

# Fraternity Membership, the Display of Degrading Sexual Images of Women, and Rape Myth Acceptance

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The present study was conducted to learn more about the association between fraternity membership and attitudes and behaviors associated with sexual aggression against women. A male experimenter took digital pictures of all of the images of women displayed in the rooms of 30 fraternity men and 30 non-fraternity men on a residential, small, liberal arts college campus. The men also filled out a rape myth acceptance scale. A total of 91 images were found in the form of posters, “pin-ups,” advertisements, or computer screen savers. It was found that fraternity men had significantly more images of women displayed in their rooms and that the images were rated significantly more degrading than those in the rooms of non-fraternity men. Fraternity men were found to have significantly higher scores on a rape supportive attitude scale (RSA). RSA scores were positively related to the amount of degradation in the images found in men’s rooms. The possible purposes and consequences of the display of degrading sexual images are discussed.

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**KEY WORDS:** fraternities; sexual; degrading.

A report from the Association of American Colleges’ Project on the status and education of women (Ehrhart & Sandler, 1986) indicated that more than 50 incidents of gang rape had occurred on US campuses and most of them occurred at fraternity parties. Since the publication of that report, many quantitative studies have demonstrated greater rates of coercion and assault among fraternity men (and/or athletes) than among men not involved in such groups (e.g., Akers, 1991; Boeringer, 1996; Boeringer, Shehan, & Akers, 1991; Crosset, Ptacek, McDonald & Benedict, 1996; Frinter & Rubinson, 1993; Garrett-Gooding & Senter, 1987; Koss & Gaines, 1993), although a few researchers have found no statistically significant differences (e.g., Schwartz & NoGrady, 1996).

Other research has revealed that fraternity membership is positively associated with attitudes related to sexual aggression (SA). Compared to

non-fraternity men, fraternity men have been found to have more traditional attitudes toward women (Schaeffer & Nelson, 1993), a more sexually permissive peer group (Lottes & Kuriloff, 1994), stronger belief in male dominance (Kalof & Cargill, 1991), and greater belief in rape myths (false beliefs about rape that tend to legitimize rape; Burt, 1980) (e.g., Boeringer, 1999). Past research has shown that “hypermasculine” beliefs that include acceptance of men’s sexual dominance and aggression against women have consistently been associated with self-report of SA (e.g., see meta-analytic review by Murnen, Wright, & Kaluzny, 2002).

Theorists debate about the causal role between fraternity membership and SA. Some researchers have proposed that men come to college with particular attitudes associated with SA and that these men affiliate with all-male groups, such as fraternities, so that their values might remain unchallenged (e.g., Kanin, 1984, 1985; O’Sullivan, 1991). Other theorists have suggested that all-male groups, such as fraternities, athletic teams, gangs, and the military play a role in creating, or at least perpetuating, attitudes and

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behaviors associated with SA. Martin and Hummer (1989) concluded from their qualitative research that fraternity men recruit pledges with hypermasculine values to be their “brothers,” and the dynamics of the pledge process means that these values get reinforced. Godenzi, Schwartz, and DeKeseredy (2001) proposed that some all-male groups promote values associated with SA that men feel pressured to adopt.

Further, some researchers have speculated that certain behaviors associated with all-male groups might encourage attitudes supportive of SA.

DeKeseredy and Schwartz (1998) reported that men sometimes use sexist cultural artifacts, such as life-size inflatable dolls or ice cubes in the shape of nude women, in all-male groups, which might strengthen attitudes of male dominance by presenting positively the idea that women are sex objects to be used by men. Sanday (1990) observed that fraternity men were likely to watch pornography together, which she argued reinforced beliefs in rape myths often present in pornography. She also argued that the initiation process in fraternities can involve anti-women rituals, which might turn women into the “other” (Sanday, 1990). Murnen (2000) found that fraternity men reported more use of degrading sexual language to refer to women’s bodies than did men not involved in a fraternity, and, in a subsequent study, a person who was the object of extreme degradation was judged unlikeable and unintelligent (Murnen, 2000). It was argued that the sexual degradation of women might lead women to be seen as “legitimate” targets of SA (Murnen, 2000).

In the present study another possible behavioral difference between fraternity men and non-fraternity men was examined. The display of degrading sexual images of women was studied because there is anecdotal evidence that fraternity culture emphasizes the sexual objectification and degradation of women, and theory and correlational data suggest that such degradation might be harmful to women. Polaschek and Ward (2002) found that the sexual objectification of women was a common attitude among rapists. In a review of research on pornography effects it was concluded that the amount of degradation in pornography is an important predictor of its effects on attitudes supportive of rape (e.g., Golde, Strassberg, Turner, & Lowe, 2000). Some feminist theorists have proposed that pornography degrades women, which leads them to be seen as legitimate victims of SA (e.g., Brownmiller, 1975; Dworkin & MacKinnon, 1988; Sheffield, 1987), and French (1992) argued that even mild pornography degrades women and teaches

people to see women through a “distorted, deforming lens” (p. 166).

Thus in the present research we examined whether fraternity men were more likely than other men to display sexually degrading images in their college residences. Further, though, the link between the display of such images and rape supportive attitudes was examined. It was expected that the presence of degrading images would be associated with acceptance of beliefs that legitimize rape. Four hypotheses were tested: Fraternity men on a college campus would have more pictures of women displayed in their rooms than would non-fraternity men; fraternity men would have more degrading pictures of women than would non-fraternity men; fraternity men would be more likely to endorse rape supportive attitudes and the amount of degradation present in the pictures would correlated with rape supportive attitudes of the men.

## METHOD

### Participants

A sample of 30 fraternity men and 30 non-fraternity men were selected from a small, mid-western, liberal arts college. On this residential campus both fraternity and non-fraternity men (as well as women) live in campus-owned dormitories or apartments. The fraternity sample came from nine different fraternities on campus. Within a given college dormitory or apartment, both a fraternity member and a non-fraternity member were selected for participation, to control for room location. Freshmen were not included in this study because no freshmen are members of fraternities. Participants’ ages ranged from 19 to 23 years ( $M = 20.73$ ,  $SD = 1.31$ ). They were predominantly White (as is true overall of the students at the college), and were selected from the sophomore ( $N = 21$ ), junior ( $N = 17$ ), and senior classes ( $N = 22$ ). The class years were spread equally between fraternity and non-fraternity men, according to a chi-square test of association,  $\chi^2(2) = 2.08$ ,  $p > .05$ .

### Materials and Procedure

The male experimenter selected fraternity and non-fraternity dormitories and apartments, after excluding all freshmen dormitories. Each fraternity on campus has a part of a dormitory sectioned off only

for members of their fraternity. Multiple fraternities and non-fraternity men (as well as women) are housed in the same buildings in different sections. Each dormitory houses both women and men, although not generally on the same floor of the building. For every fraternity room that the male experimenter visited to conduct the study, he would also try to go to a non-fraternity man's room in the same building. An attempt was made to visit a variety of dormitories and apartments to try to keep the sample as random as possible. The experimenter tested on different days of the week at different times of day.

A verbal consent form was read to each participant to tell him that this was an anonymous study of "attitudes and behaviors of college men." The experimenter stated that he was interested in what men displayed in their rooms, and asked if he could use the digital camera to take pictures of what was displayed in the men's rooms (except for personal photographs). Nine students (7 fraternity men and 2 non-fraternity men) did not want pictures taken in their rooms. In those cases, the study was ended and no survey was given. If verbal consent was given, the study proceeded, and the experimenter administered a rape myth acceptance scale and took pictures of the images of women in the room.

Lottes' (1998) 20-item rape supportive attitude scale (RSA) scale was used in this study to assess whether men believed in various rape myths, including "being roughed up is sexually stimulating to many women." Items are rated on a 5-point Likert scale, higher scores indicate less rape supportive attitudes. Lottes (1998) based her scale on several other rape beliefs scales including Burt's (1980) scale, which is frequently used. Lottes' scale appeared to have better face validity for our sample than Burt's scale. Lottes (1998) reported an internal consistency coefficient of .91 for two different samples of students.

At the end of the survey were demographic questions about the participant's class year, age, fraternity membership, varsity athletic team membership, intramural team membership, membership in other activities, and number of people living in his dormitory or apartment. Some of these questions were asked to disguise the fraternity question. A question was asked about what proportion of the images displayed in the room belonged personally to the research participant; this question was answered on a scale from 1 (*none*) to 5 (*all or almost all*).

While the participant completed the survey, the examiner took pictures with a digital camera of any

image of a woman in the room, excluding pictures of family and friends. The images of women included posters, calendars, magazine pin-ups, magazine advertisements, and computer screen-saver images. Once the examiner finished taking pictures he left the room and waited outside. When the participant finished the survey he sealed it in an envelope given to him by the experimenter, and handed the envelope to the experimenter waiting outside the room. The participant was given a debriefing sheet, which included telephone numbers, names, and e-mail addresses of the experimenters. An identification number for the room was also on the debriefing sheet; the participant was informed that if he or his roommate(s) did not want the pictures of their room included in the study, they could call a telephone number and give their identification number to have their pictures and responses excluded (nobody did this).

### Coding

The year after the pictures for all 60 participants were collected, they were randomly ordered and presented to a group of 42 college women from introductory psychology courses at the same college in order for them to judge the sexual explicitness and degradation present in the images. Participants were asked to rate each picture in terms of how sexual and how degrading they perceived it to be using a scale that ranged from 0 (*not at all sexual, not at all degrading*) to 4 (*very sexual, very degrading*). This method of having individuals rate material for degradation is consistent with Cowan and Dunn (1994), who asked participants to rate the amount of degradation in pornography.

The internal consistency of participants' degradation ratings was high,  $\alpha = .97$ . The average degradation rating across participants was assigned to each image and used in the analyses. Thus the image-related dependent measures of interest were the number of images in each room and the average degradation rating of the images in each room.

## RESULTS

### Descriptive Data on Images

There were 91 images of women found in the men's rooms. Images came from a variety of sources including posters ( $N = 28, 31\%$ ), magazine "pin-ups" ( $N = 24, 26\%$ ), magazine advertisements

( $N = 19$ , 21%), calendars ( $N = 18$ , 20%), and computer screen savers ( $N = 2$ , 2%). It is interesting to note that a lot of the material came from magazines that are specifically designed to portray women as sex objects, such as *Playboy*, *Maxim*, and *Stuff*; 37 images (41%) came from such magazines.

### Fraternity Membership and Images

The association between fraternity membership and ownership of images was examined through correlational analyses. (Fraternity membership was dummy-coded with no membership = 0.) There was a positive correlation between membership and the number of images found,  $r(58) = .52$ ,  $p < .01$ , such that fraternity men had more images displayed in their rooms ( $M = 2.53$ ,  $SD = 2.25$ ) than non-fraternity men did ( $M = .46$ ,  $SD = .89$ ). There was also a positive correlation between fraternity membership and the average degradation rating in the images,  $r(58) = .55$ ,  $p < .001$ , such that the images in the rooms of fraternity men were judged more degrading ( $M = 1.63$ ,  $SD = 1.17$ ) than those in non-fraternity men's rooms ( $M = .36$ ,  $SD = .73$ ). The strength of these associations as indexed by eta-squared were .27 and .30, respectively.

It was thought that athletic team membership might confound the relationship between fraternity membership and the number and amount of degradation of images. Some researchers have found a link between athletic team membership and attitudes and behaviors related to SA (e.g., Brown, Sumner, & Nocera, 2002; Smith & Stewart, 2003). This was a concern in this study because fraternity men were slightly more likely to be members of a varsity athletic team (70% of fraternity men) than were non-fraternity men (47% of non-fraternity men),  $\chi^2 = 3.36$ ,  $p = .06$ . Athletic team membership was dummy-coded with no participation = 0. Partial correlations were conducted to control for athletic team membership in the association between fraternity membership and number and amount of degradation in images; the partial correlation between fraternity membership and number of images, after controlling for athletic status, was  $-.56$ , and for fraternity membership and the average degradation it was  $-.61$ . Thus, the correlations increased slightly, which suggests that athletic team membership had a slightly suppressing relationship on the association between fraternity membership and the image variables. (Neither of the zero-order correlations between athletic

team membership and number of images and average degradation in images were significant,  $ps > .05$ ).

### Fraternity Membership and RSAs

There was a significant correlation between fraternity membership and RSA,  $r(58) = -.62$ ,  $p < .001$ , which indicates that fraternity men ( $M = 118.33$ ,  $SD = 9.09$ ) reported higher rape supportive attitudes than non-fraternity men did ( $M = 131.30$ ,  $SD = 7.41$ ) (a lower score indicates greater belief).

A Pearson correlation revealed a significant association between the average degradation ratings of the images ( $M = .99$ ,  $SD = 1.16$ ) and scores on the RSA scale,  $r(58) = -.34$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $r^2 = .11$ . Some men who were tested might not have owned the images displayed in the room; the images might belong to a roommate, which presumably could affect the relationship between the degradation in the images and participants' rape myth acceptance scores. Participants indicated on the questionnaire the extent to which they owned the images where "1" indicated that *almost no images belonged to the man*, and "5" indicated that *all or almost all of them did*. A partial correlation was conducted to examine the relationship between average degradation and rape supportive attitudes, after controlling for ownership of the images; the partial  $r$  of  $-.34$  was the same size as the zero-order correlation, which indicates no association with ownership of the images.

### DISCUSSION

It was predicted that fraternity men would have more images of women in their rooms than would non-fraternity men, that the fraternity men's images would be more degrading, and that the degree of degradation in the images would be correlated with the rape myths held by the men. Empirical support was found for all of these hypotheses. Fraternity men had on average two more images of women in their rooms than did non-fraternity men. In addition, their images were judged more degrading. Both of these effects were moderate in size, and accounted for 27% and 30% of the variability, respectively. These effects were still significant when the influence of athletic team membership was accounted for in the relationships. A smaller effect, although statistically significant, was a significant correlation between the degree of degradation in the images and rape myth

acceptance, and this relationship was not mitigated by ownership of the images.

What are the implications of a greater display of sexually degrading images in the fraternity men's rooms and the fact that this display was linked with the men's beliefs about rape? The correlational data do not allow us to make any causal statements about these relationships. However, the data do suggest that men who join fraternities will likely receive different information about women and sexuality than men who are not part of such an environment. The accumulated data on this topic suggest that fraternities are associated with a greater acceptance of attitudes linked with SA (e.g., Boeringer, 1999; Kalof & Cargill, 1991; Lottes & Kuriloff, 1994; Schaeffer & Nelson, 1993), a greater use of sexually degrading language (Murnen, 2000), and, in the present study, a greater display of sexually degrading images of women.

We argue that the greater display of sexually degrading images of women might communicate problematic values about women and sexuality. At a minimum, such images might communicate that women are sex objects. They might also communicate that the male sex drive is uncontrollable, that men are dominant over women, and that men are entitled to have sex with women according to their own desires. Consistent with some feminist perspectives on SA (e.g., Brownmiller, 1975; Dworkin & MacKinnon, 1988; Sheffield, 1987), we argue that degradation might lead women to be seen as legitimate targets of SA. The correlational data in the present study lend some support to this idea, as they suggest that the presence of more degrading images was associated with more endorsement of attitudes that tend to legitimize rape; however, this relationship might be spurious.

To generalize beyond the present findings, we believe that degrading images of women communicate values that elevate the status of men by putting women in a position of sexual subordination. Presenting such images in an all-male group might bond the members of a group through a set of shared values but, at the same time, these values might encourage a view of women and sexuality that perpetuates SA. According to feminist theories, the degradation of women might contribute to an atmosphere where some women are seen as legitimate targets of SA. The degradation is necessary but not sufficient for SA to occur; theorists have suggested a combination of attitudinal factors and situational factors would be most predictive of SA (e.g., Craig,

1990; Hall & Hirschman, 1991; Mahoney, Shively, & Traw, 1986). We argue that fraternity membership is likely associated with SA through agreement with attitudes supportive of rape and perhaps through situational factors that have been identified as important in predicting SA, such as alcohol use (e.g., Abbey, McAuslan, Ross, & Zawacki, 1999) and peer pressure (Schwartz & DeKeseredy, 1997). Specific processes associated with fraternities (and perhaps other all-male groups) might intensify hypermasculinity if it exists in the culture. Godenzi and colleagues (Godenzi et al., 2001) proposed that level of attachment to the group, insulation from outside influences, and amount of power of the group would all relate to the intensification of the group's values. In addition, several researchers (e.g., O'Sullivan, 1991; Sanday, 1990) have noted that fraternities often operate in secrecy and emphasize group loyalty, which would also contribute to value intensification. Of course, fraternities vary in terms of attitudes and behaviors relevant to SA (e.g., Boswell & Spade, 1996).

It would be important to test the association between display of degrading images and endorsement of beliefs that legitimize rape in an experimental manner, but it would be difficult to do so. There is likely a complex relationship between these variables that develops over time, and such research would be susceptible to demand characteristics.

Future researchers might correct some of the limitations of the current study. In terms of internal validity, the fact that the male experimenter visited the rooms of the men could have led to some demand characteristics on the RSA scale, but probably the only reason that the participants allowed pictures of their room to be taken was that the male experimenter was a senior on campus who was on the varsity basketball team and a member of a fraternity, and so he was somewhat trusted. In any case, the presence of the male experimenter was not a confounding variable in that he questioned both fraternity and non-fraternity students. In addition, a more precise measure of degradation could be developed rather than relying on the time-consuming method of ratings made by another sample. Cowan and Dunn (1994) determined themes in pornography that people found degrading, and others have looked at themes of subjugation of women in advertising (e.g., Rudman & Hagawara, 1992), so their methods might prove helpful in developing a rating system for degrading pictures. Finally, it is important to link the use of degrading images with behavior that is more likely to approximate rape than a rape supportive

attitude scale such as a measure of self-report of past SA (e.g., Koss & Gidycz, 1985) or self-report of future likelihood to rape (e.g., Malamuth, 1981).

With respect to the external validity of the study, it was somewhat surprising that such large differences between the images from fraternity members' and non-fraternity members' rooms were found. In the college setting where the study took place, fraternity members are more integrated with the rest of the campus than is often true, as they live in college-owned dormitories and apartments. Also, the campus population is small (approximately 1,600 students), and the Greek system does not dominate the social scene for most students (although there are nine fraternities, there are only three sororities, and the sororities are not affiliated with national groups). The college is fairly selective, so presumably the students are more concerned with academic pursuits than might be the case on some campuses. It is likely that on a campus where fraternity members live in houses that are not well-integrated with the rest of the campus, and possibly not well-supervised by the college or university, and where there is not as strong an emphasis on academic success, that there might be an even stronger presence of sexually degrading material.

It was also somewhat surprising that athletic team membership had a suppressing effect on the relationship between fraternity membership and SA because some researchers have found a positive link between these variables. Perhaps the fact that the athletic program on campus is Division III means that participation is not associated with attitudes and behaviors that might be found among athletes in higher profile athletic situations. In addition, at this particular college, athletes have been trained in a program called "Mentors in Violence Prevention" (<http://www.sportinsociety.org>), which targets athletes (particularly male athletes) as leaders in helping to educate other athletes about SA. Perhaps this program, which was instituted 4 years prior to our data collection, has been successful in its goals.

In sum, this study adds to a body of literature that reveals differences in attitudes and behaviors between fraternity and non-fraternity men that are reflective of acceptance of hypermasculinity. Fraternity men report a belief in male dominance and the inferiority of women. Fraternity men use language and possess pictures of women that are judged as degrading. Fraternities likely play a role in perpetuating a rape culture. Although we cannot say that these groups cause SA against women, Sanday

(1990) wrote that "Cross-cultural research demonstrates that whenever men build and give allegiance to a mystical, enduring, all-male social group, the disparagement of women is, invariably, an important ingredient of the mystical bond, and sexual aggression the means by which the bond is renewed. As long as exclusive male clubs exist in a society that privileges men as a social category, we must recognize that collective sexual aggression provides a ready stage on which some men represent their social privilege and introduce adolescent boys to their future place in the status hierarchy" (pp. 19–20).

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We thank Linda Smolak and Michael Levine for their comments on this article.

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