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The Collegiate Experiences of Lesbians In Panhellenic Sororities

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**THE COLLEGIATE EXPERIENCES OF LESBIANS IN PANHELLENIC
SORORITIES**

by

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Bachelor of Science
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Before I entered the field of higher education and student affairs, I served as chapter president of my sorority and a sister approached me with a question. Could she, as a woman, hold a candle pass for her girlfriend, another member of our chapter? A candle pass is a special sorority ritual in which a sister announces something important, so of course I said yes with no hesitation. We held the candle pass and the sister presented her girlfriend with a pearl ring, a symbol of love. After the ceremony, the amount of backlash I received was extraordinary: “Why would you let her do that?” “You’re going to scare away our new members by exposing them to that.” It was these comments that made me realize that this sister’s experience was so vastly different than my own solely because of her sexual orientation. From that moment on, I knew I wanted to study the experiences of these women, in order to inform my community, the sorority community, how to be more welcoming and inclusive. To the women who bravely deal with these experiences every day, thank you. Thank you for sharing your memories with me and letting me try to tell your stories.

I am grateful to the rest of my cohort, as well as the faculty at the University of South Carolina Higher Education Program for providing me with an experience I could not have dreamed of enjoying as much as I have. Lastly, thank you to Dr. Susan Bon, Dr. Julie Rotholz, and Dr. Spencer Platt for helping me turn my singular experience and interest into a project of which I am proud of.

ABSTRACT

Fraternalities and sororities are a well-established culture on many college campuses. Today, about 16% of all college graduates were members of a fraternity or sorority while attending their alma mater (Gallup, 2014). Out of this 16%, approximately 3-4% of sorority membership is known with certainty to be lesbian or bisexual (Case, 2005). What are the experiences of these women? Do they face specific challenges within sorority life due to their sexual orientation? This qualitative study examines the experiences of lesbians in Panhellenic sororities in order to bring light to a relatively invisible subculture and inform the practices of current practitioners. The research questions of this study included the following:

- 1. What are the positive and negative experiences of lesbians in Panhellenic sororities?*
- 2. What challenges do lesbians in sororities face specifically due to their sexual orientation?*

Interviews with women who self-identify as lesbians provide insight into these experiences and challenges. Overarching themes of role models, support systems, diversity, heterocentrism and more were identified and explored in relation to D'Augelli's Model of Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Identity Development.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Fraternalities and sororities are a well-established culture on many college campuses. Today, about 16% of all college graduates were members of a fraternity or sorority while attending their alma mater (Gallup, 2014). Out of this 16%, approximately 3-4% of sorority membership is known with certainty to be lesbian or bisexual (Case, 2005). What are the experiences of these women? Do they face specific challenges within sorority life due to their sexual orientation?

This study examines the experiences of lesbians in Panhellenic sororities in order to bring light to a relatively invisible subculture and inform the practices of current practitioners. The first chapter will introduce the research problem, the research questions, and their relevance to the field. The second chapter will introduce literature related to the research problem and identify relevant and significant research regarding the following: the history of Greek-letter organizations; lesbians within higher education settings; and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) Greek-letter organization members. After this exploration of literature, the third chapter will explain the research methods and design that were used to conduct the study and describe the procedures taken. Chapter four will report the findings of the study from the data collection and analysis process in Chapter three. The fifth chapter will discuss the results from chapter four in relation to the problem statement and the research questions posed in chapter one.

Chapter five will also draw conclusions about the study's findings and focus on implications for practice and future research.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Three themes emerge from the current literature regarding lesbians in Panhellenic sororities: inclusivity, chapter experience, and stereotyping. Research indicates that the Greek-letter community has become more inclusive over time (Case, 2005; Rankin, 2013). This apparent increase in inclusivity is coupled with a consistent positive rating of overall membership satisfaction from LGBT Greek-letter organization members (Case, 2005; Rankin, 2007). Although these two trends are relatively positive, the majority of research presents problematic stereotypes associated with lesbians who join Panhellenic sororities which may hinder the sexual identity development process (D'Augelli, 1994; Neumann, 2012; Welter, 2012).

INCREASING INCLUSIVITY. In Case, Hesp and Eberly's 2005 study of over 500 self-identified gay, lesbian, and bisexual Greek-letter organization members, it was found that only 12% of respondents who graduated before 1980 reported they had revealed their sexual orientation to one or more chapter members while in college, as opposed to 39% of members who graduated after 1980 (Case, 2005). Rankin's 2013 cohort analysis of over 300 gay fraternity members also reflects this theme. Fraternity men who joined their fraternities in the year 2000 or later were more likely to describe the climate of their fraternities as friendly, communicative, concerned, respectful, or improving than were participants who joined in the year 1989 or before, which indicates that the fraternity environment is becoming increasingly accepting of gay men and same-sex relationships (Rankin, 2013,). Similarly, in Neumann's 2012 study of heterosexual sorority women,

most women viewed themselves as very accepting of lesbians and same-sex relationships (Neumann, 2012). The implications and results of this trend may mean that the sorority community is also becoming increasingly accepting of same-sex relationships, as fraternities and sororities often interact together as part of a larger Greek-letter community.

OVERALL EXPERIENCE. Another common trend found is a positive overall experience amongst LGBT Greek-letter organization members. Case (2005) found that the vast majority of respondents indicated they were satisfied with their overall experience, but most also indicated “that their sexual orientation in some way detracted from the quality of their undergraduate fraternity/sorority experience” (Case, 2005, p. 25). The Lambda 10 Project, a clearinghouse for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender fraternity and sorority issues, published a 2007 qualitative study of LGBT fraternity/sorority members (Rankin, 2007). It was found that 50% of current undergraduate members described their chapters as non-homophobic, while the vast majority of participants indicated they were very satisfied with their undergraduate Greek-letter experience (Rankin, 2007). The connection between the percentage of homophobic attitudes experiences and overall satisfaction mirrors Case’s (2005) study, where respondents reported satisfaction with their experience, even in the face of negative situations (Case, 2005).

STEREOTYPES. The last trend to emerge from the literature regards stereotypes of lesbians. Neumann (2012) found that most heterosexual sorority members believed that lesbian sorority members would not have an effect on any chapter operations, as long as they dressed and acted like women (Neumann, 2012). Also supporting this claim, Welter

(2012) found that respondents who did not embody typical LGBT “stereotypes experienced role conflict--suggesting that the coming-out process is more of a burden for them and less of a burden for LGBTQ persons who fit the stereotypes” (Welter, 2012, p. 123).

PURPOSE OF STUDY

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of lesbians in Panhellenic sororities, in order to bring light to a relatively invisible subculture. An additional purpose was to inform current practitioners of the specific needs of the subculture and the current climate of inclusivity within the sorority community.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- Research Question 1: What challenges do lesbians in sororities face specifically due to their sexual orientation?
- Research Question 2: What are the positive and negative experiences of lesbians in Panhellenic sororities?

SIGNIFICANCE TO THE FIELD

There were no individual personal benefits to participants besides an avenue through which to tell their story. The knowledge obtained from the study will hopefully impact the consideration of inclusivity training and provide knowledge of the subculture to colleges/universities, practitioners, Greek-letter organizations and sorority members.

DEFINITIONS

- LGBT: An initialism that stands for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender. Many different acronyms and titles are used for this group of people, and LGBT was

chosen for brevity and effectiveness. It is important to note that identity is a spectrum, and this acronym is not meant to exclude any group.

- **SORORITY:** For the purposes of this study, the term sorority refers exclusively to historically white Panhellenic sororities, not historically black National Pan Hellenic sororities, Multicultural sororities, or pre-professional sororities. Panhellenic sororities are members of the National Panhellenic Conference, the organization provides basic unanimous agreements for all member sororities. Today the National Panhellenic Conference is comprised of 26 member sororities, including (in order of admission): Phi Beta Phi, Kappa Alpha Theta, Kappa Kappa Gamma, Alpha Phi, Delta Gamma, Gamma Phi Beta, Alpha Chi Omega, Delta Delta Delta, Alpha Xi Delta, Chi Omega, Sigma Kappa, Alpha Omicron Pi, Alpha Gamma Delta, Alpha Delta Pi, Delta Zeta, Phi Mu, Kappa Delta, Sigma Sigma Sigma, Alpha Sigma Tau, Alpha Sigma Alpha, Alpha Epsilon Phi, Theta Phi Alpha, Phi Sigma Sigma, Delta Phi Epsilon, and Sigma Delta Tau (National Panhellenic Conference, 2012).

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

There were minimal risks to subjects in the study such as anxiety and frustration due to the personal nature of some of the interview questions, loss of time and loss of confidentiality. All data from the study were kept confidential and the subjects' identities were not revealed before, during, or after the study. The participants' names were removed from the interview transcripts during transcription. Pseudonyms will be used for all reporting and presentation purposes. The researcher kept data on a password-protected laptop in a password-protected document.

To obtain consent from the respondents, the researcher delivered (via email or postal service) a copy of the cover letter informing them about the study and the benefits that the knowledge obtained may have for colleges/universities, Greek-letter organizations and sorority members, and requesting their participation. The researcher was available to answer any questions participants may have. Participants were also informed that participation is voluntary and may be rescinded at any time, including post member-checking.

PERSONAL STATEMENT

Researcher bias is always present in the identification of questions, the issue to be researched, and the overall research process because the study, namely data collection and analysis, is viewed through the researcher's lens. The researcher is a member of a Panhellenic sorority and has prior knowledge of the inner workings of Panhellenic sororities. In college, she served as Recruitment Vice President, and Chapter President. She has worked with both fraternities and sororities, and remains an active volunteer within the Greek Community. She believes that Greek-letter organizations are valuable and believe that the sorority community is capable of change.

SUMMARY

This chapter has provided an overview of the study and described its relevance to the field. Chapter two will introduce literature related to the research problem and identify relevant and significant research regarding the following: the history of Greek-letter organizations, lesbians within higher education settings, and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) Greek-letter organization members

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Fraternalities and sororities are a well-established culture on many college campuses. Today, about 16% of all college graduates were members of a fraternity or sorority while attending their alma mater (Gallup, 2014). Out of this 16%, approximately 3-4% of sorority membership is known with certainty to be lesbian or bisexual (Case, 2005). What are the experiences of these women like? How do negative experiences associated with their sexual orientation affect their overall sorority experience satisfaction? The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of lesbians in Panhellenic sororities, in order to bring light to a relatively invisible subculture. An additional purpose will be to inform current practitioners of the specific needs of the subculture and the current climate of inclusivity within the sorority community.

The purpose of this chapter is to summarize existing knowledge and provide context to the perception and experiences of collegian lesbian Panhellenic sorority members. This literature review will address three areas related to the experiences of lesbians in Panhellenic sororities. The first section will address existing literature on Greek-letter organizations, their history, and culture, drawing conclusions about their members' possible perceptions and attitudes towards lesbians. The second section will focus on research studies about lesbians on college campuses, including a discussion of D'Augelli's life span model of lesbian, gay, and bisexual development and its possible

impact on college students and members of Greek-letter organizations. The third section will discuss research related to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) members of Greek-letter organizations.

THE HISTORY OF GREEK-LETTER ORGANIZATIONS

The first Greek-letter organization came into existence in the same year that the United States declared its independence. Phi Beta Kappa was founded at the College of William and Mary on December 5, 1776. Although the contemporary Phi Beta Kappa organization is a scholarly honorary society, the original group had the characteristics of a present-day fraternity: “the charm and mystery of secrecy, a grip [handshake], a motto, a badge for external display, a background of high-idealism, a strong tie of friendship and comradeship, [and] an urge for sharing its values through nationwide expansion” (Owen, 1998, p.10). In the early 1800s several secret societies for men were formed and the fraternal movement was born. The names of Greek-letter organizations are usually composed of two or three Greek letters. These letters usually represent a motto or theme of purpose that is only known to members of the society (Owen, 1998). Following the form of secret societies, Greek-letter organizations have secret rituals known only to their members. Although each group has unique ceremonies, most initiation rituals are comprised of an explanation of the individual group’s secret signs and symbols, the meaning of the secret motto, and “charge or challenge to the new members to be of good character and to be loyal to the other members of the society” (Owen, 1998, p.13). When organizations began to expand from their founding campuses, each chapter was given its own Greek-letter name in order of their establishment; for example, the second chapter of fraternity Alpha Alpha Alpha would be the Beta chapter. Some fraternities chose to adopt

a state organized naming system; for example, the third chapter of fraternity Alpha Alpha Alpha founded in Indiana would be the Indiana Gamma chapter (Owen, 1998).

In the early days of fraternities, membership was only granted to upperclassman. Competition between organizations on the same campuses eventually led to a “scramble” for members at the beginning of each year (Owen, 1998). According to Baird’s *Manual of American College Fraternities*, “both fraternities and colleges have perceived the shortcomings of this sort of ‘rushing’ as the contest for members is called, and are constantly striving to set up systems which will permit the sensible recruitment of new members” (Owen, 1998, p.12). Although the solidarity within fraternities is meant to negate division based on class, race, and sexuality, “homogeneity rather than diversity often characterizes the composition of fraternities” (Yeung, 2009, p. 185).

Since their creation, Greek-letter organizations have faced many obstacles. In the beginning, they struggled with a bitter rivalry amongst themselves, and many suffered ill will from the American public because of their secretive nature. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, during the populist movement, several states adopted radical measures that banned Greek-letter fraternities in state institutions—meaning college campuses. During World War I, the War Department issued a memorandum that fraternities be closed on campuses where units of the Student’s Army Training Corps had been established, because “fraternity activities are incompatible with military discipline” (Owen, 1998, p. 23). After World War I, Greek-letter organizations encountered problems with the economic depression: students did not feel they could afford membership, therefore chapter houses were closed and chapters were withdrawn (Owen, 1998). This slump in membership continued through World War II, and chapters turned inward for an

explanation. Members began to see that their membership was defined by exclusivity and they needed to admit men and women from more diverse backgrounds in order to survive (Campbell, 2012).

After World War II, Greek-letter organizations quickly regained their popularity. With more students coming to college campuses as a result of the G.I. bill, chapters grew exponentially in size (Owen, 1998). Campuses began to recognize the potential and benefits of Greek-letter organizations and began to employ student affairs professionals to advise and regulate the groups. According to Owen, between the end of the war and the early 1960s Greek-letter organizations experienced the greatest increase in size in their history:

More campuses opened to national fraternities: more chapters were installed than in any previous period: more members initiated; more chapter houses were built; more foundations and endowment funds were established. In addition, better relationships were developed between the Greeks and educational administrations and the Greeks and the communities of which they were a part. (Owen, 1998, p. 22)

Throughout the late 1960s and 1970s Greek-letter organizations on college campuses faced yet another challenge, as campuses became centers of discontent and rebellion against perceived authority. Despite the fact that members of fraternities and sororities were taking part in the movement, Greek-letter organizations were targets for student protesters. In 1973, Greek-letter organizations had the lowest percentage of growth in membership since the establishment of the organizations (Owen, 1998). The 1980s brought a revival to fraternities and sororities and an extreme growth in

membership. Since the 1980s, there have been many allegations against the Greek-letter community, including that of racism, destructive behavior, anti-intellectualism, abuse of alcohol and hazing (Owen, 1998). In March 2015 alone, over 30 fraternity chapters were closed due to “hazing, alcohol-related problems, criminal investigations and other student conduct infractions” (Kingkade, 2015, para. 1). These issues are continuously addressed by student affairs professionals dedicated to the fraternal movement through education, outreach and programming.

HISTORY OF SORORITIES. Greek-letter organizations for women began to emerge in the mid eighteenth century. The Adelphean society (known today as Alpha Delta Pi sorority) was founded on May 15, 1851 at Wesleyan College in Macon, Georgia (National Panhellenic Conference, 2012). The Adelphean society did not model itself off of the fraternities that were colonizing across the country, but instead patterned itself after the literary societies that founder Eugenia Tucker Fitzgerald witnessed at colleges in Georgia. The purpose of the organization was to provide a social and academic outlet from the college. Although the Adelpheans were not aware of the newly emerging fraternities, their organization featured similar elements, including a secret handshake, motto and password (Nelson, 1965). The following year, another secret society for women emerged on Wesleyan’s campus. The Philomathean Society (known today as Phi Mu sorority) modeled itself after the Adelphean society, and the two coexisted on Wesleyan’s campus for many years (Nelson, 1965).

In the late nineteenth century, Greek-letter organizations for women began to multiply rapidly. As men’s groups became more popular and spread to more campuses, women felt the need to have organizations of their own (Campbell, 2012). Before 1874,

these groups were labeled as “women’s fraternities,” because there was not yet a word for women’s Greek-letter organizations. With the founding of Gamma Phi Beta at Syracuse University, the term “sorority” was coined when the organization’s advisor, Dr. Frank Smalley, a Latin professor, thought “the word ‘fraternity’ [derived from the Latin word for brother] was ill-advised for a group of young ladies” (Owen, 1998, p.12).

NATIONAL PANHELLENIC CONFERENCE. As more sororities came into existence, the women within them began to defy expectations. In 1902, eight women’s groups sent delegates to a meeting that resulted in the formation of the first Interfraternity association and the first inter-group organization on college campuses (National Panhellenic Conference, 2011). Now known as the National Panhellenic Conference, the organization provides basic unanimous agreements for all member sororities. These agreements, along with recommendations and advice provided by the conference, bring an equal standard to all Panhellenic sororities.

Today the National Panhellenic Conference is comprised of 26 member sororities, including (in order of admission): Phi Beta Phi, Kappa Alpha Theta, Kappa Kappa Gamma, Alpha Phi, Delta Gamma, Gamma Phi Beta, Alpha Chi Omega, Delta Delta Delta, Alpha Xi Delta, Chi Omega, Sigma Kappa, Alpha Omicron Pi, Alpha Gamma Delta, Alpha Delta Pi, Delta Zeta, Phi Mu, Kappa Delta, Sigma Sigma Sigma, Alpha Sigma Tau, Alpha Sigma Alpha, Alpha Epsilon Phi, Theta Phi Alpha, Phi Sigma Sigma, Delta Phi Epsilon, and Sigma Delta Tau (National Panhellenic Conference, 2012). The conference “stands for the protection, perpetuation and growth of the finest ideals of women’s friendship” and promotes the growth of the fraternal movement (National Panhellenic Conference, 2011, p.11).

DIVERSITY IN SORORITIES. Developed as part of a response to men's fraternities in the nineteenth century, sororities were originally reflective of the student body who attended the campuses they were founded on. Thus the members of early sororities were typically White and Christian (Boschini & Thompson, 1998). As college campuses became more diverse, these groups struggled to keep up with the changing times.

When institutions began to integrate, African American students began to form their own Greek-letter organizations. Alpha Kappa Alpha was founded at Howard University in Washington, D.C. in 1908 as the first sorority for African American women (Anson & Marchesani, 1998). Alpha Kappa Alpha mirrored the values found in Panhellenic groups, but also promoted African American rights (Ross, 2000). Instead of joining with historically white sororities in the Panhellenic Conference, they joined historically African American fraternities in the National Pan-Hellenic Conference. Today there are nine historically African American Greek-letter organizations in the National Pan-Hellenic Conference, four of those being sororities.

Most sororities were founded on campuses that upheld Christian values, and this is reflected in their rituals and insignia. When African American women began to form their own Greek-letter organizations, Jewish women also took the initiative to begin sororities. Alpha Epsilon Phi and Sigma Delta Tau were founded in 1909 and 1910 respectively, as Panhellenic sororities founded on Jewish principles (Anson & Marchesani, 1998). In 1975, Lambda Theta Alpha was founded as the first sorority for Latina women to create a support system for Latinas in higher education (Mauk, 2006).

According to Boschini and Thompson (1998), "diverse memberships expand the education and learning opportunities among fraternity and sorority members of different

cultures, abilities, and backgrounds. Diversity in [these] organizations helps prepare members for working and living in a highly diverse society” (Boschini & Thompson, 1998, p.22). Greek-letter organizations have had to adapt and change over the years, and must continue to do so. If they are to keep surviving and flourishing “within the modern college and university, it is imperative that they understand the importance of diversity” (Boschini & Thompson, 1998, p.19). Recently, many Panhellenic sororities have adopted anti-discrimination clauses, and according to the National Panhellenic Conference (2012), membership in all 26 organizations is open to women of all backgrounds.

PANHELLENIC SORORITY RECRUITMENT. Panhellenic recruitment differs by institution, but follows a format recommended by the National Panhellenic Conference. Formal recruitment, the term used to describe the official time period for Panhellenic recruitment, generally occurs over a series of days early in the fall semester (recruitment in the spring semester is referred to as deferred recruitment). All potential new members are required to visit all sororities during the first “round” of recruitment. An older member (recruitment counselor), typically disaffiliated from her chapter during recruitment, leads a group of potential new members to visit each sorority. After this initial meeting between potential new member and chapter, there is a mutual selection process, where chapters participate in a secret member-voting process to decide which women to invite back to the next round, and potential new members prioritize the chapters they would like to visit again. This mutual selection process continues for several rounds (the length of recruitment and number of meetings between potential new members and chapter varies by university) until preference round (the last round of formal recruitment) where potential new members prioritize which chapters they would

like to join, and sororities decide which potential new members will be extended invitations of membership. The National Panhellenic Conference unanimous agreements provide recruitment rules, including but not limited to: “Requiring a scholastic grade point average as a condition for a woman’s participation in the membership recruitment process,” “If through the primary membership recruitment process, a potential new member receives a bid and declines it, then she is ineligible to be pledged to another NPC sorority on the same campus until the beginning of the next year’s primary membership recruitment period,” and “Each College Panhellenic Association shall prohibit the participation of men in membership recruitment and Bid Day activities” (National Panhellenic Conference, 2016, p.30-33). Each university will also have their own set of rules for recruitment, such as the length of each recruitment round, the amount of decorations allowed, and a set recruitment budget.

EXCLUSIVITY. It is important to note that Panhellenic sororities are exclusive in nature because of their membership selection processes. Although these groups have policies allowing membership to women of any race, religion, sexual orientation, or creed, the members of each Panhellenic sorority chapter have the final say on who is granted membership through a membership selection process that is unique and secret to each sorority (National Panhellenic Conference, 2011). These processes allow the organizations to be exclusive based on various factors unknown to outsiders, such as personality traits, talents, and possibly outward appearance and possessions.

Chapman’s (2008) study of the effects of sorority recruitment on self-esteem found that women who were not successful in the recruitment process (were not extended a membership offer, dropped out of the process, etc.) experience a significant decline in

self-esteem. These women accounted for 5% of the sample. Women who persist through the process had significant increases in self-esteem (Chapman, Hirt, Spruill, 2008). The decline in self-esteem experienced by women who were rejected by their peer group has led to the claim that sororities are unnecessarily exclusive (Campbell, 2012).

LESBIANS ON COLLEGE CAMPUSES

Within higher education, researching the experiences of lesbians is challenging because many women did not identify themselves as part of a lesbian identity until the twentieth century. In fact, the concept of having an identity as an LGBT person, as opposed to just having a relationship with a person of the same sex, did not take hold until well into the twentieth century (Mueller & Broido, 2012). However, before Freud's ideas popularized awareness of women's sexuality, there is evidence of intimacy between women on college campuses, particularly at women's colleges (Gibson & Meem, 2005). According to Gibson and Meem (2005), in the period between 1870 and 1920, "long-term partnerships between women were seen as neither unnatural nor immoral, and therefore...they could be treated with the kind of openness and respect characteristic of heterosexual couples" (Gibson & Meem, 2005, p. 4). After World War I, attitudes regarding same-sex relationships moved from "casual acceptance to condemnation and the awareness of the need to hide" (Mueller & Broido, 2012, p. 80).

In the 1960s, some gay and lesbian students began to request recognition and funding from their universities. Although many universities refused these requests, the first gay student organization was founded in 1967 and more than 2,000 existed by 1996 (Mueller & Broido, 2012). There was a heterosexist backlash from campuses against these organizations and as a result many colleges and universities began forming offices

for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) services. In 1997, three campus directors created the National Consortium of Directors of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Resources in Higher Education as a way to support and advance inclusion on campuses (Sanlo, Rankin & Schoenberg, 2002). Today this group is known as the Consortium of Higher Education LGBT Resource Professionals and has over 300 members (Consortium of Higher Education LGBT Resource Professionals, 2011).

Although progress is being made, colleges and universities are relatively lacking in support services for LGBT students. This lack of support can make higher education seem heterosexist in nature, despite the work that is being done by student affairs professionals (Mueller & Broido, 2012). Today, discrimination based on sexual orientation on college campuses is thought to be socially accepted because instead of traditional overt sexual prejudice, people are more likely to express prejudice in subtler ways, such as encouraging heteronormative gender roles, or not recognizing the accomplishments of the LGBT community (Massey, 2009). In Rankin's 2004 study on campus climate for LGBT students, 19% of participants reported they had feared for their physical safety due to their sexual orientation and 34% avoiding disclosing their sexual identity to an instructor, administrator, or supervisor due to a fear of discrimination (Rankin, 2004). As a solution to address the challenges still facing LGBT people on college campuses, Rankin (2004) suggests an effort must be made to:

Shift basic assumptions, premises, and beliefs in all areas of the institution....In the transformed institution, heterosexist assumptions are replaced by assumptions of diverse sexualities and relationships, and these new assumptions govern the

design and implementation of any activity, program or service of the institution.
(Rankin, 2004, p. 21-22)

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A theory that may provide framework for understanding lesbians in PanHellenic sororities is D'Augelli's Model of Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Development. D'Augelli's Model has several sets of factors. First, there are three interrelated variables involved in identity formation: *personal subjectives and actions*, which includes individuals' thoughts and feelings about their sexual identity, as well as behaviors and the meanings attached to them; *interactive intimacies*, which includes the influences of families, and peer groups, and the meanings attached to experiences with intimate relationships"; and *sociohistorical connections*, which includes laws, policies and norms that exist in a particular place and time (Evans, 2010). Interactive intimacies may be of importance to the subculture of lesbians within Panhellenic sororities in particular, due to the heavy involvement with peers that occurs within sororities.

These three variables influence each other and the identity development process (seen in Figure 2.1). D'Augelli divided this process of development into six interactive processes. It is important to note that while these processes influence each other, they are experienced separately, can occur at different times, and are not necessarily experienced in sequential order. The six processes include:

Exiting heterosexual identity: The recognition that one has feelings that are not heterosexual, and telling others that one is lesbian, gay or bisexual.

Developing a personal lesbian-gay-bisexual identity status: The determination for oneself of the individual meaning that being gay, lesbian, or bisexual will have on one's life.

Developing a lesbian-gay-bisexual social identity: The creation of a support system.

Becoming a lesbian-gay-bisexual offspring: The disclosure of one's identity to parents/guardians and reevaluation of the relationship with one's parents/guardians.

Developing a lesbian-gay-bisexual intimacy status: The complex process of achieving an intimate gay, lesbian or bisexual relationship.

Entering a lesbian-gay-bisexual community: The commitment to social and political action (D'Augelli, 1994).

D'Augelli's model enforces the idea that the development of sexual orientation is a prolonged series of processes. Heterosexual identity is not generally thought of as a social construct, but as the norm, therefore heterosexism is taught to children from a young age through gender roles, parents, and school curriculums. Unlike other identity groups, "lesbians, gay men, and bisexual people have grown up absorbing a destructive mythology before they appreciate it is meant for them" (D'Augelli, 1994, pg. 315). According to D'Augelli (1994), "becoming" lesbian, gay or bisexual requires two distinct processes, first distancing oneself from the heterosexual identity, and second, creating a new identity (D'Augelli, 1994).

An important aspect of D'Augelli's model is that it is based in human development, taking on the following perspectives: First, individuals develop over the

course of their life spans, meaning that sexual feelings and preferences can change in varying degrees over time. Second, human functioning is responsive to the environment, meaning that the negative consequences of homosexual feelings can be heightened because peer relationships may be threatened by these feelings. Third, development is unique to each human being, meaning that sexual identities look and behave differently in different generations and cultures. Lastly, the actions of human beings impact their development, meaning that sexual development is rooted in conscious choice and actions (D'Augelli, 1994).

D'Augelli's model was chosen as the lens through which the study was conducted due to the involvement of the environment on the LGBT identity development.

Environmental factors such as “societal oppression can lead to feelings of panic, anxiety, and denial....Because of oppression and the feelings it elicits, developing a gay, lesbian, or bisexual identity takes time” (Evans, 2010, p. 315). The interrelated variable of interactive intimacies could provide context for the choices that lesbians within Panhellenic sororities make, such as coming out, or dating within the chapter. Stevens (2004) provides evidence of the effect of environment and context on the sexual identity development process. In a study of 11 gay undergraduate males, participants reported “incidents of heterosexism and homophobia in the campus environment, as well as supportive statements and actions, had a significant effect on their willingness to disclose [their sexual identity]” (Evans, 2010, p.318).

LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL AND TRANSGENDER GREEK-LETTER ORGANIZATION MEMBERS

There is a lack of research on the inclusion of lesbians in sororities because of the relative invisibility of the subculture. Identifying as a lesbian is not something that can be

seen on the outside, and is something that many students choose to keep to themselves during college (Case, 2005). Because of this lack of exposure and the encouragement of homogeneity in Greek-letter organizations, it is difficult for researchers to glean information about the experiences of members of this subculture. From the studies that have been conducted, several themes emerge.

CLIMATE OF ACCEPTANCE. The first theme is the changing climate of the Greek-letter community. In a 2005 study by Case, Hesp, and Eberly, over 500 self-identified gay, lesbian, and bisexual Greek-letter organization members who graduated between the years of 1960 and 2007 were surveyed to:

Assess their reasons for joining; how their membership affected their sexual identity development and intimate relationships; the degree of homophobia and heterosexism encountered; how sexual orientation affected the quality of their fraternal experiences; and the level of acceptance or rejection they faced. (Case, 2005)

According to the findings, approximately 3-4% percent of sorority membership is known (with certainty) to be lesbian or bisexual (Case, 2005). In addition, only 12% of respondents who graduated before 1980 reported they had revealed their sexual orientation to one or more chapter members while in college, as opposed to 39% of members who graduated after 1980 (Case, 2005). In 2013, Rankin published a cohort analysis of gay fraternity members from 1960 to 2007. A total of 337 men completed a survey about their experiences in a fraternity and about their perception of the climate within their chapter at the time of membership in regard to gay brothers. The findings mirrored Case's 2005 study: fraternity men who joined their fraternities in the year 2000

or later were more likely to describe the climate of their fraternities as friendly, communicative, concerned, respectful, cooperative, and improving than were participants who joined...in the year 1989 or before” which indicates that the fraternity environment is becoming increasingly accepting of gay men and same-sex relationships (Rankin, 2013, p. 579). Rankin believed that campuses need support systems specifically for LGBT Greek-letter organization members, who may have different stressors than unaffiliated LGBT students (Rankin, 2013). In 2012, Neumann conducted a study at an urban, Midwestern, private university on the attitudes and beliefs of heterosexual sorority women towards lesbian members (Neumann, 2012). Participants completed a survey about how comfortable they were interacting with lesbians, how supportive the chapter membership was of lesbians, and the effects lesbian members may have on chapter operations. Again, most women viewed themselves as very accepting of lesbians and same-sex relationships (Neumann, 2012). The implications and results of this trend may mean that the sorority community is also becoming increasingly accepting of same-sex relationships, as fraternities and sororities often interact together as part of a larger Greek-letter community.

Although the climate for acceptance within sororities seems to be growing more inclusive, in Campbell’s 2012 study, an online survey administered to 402 sorority women at a Mid-Atlantic, public, four-year institution, it was found those sorority women’s attitudes differed towards lesbian sorority members and lesbian non-sorority members. Attitudes were more positive towards members perceived as lesbians than towards non-members perceived as lesbians (Campbell, 2012).

OVERALL EXPERIENCE. Another common trend found is a positive overall experience amongst LGBT Greek-letter organization members. Case (2005) found that the vast majority of respondents indicated they were satisfied with their overall experience, but most also indicated “that their sexual orientation in some way detracted from the quality of their undergraduate fraternity/sorority experience” (Case, 2005, p. 25). In 2007, the Lambda 10 Project, a clearinghouse for gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) fraternity and sorority issues, published a qualitative study on the experiences of LGBT people in fraternities and sororities (Rankin, 2007). Researchers surveyed 347 men, 88 women and one transgender fraternity and sorority members, 49% of whom were alumni, 40% of whom were current undergraduate students and 13% of whom were graduate/professional students. It was found that more than one third of respondents came out during their Greek-letter undergraduate experience. 50% of current undergraduate members described their chapters as non-homophobic, and 47% of alumni reported that their chapters were homophobic. 100% of participants indicated they were very satisfied with their undergraduate Greek-letter experience (Rankin, 2007). The connection between the percentage of homophobic attitudes experiences and overall satisfaction mirrors Case’s (2005) study, where respondents reported satisfaction with their experience, even in the face of negative situations (Case, 2005). In fact, Case (2005) found that LGBT members tended to be overachievers, displayed in the higher percentage of respondents who held executive offices being significantly higher that what would be expected in a random sampling of fraternity/sorority members. Case attributed this “overachievement” to two theories, first the reflection of a desire for validation and acceptance within the chapter, and second, the “channeling of their energies into

organizational leadership duties that others applied toward developing heterosexual relationships (Case, 2005, p.26).”

STEREOTYPES. The last trend to emerge from the literature addressed the stereotypes of lesbians. Neumann (2012) found that most heterosexual sorority members believed that lesbian sorority members would not have an effect on any chapter operations, as long as they dressed and acted like women (Neumann, 2012). Also supporting this claim, Welter (2012) found that respondents who did not embody the stereotypes experienced role conflict--suggesting that the coming-out process is more of a burden for them and less of a burden for LGBT persons who fit the stereotypes” (Welter, 2012, p. 123).

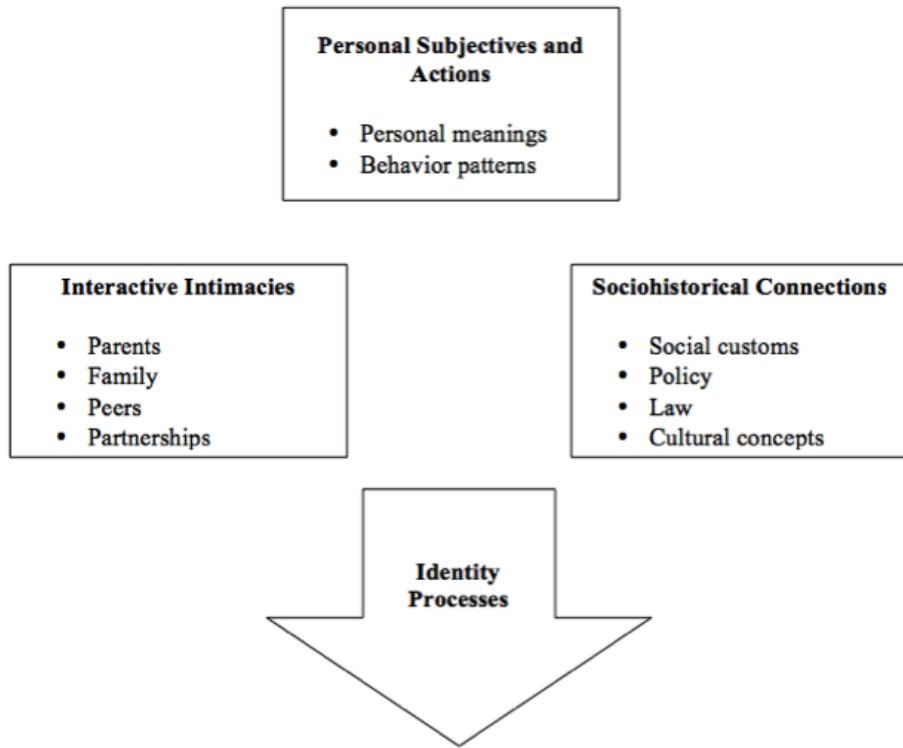
A concept that may play into all three emergent themes is that of a designated “Lesbian sorority.” In Stone and Gorga’s (2014) interview study of sorority women, there are three containment practices for what they identify as pariah females: exclusion, closeting, and the branding of a “lesbian sorority” (358). Exclusion refers to the rejection of lesbians from sorority recruitment or membership, while closeting refers to the encouragement of heterosexuality within sororities. The “lesbian sorority” refers to a sorority with multiple “out” lesbians or bisexuals. This concept constructs a space for lesbians within Greek-letter organizations while simultaneously alienating them from the community.

SUMMARY

This chapter has reviewed the previous literature on Panhellenic sororities, lesbians on college campuses, and LGBT Greek-letter organization members. While there are limited quantitative accounts of the experiences of LGBT members in Greek-letter

organizations, there is a void in the research of qualitative studies regarding the positive and negative experiences of lesbians in Panhellenic sororities. The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of lesbians in Panhellenic sororities in order to bring light to a relatively invisible subculture.

The next chapter will describe the method that will be used for this study. The sample strategy and interview protocols will be outlined, as well as the measures taken to ensure compliance with the University of South Carolina's policies with human subjects.



1. Exiting heterosexual identity
2. Developing a personal lesbian-gay-bisexual identity status
3. Developing a lesbian-gay-bisexual social identity
4. Becoming a lesbian-gay-bisexual offspring
5. Developing a lesbian-gay-bisexual intimacy status
6. Entering a lesbian-gay-bisexual community

Figure 2.1: Model of Lesbian-Gay-Bisexual Development

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

This study examines the experiences of lesbians in Panhellenic sororities in order to bring light to a relatively invisible subculture and inform the practices of current practitioners.

The research questions of this study included the following:

1. What are the positive and negative experiences of lesbians in Panhellenic sororities?
2. What challenges do lesbians in sororities face specifically due to their sexual orientation?

This qualitative study describes the experiences of lesbians in Panhellenic sororities. Interviews were used to collect data with the primary goal of investigating 8 women's stories. The narrative data were transcribed, coded, and categorized into relevant themes related to the research questions. This chapter will explain the research methods and design that were used to conduct the study and describe the procedures taken.

SETTING

This study was based on members of Panhellenic sororities who self-identified as lesbians. Because of wide range of demographic possibilities for this group, the participant pool was pulled from 4-year universities across the United States. The researcher, based at the University of South Carolina, conducted phone interviews with all participants.

UNIVERSITY REGULATIONS AND ETHICS

The researcher submitted a proposal of the study to the University of South Carolina Internal Review Board for approval. After three minor changes, the study was accepted for exemption from a full review under category 2 because the data to be collected did not place participants at any major risk. The revised proposal and acceptance letter can be found in Appendices A and B, respectively.

PARTICIPANTS

Participants recruited were any woman who self-identified as a lesbian and were a member of a Panhellenic sorority during a portion of her undergraduate experience. This included women who joined at any time during their undergraduate experience and women who have cancelled their sorority membership. Women of all races and ethnicities were recruited. In order to gauge the changing culture of inclusivity in sororities, both current undergraduates and alumni were recruited as participants. With this constraint, only women 18+ years old who attended a 4-year university were recruited.

The researcher used two sampling procedures. Due to the invisibility of the group being studied, and the personal nature of the topic, a convenience sample of volunteers was recruited through several avenues, including emails, advertisement through various higher education associations, and social media. Snowball sampling was also used to expand the number of participants. At the end of each interview, every participant was asked, "Do you know of anyone else who may wish to participate in this study?" Women suggested were then referred to the researcher via the participant. Women who were interested in participating in the study then contacted the researcher via email or

Facebook. Each woman who indicated interest was sent a cover letter reviewing the study, its benefits and possible risks. The cover letter can be viewed in Appendix C. Once consent was given, the researcher then scheduled a phone interview with each participant.

DESCRIPTION OF PARTICIPANTS

The seven participants were all women who varied from 21-26 years of age. As reflected in Table 3.1, all participants were in college or had graduated from college. Various geographical regions of the United States were represented, one woman from the Plains (North Dakota, Minnesota, South Dakota, Iowa, Nebraska, Kansas and Missouri), one from the Southeast (West Virginia, Virginia, Kentucky, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, and Florida), one from the Great Lakes (Wisconsin, Illinois, Ohio, and Michigan), and four from the Mideast (New York, Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Delaware, Maryland, and Washington, DC) (The Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, 2009). As reflected in Table 3.2, four of the women came from large institutions with undergraduate enrollment over 20,000, while there was one from a medium sized institution with undergraduate enrollment between 10,000 and 19,999, and two came from small institutions with under 9,999 undergraduate students.

PROCEDURE

Participants recruited were women who self-identify as a lesbian and were a member of a Panhellenic sorority during a portion of their undergraduate experience.

Several avenues were used to recruit participants.

1. **Prior Relationships:** The researcher had personal relationships with eligible participants and reached out to these women via email.

2. Higher Education Professionals: The researcher contacted Greek Life Office staff members, LGBT support office staff members, and other various administrators at, but not limited to, The University of Maryland, The University of South Carolina, Indiana University and The University of California, Los Angeles, to disseminate information about the study to the students they with whom work.
3. Out and Greek Institute: The researcher contacted the coordinators of the Out and Greek Institute, a track during the West Fraternal Leadership Conference (Association of Fraternal Leadership & Values), to disseminate information about the study to the students and alumnae who participated in the institute.
4. Facebook: The researcher used Facebook to reach out to potential participants that are members of open groups on Facebook such as, but not limited to, “Sorority Connection”
5. Purposeful Snowball Sampling: All interviewees were asked if they know of any others who would be able to add to the study, and asked to either pass on the contact information of the researcher or provide the researcher with contact information for that individual.

To obtain consent from the subjects, the researcher delivered (via email) a copy of the cover letter, informing them about the study and the benefits that the knowledge obtained may have for colleges/universities, Greek-letter organizations and sorority members, and requesting their participation. Participants were also informed that participation was voluntary and may be rescinded at any time.

Interview questions were developed in categories to answer specific research questions, then placed in an order that facilitated a conversation about each participant’s individual sorority experiences. Of the 28 total interview questions, 4 were demographic

in nature, 7 aimed to answer research question 1, 15 aimed to answer research question 2, and 2 utilized snowball sampling to recruit further participation (A full list of interview questions can be found in Appendix D). All data collection occurred via telephone interviews beginning in July 2015. Each interview was tape-recorded with Google Voice for accuracy and lasted from 20 to 60 minutes in length.

Participants' personal information remained and will remain confidential throughout and following the study. This includes not disclosing the names of the participants, sorority affiliation, college/university or any names mentioned. The majority of questions were asked in one session, and participants were allowed to take short breaks so they did not feel overwhelmed with participation. All participants had the option not to answer questions they were not comfortable answering.

All data from the study have been kept confidential and the subjects' identities will not be revealed before, during, or after the study. The participants' names have been removed from the interview transcripts during transcription, done by the researcher and no outside parties in order to ensure anonymity. Pseudonyms have been used for all reporting and presentation purposes. The researcher kept all data on a password-protected laptop in a password-protected document.

MEMBER-CHECKING. A draft of the study was sent to all interviewees via email for review. Each woman had approximately 14 days to review and send feedback to the researcher. The process, data record, and interpretations were said to be adequately represented and the conclusions reached within the study were credible to all participants who responded. Two participants requested to have specific events and experiences

highlighted within the study, and those were added to the participant descriptions and relevant sections of Chapter Four.

DATA ANALYSIS

After the interviews, the interview transcripts were re-read and categorized in terms of research questions. Because the qualitative data were so dense, a process was used to aggregate the data in order to identify themes (Creswell, 2014). Tesch's (2012) eight steps of coding were then used to categorize data and reveal possible patterns (Tesch, 1990). First the researcher read the entirety of the data, then recorded main underlying meanings from each separate interview transcription. Once there was a list of underlying meanings, similar topics were clustered and codes were created from these clusters. Various emergent themes were color-coded and matched to answer the two research questions. MAXQDA, a qualitative data analysis software program, was used to help sort and code data.

After coding was complete, the researcher developed emerging themes from the coded sections of data. Figure 2 demonstrates the themes that emerged, grouped by research questions. In the following chapter, the themes will be identified and defined, relying on the narrative data from participant interviews.

SUMMARY

This chapter has provided an explanation of the research methods and design that were used to conduct the study and describe the procedures taken. Chapter four will report the findings of the study from the data collection and analysis process. The emergent themes of various positive and negative experiences and specific challenges faced will be discussed.

Table 3.1

Participant Descriptions

Pseudonym	Age	Graduation Year	School	Leadership within Sorority/Greek Community
Leslie	26	2011	Small Midwestern Public Institution	Vice President, Standards Chair, Alumni Relations Chair, Panhellenic Activities Chair, Panhellenic President
Kara	24	2013	Large Southern Public Institution	Finance Assistant
Lexie	23	2014	Large Southern Public Institution	Membership Education Vice President
Kim	21	2016	Large Southern Public Institution	Director of Standards and Ethics, Scholarship Chair, Guard, Chaplain
Marie	21	2016	Large Southern Public Institution	Leadership Chair, Finance Vice President
Kelly	22	2015	Medium Southern Public Institution	Junior Panhellenic Chair, Vice President of Campus Relations, Vice President of Recruiting
Claire	25	2012	Small Midwestern Private Institution	New Member Educator, President

Table 3.2

Demographic Breakdown

Domain	Frequency	Percentage of Total
Age		
21-22	3	42%
23-24	2	28%
25-26	2	28%
Graduation Year		
2015 or later	3	42%
2013-2014	2	28%
2011-2012	2	28%
Region		
Mideast	4	57%
Southeast	1	14%
Great Lakes	1	14%
Plains	1	14%
Undergraduate Enrollment		
0-9,999 (small)	2	28%
10,000-19,999 (medium)	1	14%
20,000+ (large)	4	57%

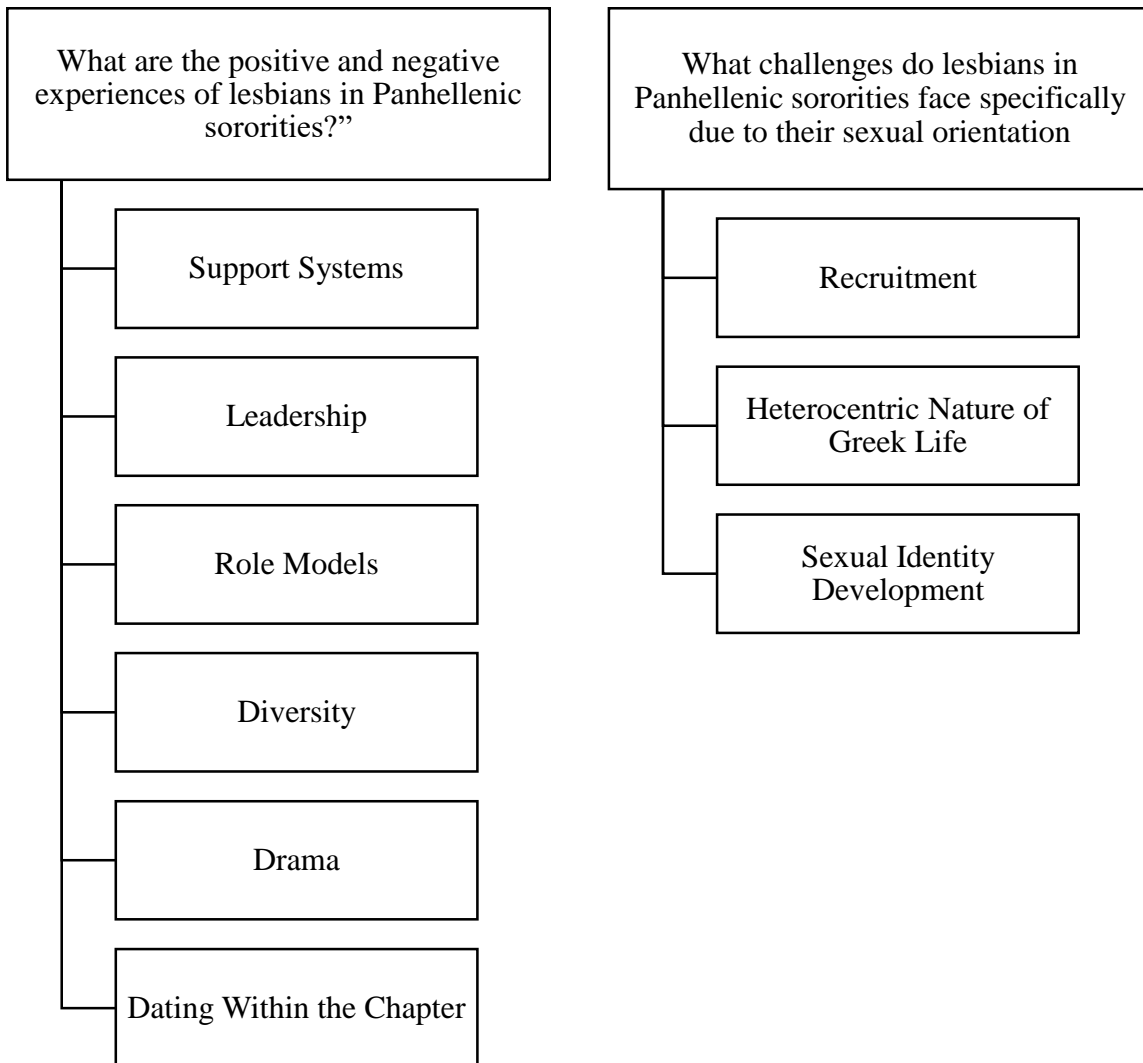


Figure 3.1: Emergent Themes

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

In an effort to bring awareness to the experiences and needs of lesbians in Panhellenic sororities, seven women were interviewed about their college experiences. Interview questions were developed to answer the research questions of: what are the positive and negative experiences of lesbians in Panhellenic sororities and what challenges do lesbians in Panhellenic sororities face specifically due to their sexual orientation? This chapter aims to report the findings of the study from the data collection and analysis process outlined in Chapter three.

PARTICIPANT DESCRIPTIONS

Leslie is a 26-year-old alumna of a small Midwestern public institution. She graduated in 2011, and during her time in her chapter, she served in multiple leadership positions, including Vice President, Standards Chair, and Alumni Relations Chair. She also served as president of the entire sorority community at her university. Leslie was the oldest participant and the most removed from college, and therefore had more reflection present in her responses. She currently works professionally with fraternities and sororities and therefore has a unique perspective about student development within Greek-letter organization.

Leslie was friends within many of the members of her sorority before she was offered membership, and so in contrast to other women interviewed, Leslie was not

closeted during the recruitment process. When asked why she joined her chapter, she stated,

I didn't feel forced or that I'd have to be somebody that I wasn't. I think coming into it I kind of had a perception of, you know, what a sorority girl was. And I felt those weren't the kind of people that I was surrounded by. It was a really, really diverse organization.

After being offered membership, Leslie tried to reconcile her sexuality and thought, "is this something that I can do, like is this an option, is this something that other people do?"

Leslie was also one of the only participants to mention fraternities during her interview, saying that they were much more likely to make recruitment decisions based on sexuality, whereas sororities were not as outright with their recruitment decisions saying, "I don't think it was like blatantly like 'no we don't want her because she's gay' but I think it was more like a 'she wouldn't fit in there.'" She also mentioned feeling unsafe at certain fraternities on her campus, remembering, "I was really uncomfortable being there or going there.... it was that kind of, you don't really, gay man or woman, want to be, like, be somewhere alone because you can be a target in that chapter." During her sorority experience, Leslie worked to improve the climate of acceptance within the Greek Community at her university, helping to pass a non-discrimination and inclusion policy for the Panhellenic Community. Reflecting on her experience, Leslie stated:

I've actually had some responses kind of recently was like the SCOTUS [Defense of Marriage Act] decision and everything. It's, like, younger people being, like,

‘Wow, you know that was really amazing what you did at that time’, but like as a freshman I didn’t understand or didn’t realize, like, that’s a big deal.

Kara is a 24-year-old alumna of a large southern public institution. She graduated in 2013, and during her time in her sorority served as Assistant to the Finance Vice President. Kara joined her chapter after dating a woman who was already a member of the sorority. This initially caused problems for Kara, after a physical altercation at a sorority-related event forced her to come out to her sisters. Kara was one of the more hesitant interviewees, taking time to think about her answers before responding, and asking clarifying questions to the researcher. One of Kara’s anecdotes referred to a time she was left out of certain activities due to assumptions about her sexual orientation.

There is a wall in the [senior house] where they had, like, a pin board and it was, like, a web of all the people that different people in the sorority had slept with....I was never even approached about that.... I thought like ‘was it because I was gay or what?’ I thought it was interesting too that there were probably assumptions made, like, I hadn’t slept with guys, but I had slept with fraternity brothers. And so, like, that would have put me in a social circle but people just kind of disregarded it because I was the gay one.

Lexie is a 23-year-old graduate of the same institution and chapter as Kara. She graduated in 2014 and during her time in the sorority served as Membership Education Vice President. Lexie had the most tumultuous sorority experience of the seven women interviewed and resigned from her leadership position due to a conflict with the chapter president of the time regarding her relationship with another sister. When she joined the chapter, she did not identify as a lesbian, and thinks that this allowed her to see the true

heterocentric nature of Greek life, because her sisters did not hold back around her. When she eventually came out, she said that the vast majority of sisters were supportive of her. One negative incident that Lexie emphasized was a fight with her ex-girlfriend within the chapter, with whom she shared a room in the chapter house.

She was trying to lock me in the room and I let go of the door and she stumbled into the hallway. Because I was the more masculine of the two of us, the chapter thought I was physical with her and tried to get me to move out of our room in the house. In reality, I was a victim of severe emotional, physical, and sexual abuse and no one ever really believed me because my girlfriend was smaller than me.

Kim is a 21-year-old collegiate member of the same chapter as Lexie and Kara. She is currently a senior and has served in various leadership positions, including scholarship chair and the director of standards and ethics. Kim had a negative recruitment experience, but not due to her sexual orientation. She was rejected from all of the sororities on her campus except for one, the chapter she eventually joined. She remained closeted during her recruitment experience, stating,

I did not see that it was relevant and it never came up. In our society we just assume everyone is heterosexual, so it is just easier for people to get to know me that way until I am actually friends with them. I also did not want them to focus on the fact that I'm gay. I didn't want to be the lesbian [potential new member].

Once she was a member, Kim found out that Lexie and another woman in the chapter were dating, and talked to them about their coming out experience. When they told her the chapter was supportive, she made the decision to come out within the chapter. She came out to small groups and had sisters meet her girlfriend at the time. She recalls being

grateful that her sorority sisters did not make a big deal out of her coming out. Through the member checking process, Kim disclosed that she had begun dating a member of her chapter.

As a 21-year-old junior, Marie was the youngest interviewee included in the study. She is also a member of the same chapter and attends the same university as Kara, Lexie and Kim. She has served as leadership chair and finance vice president of the chapter. Out of all of the interviews, Marie's was the shortest. She kept her answers short, possibly because she is too immersed within the sorority culture to reflect upon her experience yet. She is not yet out to the entire chapter, but is out to her close friends and is involved in the Greek Pride group on her campus. When asked about homophobia in her chapter, she responded, "there were some members who, like, they would just say that they were uncomfortable around, like, around other sisters who had already come out." This may contribute to Marie's hesitancy to come out to her chapter sisters.

Kelly is a 22-year-old collegiate woman at a medium-sized southern public institution. She has served as vice president of campus-activities and vice president of recruiting for her chapter. Kelly was one of the most open participants, sharing personal stories about her relationships within the chapter. She was closeted when she joined her chapter, but came out when she was caught kissing her chapter president in a stairwell of the residence hall that the sorority was housed in. She said that the vast majority of her chapter was supportive of her sexuality.

My sorority actually ended up helping me come out a lot and I really think if it wasn't for them that I wouldn't have been able to come out how I did because they were very supportive of it and I was terrified of them finding out at first....

You know because I come from a very rural area in [southern state]. You know, I knew people -- who were gay or a lesbian, but I just wasn't used to the fact that people could actually be okay with that.

Kelly was also very open about the fact that some of her sisters were "just disgusted [and] freaked out, and she lost friends when she came out. She said, "they had really negative things to say.... They were very upset about it, really just like threatened to take it to our advisers and, you know, report it." She further explained how coming out impacted her friendships in the chapter.

My relationships definitely changed. I was really good friends with this girl that I joined with and, like, we hang out all the time, but when she found out that, you know, I liked girls not guys, yes, she definitely distanced herself from me and we've -- we can no longer hang out like we had before.

Claire is a 25-year-old alumna of a small Midwestern private institution. She graduated in 2012 and during her time her sorority served as new member educator and president. Coming from a smaller university, her campus had fewer sororities and a smaller recruitment process. While Claire does not think that her sexual orientation affected her recruitment experience, "looking back [she does] think that a reservation [she] had about joining a sorority was that [she] would potentially make the other members feel uncomfortable." She decided to remain closeted during the recruitment experience, stating that she wanted women to get to know her before judging her based on her sexuality. She came out to a few of her sisters during her sophomore year, but came out to her entire chapter during her time as chapter president:

I officially came out to the entire chapter during a ceremony when I was still the president, but most of them had heard at that point. There had been some drama in the house and I just wanted to clear the air. I did not experience any negative reactions directly related to my being in a sorority, but I think this was partially due to the fact that everyone knew me really well at that point and I was also the President.

POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE EXPERIENCES

Research question one aimed to tell the stories of both the positive and negative experiences that lesbians may face as members of sororities by asking, “What are the positive and negative experiences of lesbians in Panhellenic sororities?” Through careful analysis of responses to the interview questions, such as “Tell me about your recruitment experience” and, “Tell me some of the positive aspects of being involved in a Greek house. Negative aspects?” several themes emerged regarding the various experiences for lesbians in sororities. These themes are explained in the discussion below, which also identifies how the participant’s responses supported development of the themes.

SUPPORT SYSTEM. Every participant mentioned comfort or support from her chapter sisters in some form. Lexie recalled thinking, “it was a great support system. Regardless of all of the small bad things that came along with being gay in the house, 99% of sisters were completely supportive.” Kara also mentioned the support system, recalling that there was always a sister looking out for her. Kelly, who began to identify as a lesbian while an active member of her sorority said:

My sorority actually ended up helping me come out a lot and I really think if it wasn't for them that I wouldn't have been able to come out how I did because they were very supportive of it.

Kim even encouraged women who were discovering or questioning their sexual identity to use sorority sisters as confidants:

I think if you are somebody who, I guess is still kind of figuring yourself out, or might be in the closet, and don't really know who you are yet, it's totally fine with not coming out to your chapter, but definitely finding somebody to kind of confide in at first.”

The focus on finding a support system emerged consistently across the participants and appears to be an important mechanism for working through the process of sexual identity awareness.

LEADERSHIP. The majority of participants indicated that they learned an important lesson because of their sorority membership. All of the participants served in a leadership role while they were in their college, with six of the women serving on the executive board of their chapter. Kelly and Claire both talked about how their leadership experiences within the chapter helped them grow. Claire says that the leadership skills gained from the sorority have carried over to her professional life, and while Kelly has not graduated yet, she said that her sorority saw leadership potential in her that she did not even see in herself. Even Marie, the youngest participant was able to reflect upon the skills that she has gained from being a sorority woman.

You are definitely able to network, and when I got to college I was pretty awkward. And so I learned how to talk to people and make awkward situations

less awkward. I've also learned how to kind of break out of my shell, and take risks, I guess.

ROLE MODELS. Many participants alluded to having strong role models within their sororities. Kim acknowledged that she approached other sisters that had come out before her about their experiences before coming out to her chapter. Claire thought that she was the first openly gay woman in her chapter, but indicated that several women came out after she did. Leslie recalled researching the sorority that offered her a bid, and finding the Lambda Ten Project, a project dedicated to the inclusivity of the LGBT community within Greek Letter Organizations. She found a list of openly gay members of fraternities and sororities, and found a professional staff member from her sorority on the list. She recalls thinking, "that was really cool and if she runs the organization then I could be a member too." Leslie also remembered a time when her sorority sisters recognized and corrected the heterocentric nature of certain traditions. She remembered a song that talked about how the sorority sisters would marry fraternity men and recalled her sisters "being like, 'Oh, we shouldn't really sing that one because all those people who aren't going to marry fraternity men, they're going to marry sorority women.'"

DIVERSITY. Another reoccurring trend in the participants' positive experiences was that the sorority exposed them to people different than themselves. Kara called it a tiny little world where you get to see a broader view of college, meaning that through the sorority, she had an intimate space to meet people from all different majors and backgrounds. Leslie mentioned this a few times, stating that because of her sorority membership, she was surrounded by people to whom she would not have otherwise been exposed. She also felt that being in a sorority not only exposed her to different types of

people, but taught her to work with different personality types. Marie thought that simply going through the recruitment process was exposure to people she would not have otherwise met. Many of the women even indicated that diversity was a deciding factor in their choice of sorority.

DRAMA. The most prevalent negative experience for most participants was the “drama” that occurred within their sororities. For some, this had nothing to do with their sexual orientation, but for others, their sexual orientation made them a target for passive aggressive conflict.

Leslie and Claire, who were the two oldest participants, both felt as though the drama they experienced would have existed no matter what their sexual orientation was. Leslie stated, “dealing with internal and, like, interpersonal issues of the chapter...Some of the drama was a little distracting from maybe what I should’ve been focusing on, like, actual school,” while Claire thought that living in a house full of women breeds drama, but argued that this happens with non-sorority women as well.

Lexie believed that her sexual orientation increased the drama that surrounded her in the sorority house. She never experienced threats due to her identity, but feels that she was talked about behind her back. She said that the hard part of being in a sorority was, “Everyone has something bad to say and everyone is willing to run and tell you every little detail.”

DATING WITHIN THE CHAPTER. Another recurring theme among participants was a negative experience having to do with dating within their chapters. Five of the seven participants reported dating someone within their chapter. Negative experiences were usually associated with living in the chapter house or public displays of affection. Kelly,

who had a hidden relationship with a chapter sister for some time said she and her significant other were, “hiding our relationship from everyone and... literally like sneaking across the hallway to each other’s room on the weekends to hang out.” Leslie, who did not report a specific negative experience regarding her relationship with another sister in the chapter, recalled:

I think the only time that we really felt a little uncomfortable was like living in the chapter house. Because we always felt like we had to be like very careful. But of course when you are in a relationship like physical things happen and that’s really hard because your chapter sisters don’t understand why they can’t have their boyfriend in their room.

Lexie reports that her chapter tried to force her to move out of her room in the chapter house after an altercation with her girlfriend. Kara also reported a physical altercation with an ex-girlfriend within the chapter, not within the chapter house, but at a location associated with the chapter.

Many participants reported coming out to their chapter because they were dating someone within their house. Kelly was exposed when chapter sisters saw her kissing another sister in the stairwell of their chapter house. Leslie recalled having to come out with her partner each year to the new members and not getting a reaction of “‘we don’t want gay people in our chapter’ but a ‘we don’t want people in our chapter dating’ negative reaction.”

CHALLENGES

While each of the women had individual negative experiences within their chapters, the researcher also wanted to explore systematic challenges that may face

lesbians in Panhellenic sororities. Research question two aimed to tell the stories of the difficulties that lesbians may face as members of sororities by asking, “What challenges do lesbians in sororities face specifically due to their sexual orientation?” Through interview questions such as “Do you think your sexual orientation affected your recruitment experience?” “Have you experienced any homophobic tendencies in the house?” and, “Have you come out to anyone in the house?” several themes emerged regarding potential challenges for lesbians in sororities.

RECRUITMENT. Panhellenic sorority recruitment is challenging for any woman, but presents specific challenges to lesbian women. When asked about their recruitment experiences and if or how they believed their sexual orientation affected the process, many participants recalled not being allowed to discuss men during recruitment, therefore not being able to bring up sexual orientation. During formal sorority recruitment, sorority members and potential new members are encouraged to avoid specific topics including: men, alcohol, drugs, and politics. Although this is recommended at many institutions, some participants still recalled being asked about men. Kelly said, “I felt honestly like I would have been judged if I would of, you know, tried to talk about being interested in girls. I was definitely asked, like, “Do you have a boyfriend?” or this or that.”

One aspect of many formal sorority recruitment settings is the lack of time for women to truly get to know each other. This presents a challenge to women trying to find a lifelong support system, and does not allow women to feel comfortable enough to share personal aspects of their life, such as sexual orientation. Of the seven participants, only Leslie and Claire disclosed their sexual orientation to the women recruiting them during recruitment and Claire recalled, “I do think that a reservation I had about joining a

sorority was that I would potentially make the other members feel uncomfortable.” The five other women expressed one of two reasons for not coming out during recruitment. The first was not identifying as a lesbian yet or still struggling to come to terms with their sexual identity. The second was not knowing women well enough, and wanting to get to know women before disclosing their sexual identity. Kim shared,

I wanted them to get to know me as [Kim] and then once I felt comfortable I would start telling people. I did not necessarily hide it, but it just never really came up in conversation. I don’t like to make a big deal about it and I would rather it come out naturally than make a huge production out of coming out.

HETEROCENTRIC NATURE OF GREEK LIFE. When asked about homophobia within their chapters, almost all participants denied outright homophobia from their chapter sisters, but talked about the heterocentric nature of the Greek life system as a whole and how it perpetuated their chapters. Three different women mentioned social events and dates as an example of the heterosexism within their chapters. Kim stated,

When people say dates, they still mostly mean guys, also when we paired with another fraternity for Greek week or homecoming, a lot of talk is about: ‘Oh, so who are you going to hook up with during homecoming and Greek week?’, or like: ‘What guy are you interested in?’ and things like that, I think it’s very geared towards guys meeting girls and vice versa, especially in Greek life as a whole.

Leslie recalled “[looking] at a lot of the songs and different things that we sing, they are about bringing your boyfriend and things, like, formals and different functions, like, that with your boyfriend and whatever.”

Kara emphasized the fact that women in Greek life on her campus simply did not talk about homosexuality. She said, “Honestly, I think that there are gay girls at [my university] in Greek life and at other schools. At least at [my university], they don’t talk about it.” She recalled her sisters telling her, “Oh we’re talking about guys” which sent the message that she could not “talk about girls liking girls because it is just weird.”

Lexie, who had more negative experiences regarding her sexual identity within her sorority than the other participants, had a unique experience because she did not identify as a lesbian when she joined her chapter. She believes that because of this, sisters were not as careful around her as they would have been around a sister who was out.

I think that the way sisters talk about it around the house, and they don't even realize that they are talking about it, is a little interesting. I think there's a lot of sisters will say that things are ‘gay’, or, like, talk about someone if she’s a lesbian, or be, like: ‘Oh, she's dyke.’ Or like, say someone was ‘dykey.’”

SEXUAL IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT. Many participants admitted struggling with their sexual identity during the process of recruitment, or while being an active member of a sorority. Lexie mentioned feeling pressured multiple times, both to conform to the heterocentric nature of the organization, and in coming out to her sorority sisters. In addition, she struggled when dealing with peer interactions regarding her sexual identity development, as revealed below:

I denied it for a very long period of time... When I did eventually come out, a lot of people told me that people had already told them, that I told and it was very catty... [there was a] negative stigma that I heard around it. I mean, even when we had been just close friends, before we ever were dating, it was like why are

you holding hands, that looks bad. So, that, in my mind, it translated to "don't tell them, because it's a bad thing." Which it wasn't, of course. But that's how it was translated in my mind based on people's reactions to other things.

SUMMARY

This chapter has reported the findings and emergent themes from participant interviews. The next chapter will analyze these findings and themes. Existing literature and sexual identity development will be revisited. Finally, implications and recommendations for future research and student affairs professionals will be presented.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

The following discussion is organized to reveal how the participants' responses and resulting themes were analyzed to reveal answers to the identified research questions. In addition, this section provides an examination of the D'Augelli's Model of Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Development. Following the discussion section, implications, recommendation, and limitations are presented and explained.

RESEARCH QUESTION 1

Results from the interviews provided insights into the positive and negative experiences of lesbians in Panhellenic sororities. While this question explored both positive and negative experiences, and all participants had both good and bad associations with their sororities, the majority of data revealed positive experiences.

POSITIVE EXPERIENCES. The first positive emergent theme was the learning of life lessons through sorority affiliation. All participants held a leadership position during their collegiate experience and the majority of women interviewed said they learned important life skills through sorority membership. The high percentage of women who held a leadership position is a reflection of Case's 2005 study where the percentage of respondents who held executive offices was significantly higher than what would be expected in a random sampling of fraternity/sorority members (Case, 2005). Case attributed this "overachievement" to two theories, first the reflection of a desire for

validation and acceptance within the chapter, and second, the “channeling of their energies into organizational leadership duties that others applied toward developing heterosexual relationships? (Case, 2005, p.26). The women interviewed for this study did not show an alignment with one of these theories, but further questioning about their motivations may have revealed this.

The next positive theme identified the association of the sorority as a support system. This theme intertwines with the experience of having a role model within the sorority. Every woman interviewed indicated that she was not the only lesbian in the chapter. Leslie, Kara, Lexie, Kelly and Claire all dated women in their chapter during their college years, and both Kim and Marie indicated having older sisters come out before they did. It seems that having another person within the chapter who was having a similar experience creates a safer space within the sorority. The trend of having a support system was reflected in the existing literature. These findings mirrored Case’s 2005 study where fraternity men who joined their fraternities in the year 2000 or later were more likely to describe the climate of their fraternities as friendly, concerned, and respectful than were participants who joined...in the year 1989 or before” (Rankin, 2013, p. 579). Although many participants had negative experiences associated with individual sorority sisters or members of the Greek-letter community, the overwhelming degree of support identified by participants during the interviews indicates that they overwhelmingly perceived the Greek-Letter community as accepting of varying sexual identities.

The last, and perhaps most prevalent, positive theme is that of diversity within sorority membership. Kara said that being in a sorority gave her a “micro-view [of college] that is just in your little house” and this held true for many of the participants.

When asked why they chose the sorority they joined, many of the women indicated that they felt “included” or “like I fit in” because of the variety of types of women in their chapters. It is possible that participants felt comfortable in the chapters they joined because those chapters fell into the previously mentioned “stereotype chapter” category. As discussed in previous research (Stone & Gorga, 2014), the branding of a “lesbian chapter,” or even a chapter that is “different” than the rest of the Panhellenic sororities on a specific campus constructs a safe place for women who may identify as “different,” while simultaneously alienating them from the community.

It is important to note that the participants who mentioned diversity did not refer to the typical constructs of diversity, such as race, socioeconomic status, or disability, but instead to “different personality types,” “a variety of majors” and “various backgrounds.” This definition of diversity is limited, possibly because of the historically homogenous nature of Greek-letter organizations. While the sexual orientation of the women interviewed made their chapters diverse in the eyes of the sorority community, that diversity was not multi-dimensional.

NEGATIVE EXPERIENCES. A reoccurring negative theme was drama within the sorority. Three women indicated that drama was a norm within the sorority community, therefore the drama they experienced did not always pertain to participants’ sexual identities. However, several women still indicated that they felt like a target for drama within their chapter due to their identity. It was interesting that the two oldest participants expressed their beliefs that the drama they experienced was not due to their sexual orientation. It could be that the more time a woman spends removed from the sorority, the more insight she has into her experiences. The older women interviewed were more

comfortable discussing the drama within their chapters, perhaps because they are removed from the environment and it does not affect them as emotionally as it does the women who are still experiencing it.

The most consistent negative experience for the women interviewed was regarding intimate relationships between chapter sisters. This is mirrored in Neumann's 2013 study where sorority women reported that lesbian members would not have an effect on chapter operations, as long as they dressed and acted like women (Neumann, 2013). If one was to assume that dating a man is part of acting like a woman, it makes sense that there would be conflict when women deviated from typical gender roles and dated sorority sisters. Campbell (2012) confirmed this, finding that sorority members view one of their members varying from the norm as negatively affecting their identity as a group (Campbell, 2012).

RESILIENCY. Every woman interviewed had some sort of negative experience to report, but the majority did not expand upon those experiences. In the member checking stage, Claire discussed how this downplaying of negative experiences could be due to the resiliency built by being a part of this population. She said as a woman adapts to being the minority, she becomes used to microaggressions and everyday challenges. This could account for the participants who did not seem to be upset by hearing chapter sisters use the word "dykey" or being told not to hold hands with their significant other in public.

RESEARCH QUESTION 2

Data collected provided insight into overarching challenges that lesbians may face as members of sororities. The most prevalent challenge that emerged from the data was the heterocentric nature of Greek life as a whole. When asked about the homophobic

tendencies within their chapters, most participants denied outright homophobia. What the women had in common was experiences of microaggressions within their chapters.

Microaggression is defined by Dictionary.com as a subtle but offensive comment or action directed at a minority or other non-dominant group that is often unintentional or unconsciously reinforces a stereotype (Microaggression, 2016). When asked about homophobic tendencies within the sorority house, Lexie stated,

It wasn't necessarily always intentional. It was - people talking about it with negative connotations, not realizing that there was a gay person in the room. I think that's kind of indicative of a lot of cultures that you never know who your company is, and so to make comments that are negative towards the gay community around people, even if you don't think anyone's gay, it's very likely that there is someone there who is being affected by it.

As explained by most of the participants, microaggressions were found in many aspects of sorority life. Some of the examples of microaggressions that participants recalled were hearing the use of the word “dyke” as a negative descriptor, being asked what boy she was going to hook up with during Greek Week, and singing songs referring to sorority husbands and boyfriends.

Another challenge encountered by participants was recruitment. First, women did not feel comfortable enough with recruiters to share their sexual identities, and second, women are not even allowed to discuss men or relationships during the formal recruitment process. The process is not conducive to forming lasting relationships, and while lasting friendships are not the goal of formal sorority recruitment, it should be a safer space for women to disclose information that they feel may affect their future

membership. Kelly stated, “I mean yes, like, a lot of things I was very truthful about, but yes, there were some things that I did not feel very comfortable sharing.” Campbell (2012) explored sorority women’s view of heterosexual non-members and lesbian non-members, finding that the women tended to hold more positive views towards presumed heterosexual non-members. When asked if she thought that sororities made eliminations based on sexual orientation, Lexie answered, “For sure. I definitely think they did. If it was known during the recruitment, it probably would have had an effect on it.” This variance in attitudes could attribute to recruitment being challenging for lesbians.

THEORY REVISITED

D’Augelli’s Model of Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Development indicates that there are three interrelated variables involved in sexual identity formation: personal subjectives and actions, interactive intimacies, and sociohistorical connections (D’Augelli, 1994). While all three variables play an important role in the development process, narrative data indicates that interactive intimacies plays a large role of the identity development of lesbians in sororities. An example of this came from Lexie’s experience, when she felt she was trained to think that being gay was “bad” because of the negative way her sorority sisters spoke about lesbians. Lexie felt that this influence caused her to deny her sexual orientation for a long time. This shows how interactive intimacies affects the six processes of development, particularly development of a personal lesbian-gay-bisexual status. Because Lexie was primed to believe that being gay was bad, she was not able to determine the individual meaning of her sexual orientation or the effect it had on her life.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Although this study and previous research indicate that the sorority community appears to be increasingly inclusive, there are still improvements to be made. Based on the emergent themes, the researcher has identified three recommendations for practitioners.

First, sorority communities appear to be ready for inclusivity education. Participants indicated that there was not a lot of outright homophobic behaviors within sorority chapters, but many microaggressions that straight sorority women did not take notice of. With targeted education on inclusive language, these types of negative experiences could be greatly alleviated. Creating awareness about the negative impacts of microaggressions through workshops, speakers and community-wide discussions could go a long way in increasing inclusivity in the Greek-letter community.

Second, the revision of sorority recruitment procedures is important. There are several expectations and regulations in place that may prohibit women from feeling comfortable with their sexual orientation during recruitment the first of which is the time restraints imposed during the formal recruitment process. With the short amount of time given, it is almost impossible for women to feel comfortable enough to disclose personal information. With more time to get to know sisters, potential new members may develop trust and be able to talk honestly about what their future experience may look like. Many interviewees indicated that they did not have the opportunity to discuss their sexuality because of a rule regarding talking about men. If there is a guideline prohibiting women from talking about their relationships, this also closes the door on talking about their

sexuality. These few revisions would make the recruitment process more inclusive, not only for women who identify as lesbians, but for women of all backgrounds.

Third, the creation of a support system for LGBT Greek-letter organization members is vital. Kim spoke of her involvement with Greek Pride on her campus, an organization that encourages Greek-letter organization members to talk about LGBT issues. Kim, who was serving as president of the organization at the time of her interview, said, “I want more people to see that Greek life is welcoming of LGBT students. I have always been supported by my sorority, and I would hope that other sororities and fraternities would support other people like that.” More organizations such as this, or support from professionals who work with sororities and fraternities, would go a long way in making students feel more comfortable with their sexual orientation or the process of discovering and exploring their sexuality.

LIMITATIONS

This study is limited by a number of factors. To begin, this is a compilation and analysis of the experiences of only seven women. Given the small number of participants, the lack of sophisticated sampling, and the qualitative nature of this study, generalizations to the entire population are not possible. Specifically, the results and themes emerging in this study are solely representative of the experiences of these seven participants and are not applicable to the experiences of lesbians in sororities generally. Increasing the number of participants and extending the length of interviews would provide greater insight into this topic.

It is also important to note that because these women wanted to and were comfortable enough to speak about their experience, they are not at all representative of

women who would be unwilling to be interviewed about their experiences. Women who had negative experiences regarding their sexual orientation in their sorority may not be comfortable talking about their experience, and may not even be openly out in the gay community.

Another significant limitation is that the data was all reported from the individuals themselves, which makes it impossible to verify their responses. It is possible that participants may have inaccurately recalled or altered their experiences in order to protect their chapter or individual sorority members. The researcher sensed some hesitation in responses, specifically from the younger participants, but overall believed the participants responses, because of their detailed stories and willingness to talk about their experiences.

The study is also limited based on the time period constraints and the potential for personal bias of the researcher. First, with respect to the time period constraint, this study had to be completed within the restrictions of a two-year master's degree program, and therefore did not include any follow up with undergraduate participants on their overall experiences upon their graduation. Second, researcher bias is always present in the identification of questions, the issue to be researched, and the overall research process because the study, namely data collection and analysis, is viewed through the researcher's lens. The researcher is a member of a Panhellenic sorority and has prior knowledge of the inner workings of Panhellenic sororities.

Finally, while there are quantitative data regarding the experiences of LGBT persons in Greek Life, this is the first study to use interviews of lesbians to report on their

experiences within the Panhellenic community. This may have contributed to missed opportunities for exploration and the need for further research.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The limited research on the recent experiences of LGBT people within Greek Life opens the door for opportunity for further research and perspectives on this topic. First, the expansion of a study similar to this one, to include the experiences of straight women in Panhellenic sororities, would provide a baseline to compare and contrast the experiences already explored within the study. While the current study provides insight into individual experiences, an expansion of the study could establish that there is no “typical” sorority experience, no matter a woman’s sexual orientation.

Secondly, an investigation of what specific lessons or takeaways were gained by different subpopulations of women within sororities could indicate if sorority memberships are more positive or negative for various subpopulations. Each sorority membership is unique, and women with other identities may have other experiences. Studies with women of color, various socioeconomic statuses and other on-dominant populations may reveal more about the true state of inclusivity within the Greek community.

Thirdly, it is important to note that all women interviewed held leadership positions during their experiences. Is this a coincidence, or a testament to the personalities and generally positive experiences of these women? A study on the relationship between characteristics of Greek-letter organization leaders (e.g., gender, sexual orientation, background) and the initiative they take to get involved in the organization (e.g., leadership roles, events attended) could reveal motivations behind

student leadership and also an explanation for why these seven women appeared to have particularly positive experiences overall during their involvement in the organizations.

CONCLUSION

Although the size and methodology used in this study limits the generalizability of the results, this is an important start to having conversations about the experiences of lesbians in Panhellenic sororities. This study also raises awareness by casting new light on a relatively invisible subculture. While it is impossible to make generalizations about an entire population based on the experiences of seven women, there are a few compelling revelations that can be shared based on the themes that emerged from this study.

First, it is possible that a sorority can provide a safe space for women who are questioning their sexual identity. Shown through the experiences of these women, sororities can provide a venue for unconditional support and possible role models, and women can develop and explore their identity without judgment. Even though many of the women interviewed had singular negative experiences or challenges, all of the women indicated that their overall experience was positive.

Second, while some sororities may provide a safe space, there is room for improvement. Education is vital for this population of women to feel supported and comfortable with exploring their identity within their community. It was heart-warming to hear the stories of support and positivity, but participants also indicated that there are women having much more negative experiences than theirs. It is my hope that this study will bring attention to these women, and help practitioners create a more welcoming and

supportive Greek Community, so that all woman can enjoy the benefits that sorority membership provides, no matter their sexual identity.

The conclusions drawn from this study are meant to inform current practitioners by providing them with insights that are directly based on the stories and experiences of this invisible population of women. The biggest takeaway would be that the Panhellenic community is ready for more education regarding the LGBT community. If given the education and opportunity, sororities can become a safe space for women to explore their sexual identities.

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APPENDIX A

INTERNAL REVIEW BOARD PROTOCOL

Purpose

Today, about 16% of all college graduates were members of a fraternity or sorority while attending their alma mater (Gallup, 2014). Out of this 16%, approximately 3-4% of sorority membership is known with certainty to be lesbian or bisexual (Case, 2005, p.22). What are the experiences of these women like? How do negative experiences associated with their sexual orientation affect their overall sorority experience satisfaction? The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of lesbians in Panhellenic sororities, in order to bring light to a relatively invisible subculture. An additional purpose will be to inform current practitioners of the specific needs of the subculture and the current climate of inclusivity within the sorority community.

Research Questions

- What are the positive and negative experiences of lesbians in Panhellenic sororities?
- What challenges do lesbians in Panhellenic sororities face specifically due to their sexual orientation?

Procedures

Description of Sample. Participants may be any woman who self-identify as a lesbian and were a member of a Panhellenic sorority during a portion of their

undergraduate experience. This includes women who join at any time during their undergraduate experience and women who have cancelled their sorority membership. Women of all races and ethnicities will be recruited. In order to gage the changing culture of inclusivity in Panhellenic sororities, both current undergraduates and alumni will be recruited as participants. With this constraint, only women 18+ years old that attended a 4-year university will be recruited. As a sorority member and active alumnae member, the researcher has personal relationships with at least three women at two different universities, and has a goal of interviewing eight to ten women from different regions and types of institutions (public, private, small, large, etc.).

Recruitment Procedure. Several avenues will be used to recruit participants.

- **Prior Relationships:** The researcher has personal relationships with eligible participants and will reach out to these women via email.
- **Higher Education Professionals:** The researcher will contact Greek Life Office staff members, LGBT support office staff members, and other various administrators at, but not limited to, The University of Maryland, The University of South Carolina, Indiana University and The University of California, Los Angeles, to disseminate information about the study to the students they work with.
- **Out and Greek Institute:** The researcher will contact the coordinators of the Out and Greek Institute, a track during the West Fraternal Leadership Conference (Association of Fraternal Leadership & Values), to disseminate information about the study to the students and alumnae who participated in the institute.

- Facebook: The researcher will use Facebook to reach out to potential participants that are members of open groups on Facebook such as, but not limited to, “Sorority Connection”
- Purposeful Snowball Sampling: All interviewees will be asked if they know of any others who would be able to add to the study, and asked to either pass on the contact information of the researcher or provide the researcher with contact information for that individual.

Subject Consent Process. To obtain consent from the subjects, the researcher will deliver (via email or postal service) a copy of the cover letter, informing them about the study and the benefits that the knowledge obtained may have for colleges/universities, Greek-letter organizations and sorority members, and requesting their participation. The researcher will be available to answer any questions participants may have. Participants will be informed that participation is voluntary and may be rescinded at any time.

Method of Data Collection. All data collection will occur via telephone or skype interviews beginning in July 2015. Each interview will be tape-recorded and should last from twenty minutes to an hour. Questions will be asked in different categories pertaining to different research questions. The researcher will transcribe the interviews. Keywords will be used to categorize data in terms of research questions and/or emergent themes. Follow-up interviews of fifteen minutes will be conducted if further data is needed. Member-checking will be used once the study is completed in order to increase the validity of findings.

Potential Risk to Subjects. There are minimal risks to subjects in the study such as anxiety and frustration due to the sensitive nature of some of the interview questions, loss of time and loss of confidentiality

Minimization of Potential Risk. Participants' personal information will remain confidential throughout and following the study. This includes not disclosing the names of the participants, sorority affiliation, college/university or any names mentioned. The majority of questions will be asked in one session, and participants will be allowed to take short breaks so they will not feel overwhelmed with participation. All participants will have the option not to answer questions they are not comfortable answering.

Confidentiality of Records. All data from the study will be kept confidential and the subjects' identities will not be revealed before, during, or after the study. The participants' names will be removed from the interview transcripts during transcription, to be done by the researcher and no outside parties in order to ensure anonymity. Pseudonyms will be used for all reporting and presentation purposes. The researcher will keep data on a password-protected laptop in a password-protected document.

APPENDIX B

INTERNAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL



OFFICE OF RESEARCH COMPLIANCE

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD FOR HUMAN RESEARCH APPROVAL LETTER for EXEMPT REVIEW

This is to certify that the research proposal: **Pro00044037**

Entitled: *The Experiences of Lesbians in Panhellenic Sororities*

Submitted by:

Principal Investigator: Rebecca Littlefield
College: College of Education
Department: Education Leadership & Policies
Wardlaw
Columbia, SC 29208

was reviewed in accordance with 45 CFR 46.101(b)(2), the referenced study received an exemption from Human Research Subject Regulations on **6/17/2015**. No further action or Institutional Review Board (IRB) oversight is required, as long as the project remains the same. However, the Principal Investigator must inform the Office of Research Compliance of any changes in procedures involving human subjects. Changes to the current research protocol could result in a reclassification of the study and further review by the IRB.

Because this project was determined to be exempt from further IRB oversight, consent document(s), if applicable, are not stamped with an expiration date.

Research related records should be retained for a minimum of three (3) years after termination of the study. The Office of Research Compliance is an administrative office that supports the University of South Carolina Institutional Review Board (USC IRB). If you have questions, contact Arlene McWhorter at arlenem@sc.edu or (803) 777-7095.

Sincerely,
Lisa M. Johnson

IRB Manager

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Lisa M. Johnson".

APPENDIX C

RECRUITMENT COVER LETTER

Dear Madam,

My name is Rebecca Littlefield and I am a Master's of Education Candidate in the College of Education at the University of South Carolina.

I am writing to you to request your participation in a research study that I am doing to investigate the experiences of lesbians in Panhellenic sororities. This study looks to examine the positive and negative experiences of lesbians in Panhellenic sororities. A study in 2005 found that 3-4% of sorority membership is known to be, with certainty, lesbian or bisexual, and yet there is virtually no research on the experiences of this subpopulation (Case, 2005, p.22). The purpose of this study is to examine the experiences of these women in order to bring light to a relatively invisible subculture and to inform current practitioners of the specific needs of the subculture and the current climate of inclusivity within the sorority community.

If you agree to participate, I will collect data through telephone and Skype interviews. An initial interview will be tape-recorded and should last from thirty minutes to one hour. Questions will be asked in different categories pertaining to different research questions such as "What are the experiences of lesbians in Panhellenic like?" and "How do negative experiences associated with sexual orientation affect their overall sorority experience satisfaction?" Follow-up interviews of fifteen minutes will be

conducted if further data is needed. You have the optional opportunity of reading the study at its completion in order to increase the validity of findings.

Rest assured I will take steps to maintain confidentiality of your records. All data from the study will be kept confidential and your identity will not be revealed before, during, or after the study. All names, affiliations, and colleges/universities will be removed or changed from the interview during transcription. Data will be kept on a password-protected laptop in a password-protected document.

There will be no cost for participating and there will be no payment available for your participation. It is my hope that the knowledge obtained from the study will impact the consideration of inclusivity training in Greek-letter communities and provide knowledge of the subculture to colleges/universities, practitioners, Greek-letter organizations and sorority members.

Participation in research is voluntary. You are free to decline participation in this study, or withdraw from it at any point.

Thank you for your consent and assistance with this study. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me by phone at (301)580-0225 or by email at RML1@mailbox.sc.edu.

Sincerely,

Rebecca Littlefield

Masters of Education Candidate

Higher Education and Student Affairs

College of Education

University of South Carolina

APPENDIX D

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

The following list of questions was used as an outline for the interview questions. Where appropriate, the interviewees were asked to expand upon their answers.

1. University
2. Affiliation
3. Current Age
4. Academic Year or Graduation Year
5. Tell me about your recruitment experience
6. Were you comfortable during the recruitment process?
7. Did you feel that you could be your “true-self” and reveal your personality during recruitment?
8. Did you ever feel judged during the recruitment process?
9. Do you think your sexual orientation affected your recruitment experience?
10. Was recruitment an overall positive or negative experience for you? Why?
11. Did you remain closeted during formal recruitment?
 - a. If yes, please explain why you made this decision.
 - b. If no, please explain your revelation during formal recruitment (who? when? why?)
12. Do you feel that Greek houses made eliminations based on sexual orientation

13. What are the characteristics of the house that encouraged you to pledge?
14. Are you involved in any leadership position within the house?
15. Tell me some of the positive aspects of being involved in a Greek house. Negative aspects?
16. Have you come out to anyone in the house?
 - . If yes: Was this revelation voluntary or exposed? Who have you come out to (close friends, entire chapter)? When did you come out? Tell me about this experience. How did others react to your coming out?
 - a. If no: Is there a certain reason you have chosen to remain closeted? Do you plan to come out the fellow members?
17. Has your sexual orientation made it hard for you to form close friendships with other members of the house?
18. Do you participate in other LGBT events on campus?
19. Have you experienced any homophobic tendencies in the house?
 - . If so, how did you react?
20. Do you have a girlfriend?
 - . Are they involved in Greek life at this university?
 - a. Do you feel comfortable inviting them to your sorority events/socials?
21. Have you ever feared for your physical safety in your Greek house or community because of your sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression?
22. Have you ever been a victim of harassment by other members due to sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression?

23. Have you experienced threats by other members to have your sexual orientation exposed or threats of expulsion from your chapter?
24. Is your local Panhellenic or Greek Community doing anything to educate members in LBGT awareness?
25. How would you rate your overall Greek experience so far?
26. Do you have any advice for potential LGBTQ students who are interested in Greek life?
27. Anything else that may be of importance?
28. Do you know of anyone else who may wish to participate in this study?