

“GANGS GO TO COLLEGE: A PRELIMINARY REPORT”

BY

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Abstract

This study was a pilot investigation of the relationship between gangs and Greek organizations at an urban university. Participants included 42 males and 51 females, with Greeks representing about ½ the sample. Participants were ethnically diverse, and representative as to age and student status. An interview questionnaire and a “student behavior rating scale” were employed to explore student experiences and behavior. The underlying structure of the student behavior rating scale was examined by factor analysis, and effects of gang familiarity and involvement are explored in the context of this analysis. The hypothesis that that Greeks would have experienced greater contact with or exposure to gangs was not supported. Evidence that fraternities and sororities serve a protective role is discussed.

The image of college fraternities has evolved in recent years. The suit-and-tie look of fraternities in the mid-20th century, emphasizing social standing and political or financial connections, gave way to the “Animal House” fraternity of the 1970s. Fraternities gained a reputation for excessive alcohol use and indiscriminate sexual activity. Much of the current research involving fraternities and sororities is concerned with alcohol and substance use, unprotected sex and other risk behaviors (Capone, C., Wood, M. D., Borsari, B., & Laird, R. D., 2007; Flack, W. F. Jr. et al., 2008; Grekin, E. R., & Sher, K. J., 2006; McCabe, S. E., Schulenberg, J. E., Johnston, L. D., O’Malley, P. M., Bachman, J. G., & Kloska, D. D., 2005; Park, A., Sher, K. J., & Krull, J. L., 2008).

Recent events mark yet another development in the evolution of fraternities – that of the fraternity as street gang. In January of 2003, it was widely reported that two Asian-American fraternities from San Jose State College and UC Santa Cruz engaged in a brawl that left one dead and four injured. According to the San Francisco Chronicle, the fraternities under investigation had web sites that “evoke the outlaw

'gangsta' hip-hop image popular among many young Americans. Police investigators said they have noted gang references on the Web sites and are looking into possible gang ties." (Gathright & Goura, 2003). More recently, fraternities were implicated in a drug ring at San Diego State University that resulted in 96 arrests (Perry, 2008).

Cadwallader and Cairns (2002) noted a potential overlap between fraternities and gangs in research among middle and high school students. Youth in a large industrial urban center in the U.S. south were asked to identify the gangs that were most prominent in their neighborhoods. Participants named a number of "gangs" with Greek letters in their title (e.g., A Phi E, A T O.). It was not clear if those groups were organized fraternities, or formerly affiliated with any educational institution.

Perhaps more relevant is the question of what distinguishes a gang from any other sort of social group. Cairns, Cadwallader, Estell and Neckerman (1997) contend that gangs generally develop along pathways similar to any social group. If anything, gangs may produce greater "relationship stability and membership continuity" (p. 201). Accordingly, between fraternities and gangs, the only distinguishing factors may be the presence or absence of violence, coercion, and illegal behavior. For example, the practice of being "jumped in" to a gang may share a similar function or purpose with the routine "hazing" of fraternity pledges.

This project proposed to undertake an investigation of fraternities and sororities beginning with a pilot study at one California State University campus. One aim of this research was to evaluate whether fraternal organizations encourage and support academic success, or reinforce deviance and law-breaking. Another question to be examined was the presence of visible markers or outward characteristics that distinguish pro-social "fraternities" from anti-social "gangs." Based on the media accounts mentioned above, it was hypothesized that fraternity and sorority members would be more likely to have a history of gang awareness or involvement (e.g., presence of gangs in the student's neighborhood or high school, friends in gangs, gang membership).

Method

Participants

Participants included 42 males and 51 females. Students involved in Greek activities were over-sampled. Forty of the participating students were members of fraternities and sororities; 50% of the males (21/42) and 37% of the females (19/51). Students ranged in age from 19 to 51 years old, with 86% (80/93) being between 19 and 23 years old. Freshmen accounted for 17% of the sample (16/93), 46% were sophomores (43/93), 17% were juniors (16/93), and 19% were seniors (18/93). There were no graduate students. Caucasians accounted for 26% of the participants (24/93), 7% were African-American (6/93), 17% were Hispanic (16/93), 33% were of Asian descent, 9% reported that they were of mixed heritage (8/93), 7% said they

were Middle Eastern (6/93), and 2% declined to state (2/93).

Materials

A brief interview questionnaire was devised, and a “student behavior rating scale” was created. The interview consisted of questions regarding the student’s club and fraternity participation, tattoos, musical preferences, academic standing, demographics, and the following questions regarding gangs:

Were there gangs in your neighborhood or high school, or groups with names (like posses or crews)?

If yes:

What was/were the names of those groups?

Did you ever belong to a group like that?

Did any of your friends belong to groups like that?

Do you know anyone now that belongs to a gang or a group with a name?

Do you belong to a gang now?

Have you ever had any problems or conflicts with someone from another club, fraternity, sorority, gang, or group with a name?

(If so) Tell me about it.

The rating scale allowed students to rate themselves on 18 behavioral indices (e.g., popularity, grades, substance use, speeding, etc.). The scale is adapted from the Interpersonal Competence Scale (Cairns, Leung, Gest & Cairns, 1995). The ICS has demonstrated reliability for application with younger students. The Student Behavior Rating Scale (SBRS) used here was modified to explore behaviors more common among college-aged youth. The scale is included as an appendix.

Procedure

Each participant was interviewed in a private office or another location of the participant’s choice. Participants were asked to review and sign a consent statement prior to the interview. No compensation was offered or implied. Interviews were conducted by the author or his assistant, and were tape-recorded. Each interview and completion of the questionnaire required an average of 10 to 15 minutes. Interviews and questionnaire responses were coded into an SPSS data file.

Results and Discussion

The hypothesis that fraternity students would have more “background” connections to gang activity was not supported. One explanation for this failure to find a connection between gang activity in the student’s background and fraternity participation at school may be due to the ubiquity of gangs generally. Seventy-three percent of participants (68/93) reported having gangs in their childhood neighborhoods. Five percent of students (5/93) said that they had belonged to a gang

in the past, and half of the respondents (47/93) said that they had friends who were gang members. Twenty percent of the students (19/93) reported knowing a current gang member. None of the participants claimed to be a current member of a gang. Notably, of the five students who claimed past gang membership, four were current members of a fraternity.

Other analyses involved effects related to being in a fraternity or sorority, e.g., musical preferences, wearing “colors” or using hand signs. The only significant predictor of fraternity or sorority membership identified in this data set was having a tattoo, ($X^2_{(1, n=93)} = 8.94, p < .01$). Apparently it is commonplace to wear a tattoo of the letters or insignia of the fraternity or sorority to which the student belongs.

This research was by its nature cross-disciplinary, involving both concerns of criminal justice professionals (e.g., are gangs infiltrating our colleges and universities?) and issues of interest to Developmental Psychologists (e.g., what are the features and functions common to both Greek organizations and gangs?) As such, these data presented an opportunity to explore similarities and differences between fraternity/sorority members and their non-Greek counterparts.

The underlying structure of the student behavior rating scale was examined by factor analysis. A principal component analysis was extracted, to obtain the full correlation matrix and to establish eigenvalues. Initial principal components analysis established eigenvalues of 3.84, 2.10, 1.47 and 1.32 for the first four factors, respectively. The first four factors explained 48.5% of the variance; based on eigenvalues and the scree plot a four-factor solution was obtained. Subsequent extraction by principal component analysis, using Oblimin rotation with Kaiser normalization to approximate simple structure, resulted in the extraction of four clearly interpretable factors. The rotated factor pattern is given in Table 1.

These four factors were identified: 1) a “Party” factor, characterized by high scores on items such as drinking, speeding, popularity, partnerships, partying, friendships, and writing, and a negative factor scores for shyness; 2) a “Risk” factor, reflecting high factor scores for arguing, being in trouble, being angry, and negative scores for attractiveness; 3) a “Competent” factor, revealing high scores on items such as grades, athletics, math and writing, and negative scores for being in trouble and smoking; and 4) a “Withdrawn” factor, with high scores for worrying, shyness and smoking, and negative item scores for popularity, partying, friendships, math, attractiveness, and happiness. Figure 1 and table 2 describe a regression analysis of the differences among these factors between Greek and non-Greek students. This analysis reveals that there are significant differences ($p < .001$) between Greeks and non-Greeks on the “Party” factor, (Greeks like to party) and between Greeks and non-Greeks on the “Risk” dimension (non-Greeks are more at risk, $p < .01$).

Insert Table 1 about here

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Figure 1: Differences in Standardized Factor Scores on the Student Behavior Rating Scale between Greek and Non-Greek Students

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The author notes the many historic benefits of belonging to a fraternity or sorority. Much effort goes into assuring that the Greek organizations on college campuses are properly administered and governed. This research was not intended to besmirch the name or reputation of any Greek organization; rather, the aim was to consider objectively how the goals and activities of fraternities and sororities mesh with the reality of student life in the 21st century. An assumption of this research was that not all fraternities and sororities are created equal, and that negative events such as those described above are best avoided by improved understanding of fraternity and sorority culture.

As indicated, one aim of this research was to understand more fully if and how aspects of gang culture are filtering into student organizations, and into students' lives. Most of the participants in this study have had some direct exposure to gang influences. One hypothesis of this research was that Greek students would have experienced greater contact with or exposure to gangs in their childhood neighborhoods. This hypothesis was not supported. The failure to support this finding is likely due to the ubiquity of gangs in urban settings – the context from which most of these students are drawn.

This preliminary study suggests that involvement in traditional Greek organizations may serve either a protective role for acting out behavior and school failure, or may simply attract students who are at lower risk. For future investigation, we hope to include the non-traditional, non-sanctioned, “off-campus” Greek societies reported to be active at other universities.

About the Author

Dr. Cadwallader was a prosecutor's investigator in Colorado from 1976 to 1988. From 1988 to 1995 he was a Supervising Public Defender Investigator with the Public Defender's office in San Diego, CA. In 1995 he graduated Summa Cum Laude from San Diego State University, with honors in Psychology. Cadwallader was accepted into the Developmental Psychology program at UNC Chapel Hill in the fall of 1995, where he earned an M.A. and Ph.D. After receiving his doctorate in 2000, Dr. Cadwallader went to California to work as a post-doc at S.R.I., a research firm in Menlo Park. In 2002 he joined the criminal justice faculty at California State University - East Bay. In 2008 he returned to North Carolina to accept a faculty position in the Department of Criminal Justice at North Carolina Central University. His research interests generally are in the behavioral characteristics and social development of deviant youth and special populations.

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Note:

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