

It's All Greek to Me! – A focused case study

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When a new male student drives up College Avenue in Easton, Pennsylvania, so many questions go through his mind: "What is college life like?" "What kinds of clubs and activities do they have to offer?" "How do most people make friends here?" The go to answer many choose is to seek out is Greek Life at Lafayette College. This choice is further reinforced by media hype and the culture to belong that is emphasized in today's society. After going through the rushing process, accepting their bids, experiencing the pledging period, which culminates in the initiation process, they find that they finally have college group where they feel accepted in. They feel a sense of comfort, belonging, and trust they have longed to achieve ever since they first saw the movies *Animal House* (1978) or *American Pie* movie. But the important underlying question that lies is what exactly did they have to experience to achieve the title of brother, both physically and mentally? The purpose of this paper is to analyze if and how fraternity life abuses the theory of masculinity while simultaneously warping the young mind in order to conform to a predetermined expectations that a fraternity brother must adhere to.

Before I go deeper in my analysis, I find it important to explicitly explain my point of view. I am concluding my second year participating in a national college fraternity, the Chi Phi Fraternity at Lafayette College. After going through my freshman year having successfully found a friend group, I entered my sophomore year curious in the truths of what the fraternity experience has to offer beyond what any movie or television show portrayed. I chose Chi Phi because I had initially been interested in them from the beginning of my time at Lafayette. I had met several current brothers throughout my freshman year with whom I had developed immediate connections with. When I was able to fully experience the Chi Phi culture, I knew this was the organization for me.

From the start of my official rushing period it was clear they all shared a deep commitment to brotherhood, trust, honor, and personal integrity. The most enticing aspect of the fraternity was its diverse set of students who had completely different backgrounds, interests, and ideologies yet who were all able to find commonalities in formal relationships. Through my time as a Chi Phi brother, I have shared my college experience with students who not only have ranging interests outside of the classroom, (athletes, musicians, engineers, etc.) but students who are completely different in all social personal identifiers. Through Chi Phi I have brothers who are of different race, religions, socio-economic backgrounds, sexualities and so much more. I am grateful to have this opportunity and it will always remain an important part of who I am for the rest of my life.

Despite all my positive personal experiences I am sure to approach this examination with the mindset that not everyone may have similar experiences and observations. I had the pleasure of interviewing Ethan Binder, a first year member of the Delta Kappa Epsilon (DKE) fraternity here at Lafayette. Ethan joined DKE because his freshman friend group developed relationships with current members at the time so he was interested in further pursuing those commonalities. I first asked Ethan if at any time he felt any obligations to conform to any specific social personalities or behaviors surrounding stereotypical fraternity life: "I don't think so because there is a lot of freedom to be who you are and participate in what is important to you. In DKE you can take part in different events as much as you want so if you don't want to do anything not correlated with your values there is no punishment or exclusion from other events. DKE is a very open and accepting community." Deeper into the discussion, I wanted to hear

his opinion on fraternity life beyond College Hill on a national scale: "I have a friend at the University of Mississippi (Ole Miss) and from what he has told me that is the stereotypical fraternity you see in movies and popular culture. During rushing and pledging periods they look for specific stereotypical frat boy qualifications like drinking often and heavily, attend all the parties, is a ladies man who hooks up with a lot of girls, and so on. I have another friend who goes to a southern school who had to send bikini photos to all the sororities before she even got onto campus to begin her freshman year." I was immediately appalled and disgusted which prompted my next question on the factors that may contribute to the difference between Lafayette and the southern schools Ethan had talked about: "School size definitely plays a significant role. Lafayette is small so there is a high focus on education. At huge state schools there is, in a way, a different importance beyond academics. People rush their freshman year or even earlier so they get pushed into the culture before having the chance to truly experience anything else. Since Lafayette limits recruitment to second year students, it provides the opportunity for students to learn about themselves, what the school has to offer beyond fraternity life, and a chance to really discover the person you want to be before you purposefully subject yourself to specific cultures." In relations to my original argument, Lafayette is a community that doesn't enforce masculine conformity but it certainly exists outside Easton.

Further diving into the inclusive masculinity setting in fraternal life, university professor Dr. Eric Anderson dissects the term hegemonic masculinity and how it specifically applies to fraternity life among college campus cultures. Robert Connell of the University of California describes it as "a social process in which one form of

institutionalized masculinity is “culturally exalted” above all others” (Anderson, 604). When applying this to fraternities, college men must be sure to continually exhibit and portray a particular set of qualities to achieve ‘hegemonic power’. Men that subscribe to this mindset do so by shunning individuals they believe to be socially beneath them while simultaneously recruiting potential new brothers who boast a set of prerequisites that can further strengthen stereotypical fraternal aspects. The important take away is that these specific fraternities who take part in this type of recruitment are supporting hegemonic masculinity in life beyond a college campus and producing young men who will continue this behavior after college life.

Hegemonic masculinity captures a wide range of self-superior connotations. These include gender segregation, racial exclusiveness, and sexism. These prejudices play a dominating role in the fraternity social scene. Author Laura Hamilton conducted an important social experiment to see the degree to which these prejudices play on her college social scene. The study provides a first person point of view on the prevailing heterosexual erotic market on campus and the status hierarchy linked to it. “Fraternities have a monopoly on this scene...this allows them to dictate almost every aspect of the parties they hold” (Hamilton 363). These ‘dictations’ include a social scene that is heavily sexualized, effectively white organizations, and all have a selective system that accepts only the most attractive and scantily clad women who appear to drink while rejecting those who fail to meet this subjective criteria. If these women were unwilling to ‘trade on’ their erotic interest, then the fraternity men labeled them as inferior to those selective females who did such things and as a result exclude them from social scenes. The huge importance men placed on physical appearance further translated into a

hierarchy among the females. At the top of the chain, the alpha dog so to speak, were the “the blonde” women who were white, had tan skin, and were thin and thick in specific areas of the female anatomy. This culminated in a strong desire for women who didn’t meet these expectations to take part in expensive measures to do so like hair-coloring, fat burning supplements, and colored contacts. The social pressures these fraternity men are enforcing in the college social scene are therefore detrimental to the health and security of heterosexual women at college whether they participate in the party scene or not.

Later in the social experiment, Hamilton discovered another rather disturbing phenomena in the hypocrisy concerning lesbian women in the social scene. After interviewing fifteen lesbian students in college dorms, she learned that they were very critical or opted out of fraternity parties because they don’t feel welcomed. It wasn’t just a matter of not being big fans of not drinking or sexually interested in a guy, they were initially rejected by fraternity men at the doors of these college house parties. If a brother knows a woman identifies as a lesbian, he immediately makes the conclusion that she will offer zero sexual benefits to his fraternity brothers. Due to high sexual desires of heterosexual fraternity men, they will turn away anyone who they are certain will not fulfill this incessant need. The irony and hypocrisy of all this is the appropriation of lesbian eroticism. Despite the lesbian community being strictly shunned, same-sex eroticism was rather popular with the fraternity brothers. Same-sex eroticism includes “kissing (on the mouth, often involving tongues) and fondling (of the breasts and buttocks), particularly while dancing; no heterosexual women reported oral or digital stimulation of the genitals” (Hamilton, 369). Lesbians interviewed reported that this type of erotic appropriation puts them in a difficult position and are received with disgust and

hostility. Researchers Cindy Jeneffsky and Diane H. Miller note, "the performance of lesbianism for men may signal heterocentric eroticism. Women on the floor who engaged in this behavior claimed that they intended their same-sex kissing for an audience of heterosexual men. Several noted that they liked to get reactions from men" (369). One student interviewed said that some heterosexual women do these actions because it's a way of getting attention from guys that doesn't involve physical harm to the body like excessive alcohol or drug use. It has been reported that alcohol use had a significant effect on this erotic appropriation.

The masculinity that has appeared in fraternity life, not particularly at Lafayette College but on a national scale, often includes a strict and dismissive set of homophobic ideologies. In one of his essays on male sexuality, American sociologist Michael Kimmel explains how masculinity in men is a rather sensitive subject to talk about and people tend to get shamed or shunned for talking about it. Traditionally, masculinity is homophobic in the sense that any sign of femininity in a man is sure to draw emasculating criticism. Within a fraternity, if any male brother doesn't adhere to the set of guidelines that are enforced by the upperclassmen then he is immediately mentally, emotionally, socially, and or physically punished. Men who subscribe to a narrow form of masculinity are afraid of or have a hatred of non-conforming men, "We think of manhood as a thing, a quality that one either has or doesn't have. We think of manhood as innate, residing in the particular biological composition of the human male, the result of androgens or the possession of a penis. We think of manhood as a transcendent tangible property that each man must manifest in the world, the reward presented with great ceremony to a young novice by his elders for having successfully completed an

arduous initiation ritual" (Kimmel, 25). What Kimmel is saying is that masculinity is very black and white, oil and water. Rather than being a spectrum of different variations of masculinity, if a male doesn't do all the things society expects him to do, then he is assumed to be criticized for being non masculine and thereby doesn't have the innate qualities of a 'true man'. These viewpoints can easily be applied to the fraternal setting. The androgens, meaning male ex hormones such as testosterone, can be the incessant need to be continuously sexually active with not just one partner, but multiple. The certain qualities Ethan Binder was talking about earlier is that the fraternity brothers who are recruiting potential future brothers want young men who display confidence with the female sex. If at a rush event they see a male who is able to 'hook up' with girls and has the bravado of a playboy, then they will actively recruit them. This further strengthens the negative image fraternities often display which further damages Greek life's image. The 'initiation ritual' in ways has a strong connection to actual official initiations at the end of the rushing process. For example, after fraternity men recruit men who they believe can continue the lineage of objectifying women, they potentially use this ritual by implying they have the same qualities the upperclassmen share of being confident in their heterosexuality. The reward for successfully displaying society's degrading standards for masculinity is being an official brother of a fraternity who does just that. The 'young novices', or in this case the pledges, are welcomed by the 'elders', the current brothers.

Once the initiation rituals are complete, the new brothers are expected to continue their sexual performances they displayed during the rushing and pledging period. The important part is that if they fail to live up to the strict masculinity code they face the potential of being considered unmanly by other men. This need for other men's approval

is damaging. Traditionally masculinity is homophobic in the sense that any sign of femininity in a man is sure to draw emasculating criticism. Plain and simple, a man isn't supposed to cry. They're not supposed to be emotional, weak, inferior, or yielding. They're supposed to be the apathetic, strong, and superior individual to their counterparts. As a result, men feel powerless to masculinity. If they wanted to change there is little they can do. These demeaning social systems go even further by preventing men from challenging them, "The fear of being sissy dominates the cultural definitions of manhood" (25) means to be less feminine is to be more manly in addition to leading men towards homophobic behavior.

Homophobia is the extreme and irrational aversion to homosexuality and homosexual people. Furthermore, heterosexism is the prejudice against homosexuals due to the belief that heterosexual behavior is superior. Men are pressured to fit into what society defines as a man. This leads them to do things not considered gay. They often feel homosexuality is a threat to their heterosexual masculinity. "Power corresponds to the human ability to not just act but to act in concert. Power is never the property of an individual; it belongs to a group and remains in existence only so long as the group keeps together. When we say of somebody that he is "in power" we actually refer to his being empowered by a certain number of people to act in their name. The moment the group, from which the power originated to begin with...disappears, "his power" also vanishes" (41). This hypothesis can be applied to fraternities and how they always care about their image. When a college campus has multiple fraternities (which they usually do) they are always in competition with each other. They want to recruit all the students who they believe to have the highest value; they want to have the best parties and the best image.

Plain and simple they want to be the alpha dog on campus. If they recruit someone who is homosexual or even someone who is heterosexual but displays characteristics society labels as homosexual, they ignore the potential that student has to offer and move on to applicants who they believe can do a better job. This same thing can be applied to current members. If a brother starts to display these 'negative' qualities, then a fraternity could possibly be worried their image is being threatened. They fear sororities and people on campus will start to label them as the 'weird' fraternity or the one that has that one gay kid. A fraternity, like any other organization, always cares about their image and they don't want something to tarnish it. This type of behavior is therefore a threat to the homosexual and female community on college campuses.

The unfortunate truth is that this type of behavior exists on all college campuses, even Lafayette College. During my research I interviewed one male student involved in fraternity life who wished his name along with his fraternity to remain anonymous. During our discussion we talked about the entire fraternity experience from the beginning of rushing period to where he stands now. Being a member of a fraternity myself made this discussion relatively easier and I was able to relate and connect to him on a number of perspectives. I first asked him why he felt his fraternity recruited him, "During my freshman year I worked out a lot in the gym as well as participated in intramural sports. The combination of these two allowed me to interact with a number of brothers from all fraternities on campus. I feel they connected with me because I displayed typical characteristics of a man. I worked out, I played sports, I was social, and basically I did everything they did which allowed me to connect with them. But the truth is those types of interests and qualities are characteristics of a 'real' man. I strongly believe that a

fraternity member who is looking for recruits doesn't go looking in the theater clubs, the music groups, or minority affiliations for example Behind Closed Doors [a club devoted to sexuality and gender identity]. I'm not saying they're strictly excluding those students. I'm saying they just don't try to recruit there because they immediately assume those students don't share the qualities the brothers exhibit." It's definitely unfortunate that these particular men appear to not have the same opportunities at experiences my interviewee had. Whether they wanted to join a fraternity or not, all students deserve the same opportunities as everyone at joining clubs and activities throughout campus. I later asked if during rushing period he felt the fraternity men were looking for students who had certain qualities relating to women: "I definitely think that plays some role here. When I was at a rush event with a friend who was not as social, confident, and outgoing with girls as I am, I felt the brothers took more of an interest in me and not my roommate. This definitely made him feel uncomfortable and made him worried that him not being as affable as others and myself gave him a disadvantage. In the end he joined a different fraternity from myself but it definitely makes you wonder if him not being suave and charming limited him." This exact behavior is what gives fraternities a negative image and it further supports the notion that men feel the pressure to adhere to a strict set of masculine rules and laws and feel ostracized if they fail to uphold the standards.

The theory that masculinity is a limiting set of qualities is strongly applicable to fraternity life on college campuses. During recruitment, current brothers look for students who display similar characteristics as themselves. On campus they see themselves as superior to everyone else, especially those not involved in Greek life. They want to further continue this sense of self entitlement by continuing the lineage through

recruitment. If they see an applicant who fails to portray the appropriate characteristics they turn towards others who successfully do. This repeated cycle ensures the continuation of this masculine dominance. Once brothers are officially initiated into the fraternity, they display those dominating masculine characteristics, behaviors, and appearances towards the entire college campus by having a monopoly over the college social scene. They dictate the atmosphere of college parties, limit who is allowed to enter and partake in their festivities, and pressure young women to behave in ways that not only is degrading to themselves, but to an entire minority community. Not only to they negatively affect students outside the fraternity, but inside as well. If they see members who are stepping out of masculinity bounds, they shun them and give off this sense that they are wrong and need to be corrected. In turn this strongly affects their own self-identity by forcing them to be someone who they are not. Furthermore, this dominating masculine structure is a threat to homosexual individuals because testosterone filled fraternity men see homosexuality and the people who identify with this category as a threat to their own heterosexual, masculine identity.

The purpose of my work was to research how the topics of masculinity, homophobia, and heterosexuality play in a fraternal setting on college campuses beyond Lafayette College. Despite at times hearing positive reviews on fraternity experiences, my research and observations definitely has shown that considerable work needs to be done to address the ongoing problems relating to these issues. In my remaining time as a student at Lafayette and, by extension, a member of Chi Phi, I hope to address these issues. My working with others, both in and out of Greek life, and definitely see the potential for great work and achievement. This was only referenced in this paper, but

future work involving this topic would be to research and examine how masculine behaviors in fraternity settings affect the female community, both sororities and non-affiliates. I feel the knowledge taken from this research can be applied to female concerns on college campuses including but not limited to campus rape culture.

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