sorority) significantly increased the likelihood that students would engage in the risk taking behavior of binge drinking, with an increased occurrence of sexual promiscuity.

Within this study, the greatest risk group for binge drinking was Caucasian males with a high sensation seeking status (Kahler et al., 2006).

Park, Sher, & Krull (2008) noted that alcohol use on college campuses is becoming a public health concern, as more college students show higher rates of alcohol abuse and dependency. They also found an increase in marijuana and other illegal substances being used on college campuses across the U.S. Park et al. (2008) also reported that membership in a Greek house is the highest predictor for substance abuse. They discussed national data which shows how Greek members have the highest rates of cigarette, marijuana and ecstasy use, have an increased likelihood of being diagnosed with an alcohol-related disorder and are more likely to experience consequences related to alcohol use (idem, 2008).

Excess substance use has many adverse effects including negative academic performance in students who may also struggle to keep up with the rigorous academic standards of college. When the pressure and stress of college life build, alcohol can serve as a temporary relief from their problems. According to Gall (1988), poor time management, such as last minute cramming for exams and spending minimal time on homework is connected to a decrease in academic performance. Alcohol use can also be connected with poor time management when hangover effects are considered, or excessive late night partying. The sample by Cox, Zhang, Johnson and Bender (2007) included 1,488 high school students and defined "low academic performance" as students who mostly had grades of C and below. Their research found that a majority of the students who fit into the category of low academic performance, were frequent smokers, binge drinkers and regular marijuana users. This type of at-risk behavior often continues from high school into college, and particularly in Greek houses (Cox et al., 2007).

Current Study

The purpose of the current study is to examine the relationship between length of membership in the Greek system, conformity and risk taking behaviors as measured by poor academic performance, sexual promiscuity, and binge drinking. The study hypothesizes that conformity and risk taking behaviors will decrease with increased time of membership.

Method

Participants

The study included 66 male students from fraternities at a state university in the Pacific Northwest. Although 66 of these students completed the first administration, only 31 completed both the October and May surveys. A letter was sent to Greek houses to solicit interested participants in November 2008. The letter described the study as one which was aimed at "better understanding" the Greek system, would be "anonymous," but would require the participants to identify age, year in school, and gender. It also described the format of the survey as "paper format, requiring approximately 10-15 minutes to complete." The letter was sent to both the Panhellenic and Interfraternity Councils to be read at the monthly meetings.

The initial letter only yielded the participation of one fraternity, and therefore, the researcher made contact with additional Greek houses via telephone to obtain further participation.

Instrument

The Peer Pressure Inventory (PPI) by Clasen & Brown (1985) which is a 53-question Likert scale, was used to measure peer pressure on a -3 to 3 rating system within five sub-scales. The instructions state: "Here are some pairs of statements describing peer pressure which is when your friends encourage you to do something or to not do something else. For each pair, read both statements and decide whether friends mostly encourage you to do the one on the left or the one on the right. Then, mark an "X" in one of the boxes on the side toward the statement you choose, depending on how much your friends encourage you to do that ("A Little," "Somewhat" or "A Lot"). If you think there's no pressure from friends to do either statement, mark the middle ("No Pressure") box." (Clausen & Brown, 1985)

The Peer Pressure Inventory five subscales include: misconduct, peer conformity, peer involvement, family involvement and school involvement. The five scales resulted from a "content analyses of responses (which) indicated that peer pressures clustered in five areas: peer involvement (spending free time with friends, attending parties and school social events, interacting with the opposite sex, etc.), involvement in school (academic and extracurricular), involvement with family, conformity to peer norms (in dress and grooming, musical tastes, etc.), and misconduct (drug and alcohol use, sexual intercourse, and minor delinquent activities) from the initial list of items an instrument was derived, piloted and revised" (Clasen & Brown, 1985, p. 457). Misconduct includes behaviors such as drug and alcohol use, as well as sexual intercourse and property crimes. Peer conformity includes factors such as having the same opinion as your friends, talking and acting similarly to your friends, and being part of a certain crowd or group. Peer involvement includes feeling encouragement from peers to attend school functions, to be "social," and to go out on dates. Family involvement includes behaviors such as getting along with your parents, talking respectfully to adults and acting in accordance to your parent's wishes. Lastly, school involvement includes feeling pressure to study, taking advanced classes and finishing one's degree.

According to Clasen & Brown, "items for each scale were interspersed and counterbalanced (half had the statement representing pressure toward the domain on the left side of the page; half had it on the right side). A mean score for each PPI subscale was calculated after the items were re-coded to score them all in a "positive direction." (p. 458). An average score of -3 indicates strong peer pressure against a certain construct (misconduct, peer involvement). A mean score of a 3 indicates strong conformity towards a specific area (peer, family, or school involvement). A rating of a zero suggests the rater feels no peer pressure in either the negative or positive direction. The original study which administered the PPI to 70 participants in both a rural and urban sample, the Peer Pressure Inventory was determined to be a reliable instrument for gauging an adolescents' view of peer pressure. Aside from the conformity scales among the urban sample, alpha coefficients were 0.70 and higher. The PPI also displayed internal consistency and test-retest reliability when the test was administered in weekly intervals over a six week period with correlations ranging from 0.48 to 0.65 (Clasen & Brown, 1985). The PPI, developed for English speaking individuals, was administered in English to the participants.

In addition, demographic information was collected on each participant. The questions included: number of drinks consumed within the last week (on a scale of 0-7), number of sexual partners in the last month (defined as someone who you have intercourse with, whether anal, oral or vaginal intercourse), cumulative college GPA, cumulative high school GPA, age (in years), ethnicity: Caucasian, African American, Asian, Pacific Islander, Native American, and other. The last questions included: year in school, year in Greek House and length of time in house: (in months).

Design

This research explores the effect of the length of Greek membership on conformity. The dependent variables were the grade point average (GPA), alcohol use within the past week and number of sexual partners within the past month. The independent variables were level of conformity as measured through the PPI's five sub-scales of peer conformity, family involvement, peer involvement, school involvement and misconduct. Each of the participant's scaled scores were rated as high or low based upon the average response of the participants using a mean split technique. A response over the average was coded as high (1) and a response lower than the average was considered a low (2).

Procedure

The survey was administered in person on October 4, 2010 and on May 2, 2011. For each administration, the data was collected by the principle researcher and the participant required approximately 10-15 minutes to complete the measure.

Data Analysis

A series of five 1-way analyses of variance (ANOVA) were used to examine the differences between students' levels of conformity between the first data collection and the second. Then a series of repeated measures ANOVAs were conducted to examine the effect conformity and time had on behaviors such as binge drinking, grade point average and promiscuity. A p-value of 0.05 or smaller was considered significant.

Results

Demographic and Descriptive Statistics

The dependent variables were the GPA, alcohol use within the past week, and number of sexual partners within the past month. The total sample consisted of 66 students on the first administration, all of which were male. Only 31 students completed both administrations. The average age for the original 66 participants was 19.67 (see Table 1). The average number of sexual partners for the original 66 was 0.79. The average GPA on a 4-point scale was 3.65 for high school and 3.36 for college (See Table 1).

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics: Age, GPA, Sexual Partners, Drinks Consumed, and Total PPI

Fraternity Member	Age			GPA: college		GPA: high school		Sexual Partners		Drinks Consumed		Year in school	
	N	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
First Administration	66	19.7	1.3	3.4	0.62	3.6	0.33	0.79	1.03	3.4	1.6	2.4	1.3
Completed Both Administrations	31	19.6	1.6	3.2	0.74	3.7	0.32	0.94	1.03	3.3	1.6	2.9	1.1

Note. M = Mean, SD = Standard Deviation, Year in School: 1-4 = freshman-senior.

Statistical Analysis

Paired samples *t*-tests were used to determine if significant differences existed between the subjects' first and second administrations of the PPI. No significant differences on PPI subscale scores (high and low) were found between the two administrations for the group of 31 students who completed both administrations (see Table 2).

Table 2: Paired Samples *T*-Test

	First Administration		First Administration Range		Second Administration		Second Administration Range		t	df	p = (2-tailed)
	Mean	SD	High	Low	Mean	SD	High	Low			
School Involvement	1.48	0.51	22	4	1.65	0.49	24	-1	-1.13	30	0.27
Peer Conformity	1.58	0.50	12	-4	1.45	0.51	17	-7	-0.9	30	0.38
Misconduct	1.48	0.51	22	-12	1.50	0.51	8	-15	1.03	30	0.31
Peer Involvement	1.51	0.51	27	2	1.48	0.51	23	0	0.34	30	0.74
Family Involvement	1.39	0.50	18	-3	1.45	0.51	21	-1	-1.28	30	0.21

Since the purpose of the current study was to examine the relationship between length of membership in the Greek system and level of conformity on risk taking behaviors as measured by poor academic performance, sexual promiscuity and binge drinking, a series of repeated measure ANOVAs were conducted to explore the interaction effects of time and level of conformity. Each participant's scale scores were rated as high or low using a mean split technique. A response over the average was coded as high and a response lower than the average was considered a low. Then, repeated measures ANOVA's were used to explore the effect of time (October, 2010-May, 2011) in the fraternity and level of PPI subscale scores (high, low) on number of sexual partners, college GPA and drinks consumed. There was a significant interaction effect between peer conformity (high, low) and time on alcoholic beverages consumed ($F(1,29)=5.78, p=0.02, \eta^2=0.166$). Significant main effects were also found for both peer involvement ($F(1, 26)=7.09, p=0.01$) and time ($F(1, 26)=24.229, p=0.00$) on college GPA. However, no significant interaction effect between peer involvement and time was found for college GPA ($F(1, 26)=0.003, p=0.857$). Means and standard deviations

related to these significant findings are contained in Table 3. The remaining repeated measure ANOVA's were insignificant.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics for Peer Involvement, Peer conformity, College GPA and Drinks for Participants Completing Both Administrations (n=31)

Scale	Mean		Standard Deviation	
	First Administration	Second Administration	First Administration	Second Administration
Peer Involvement	13.8	12.6	6.6	6.5
Peer Conformity	1.8	2.41	3.6	4.7
College GPA	3.19	3.16	0.74	.43
Drinks	3.3	3.8	1.6	1.4

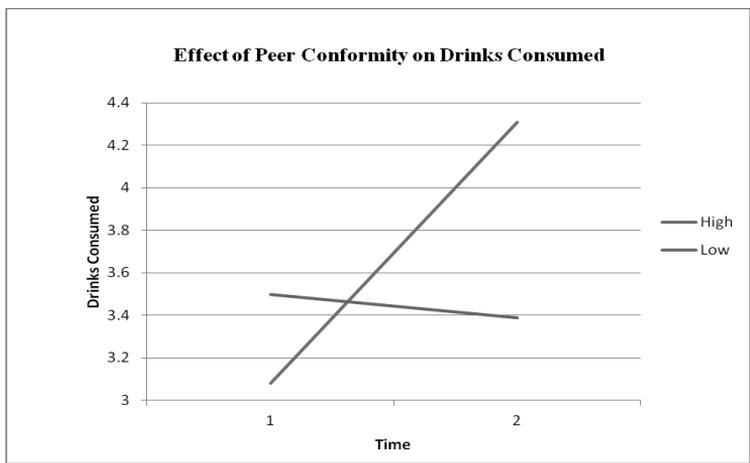


Figure 1: Effect of peer conformity on drinks consumed.
Note. High refers to high peer conformity and Low refers to low peer Conformity.

Discussion

Previous research has demonstrated the growing prevalence of the Greek System in college campuses across the United States. Often seen in a negative light, fraternities and sorority members appear more susceptible to risk-taking behaviors such as alcohol-related problems, sexual promiscuity or assault, as well as poorer academic performance than the general student body (Barry, 2007). Greek Life became known as a public health concern as one of the highest predictors for alcohol use in college (Park, Sher & Krull, 2008).

Although a plethora of research has evaluated the negative consequence of membership in Greek Life, the reasoning behind this problem is still unclear. Research suggests not all college students are equally vulnerable to the negative experiences of binge drinking, high risk sexual practices or poor academic performance. It has become evident that students who are part of a cultural group that endorses such behaviors become more susceptible to these effects (Barry, 2007).

When combined with other factors such as younger age, a desire to affiliate and the availability of increased decision making, a Greek member is particularly at risk for these behaviors. A hypothesized explanation for high risk sexual practices, poor academic performance and binge drinking has been the influence of conformity and peer pressure on the choices of young adults.

The purpose of the current study was to examine the relationship between length of membership in the Greek system, conformity and risk taking behaviors as measured by poor academic performance, sexual promiscuity and binge drinking. The study hypothesized that conformity and risk taking behaviors would decrease with increased time of membership. Greek Fraternity members from a state university in the Pacific Northwest were evaluated through two separate administrations of the PPI. Thirty-one of the participants completed both administrations, while 66 completed the first administration.

Although the study was intended to include a larger number of participants, there was a high level of attrition from the first to second administration. A possible explanation for this could exist in the inherent nature of the Greek system. During the Fall, many young college students are attracted to an organization such as a fraternity, which offers not only a place to live, but also an instant "identity." By the spring time though, some members may become disillusioned with the realities of house membership. In turn, those members who remain are those who have developed a certain level of conformity which is an unstated part of house membership. This could provide a possible explanation for the significant findings with a relative small sample size. In order to be a sustaining member, one sheds a portion of their individual identity in order to become a functioning fraternity member. These 31 individual aren't a typical sample; they are fraternity members who have conformed on some level to the norms and belief systems of their respective chapters. Those members who weren't able to make this shift were likely excluded from the sample as a need for individualism led to a disassociation with their fraternity chapter.

Overall, the findings provide a mix picture relative to the common perception of the Greek System. Peer conformity (as measured by the PPI) did have a significant effect on the amount of alcohol consumed. However, it did not impact the number of sexual partners, and academic performance (GPA) when measured over time within members of the Greek System. The results indicate that the participants with high peer conformity scores reported drinking an average of 3.08 drinks on alcohol use during the first administration. On the second administration the same participants reported an average score of 4.31 drinks on alcohol use. In contrast, those scoring low on peer conformity reported an average of 3.5 drinks on the first administration and 3.39 drinks on the second administration. Alcohol use increased for those participants with higher levels of peer conformity. This finding is supported by current research which suggests that membership in a Greek house significantly increased the likelihood that students would engage in the risk taking behavior of binge drinking Kahler et al. (2006).

The results also indicated that there was a significant difference in GPA between students scoring high and low on the peer involvement subscale. Participants who had a high level of peer involvement reported an average college GPA of 3.12 on the first administration and a 3.49 on the second administration. Participants who scored low on peer involvement had an average college GPA of 3.42 on the first administration and 3.77 on the second. In addition, the average GPA for both groups increased significantly between the first and second administrations. This result differs from the current literature which suggests that peer involvement, such as "going out with friends", which is often related to alcohol consumption and in turn, has a negative effect on academic performance. For many college students, alcohol helps to relieve the pressure and stress of college life build, which can be connected to spending minimal time on homework, poor time management, such as last minute cramming for exams, all of which are connected to a decrease in academic performance (Gall, 1988). To the contrary, it is plausible that Greek Membership could actually provide additional means (outside of alcohol) which help to circumvent the academic pressure, leading to reduce stress levels, and potentially, increased performance. This study

demonstrated that even the participants who endorsed a high level of peer involvement managed to maintain a relative high GPA, which actually increased with length of time in the house.

According to Miller & MacIntosh (1999), stressful environmental factors were positively impacted by the resilience factor of educational involvement. Many of the teenagers in their study were able to overcome a difficult upbringing when establishing a racial identity which interacted with educational achievement to promote success (idem, 1999). While the statistical analysis doesn't establish causality, it's possible the findings of this current study lend support to the existence of protective factors that mitigate the impact of peer pressure.

This implication extends to the policies at this particular school in which there are specific incentives in place to promote academic success, and decreased risk taking behavior. For example, there is an award each year for the Greek man who most exemplifies attributes such as scholarship, community service, and who has served as a role model within the community (<http://oregonstate.edu/cfsl/greek-achievement>).

There is the opportunity for Greek members on this campus to become involved in leadership on campus and within the fraternity through roles on the student government, the Greek life student counsel, as well as other positions on campus and within the fraternity. All of these leadership roles require a minimum GPA of 2.5 or above in order to apply. Lastly, on this college campus, the Greek Houses are ranked each term based on the overall house GPA. Many chapters strive to become the top house on campus through the excellent academic performance of the members.

In addition, remediation plans are created for those who are performing with a cumulative GPA below 2.5 (on a 4.0 scale). Methods such as study tables (quiet study areas), mandatory study times, and a specific executive position of a "Scholarship Chair," all act to encourage academic success. There are also a number of rules which enforce safety and encourage positive decision making at all house events. These regulations include establishing a crowd control plan, limiting alcohol use to those who are 21-years of age and older, as well as denying alcohol to those who appear visibly intoxicated. Finally, this specific university, as well as most schools across the country, has established a policy which specifically prohibits any form of hazing of the members within the Greek system.

Areas for Future Research

Although exploring high school GPA's impact on prosocial behaviors in college was not the focus of this study, these results may be worthy of further evaluation. Research suggests a variety of factors can contribute to success in choosing positive behaviors in college including church attendance, a positive approach to school, a value on health, parents and friends who model positive behaviors and involvement in pro-social activities (Jessor, Turbin & Costa, 1998).

The interaction of conformity within Greek Life is one which requires a substantial amount of further research. There are many possible directions for future exploration, including a more comprehensive analysis of the differences among universities, as well as between chapters, focused on both fraternities and sororities as there are relatively few studies comparing conformity or peer pressure in fraternities and sororities. Lastly, it may be helpful to further explore the role of protective factors such as high school GPA, parental and peer behavior, religiosity and a value on health, and their potential influence on behaviors, specifically within the Greek population of fraternities and sororities.

Limitations

There are a few limitations to the current study which could have contributed to the lack of more significant findings. The data was collected from a limited population at one state university within the Pacific Northwest. Although the request for participation was sent to all of the fraternities and sororities on campus, only three fraternities opted to participate. In addition, the sample consisted solely of males therefore the effects of gender, sorority membership and conformity weren't evaluated. The sample was also not collected randomly considering that it included only Greek Houses who responded to the request for participation.

Another limitation to consider is the homogeneity of the sample as there was a disproportionate number of white participants when compared to non-white participants. It may be that a more diverse sample would have yielded different results. One last limitation to consider is the use of the PPI for the purpose of measuring conformity within a college sample. The PPI has typically been utilized as a tool for measuring peer pressure among adolescents and therefore some of the questions may not apply to a college sample.

In summary, there were some positive insights gained from the current study. At least with this sample, level of conformity (as measured by the PPI) does not appear to impact the frequency of the high risk taking behaviors of sexual promiscuity and decreased GPA. High school GPA also emerged as a protective factor which could be in promoting requiring higher academic standards for entrance into the Greek system. Additionally, university administrators may be interested in increasing admission GPA requirements in an effort to decrease the frequency of misconduct on college campuses.

It is also worth noting that there may be a misunderstanding of the prevalence of negative behaviors such as, sexual promiscuity and academic performance within the Greek System. Considering the pop culture representation of Greek life, movies such as *Animal House* portray an out of control, animalistic group of men, motivated only by sex and alcohol. In a more recent publication, the novel *Pledged* provides an insider's view on the "dark side" of sorority life, including both hazing and sisterhood bonding. Outside of extreme examples though, there is a lack of insight into the culture of Greek Life, especially, into the benefits of membership. Future research focused on providing a more balanced view on both the benefits and drawbacks of Greek membership could help to illustrate the place and purpose of the Greek Organizations as a part of university life.

The current study found that these cultural stereotypes may not accurately reflect all Greek experiences. An alternative perspective of Greek Life that promotes academic success, leadership, and service also exists. Awards such as "Greek Man of the Year", reward students with recognition and scholarship money for being an outstanding Greek member, contributing scholastically, with exemplary leadership and community service. Overall, participants endorsed relatively moderate levels of drinking, consuming about three drinks per week. On average, sexual partners were at less than one within the past month. Participants also endorsed an average GPA in high school of a 3.65, and a college GPA averaging a 3.3. This differing perspective is evidence of more moderate engagement in negative activities within Greek Life, rather than the wild and out of control culture, often misrepresented by society.

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