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Alex Zernechel
Western Carolina University

April L. Perry
Western Carolina University

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The Final Battle: Constructs of Hegemonic Masculinity and Hypermasculinity in Fraternity Membership

Alex Zernehel and April Perry, Western Carolina University, Cullowhee, NC

This article explores the correlation between membership in a fraternal organization and masculinity identity development. Masculinity is embedded into the very foundation of the American fraternity culture. Fraternal organizations have served as a haven for young men that support the development of hegemonic masculinity and hypermasculinity, while preventing those same students from being exposed to opposing personality traits and challenges to their own idea of masculinity. In this paper, we present literature on hypermasculinity, fraternities, and a synthesis of the two. Based on the information presented, we make a call to action to educators and university administrators to help young men form a healthy understanding of masculinity and themselves and to start exploring ways (through research and best practices) to break down these systems and better support students.

Keywords: Fraternity, higher education, hypermasculinity, masculinity

This article explores the correlation between membership in a fraternal organization and masculinity identity development. Masculinity is embedded into the very foundation of the American fraternity culture, and this masculinity tends to take on a more toxic nature. Fraternal organizations have served as a haven for young men that support the development of hegemonic masculinity and hypermasculinity, while preventing those same students from being exposed to opposing personality traits and challenges to their own idea of masculinity. The development of hypermasculinity and hegemonic masculinity in fraternity men can be linked to key behaviors that include the exploitation of women, hazing, alcohol and drug abuse, and homophobia. Following a review and synthesis of literature, a call to action is presented to educators and administrators to better understand the core behaviors that contribute to hypermasculinity and hegemonic masculinity so that they may help combat the increasing number of sexual assaults, racial incidents, and hospitalization of students.

Masculinity

Society views the traditional male gender role as a fundamental truth established between men, and includes ideas that men should be aggressive, independent, act as the provider and protector, and be resistant to any form of femininity (Brannon, 1976). Kimmel (1994) defines masculinity as:

A constantly changing collection of meanings that we construct through our relationships with ourselves, with each other, and with our world. Manhood is neither static nor timeless; it is historical. Manhood is not the manifestation of an inner essence; it is socially constructed. Manhood does not bubble up to consciousness from our biological makeup; it is created in culture. Manhood means different things at different times to different people. (p. 120)

Masculinity has been too narrowly defined by today's culture, and young men's interests are being devalued by the evolving social conditions in which they live (Clayton, Hewitt, & Gaffney, 2004).

Hypermasculinity and Hegemonic Masculinity

Research has demonstrated that fraternity membership leads to the potential development of hypermasculinity or hegemonic masculinity. Hypermasculinity is viewed here as an overemphasis and exaggerated adherence to the traditional male gender roles established by an outdated societal view (Mosher & Sirkin, 1984). Hypermasculinity is often associated with aggression towards women and other men who violate the traditional gender norm (Kilmartin, 2007; Parrot & Zeichner, 2003), heightened risk-taking behaviors (e.g., drugs, alcohol, large number of sexual partners; Burk, Burkhart, & Sikorski, 2004), and low academic achievement (Czopp, Lasane, Sweigard, Bradshaw, & Hammer, 1998). Kilmartin (2007) stated, "The picture that emerges is of a man who is not really masculine, but is more of a caricature of masculinity – the man who puffs out his chest, spits on the ground, beats up gays, and hates women" (p. 43). These acts of hypermasculinity are a man's mechanism of disguising their emotions or insecurities, much like that of an insecure child (Kilmartin, 2007). Hypermasculinity is believed to develop in a culture of fear for anything that is feminine, and one cause of such fear could be the result from a young man's lack of personal and emotional relationship with his father (Disney et al., 2015; Murnen & Kohlman, 2007).

Hegemonic masculinity is a societal construct that conforms to the most accepted form of masculinity. Kimmel and Davis (2011) defined hegemony as "the process of influence where we learn to earnestly embrace a system of beliefs and practices that essential harm us, while working to uphold the interests of others who have power over us" (p. 9). Hegemonic masculinity forms a hierarchy of different types of masculinity and those few men that embody the most archaic forms of masculinity are seen as leaders (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). According to Connell and Messerschmidt (2005), hegemonic masculinity is about ascendancy that is accomplished through culture, societal constructs, institutions, and persuasion.

Fraternity Membership

Social fraternities offer young men an opportunity to network and secure friends who pledge their loyalty to each other, the older members, and the national/international organization until death. These organizations also assist young men with the transition to collegiate life; they provide a life outside of the classroom. By sharing meals together,

engaging in social events, and living together, fraternity members strive to create a balance between academic rigor and the social advantages of college (McKee, 2013). Although there are positive benefits to fraternity membership, research also demonstrates many negatives. The structure of the American fraternity culture is built on the idea of hegemonic masculinity and the idea of brotherhood through rituals, hazing, and unquestioning loyalty. Those practices contribute to the subordination of members and a blind trust in those members who maintain a higher status because of their membership number (Rogers, 2006). Negative effects often associated with fraternity membership include:

- less exposure to people from different racial and ethnic backgrounds (Pike, 2000);
- less openness to diversity (Pascarella et al., 1996);
- lower academic performance (Astin, 1993);
- stunted intellectual development for members in their first year of college (Pascarella et al., 1996);
- higher levels of alcohol use and abuse (Wechsler, Kuh, & Davenport, 1996);
- elevated incidents of sexual assault and aggression (Foubert & Cowell, 2004); and,
- hazing (Nuwer, 2004).

Corprew and Mitchell (2014) found that in their traditional hypermasculine group of research participants, fraternity members made up fifty-five percent of the population, which was elevated compared to what they had expected to occur. The secrecy of these organizations and extreme loyalty to one another allows for aggressive behaviors and practices to go unnoticed by university administrations and fraternity headquarter staff. Murnen and Kohlman (2007) found that on a smaller campus, organizations like fraternities have a greater ability to define the confines of masculinity to which their fellow students will be measured. Peer pressure becomes a weapon to force new members and initiated members to conform to the group's definition of gender norms on campus (Murnen & Kohlman, 2007).

Harris's (2010) study focused on the meanings of masculinity and gave a depiction of how college men view masculinity. The study participants shared there were key areas that defined their idea of masculinity: being respected by their peers, the willingness to stand up for oneself when challenged, being confident and self-assured in oneself, and taking on responsibility within the family. The participants also explained that men who were self-assured and viewed as leaders could engage in activities and exude behaviors that could be perceived as more feminine without the risk of their masculinity being challenged (Harris, 2010). The *man-card* is a term that is used amongst young men to signify those who are deemed masculine, and those men that were deemed unworthy of a man-card were viewed as less masculine. The men in Harris's study talked about engaging in unnecessary behaviors to defend their man-card including: "getting into physical fights, vandalizing property, lying about having sex with girlfriends, consuming alcohol, using profanity, and downplaying their academic achievements and

involvement in activities that were not deemed masculine” (Harris, 2010, p. 308). In this hierarchy of young men, an individual could lose his “man-card” for actions or comments that were deemed feminine or not masculine.

Sexual Assault, Alcohol Consumption, and Homophobia

When discussing fraternity membership and hypermasculinity, the literature focuses on three areas – misogyny and sexual assault, alcohol consumption, and homophobia. Across the nation, fraternity men only make up twenty-five percent of the undergraduate male population, but they account for forty-six percent of the perpetrators of sexual violence (Fritner & Robinson, 1993). Fraternity men utilize the promise of access to women and sex as a tool to recruit new members for their organizations (Murnen & Kohlman, 2007). Men who join a fraternity are three times more likely to commit an act of sexual assault than the men who do not pursue membership (Foubert, Newberry, & Tatum, 2007). Murnen and Kohlman’s (2007) study found that the behaviors and attitudes that support rape are not as developed in fraternity men when they first arrive to college, but instead are taught and rewarded during their membership.

On college campuses today, fraternities seem to have the purpose of speakeasies for underage students to consume alcohol, take part in drug usage, and be exposed to the sexual exploitation of women (Fabian, Toomey, Lenk, & Erickson, 2008). In this reference, a speakeasy is referring to secret establishments that served alcohol during the era of Prohibition in the United States. Alcohol provides some young men the opportunity to lower their mask of masculinity and relax their restriction on emotions so they can engage in more intimate bonding (Disney et al., 2015; Sasso, 2015). Unfortunately, some young men only display their emotions and vulnerability once under the influence of alcohol, because they can later blame their actions on the alcohol. Young men utilize alcohol at times to treat loneliness, because they may not have the words or means to express how they are feeling to those around them (Disney et al., 2015).

Harris’s (2008) study documented young men who chose to openly abstain from drinking, but were ridiculed and their masculinity publicly challenged. Sasso (2015) found that the experiences of the fraternity members depicted a group of underperforming and unprepared young men. He identified several characteristics to support that the culture of fraternal organizations are affected by the student’s behavior of alcohol consumption including: competitive heterosexual sex, alcohol misuse and potential abuse, lack of preparation for academic coursework, and noncompliance with policies outlined by their national/international headquarters and host institutions (Sasso, 2015). The excessive rate of alcohol consumption, often rooted in hypermasculine behaviors, can not only impair the judgment of the individuals, but can also lead to life or death situations. Furthermore, these behaviors can have a significant impact on students’ mental health.

The literature addresses homophobia as one of the core aspects to hypermasculinity. However, two studies conducted by Harris (2008, 2010) found that fraternity members were not opposed to fellow members coming out once they shared membership in the same organization. In one interview, Harris (2010) was told that having a gay fraternity brother was acceptable as long as “he was not trying to be a poster

child for homosexuals by changing the house into a bunch of gay guys” (p. 468). As long as their personal sexuality and masculinity was not being challenged, a fellow brother’s sexuality did not seem to bother individuals (Harris, 2008).

Disney et al.’s (2015) documentary, *The Mask You Live In*, portrays that masculinity is molded in part by a man’s father, male role models, and society. With this, making meaning of masculinity is often determined by young men with little direction or guidance from positive male role models (Disney et al., 2015). Fathers who continue to emphasize the rejection of everything feminine, the suppression of true emotions, and the importance of meaningful relationships contribute to the growing issue of hypermasculinity in youth. Media is another major contributor to the continuance of hypermasculinity through television shows, movies, and video games that perpetuate violence towards women, the notion that drinking alcohol and doing drugs will lead to a vibrant social life and sexual encounters, and the demasculinization of men that identify as a part of the LGBTQ+ community.

Previous research does not examine when exactly hegemonic masculinity and hypermasculinity become the focus of a young man’s fraternity membership. Therefore, there are limited best practices in the literature to help campus professionals and fraternity headquarters’ staff combat these toxic forms of masculinity; however, there are ways to move this research and conversation forward.

Call to Action

Partnerships between campus administrators and fraternity headquarters staff become crucial in supporting the young men on our campuses, because they are working against many years of societal training. Until the norm is a society that allows young men the room to explore their own masculinity and showcase their own personality, educators must work to peel off these masks that students are hiding behind when they walk onto campus. Students who begin to take off their mask may revert back if they feel threatened. They will often resort back to dominance and aggression to mask their apparent vulnerability (Corprew, Matthews, & Mitchell, 2014).

Supporting young women has become a major priority for university administrators when talking about positive body image, sexual assault, and empowering them as individuals. Although it is important to educate and support women who are victims of sexual violence (often at the hand of the forty-six percent of perpetrators who are members in fraternities), there is a significant role to also address this issue with young men (often the perpetrators). In many ways, higher education has allowed these young men to slip through the cracks and only focus on the role of the victim (most often women), because campus administrators have not taken the time to identify the underlying causes to the young men’s behavior or actions. McKee (2013) stated, “Today’s fraternity man and the issues plaguing the modern fraternity experience are both vitally important for every administrator to understand, but it is even more important for administrators to understand the often invisible culprit at play—fraternal masculinity” (p. 34).

An opportunity for further research of fraternity membership and masculinity identity, and an attempt to fill a gap in the literature, would be to compare the

national/international fraternal organizations that have constructed a more meaningful member education process to the fraternal organizations that have not put national standard programs like this into place. Another interesting area for further study would be to examine fraternity membership and the concepts of vulnerability in the confines of healthy masculinity development.

As educators, we must turn the attention to the young men on college campuses that are drifting through each day. We need to help the young men form healthy understandings of masculinity and themselves. Through support they will begin to discover their authentic selves and become comfortable with who they truly are, so they do not have to hide behind a mask of what society has deemed acceptable. These young men can be the agents of change within their organizations. Fraternities no longer need to be a stronghold for “locker room talk” and sexist behavior. Instead, they can become true brotherhoods that represent the ideals of their founding fathers while remaining open to all men from every walk of life. Once fraternities move away from this idea of hegemonic masculinity and hypermasculinity, they will see an improvement in the health and strength of their brotherhood, and national/international organizations will see an increase in active alumni. There is an urgent need in higher education practice for further research and improvement in these areas, and we believe it is time for us, as educators, to start exploring ways to break down these systems and better support our students.

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*Correspondence for this article should be addressed to Alex Zernechel at
abzernechel@gmail.com.*