The Phenomenon of Unethical Behavior in the College Fraternity

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Introduction

Project rationale
This qualitative study sought to understand the nature of unethical behavior in college fraternal organizations. Numerous examples of unethical behavior have been illuminated in the popular press and scholarly research. Several studies quantified a nuance of unethical behavior that is performed for the organization's benefit. To date, no studies have explored how fraternity and sorority members rationalize unethical behavior—particularly organizationally benefitting unethical behavior—in the fraternity/sorority context from a qualitative method of inquiry.

Research Questions sought generally to provide:
1. **Examples** of organizationally benefitting unethical behaviors within fraternal experience
2. **Rationalizations** and beliefs that may be present in members who commit organizationally benefitting unethical behaviors.

Theoretical Framework
Research from Schutts and Shelley (in press) was the first to extend the Umphress, Bingham and Mitchell (2010) definition of "unethical pro-organizational behavior" (UPB) into the college fraternity/sorority setting. Prior work on organizationally benefitting unethical behavior has largely focused on the corporate setting (e.g. Vardi & Weitz, 2004).

The initial work by Vardi & Weitz(2004) on "organizational misbehavior" did not decompose the belief of acting to help the organization, as noted in Umphress et al. (2010) who found that the interaction between reciprocity beliefs and organizational identification results in higher levels of UPB. Schutts and Shelley (in press) and Schutts (2013) further supported the hypothesis that organizational identification alone does not predict unethical behavior.

Schutts (2013) demonstrated a significant relationship between organizational attachment, moral disengagement, and UPB. Higher levels of attachment (i.e. organizational commitment) and moral disengagement were found to result in higher levels of UPB among a national sample of college fraternity members. Similarly, Detert, Klebe Trevino, and Sweitzer (2008) reported that empathy, trait cynicism, and moral disengagement significantly predicted unethical behavior in a sample of college students.

Schutts and Shelley also proposed several examples of potential UPBs in the fraternal setting, such as hazing behaviors, intentionally misrepresenting the truth to protect the organization, and violating campus rules for recruitment purposes.

To date, no study has been conducted to qualify organizationally benefitting unethical behaviors in the fraternal setting.

Method

Permission to research Human Subjects was obtained from the IRBs of the University of Southern Mississippi and the from the University of West Florida.

Bracketing the Researcher's experience
The researcher has been a student affairs practitioner and campus fraternity/sorority advisor at four institutions spanning a 10-year career. His tenure as president of his fraternity chapter gave him first-hand experience with unethical acts intended to benefit the organization, and informed his passion and perspective on the subject. The researcher experienced hazing in his college fraternity, and was a perpetrator of those behaviors for a period of time in his college career.

Participants
The present study is composed of three participants from two institutions in the southeastern United States. Efforts were made to recruit a diverse sample based on gender, race, ethnicity, institution, fraternal organization, and classification year. Table 1 displays the general characteristics of the research participants.

Table 1. *Participants*			
Pseudonym	Campus	Fraternal Organization	Demographic Information
"Rafe"	A	A	Junior Caucasian Current fraternity president
"Chris"	B	B	*Senior* Caucasian Current fraternity president
"Rainn"	A	B	*Sophomore* Caucasian Current fraternity treasurer

Selection Criteria
Participants were selected using purposive snowball sampling. Professional colleagues of the researcher supported the project by sharing the opportunity to participate with their fraternity/sorority students. Leadership members were intentionally targeted because of their willingness to participate, and the exposure they likely have to knowing of unethical behaviors within their organization.

Materials
Semi-structured interview questions were developed for the participant interviews. All participants signed informed consent documents and were notified of their right to not participate. All participants agreed to be audio recorded.

Procedures
Participant interviews occurred a time, place and manner of the participant's choosing. In all circumstances, quiet study rooms within the institutional libraries were selected by participants. The average interview lasted around 40 minutes. The researcher took handwritten notes and audio recorded the conversation for transcription and analysis. Interview data were analyzed for themes after each interview. Emerging themes also guided successive interview questions. An external auditor assisted with the verification of transcription accuracy and analysis of data.

Findings

Results were based on a preliminary, pilot study of fraternity and sorority members at American institutions of higher education. Initial analyses explore definitions, examples, linkages to moral disengagement, and the role of the chapter's external image.

"They think that they are producing better pledges when the pledges listen. But really they're producing monsters, just like them." –Chris

Definitions
Behavior that is Illegal or "frowned upon" (Rafe) behaviors that are outside of group norms (Chris). Also bad things (Rainn) that an individual would not be proud of doing (Rafe), but at the time justified the action as doing something *quid pro quo* (Rainn).

Behaviors intended to benefit the chapter
• Hazing (Chris, Rafe, Rainn = maybe)
• Keeping secrets (Rafe) / lying or misrepresenting the truth (All)
• Being a *player* toward women (Chris)
• Drugs, recruitment, and taking advantage of women (Chris)
• Alcohol and recruitment (All)

"Every fraternity member knows how an incoming freshman's mind works. We recruit along the basis of that - we know what surprised us, what drew us to certain places—it was girls, alcohol, and parties…which is extremely unethical. I think if a fraternity didn't recruit on the basis of alcohol and girls – what we all recruit with – they wouldn't stand a chance. It's a bad thing. It's a sad thing." –Chris

• Fighting (Chris)
• Badmouthing rival organizations (Chris)
• Academic cheating (All)

Behaviors not intended to benefit the chapter
• Drug use, recruitment (Rainn) and taking advantage of women (Chris)
• Alcohol and recruitment (Rafe)
• Academic cheating (Chris, Rainn)
• Vandalism (Chris)
• Hazing w/ forced alcohol consumption (Rafe)

Moral disengagement
The most frequently described mechanisms were **moral justification**, **attribution of blame**, and **dehumanization**. Moral justification was evident in the belief of hazing to produce better new members, and because it had traditionally been done. Attribution of blame was largely connected to the pledge's fault for not knowing required information. Dehumanization focused on referring to new members as goats, crabs, worms, or even the word "pledge."

"If after four weeks [the pledges] don't know the basis of which we were founded, it shows me that [we're] not important…so [hazing] happens to add extra pressure – to exemplify that pledging is a real commitment." –Rafe

Image
• Linked to respect from peers (Rafe)
• More important to younger members than older members (Chris)
• **Highly committed people** to the chapter may do more unethical things because are concerned with protecting the chapter's image (Rainn)

Discussion

When "Chris" was pressed about why the chapter's image was no longer important to him, he indicated that a transformation had occurred in his thinking. When probed what comprised this transformation, Chris noted **empathy, learning from others**, and **being held accountable**.

This is a critical connection between findings and implications. Previous research has noted has stated that a relationship exists between commitment and unethical behavior, such that people who feel a strong obligatory commitment to the organization are more likely to commit these acts. Chris' transcendence toward a more affective state suggests empathy, learning, and accountability play a key role. Findings have also linked actions to moral disengagement mechanisms. Chris' commentary provides context to the empathy-moral disengagement-unethical behavior described in Detert et al. (2008).

Emerging research by Schutts and McCreary on the role 'brotherhood' plays in the commitment and unethical behavior arena supports these findings. To date, we find brotherhood based on accountability as the only dimension of brotherhood that significantly relates to unethical behavior (i.e. higher accountability beliefs lead to less unethical behavior) and qualitatively that commitment has a direct connection to unethical behavior.

Implications of the study
This project adds to the literature around unethical activity fraternities. These findings help practitioners and scholars unpack the complex nature of unethical behavior in student organizations. Further evidence is provided relative to example behaviors suggested in Schutts and Shelley (2013). That information may help practitioners diagnose intent and construct interventions and mediations to suppress unethical behavior.

Limitations of the study
The present study has several limitations. First, the majority of participants hold chapter leadership roles. Because of the access they have to the organization, they may be self-reporting attitudes and behaviors, or conveying second-hand rationalizations and experiences they have observed from fellow members. Second, participants may filter rationalizations through their own confirmatory biases and preconceived notions. Third, research on unethical behavior has been shown to be limited by social desirability bias whereby participants may portray themselves or their fellow members in a more positive framework.

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