

The Creation of Heterosexuality in Fraternities: A Case Study of the "Back to the Womb" Party

Held by Delta Upsilon Fraternity at Lafayette College

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WGS 340 Sexuality Studies

10 May 2017

If one were to walk into a fraternity house on a Saturday or Sunday morning, he or she would most likely be surrounded by crushed red solo cups, ping-pong balls, and other remnants indicative of a vibrant, well-attended party the night before. What lies beneath the excessive consumption of alcohol, the wild parties with sexualized themes, the aggressive displays of hyper-masculinity the fraternity brothers project is not completely visible in the traces of parties past (although it can in part be interpreted from the actions and attitudes of the brothers while the party was going on). With the privileges and power the fraternity brothers hold both as individuals and an institutional group in the social scene of each particular college and society at large for being (most commonly) white, middle to upper class, heterosexual men, their gender performances are restricted to a narrow bandwidth of masculinity. Because men are already at the top of the gender binary, any deviation from hegemonic masculinity is a step down the gender slope, away from power, success, and privilege. Sustaining a strict, hyper-masculine gender performance is thus required for all men in order to receive the privileges available to them through their gender. Additionally, because a good masculine gender performance allows one access to gender power in a patriarchal society and masculinity is conferred relationally to men by other men, acquiring masculinity is a competition – putting down other men for not being masculine enough serves as a way to increase one's own masculine status.

In a fraternity setting, the bandwidth of acceptable gender performances is even narrower as the men are conferred masculinity by the other men individually due to their ability to perform hegemonic masculinity and are judged as a group when they are compared to the other fraternities at each particular college. Because the actions of the fraternity members as individuals have an effect on the social, masculine status of the group, their actions are more closely scrutinized and policed by their fellow members and the fraternity members of

“competing” fraternities (Rhoads 321). The fraternity members are forced to prove their masculinity over and over again to one another in order to maintain their privileged societal position (Kimmel “Rites of Almost Men” 97). The importance of an individual’s masculine gender performance is, thus, elevated in a fraternity setting because the image and reputation of the group (their position in the masculine hierarchy) as a whole becomes important – and, a group is only as strong as its weakest member. Because social status within the Greek hierarchy is defined in this way, fraternities can become “contaminated” by the low masculine status of a few of their members – having an openly gay member can cause a fraternity to be deemed the “gay fraternity” (Joseph 25). The higher costs of gender nonconformity in this setting increases the scrutiny the fraternity member’s gender performances are subject to. Through this increased scrutiny, a narrow, structured form of heterosexuality, one of the most important aspects of a good masculine gender performance, is created and managed by fraternity members. Through interactions with institutions of power, this form of heterosexuality is shaped by race, class, sexuality, and gender forces. By examining the actions and attitudes of members of the Delta Upsilon fraternity at Lafayette College surrounding a “Back to the Womb” themed party, the way in which this narrow form of heterosexuality is created and policed by the fraternity members becomes clear.

A man’s masculine status is determined by his ability to fulfill hegemonic masculinity. Hegemonic masculinity is defined to be a masculine gender performance that stresses physical strength, attractiveness towards and ability to interact well with women, intelligence, financial success, confidence, being heterosexual but only interested in women who meet hegemonic femininity standards, white, middle or upper class, competitive, macho, emotionally detached, and athletic (Kimmel “Rites of Almost Men” 96). Because fraternities create a stricter, more

narrowly defined form of masculinity, in addition to successfully meeting most or all of the aspects defining hegemonic masculinity, they also stress "dominance, winning, conflict, (...)willingness to drink alcohol, and sexual prowess vis-à-vis women" while denouncing "whimpishness," effeminacy, and homosexuality (Joseph 8). Failure to meet any or, worse, most of the components of hegemonic masculinity means that the man is failing at his gender performance.

Men who do not meet some of the hegemonic masculinity standards have the ability to "compensate" for their "shortcomings" by succeeding at other aspects (Joseph 21). For instance, homosexuals, who were deemed sexually immoral when the identity was created, have the ability to acquire a morally "good" sexuality by adhering to gender conventions, traditional family values, and viewing sex as an expression of intimate love – by mapping their homosexual sexuality performance onto the hegemonic, accepted display of heterosexual sexuality performance, homosexuals can move up in the moral sexuality binary (Seidman 198). The shift of "good" homosexuals into a morally good sexuality performance leads to the creation of new identities, as Foucault suggests, by shifting the definition of who is normal, thus, constructing a new abnormal, immoral sexual identity (Foucault 38). In a similar fashion, black fraternity men have the ability to move up in the masculine gender performance binary by "compensating" for their failure to meet the hegemonic masculinity standard by not being white through the exploitation of their ability to meet the hegemonic masculinity standard in other ways (Joseph 19). For example, they can be accepted into fraternities and form bonds of brotherhood with the other men by dating and being attracted to white, beautiful women who are meeting the hegemonic femininity standards (20). By being both heterosexual and attracted to white women, these fraternity men of color have a platform to form bonds with their fraternity brothers despite

failing to meet the hegemonic masculinity standard of being white. In this way, sexual prowess and success with white women becomes a vessel through which black fraternity men can cross the line dividing good and bad masculine gender performance in fraternities, thus shifting the line and creating new relationally defined forms of masculinity (Foucault 41). Their ability to use other aspects of their masculine gender performance to successfully display a "good" form of masculinity creates new masculine gender performance identities defined by the men who are unable to meet the new standards – when these men shift the line of what defines a good masculine gender performance, they are still leaving behind people who do not express their gender in this new way (Foucault 39). The shift does not get rid of the gender performance standards, it is simply shifting and redefining who is acceptable to include more or simply different people.

Gender performances are defined through interactions with other people, and one's success at projecting a proper gender performance is determined by the reactions, expectations, responses, and judgments of the people he or she is interacting with (Joseph 1). Masculinity, however, cannot be conferred onto men by men and women – it can only be conferred onto men by other men (Kimmel "Rites of Almost Men" 95). Because men hold the power on the gender slope, they control what defines a proper masculine gender performance and are thus the only ones who can confer masculinity and its accompanying masculine power on others. Although many sorority women claim to find the lower status fraternities who are openly welcoming to a diverse group of men often members of various oppressed groups to be more inviting, "cooler," and nicer than the outwardly homophobic, sexist fraternity men, their judgment of the fraternity holds little to no value in conferring masculinity upon the group and does not translate into higher social status within the Greek system hierarchy (Joseph 27). Only the other fraternities

and other men can confer this status and power upon each fraternity, and thus, the standard upon which this conference of power depends remains defined by the hegemonic masculinity upheld by the fraternity system.

A central aspect of male-male friendship is a specific public performance of their male heterosexuality, and thus, the creation of this strict, ever-present form of heterosexuality. Forming bonds between men in a homosocial environment is difficult when they are forced to adhere to and uphold hegemonic masculinity, as is the case in fraternities. The men are expected to prove their masculinity through an intense and ever-present display of their heterosexuality, yet they are not allowed to show any vulnerability, weakness, or sensitivity (Schultz 389). Intimacy and sensitivity are considered feminine traits, thus, fraternity men are not allowed to display them. To avoid this, they demonstrate their heterosexual desires and, in turn, their masculinity by talking about, watching, and making jokes putting down female sexuality (390). In order to show their enjoyment of sexuality without revealing their own emotions and feelings in front of other men, however, it is not enough for the fraternity men to show interest in intimate, personal female sexuality, instead, they exploit women and treat them as sex objects (390). If the men were to talk about what really makes them feel sexy, what they enjoy about sex, and appreciate about their sexual partners, they would be exposing their vulnerabilities by sharing personal, intimate information about a private part of their lives. This could then discredit their manhood and take away their powerful masculine status. This is especially true in large groups of men such as in a fraternity setting (390). Men cite being able to feel sexy and "like [he's] the man" when speaking about his girlfriend and knowing that she finds him sexy, but "usually only when talking with one other guy" (390). In a group setting, the men do not feel comfortable sharing truly personal information about their sex lives because they are worried

that the group will hassle or make fun of them (390). The change in a man's masculine gender performance when in a group setting versus when talking one on one with another man makes clear the effect the competitive aspect of masculinity has on what the men are comfortable discussing. When speaking one on one with one of his close friends, a man is able to be vulnerable and show his enjoyment of sexuality without the need to exploit women's bodies in order to counteract the seriousness and emotional aspect of the conversation because he can trust that the friend will not discredit his masculinity, as the conversation would only take place if both men were bringing the same level of trust and intimacy to the conversation. Men admit this type of conversation does not happen very often, mostly likely due to the fact that it requires the men to relinquish their power for a moment in order to ignore the competitive requirement of a good masculine gender performance (390). If the men are worried about their masculine status as compared to one another, they are not willing to be vulnerable; it is only in this suspension of competition that men can talk about their sexuality without fear of losing their manhood. In a group setting, on the other hand, the suspension of competition is near impossible as the stakes for a proper masculine gender performance are amplified due to the fact that a man's masculine status is dependent on judgment and interactions with other men (Joseph 2). The social benefits for a man to ridicule the vulnerability of his friend in a group setting are much more desirable than the possible loss of masculinity he would suffer by allowing that type of conversation to take place with his implied endorsement – the risk is too high when a man is performing his masculinity in front of so many people with the power to emasculate him.

Mocking and teasing their friends for any deviances from a hegemonic masculinity display in a large, homosocial male setting is a means through which the men can create power and dominance for themselves through interaction (Kiesling 701). Thus, ridicule, or "roasting"

as it is commonly referred to today, is a tool through which men both improve and prove their own masculinity and enforce hegemonic masculinity standards upon one another (702). Through the policing of masculine gender performance, the men are strengthening the power and rigidity of an acceptable gender performance. In this way, they are bettering their own position within the standing power structures while overall doing themselves a disservice by giving in to and reinforcing the validity of the power structures at play (Foucault 44). By fighting in terms of their own oppression, the men are not freeing themselves from the oppressive demands of a good masculine gender performance and are, instead, strengthening the unyielding definition of good masculinity as hegemonic heteromascularity and supporting the gender power dynamics that created this identity (Foucault 44). The shape the mocking jokes take are indicative of the most significant aspects of a good masculine gender performance and the sexism and homophobia upon which masculine power lies. For example, when a boy is young and fails at properly performing good masculinity, he is most commonly called a "girl" or a "sissy" by his classmates (Kimmel "Masculinity as Homophobia" 35). Even at a young age, his gender performance is being policed by his peers and he is taught that to be feminine is to be "less than." Similarly, men are often made fun of through the use of derogatory terms for homosexuality such as "fag" or "homo" for deviant gender performances (Joseph 28). In fraternities, the use of homophobia as a means to police a masculine gender performance is enhanced, as it is used as a means to deny the homoerotic nature of many of the "bonding activities" the men are subject to (Joseph 11). Because "homoerotic desire is cast as feminine desire" and heteromascularity denounces the value of femininity, fraternity brothers use homophobia as a means to "purify all [their] relationships with other men" – an outward, active display of homophobia is the means through which the fraternity members diffuse the homoerotic aspects of their homosocial interactions

(Kimmel "Masculinity as Homophobia" 35). Thus, the fear that one will be deemed "a little queer" for sharing their personal tastes and admitting that they enjoy the intimacy of sex polices men to perform their heterosexuality in a particular way when in a large group of men, while exposing the way in which homophobia is used as a tool to enforce a uniform performance of masculinity (Schultz 390).

The sexualization of women and the treatment of them as solely bodies for men's sexual enjoyment serves as a tool to form bonds between men in a homosocial, or even mixed-sex, environment. The reinforcement of the notion that women are sex objects through themed parties and sexist language allows fraternity men to redefine women as something subhuman. Considering women in this manner allows the fraternity men to disconnect themselves from the intimacy of sex and its associated vulnerability (389). Thus, they can talk about sex, sexuality, and women to prove their heterosexuality without revealing their emotions and feelings (390). Fraternity men are expected to be sexually aggressive towards women at parties in order to properly display their masculinity and receive the power this success has among the fraternity brothers (Kimmel "Rites of Almost Men" 120). This aggression is most commonly directed at younger, inexperienced girls who the fraternity brothers do not know (Joseph 35). To a degree, it stops or is not directed at girls the fraternity man knows well (35). Because the fraternity men do not know the women intimately or personally, the woman represents a neutral player for each man – she is simply an object of their sexual desires; someone they enjoy; she does not hold any emotional value for any one individual man – her presence, therefore, provides a "common emotional context" for each of the men through which they can bond with one another (Schultz 390). She represents sex without intimacy – until she becomes a human being worthy of respect when they get to know her. The difference between the way fraternity men interact with women

they know versus women they mean at parties anonymously to have sex with show that the fraternity men's treatment of women stems from an understanding of women as subhuman or undeserving of respect until they become "real people" and more than simply a sex object to them in particular. The woman is simply a tool the fraternity brother is using to improve his masculine standing in the fraternity by proving his heterosexuality and interest in sex without revealing any vulnerability (390). Women, thus, are objects through which men can form bonds with one another indirectly, as a direct connection would be intimate and have possible homosexual implications in the strict fraternity atmosphere. If the fraternity men did not give in to sexism by treating women as bodies and sex objects, they would not be able to validate their sexuality by talking about women as sex objects and watching sex in the form of strippers and porn without also exposing their emotions (394). This understanding of women is dangerous as it creates a threatening atmosphere for women in which the fraternity men they are interacting with at parties are focused on proving their heterosexuality to their brothers more than they care about treating the women like human beings deserving of respect and care. This leads to a culture of sexual assault.

Examining the history of the formation of fraternities at Lafayette College reveals the source of the institutional power they hold at the college. The fraternities originally arose as secret societies, leading to a relationship with the administration as one of rebellion, suspicion, and distrust (Lafayette College and the Greek Experience). Despite their deceitful original relationship, when the fraternities became nationally recognized and asked the administration for permission to build fraternity houses on the campus, the administration embraced the plans as a means to combat their housing shortage in the early twentieth century (Lafayette College and the Greek Experience). By alleviating the college's financial responsibility by creating private

housing and meal plans for the fraternity brothers, the fraternity gained power at the college. With the ability to pay for the construction of the houses themselves, the fraternities' class status and financial success served as a means through which to benefit them greatly and give them power when interacting with the college administration (Lafayette College and the Greek Experience). This advantage provided by the upper class status and financial ability of most of the fraternity members has continued to benefit the fraternities at Lafayette College as the financial contributions of the fraternity alumni to the renovation and construction of buildings on campus give the college administration a reason to maintain positive relationships with the college. The desire to maintain these mutually beneficial relationships with the fraternities give the fraternities power and influence over the decisions made on campus. The influence this desire has in informing the decisions of administrators when disciplining or interacting with a fraternity cannot be ignored, as it reveals the influence the institution of capitalism has on what seem to be private affairs on campus.

On Friday February 20, 1981, Delta Upsilon fraternity at Lafayette College held a party they advertised as a "Back to the Womb" theme (Burke). To fit the theme,

The party included stairway walls decorated with pink tissue paper, which was illuminated by red light bulbs, a mattress shaped to resemble a giant tampon, inflated condoms above the bar, a sign behind the bar reading "ALW – Association of Lafayette Wombs," and one person with a hanger around his neck dressed to resemble an aborted fetus. (Burke).

By decorating the party in this way, the members of Delta Upsilon "fragment[ed] women's bodies, and focus[ed] on [them] as sexual and reproductive objects" (The Professional Women of Lafayette). They turned women into bodies alone whose most significant components have to do

with sex and reproduction. Thus, the DU brothers sexualized and dehumanized women by turning them into objects disconnected from their personhood. The party's theme derived from the idea that women are most valuable for their ability to reproduce; their worth is equivalent to the worth of a womb – a stereotype that ignores the role women play in society and takes away their ability to be active agents leading independent lives. By directly mocking the Association of Lafayette Women (ALW) with the sign above the bar reading "Wombs" in place of "Women," the fraternity targeted a group focused on fighting for women's rights and position within the college community. By making a joke about a serious group on campus addressing women's concerns, the fraternity members were underwriting the good the group has accomplished by calling into question the validity of the group by equating them to sexual objects. Additionally, by degrading the women on the campus taking an active role in bettering the position of women in the community to wombs, the fraternity was undermining the ability of these women to remove themselves from the stereotypes and sexist attitudes holding women back, let alone be able to help other women overcome these as well. The party also, however, mocked the value, power, and pain associated with women's role as a mother and bearer of children and "trivializes the brutalization of women" by having a fraternity member dress as an aborted fetus (The Professional Women of Lafayette). The exploitation of women's bodies simply as a sex and reproduction playground for men to enjoy while it's fun through this party adds to the idea that women are solely responsible for reproduction and the aftermath of unprotected sex – by turning women's bodies into a place for men to have fun and leave, the party denied the realness of women's pain and responsibilities. By showing only women's bodies, the party removed the responsibilities and role of men in the act of reproduction completely, thus reinforcing power structures already governing the role and power of men and

women in society. Through this party, the brothers of Delta Upsilon were able to show their enjoyment of sexuality and women without revealing their own emotions and feelings by distancing themselves from the act by focusing solely on women's bodies. Additionally, by treating women as fragmented bodies, the men could affirm the validity of their masculine power through the dehumanization and degradation of the feminine.

As punishment for holding a party that broke the Student Code of Conduct as it was not "honorable, ethical, and mature in every regard" and "led to the demeaning of Lafayette individuals," the Student Conduct Committee originally fined the fraternity one thousand dollars (Delta Upsilon Fraternity 1). On April 16, 1981, however, the brothers of Delta Upsilon appealed to the committee for a change in disciplinary action on the basis that "many incidents by various groups and individuals contribute to an (...) atmosphere that fosters insensitivity towards others, [and] (...) the magnitude of D.U.'s contribution to the fund (...) outweighs their contribution or representation of the problem" (Delta Upsilon Fraternity 1). They argued that the problem of insensitivity towards women was widespread on campus, proven through a series of quotes from members of the college community in the school newspaper, *The Lafayette*, attesting that the social unawareness and sexism displayed at D.U.'s "Back to the Womb" party was not a unique, singular occurrence, and, thus, they should not be singled out "as a focal point, a scapegoat" (The Brothers of Delta Upsilon). The administration, hearing this argument, removed the fine and instead required Delta Upsilon to organize a campus-wide program to inform the students about the provisions and implication of the Code of Conduct, foster a sense of maturity and sensitivity towards other members of the Lafayette community, and encourage conversation among members of the community (Delta Upsilon Fraternity). Although the original punishment did not necessarily fit the crime in that it required a monetary amount for the

fraternity brother's contribution to a sexist, insensitive attitude towards women on Lafayette's campus, the new punishment was lenient in the sense that it did not directly reprimand the fraternity for their actions. Through the acknowledgement that the problem was more widespread than simply one fraternity (an important acknowledgment necessary for administrative intervention and change on the campus) the administration facilitated conversation and validated the lived experiences of the women on the campus, while allowing the fraternity men to remove their personal responsibility for promoting these attitudes on campus. The administration's decision allowed the fraternity to sidestep the problem by validating the idea that they should not be held especially responsible for promoting insensitive attitudes toward women because their party was simply an example of a larger problem within the college. Given the strict form of heterosexuality and masculinity the fraternity brothers are required to express, the administrative decision also served to justify the fraternity brothers' absolution of self-responsibility when they are part of a larger, powerful group. This interaction with the college administration must also be considered with respect to the power the fraternity as a wealthy, powerful institution with a large influence over the social life of the college in mind. Although the exact influence these factors had on the administrators' decision cannot be known, they cannot be removed from the college's interactions with the fraternities.

Many of the claims made in defense of the Delta Upsilon fraternity after the "Back to the Womb" party argued that the party did not cause a significant insult to the female community at the college because it was well attended by both men and women (Burke). This argument, however, ignores the position the women attending the party are in with regard to the patriarchal systems of power. The fraternities at Lafayette at the time controlled the social scene and threw all the parties, as sorority houses were not allowed to host parties (as is the case at many colleges

around the United States today) (Lafayette College and the Greek Experience). By providing free alcohol to the women, the fraternities have a monopoly on the party scene which "allows them to dictate almost every aspect of the parties they hold" (Pope; Hamilton 363). For the women, power within the patriarchal power structures looks like succeeding at gaining the attention and favor of men, thus, in order to gain power within the system forced upon them, women at fraternity parties are forced to participate in the erotic market by appealing to men and acting as the most desirable object (363). Because desirability is a form of cultural capital for women, the women attending the fraternity parties comply with the themes and conditions they are subject to at parties in order to gain as much power as their status within the patriarchal system will allow. Unfortunately, by engaging in the system and exploiting their ability to fulfill hegemonic femininity to be desired by fraternity members, the women sure up the system and give it power through validity (371). Thus, by balancing their argument as to why the party could not have been as insulting to women as the "few self-righteous guardians running to the faculty" claimed on the backs of women who attended the party in order to, knowingly or not, gain power by exploiting their object status, the fraternity men are using the disenfranchised position of women as justification for their continued oppression (Pope). Similarly, this justification reveals the expected, acceptable, and valued masculine and feminine gender performances promoted in the Greek system at Lafayette – women are expected to be passive sex objects and men are expected to enjoy the exploitation of the female body, as it is a means through which he can prove his interest in women and enjoyment of sex without intimacy.

Men are subject to a limited spectrum of acceptable masculine gender performance due to their privileged and powerful gendered societal position. In fraternities, the strictness with which this specific form of masculinity is enforced is intensified, as the brothers are judged and

conferred masculinity individually and as a group meaning the stakes for a deviant gender performance are higher. The class, race, gender, and sexuality status of fraternity brothers creates a new, rigidly defined form of heterosexuality in which the men are expected to show a constant interest in sex, be sexually successful with women who meet the hegemonic femininity standards, denounce homosexuality as a means through which to prove their heterosexuality, and objectify women in order to prove the inferiority of femininity (Joseph 8). This form of heterosexuality was demonstrated by the brothers of Delta Upsilon fraternity at Lafayette College when they threw a "Back to the Womb" themed party. Through this party, they demonstrated the means through which fraternity men acquire power and privilege through their masculine gender performance by fragmenting women into bodies only valuable for their role in reproduction and sex and denying their personal responsibility in promoting an insensitive attitude towards women. Through parties of this manner, fraternities create a rigidly defined, hard to achieve form of heteromascularity and in turn create new definitionally dependent, less powerful forms of heterosexuality. For example, the Troubadours, who Anderson studied in depth, represent a new form of heterosexuality in fraternities which "requires the acceptance of homosexuality, respect for women, and emotional intimacy among brothers" (Anderson 616). Through a failure to meet or a desire to avoid hegemonic masculinity, these brothers created new standards upon which one's masculinity is determined within their group (617). The brothers are changing their definition of masculinity, and thus, pose some challenge to the standing accepted form of heteromascularity prevalent in fraternities. However, because they cannot remove themselves from the structures of power already enforcing their actions and power positions in society, the brothers are still fighting for power within a system that oppresses them (Foucault 39). They are thus attempting to move the line defining a good masculine gender performance

by changing the frame of reference, however, because they are operating within a structured power system, they are simply stretching and fighting against the highly regarded and powerful form of hegemonic masculinity currently informing the hierarchy of fraternities.

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