

STEREOTYPES AND SISTERHOOD: AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF GREEK LIFE AT THE COLLEGE OF NEW JERSEY

Author:

Lucy Obozintsev

Faculty Sponsor:

Yifeng Hu,

Department of Communication Studies

ABSTRACT

Through mainly investigating the Alpha Beta¹ sorority, this ethnographic study aimed to examine the dynamic of Greek life culture at The College of New Jersey (TCNJ) campus and to either confirm or debunk the negative stereotypes perpetuated by the media about Greek life. Two different Alpha Beta events were attended in order to gain a better understanding of this particular sorority's culture. Since these two events also had other Greek life organizations in attendance, the data collected from the observations could be applied to TCNJ's Greek life culture as a whole. Additionally, interviews were conducted with a member and non-member of Alpha Beta in order to paint a more thorough picture of Alpha Beta culture and the perceptions that outsiders may have of it. This study revealed a variety of different cultural patterns, all of which thwarted many negative stereotypes about Greek organizations and their members. Specifically, this study found that while many of the heavily rooted traditions and rituals were kept secret, Alpha Beta put exceptionally strong emphasis and value on intimacy, respect, friendship, and camaraderie, which may be extended across all Greek life organizations on TCNJ campus. Thus, Alpha Beta, and TCNJ's Greek life as a whole, is a complex culture that deserves to be appreciated in its own right and, unlike many popular stereotypes, these cultures actually promote quite positive values among its members.

INTRODUCTION

Being that I myself am not a member of the Greek life community at the Eastern American College studied, I felt it would be interesting to delve into and explore the Greek life culture, specifically that of the Alpha Beta¹ sorority. My research was, essentially, an investigation into TCNJ Greek life culture and whether or not it aligns with the negative stereotypes perpetuated by the media about it.

Two main qualitative methods were utilized. Primarily, I played the role of an observer by attending events hosted by the sorority in order to cultivate greater insight into the complexities of the organization, as well as to take note of any rituals that the group may participate in. Specifically, events where multiple Greek organizations, including Alpha Beta, were present were selected so that I could witness the dynamics between different organizations and the research could be expanded beyond merely Alpha Beta culture, but to TCNJ'S Greek life culture as a whole.

In order to supplement the notes obtained from the observation events, two interviews were additionally conducted – one with a member of Alpha Beta and another with a non-member of Greek life – with the intent of creating a better understanding of the culture of both Alpha Beta and Greek life in general. The interview with Eve², a member of Alpha Beta, was set up in order to clarify what it is that set Alpha Beta apart from other organizations, and to explain the values of her organization. The goal of my other interview with Caitlyn², a non-member of Greek life, was to better understand the perception that outsiders have about Greek life, as well as to learn about the possible motivators for joining (or not joining) Greek life.

Pop culture has frequently conveyed the concept that Greek-letter organizations on college campuses tend to have rivalries with one another, and that they basically compete with

one another to be the most popular or the “best” organization on campus. These negative stereotypes about Greek life likely stem from a lack of understanding about the culture, given that Greek life certainly holds thick intergroup boundaries from outsiders. Due to the exclusive nature of Greek life, it may be rather difficult for an outsider to develop an accurate understanding about Greek life culture and dynamics – unless they actively attempt to do so, as I have in this study – and thus misinformed stereotypes are perpetuated. While it is important to recognize that not all of these stereotypes prove true, it is equally as important to understand that due to the strict exclusivity of Greek life that tends to alienate outsiders, misinformed stereotypes are expected to develop. However, the findings from this study completely thwart the stereotypes that the media perpetuates. After examining and analyzing the content from the field notes and interviews, the cultural pattern of camaraderie among TCNJ’s Greek life community immediately presented itself.

ALPHA BETA SORORITY

Before explaining the findings of my fieldwork in more depth, I would like to briefly introduce the Alpha Beta sorority. This organization, which was formed over 100 ago, is classified as a social sorority whose mission statement places a special emphasis on creating lifelong bonds of loyalty, developing camaraderie, and philanthropic interests. Currently, Alpha Beta has 53 active collegiate chapters, as well as 37 alumnae associations and clubs across the United States. The Alpha Beta chapter on TCNJ’s campus is composed of over 100 members, and each of these members is expected to attend a weekly (and mandatory) chapter meeting. It should be noted that only members of Alpha Beta are permitted to attend, and anything discussed at these meetings is not to be disclosed to anyone who is not a member of the organization. Thus, Alpha Beta is a complex organization that is rather hard to study as an outsider given its level of exclusivity and secrecy to non-members. Nevertheless, I was able to observe numerous meaningful cultural patterns that provided me with valuable insight into Alpha Beta culture, and TCNJ’s Greek life culture as a whole.

A pattern of mutual respect and camaraderie among Greek organizations was primarily observed at the first Alpha Beta event attended, which was a philanthropy event. Participation in this kind of philanthropy event is completely voluntary, but when I arrived, I saw representatives from a variety of Greek life organizations. All of these participants appeared excited to be there, and seemed to truly want to support both Alpha Beta and Alpha Beta’s philanthropy. There was really no reward for these twenty individuals from different organizations to take time out of their busy schedules to attend another organization’s event, but yet there they were. After consulting Melanie², my main link to the Alpha Beta organization, she confided in me that people tend to show up because they know that if they do, other organizations will reciprocate when it comes time for their organization to host an event. I found this piece of information to be incredibly interesting and very reflective of TCNJ’s Greek life culture; these organizations are expected to respect and support one another as much as they can.

The next Alpha Beta event that I attended, which was the dodge-ball game between Alpha Beta and Beta Beta¹, only confirmed this cultural pattern of camaraderie among Greek life organizations. Given that this was a sporting event between two “teams,” I expected people to root for each respective team. However, the spectators did not root for Alpha Beta or Beta Beta specifically, but rather for individual players. For instance, I sat next to a group of boys a part of the Kappa Beta¹ fraternity, and I noticed that they were cheering for various girls on the two different teams. Thus, these individuals were simply there to show their support for their friends, rather than show support for one organization over the other. In fact, most people in the crowd were simply yelling out names of players, rooting for them to do their best; instead of most people in the crowd yelling, “Go Alpha Beta!” or “Go Beta Beta,” everyone was simply cheering on their friends. Even members of Alpha Beta would additionally let out cheers for members of the Beta Beta team. The fact that neither organization was being pitted against one another demonstrates the friendly nature of the relationships among the Greek life organizations; it is not a part of TCNJ’S Greek life culture to promote bitter rivalries or create any sort of negative

sentiments among the organizations. Instead, Greek life culture is supportive of their fellow organizations.

Even though Alpha Beta ended up losing to Beta Beta, they did not express any frustration, nor did Beta Beta appear to gloat in their victory. Instead, the two teams shook hands and cordially congratulated one another, demonstrating the camaraderie among organizations. This camaraderie was further demonstrated when the spectators cheered and applauded the winning team with exceptional enthusiasm; no “boos” were heard from the crowd because everyone was there to support both organizations equally and did not want to go out of their way to show significantly more support for one organization over another.

It should be mentioned, additionally, that the turnout for the dodge-ball event by Greek life members who were not part of Alpha Beta or Beta Beta was overwhelming, just as it was during the philanthropy event. This, once again, shows the level of respect that the organizations have for one another, since they are willing to come out and support one another’s events.

GREEK FRIENDSHIPS

Another cultural pattern that I observed during my research was the closeness and friendship experienced among the members of the Alpha Beta sorority. The Alpha Beta organization is undisputedly characterized by friendship; the fact that the organization is so close-knit certainly contributes to the culture of the organization as a whole. Even Caitlyn, who is not a member of Greek life, mentioned during her interviews that she felt as though the Alpha Beta members, as well as members of other Greek life organizations, appeared to develop exceptionally close bonds with one another. She admitted that when she sees all of the Alpha Beta members eating in the dining hall together, she almost wishes that she could be a part of Greek life. As a side note, she mentioned that she expects to see members of the same Greek life organization eating together because of the culture of friendship that is developed among them.

I was fortunate enough to witness close-hand just how tight-knit the sisters of Alpha Beta are at their philanthropy event. All of the members of this organization were asked to wear a semi-formal black dress in order to distinct themselves from anyone who was not a part of their organization. This sort of matching attire also demonstrates that they are a unit. For instance, the girls could have been asked to simply dress up for the event, but instead they were asked to appear almost identical to one another, thus visually displaying the bond that they have to one another.

A similar phenomenon presented itself at the dodge-ball event as well. All of the members of Alpha Beta – those girls that were playing as well as those that came to support their sisters – were all wearing shirts with their Greek letters on them. Typically, members of the sorority have a T-shirt with their letters on them, but the letters are always colored in with a unique pattern or design. However, for the dodge-ball game, every member of Alpha Beta wore letters that were all filled in with the same bright blue. Once again, this dress code selection made them appear as a unit, representing the strong bonds that they share with one another.

One of the Alpha Beta rituals that I was privy to observe further demonstrated the cultural pattern of intimacy among the sorority sisters. At the dodge-ball event, right before the game started, the players on the Alpha Beta side all grouped themselves into a circle, and began to engage in a chant. The closeness of their bond was represented not only by the idea that they all had the same chant memorized, but also by the fact that they were able to recite the chant so quickly (almost instantly).

GREEK RITUALS

Finally, the last observed cultural pattern of tradition and ritual within Alpha Beta was extremely prevalent throughout my fieldwork, as well as within each and every Greek life organization on campus. During my interview with Eve, who is a member of Alpha Beta and had served as the Ritual Chair for the organization, I was able to discover the level of importance that rituals hold. Unfortunately, since I am not a member of the organization, I am not privy to the exact details of these rituals, so I am unable to analyze them in accordance to what they may mean to Alpha Beta

culture. However, just by learning about how seriously the secrecy of these traditions and rituals is preserved from Eve, I have certainly developed a pretty clear idea of the importance of rituals to the Alpha Beta organization and organizations like it.

However, during our interview, Eve did reveal that during the “pledging” process, each and every new member—in TCNJ’s chapter and chapters nationwide—is expected to memorize the Alpha Beta motto, and that it is frequently repeated at chapter meetings. This expectation of memorization and recitation indicates that the motto is not only to be remembered and repeated, but embodied as well, and thus these traditions shape the Alpha Beta culture. Additionally, the notion that literally every Alpha Beta member is expected to memorize this motto explicitly indicates that the Alpha Beta culture is one that is heavily rooted in ritual and tradition.

I wish that I could have learned more about and observe the traditions of Alpha Beta, just so that I would be able to gain a better understanding of the Alpha Beta culture, since I assume that the nature of the rituals and traditions that they participate in are reflective of the culture as a whole. Even though I was unable to do this, learning about the importance of ritual and tradition to Alpha Beta from its members helped me develop a deeper understanding of the culture anyway, but I just wish that it could have been more thorough.

After observing the various cultural patterns found in the Alpha Beta organization, it is important to put these patterns into the context of intercultural communication. Some may believe that Greek life culture may not be so significantly different from college culture that it would influence the way in which one interacted with a member of a Greek life organization. While that may be true, Greek life is a unique culture, and the subtle differences between this culture and say, college culture, will impact the interaction. That being said, there are certainly some things that should be taken into consideration when interacting with a member of Alpha Beta, or any other member of Greek life for that matter; the cultural patterns previously discussed.

As described before, Greek life culture is marked by a sense of camaraderie among all of the organizations, thus when interacting with a member of say, Alpha Beta, it would be frowned upon to say anything outwardly negative about other organizations. I say this because many may believe, in accordance to what they see in pop culture, that Greek life organizations encourage rivalry among one another, but, as previously stated, in the case of TCNJ’S Greek life this simply is not true. Thus, one must be mindful about what one says about other organizations when talking to members of Greek life in order to avoid potentially offending anyone.

Additionally, since the members of Alpha Beta (and other organizations) are so close, it is important to remember that, when interacting with members of this culture, it is normal to feel a little bit out of place. Some may say that Greek life members are “clique-y,” but from what I have observed of the culture, they are simply very tight-knit and this may come off as a bit intimidating to non-members; for instance, talking to a member of Greek life when they are with their organization and are all wearing matching clothing may make one feel, naturally, like an outsider. Thus, it is important to understand that the outward expression of closeness that is displayed through their clothing (making themselves appear to be a unit) is just an aspect of Greek life culture and is certainly not meant to be taken personally.

Finally, it is vital to understand the importance of tradition and ritual to Greek life culture when interacting with members of this culture. There will always be things that Greek life members will not be able to discuss with those that are not members of their own organization, and it is important to understand that and not take offense to that. Understanding the value placed on keeping these traditions and rituals secret, as well as the value that these things have to Greek life culture, is extremely important to realize that one should not probe Greek life members about these things, seeing as it is seen as inappropriate, and even a bit awkward.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, throughout my research, I was fortunate enough to gain a better understanding about Alpha Beta as a Greek life culture. It is an organization that is heavily rooted in traditions and rituals, most of which are kept secret. Additionally, Alpha Beta places an enormous

emphasis and value on friendship, respect, and collaboration with one another and other organizations. Thus, Alpha Beta, and TCNJ'S Greek life as a whole, is a complex culture that deserves to be appreciated in its own right and, unlike many popular stereotypes, these cultures actually promote quite positive values among its members.

After conducting this research, I had to take a step back and reflect not only on what I had learned, but also on myself. Conducting interviews with my subjects was not terribly difficult in that many members of Alpha Beta were eager to discuss their experience with the sorority. The only issue that I encountered during the interview process with Alpha Beta members was their reluctance to really share any kind of intimate knowledge about their organization given the secrecy of their traditions and rituals. However, I had considered this potential issue prior to beginning my project. I knew that many of the members of Alpha Beta would run into the ethical dilemma of just how much information they would be willing to share with me when it came to their organization. Although they may have wanted to share some of their traditions with me in order to show just how special their organization is and just how much they differ from other Greek organizations, it would not be ethical since they have sworn to keep these traditions strictly among members. Although there would be no legal repercussion if they chose to tell me something about their rituals, they feel an ethical and moral obligation to their sisterhood to keep certain things secret, and thus I was unable to develop a more complete understanding of the Alpha Beta culture. However, I anticipated this, and thus did not pressure any of the members of the organization to share information that they would be uncomfortable sharing due to these ethical concerns.

I encountered some potential obstacles when it came to interviewing Caitlyn, who was not a member of Greek life, in that she was a bit hesitant to talk about her perceptions of the Greek life community. Although I have faith in the fact that the information that she shared with me about her perceptions were all completely true, I do have a feeling that she might have held back some of her real opinions about Greek life. Since I let her know that I was interviewing her for a project that would be shared with my professor and classmates, she certainly filtered any negative opinions or perceptions that she may potentially have had about Greek life, thus limiting the scope of my research since I may not have a completely accurate understanding of how it is that Greek life is perceived by non-members.

Further limitations concerning this paper should also be considered. For instance, my findings concerning Greek life are not entirely generalizable; I can only speak for the groups that I studied on this particular campus. Likewise, the size of the TCNJ student body may also prevent my findings from being generalizable; larger schools, as well as schools located in different regions of the United States (especially the South), may have a different Greek life culture than what was found in this paper. Thus, it should be kept in mind that each college or university will have a Greek life culture that is unique to that campus, and that the findings of the study, while reflective of TCNJ Greek life, is in no way representative of Greek life culture on other campuses.

Overall, though, I feel I have developed an insightful examination into Alpha Beta and TCNJ'S Greek life as a whole. As I have mentioned before, I found that the sisterhood of Alpha Beta is extremely tight-knit, and based on many positive values, such as respect and appreciation for its own members as well as members of other organizations. This certainly dispels many stereotypes perpetuated about Greek life by the media, and really shows me that one should never judge a culture that one knows little to nothing about. Going into this study, I can honestly say that I did not know what I would find out about the organization, but I was pleasantly surprised that I found nothing negative about Alpha Beta and Greek life as a whole at TCNJ.

Throughout the course of this study, I have learned much more than just the basis behind the Greek life culture; I have learned how difficult, challenging, and time-consuming it is to fully study and appreciate a culture other than one's own. I have learned that investigating and immersing oneself into another culture requires a lot of patience and understanding, and I am grateful for the experience. I learned a lot about a culture other than my own, and I also learned that one should never be quick to judge another culture based strictly on stereotypes

Footnotes

1. Pseudonym for the actual organization(s) studied
2. Pseudonym for the actual individual(s) interviewed