

MEMBERSHIP IN FRATERNITIES AND SORORITIES, DEPRESSION, AND SUICIDAL IDEATION¹

RACHAEL RIDGWAY, CONNIE TANG, AND DAVID LESTER

The Richard Stockton College of New Jersey

Summary.—College student membership in fraternities/sororities may have positive or negative effects on their behavior. This study investigated the relationships between fraternity/sorority membership, depression, and suicidal behavior. 293 undergraduate students (232 women, 61 men; M age = 22.6 yr., SD = 1.5, range = 18–24; 127 sorority sisters, 35 fraternity brothers) from a rural state college participated in the study. Depression, self-esteem and perceived social support were measured with the Beck Depression Inventory, the Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale, and the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support, respectively. Depression and suicidal ideation correlated negatively with self-esteem and perceived social support, but were not correlated with membership in fraternities/sororities.

In the study of suicidal behavior, college undergraduate students are frequently used as participants in research out of convenience (Lester, 1969). Yet researchers rarely study college-related variables as predictors of suicidal ideation (Lamis & Lester, 2011). Rather, the students are used to test general theories of suicide, such as the role of hopelessness or feeling of defeat and entrapment (Lester, 2012). Lester (2013) reported a preliminary study of the association of college-related variables with suicidal ideation in which students living on campus had higher depression scores and were more likely to report suicidal ideation than those living at home with their parents.

Self-esteem in college students is associated with variables such as gender, body satisfaction, and romantic relationship status (Pettijohn, Naples, & McDermott, 2010). Self-esteem is also associated with measures of loneliness and hopelessness (McWhirter, 1997; Chioqueta & Stiles, 2007), while depression and suicidal ideation are associated with loneliness and the perception of low levels of social support (Chioqueta & Stiles, 2007; Li, Lin, & Hsiu, 2011).

One way that students can reduce their feelings of loneliness is by joining a social group on campus such as a fraternity or sorority. Joining these groups can help students build new friendships and connections and facilitate feelings of acceptance by the members (Taylor, 2010),

¹Address enquiries to Connie Tang, Ph.D., Psychology Program, The Richard Stockton College of New Jersey, 101 Vera King Farris Drive, Galloway, NJ 08205-9441 or e-mail (connie.tang@stockton.edu).

but negative attributes have also been associated with these organizations (Wells & Corts, 2008); e.g., membership in fraternities/sororities was found to be associated with eating disorders in men (Piquero, Fox, Piquero, Capowich, & Mazerolle, 2010) but not in women (Allison & Park, 2004). McCabe, Schulenberg, Johnston, O'Malley, Bachman, and Kloska (2005) found that members of sorority or fraternal organizations engage more often in heavy drinking. However, there is no research on depression in college students who are members of fraternities and sororities compared to those who are not members.

The purpose of the present study was to investigate the relationship between fraternity/sorority membership and students' perceived support, self-esteem, and depression. It was predicted that membership in a fraternity/sorority would be associated with higher perceived social support and self-esteem and lower depression and suicidal ideation.

METHOD

Participants

Undergraduate students ($N = 293$; 232 women, 61 men; M age = 22.6 yr., $SD = 1.5$, range 18–24) from a rural state college participated in the study. At the time of the study, the college had 6,481 students, of whom 42% were male and 4% were members of fraternities and sororities. Of the 293 participants, 127 were sorority sisters and 35 were fraternity brothers. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board, and all participants gave their informed consent.

Measures

Depression was measured with the Beck Depression Inventory. This scale contains 21 items (e.g., "I feel sad much of the time"), each scored on a four-point scale (1–4). This scale has been used widely and found to have good reliability and validity (Reinecke & Franklin-Scott, 2005). One item on the inventory assesses current suicidal ideation. The depression score was calculated from the remaining 20 items, so that the scores on the suicide item could be analyzed separately. The range of possible depression scores is 20–80. The mean score for the present sample was 30.11 ($SD = 9.63$), and Cronbach's α was .93.

Self-esteem was assessed with the Rosenberg Self-esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965). It is a 10-item measure (e.g., "At times I think I am no good at all") answered on a four-point Likert-type scale with anchors 1: Strongly agree and 4: Strongly disagree. The range of possible scores is 10–40. Griffiths, Beumont, Giannakopoulos, Russell, Schotte, Thornton, *et al.* (1999) have found the scale to have both strong construct and convergent validity. The mean score for the present sample was 36.99 ($SD = 7.44$), and Cronbach's α was .89.

Perceived social support was measured with the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet, & Farley, 1988). It is a 12-item inventory (e.g., "I can talk about my problems with my family") answered on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1: Very strongly agree and 7: Very strongly disagree. It contains the three subsections family, friends, and significant others. Total scores can range from 12 to 84. This measure has good reliability and validity (Başol, 2008). The mean score for the present sample was 64.85 ($SD = 15.79$), and Cronbach's α was .93.

Procedure

The survey was conducted online, and students in psychology courses were offered extra credit for their voluntary participation. In order to increase participation by members of fraternities and sororities, requests were sent to the Greek organizations on campus asking their members to participate. A questionnaire asking for the students' age, sex, and membership in fraternities/sororities was placed on the college's online system. After providing their demographic details, the students completed the three self-report inventories.

RESULTS

Neither the sex nor the age of the students was associated with any of the scores. Depression scores were significantly correlated with self-esteem scores ($r = -.71$, $df = 291$, $p = .001$, Cohen's $d = 2.02$) and perceived social support ($r = -.53$, $df = 291$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.25$), but not with membership in fraternities/sororities (point-biserial $r = .004$, $df = 291$).

Suicidal ideation was significantly correlated with social support ($r = -.46$, $df = 291$, $p < .001$, $d = 0.92$), self-esteem ($r = -.49$, $df = 291$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.12$), and depression ($r = .65$, $df = 291$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.71$), but not with membership in fraternities/sororities (point-biserial $r = -.006$, $df = 291$). The pattern of results was the same for both the men and the women considered separately.

Multiple regressions using age, sex, membership in fraternities/sororities, and perceived social support scores to predict self-esteem, depression, and suicidal ideation scores all found that membership in fraternities/sororities played no significant role (standardized beta coefficients for membership in fraternities/sororities ranged from -0.01 to 0.00). The hypothesis was not supported: membership in fraternities/sororities was not associated with self-esteem, depression or suicidal ideation.

DISCUSSION

The results of the present study confirmed previous research indicating that self-esteem and social support are correlated negatively with depression and suicidal ideation (Lester, 2000). However, membership in fraternities and sororities was not associated with either depression or suicidal ideation. Incidentally, for the total sample, depression scores

were significantly associated with lower self-esteem and less social support. Thus, the results of the present study do not lend support to the hypothesis guiding the study that membership in fraternities and sororities would be associated with better mental health. It may be that the advantages of belonging to a fraternity (e.g., becoming a member of large social group) or sorority are balanced by the drawbacks (e.g., engaging in risky behavior or the stress of obtaining membership in these groups). Further research is needed to explore these factors.

A limitation of this study is that the fraternities and sororities at the college studied did not possess residential houses. All the students at this college lived primarily in the college dormitories and apartments or at home. It may be that research at colleges where the fraternities and sororities have residences in which the members live would find results different from the present results. The authors did not study the frequency of engagement in fraternity and sorority activities, and it would of interest in future research to include other extracurricular activities besides belonging to a fraternity/sorority. The use of single items measures for past suicidal behavior is also a limitation, and future research could use multi-item measures of suicidal behavior. In addition, current suicidal ideation could be measured separately from depression.

REFERENCES

- ALLISON, K. C., & PARK, C. L. (2004) A prospective study of disordered eating among sorority and nonsorority women. *International Journal of Eating Disorders*, 35, 354-358.
- BAŞOL, G. (2008) Validity and reliability of the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support-Revised, with a Turkish sample. *Social Behavior & Personality*, 36, 1303-1314.
- CHIOQUETA, A. P., & STILES, T. C. (2007) The relationship between psychological buffers, hopelessness, and suicidal ideation: identification of protective factors. *Crisis: The Journal of Crisis Intervention and Suicide Prevention*, 28(2), 67.
- GRIFFITHS, R. A., BEUMONT, P. V., GIANNAKOPOULOS, E., RUSSELL, J., SCHOTTE, D., THORNTON, C., & VARANO, P. (1999) Measuring self-esteem in dieting disordered patients: the validity of the Rosenberg and Coopersmith contrasted. *International Journal of Eating Disorders*, 25, 227-231.
- LAMIS, D. A., & LESTER, D. (2011) *Understanding and preventing college student suicide*. Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas.
- LESTER, D. (1969) The subject as a source of bias in psychological research. *Journal of General Psychology*, 81, 237-248.
- LESTER, D. (2000) *Why people kill themselves*. Springfield, IL: Charles C. Thomas.
- LESTER, D. (2012) Defeat and entrapment as predictors of depression and suicidal ideation vs hopelessness and helplessness. *Psychological Reports*, 111, 498-501.
- LESTER, D. (2013) Depression and suicidal ideation in college students. *Psychological Reports*, 112, 106-108.

- LI, C. J., LIN, P. C., & HSU, H. L. (2011) The relationships among adult attachment, social self-efficacy, distress self-disclosure, loneliness, and depression of college students with romance. *Bulletin of Educational Psychology*, 43, 155-174.
- MCCABE, S., SCHULENBERG, J. E., JOHNSTON, L. D., O'MALLEY, P. M., BACHMAN, J. G., & KLOSKA, D. D. (2005) Selection and socialization effects of fraternities and sororities on U.S. college student substance use: a multi-cohort national longitudinal study. *Addiction*, 100(4), 512-524.
- MCWHIRTER, B. T. (1997) Loneliness, learned resourcefulness, and self-esteem in college students. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 75, 460-469.
- PETTIJOHN, T. F., NAPLES, G. M., & McDERMOTT, L. A. (2010) Gender, college year, and romantic relationship status differences in embarrassment and self-attitudes of college students. *Individual Differences Research*, 8, 164-170.
- PIQUERO, N., FOX, K., PIQUERO, A. R., CAPOWICH, G., & MAZEROLLE, P. (2010) Gender, general strain theory, negative emotions, and disordered eating. *Journal of Youth & Adolescence*, 39, 380-392.
- REINECKE, M. A., & FRANKLIN-SCOTT, R. L. (2005) Assessment of suicide: Beck's scales for assessing mood and suicidality. In R. I. Yufit & D. Lester (Eds.), *Assessment, treatment, and prevention of suicidal behavior*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley. Pp. 29-61.
- ROSENBERG, M. (1965) *Society and the adolescent self-image*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univer. Press.
- TAYLOR, G. (2010) An analysis of leadership programming sponsored by member organizations of the National Panhellenic Conference. *Research Journal of the Association of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors*, 5, 22-33.
- WELLS, B., & CORTS, D. P. (2008) Measuring attitudes towards sorority and fraternity members: indication of implicit, ingroup favoritism. *College Student Journal*, 42, 842-846.
- ZIMET, G. D., DAHLEM, N. W., ZIMET, S. G., & FARLEY, G. K. (1988) The Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support. *Journal of Personality Assessment*, 52, 30-41.

Accepted April 8, 2014.