

**Interrogating the ‘Exceptional’:
The Rhetoric and Reality of Sexual Violence and Stanford Greek Life**

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Content warning: Discussion of campus sexual violence and rape.

Abstract: Greek life is often cited as contributing significantly to the epidemic of campus sexual violence. Simultaneously, Stanford students and affiliates subscribe to the notion of *Stanford exceptionalism*: an understanding of Stanford Greek life as less sexually violent and problematic than Greek life at other institutions. Through my research, I seek to explore the extent to which this idea is true and the impact that the belief in Stanford exceptionalism has on the reality of sexual violence within Stanford Greek life. Based on interviews with Stanford students and affiliates, I conclude that Greek life’s sexual violence problem is a result of the system’s features, which exist regardless of the school or its individuals. My research reveals a strong belief among students in Stanford exceptionalism along with the dangerous consequences of this false image. Further, my research demonstrates that there are features unique to Stanford’s context that serve to exacerbate the relationship between Stanford Greek life and sexual violence, rather than remedy it.

Daniel was a freshman when he decided to participate in the fraternity rush process (Former Fraternity Member 1, 2023). He wasn't initially interested in Greek life when he came to Stanford. But once he arrived on campus, he realized that everyone who seemed to be a social person was in Greek life. *Why shouldn't I join?*, he thought. His friends who were women told him that one organization in particular was "non-problematic." After realizing he knew a lot of students in this organization, he saw it as a safe choice. So, in the spring of his frosh year, he joined a fraternity.

His first year in the organization was great. He got to live with his best friends, he was surrounded by well-rounded men, and his organization was separate from the problems within Greek life.

He believed this to be true until his sophomore year, when Daniel learned about two disturbing incidents involving his fraternity brothers. In one instance, a member of his organization was found with an incredibly intoxicated girl — he was sober and trying to get her alone with him. In another case, a member was found to have repeatedly raped his girlfriend. In both instances, fraternity leadership sought to keep the cases under wraps. No conversations were had among members about what happened, why it was wrong, or what steps were being taken. Daniel recognized the importance of maintaining the anonymity of the survivors, but he believed there were ways to address the fraternity members' problematic behavior while honoring confidentiality. How would future cases be prevented if these ones weren't talked about?

Daniel realized that the fraternity culture he was becoming immersed in was not healthy. He was pretending to be someone he was not. It was deeply uncomfortable for him to have to buy into his organization's mono-culture and remain associated with these perpetrators. His initial impression of the fraternity as consisting of nice, non-problematic guys had been shattered. He now saw the problems under the surface and, morally, could no longer be a part of the organization. A year after joining, Daniel disaffiliated from his fraternity.

Three years later, despite an observed increase in campus discourse about sexual violence in Greek life, Daniel is even more concerned his former organization. He's witnessed the fraternity become even more "fatty," signaling that problematic attitudes within the organization are only becoming more acceptable. Four years after he first rushed, he says he now sees no merit to Greek life as it currently exists.

Framing Stanford Exceptionalism

Daniel knew that Greek life had problems, but he thought his organization was exempt from these. Within a year, he was proven wrong. Why did he and his friends think that one fraternity could be different in the first place? Is it possible for one organization to not fall victim to the problems that Greek organizations often face?

Daniel's experience is by no means unique. Stanford students often see Stanford Greek life as different from Greek life on a national level. This phenomenon is known as *Stanford exceptionalism* — the idea that Stanford Greek life is less racist, elitist, violent, and problematic

than Greek life at other schools. Many students hear this idea when they arrive at Stanford, and this notion often encourages them to join Greek organizations (abolishstanfordgreek, 2020).

However, a cursory look at Stanford's history and current context reveals that the university is not exempt from the epidemic of campus sexual violence, nor is Stanford Greek life innocent in this phenomenon. During their time at Stanford, 25% of undergraduate women will experience non-consensual contact (defined as penetration or sexual touching) by force or inability to consent, and 38.5% will experience non-consensual contact (including attempted penetration) as a result of coercion and without active, ongoing, voluntary agreement (Cantor et al., 2019, p. 30). Many students point to fraternities as major perpetrators of campus sexual violence (Muys & Rathi, 2022). In addition to national data and anecdotal evidence, Stanford surveys corroborate this understanding of fraternities as sites of violence. Among Stanford undergraduate women who were non-consensually penetrated, 29% encountered their assaulter at a fraternity house before the assault occurred (abolishstanfordgreek, 2021; Stanford IR&DS, 2020).

For years, this information about sexual violence within Greek life has existed alongside the belief in Stanford exceptionalism. This dichotomy leaves students, myself included, feeling deeply confused. When I first arrived on campus, I understood that Greek life generally has a strong relationship with sexual violence and is a deeply problematic institution. Yet students at Stanford kept telling me that our university was different. After more than a year here, I was still unsure of how to reconcile these conflicting messages. I entered this research with a genuine curiosity and desire to answer the questions I was facing: *Is Stanford Greek life exceptional? Do Stanford students see their Greek system as exceptional? And perhaps most important, does the belief in Stanford exceptionalism have an impact on the way that sexual violence functions within Stanford Greek life?*

Before attempting to understand the dynamics at play on Stanford's campus, we must understand why Greek life as a whole has such a strong association with sexual violence. Nationally, fraternity members are 300% more likely to be perpetrators of sexual violence than non-fraternity members (Foubert et al., 2007, p. 739). Scholars attribute this relationship to a few components. First, fraternities maintain extreme levels of control and power over their membership, campus social life, alcohol distribution, space at parties, and more (Martin, 2016). This unequal power dynamic can allow for an increase in violence perpetrated by members who are afforded access to this outsized degree of control. Second, the tight-knit, exclusive nature of Greek organizations often serves to promote in-group loyalty and secrecy. The desire to create a strong "brotherhood" incentivizes against students speaking negatively about their organization or alerting other students to problematic occurrences among members. In addition, because of the close-knit nature of these organizations, if members enter with problematic ideas, beliefs, or practices, these practices can spread and become common among members (Franklin et al., 2012; McCready et al., 2022). Finally, Greek organizations are rarely subject to accountability. While there is debate among activists and scholars about what accountability should involve, national organizations that oversee individual chapters rarely take any action whatsoever to remedy harm or prevent future assaults after cases of violence, and neither do the universities that house these chapters (Kwon, 2021).

Those who believe in Stanford exceptionalism would argue that Stanford Greek organizations are exempt from these flaws. Do current undergraduates believe this, and how true is it?

Interview Methodology

In order to better understand the dynamics at play at Stanford, I conducted a series of interviews with those intimately familiar with Greek life at Stanford. I conducted 10 interviews with Stanford undergraduates, including members of fraternities and sororities, students who have never been members of Greek organizations, and a student who disaffiliated from his fraternity. The conversations ranged from 40 minutes to nearly two hours. I also consulted professors and University administrators.

Although all fraternities and sororities can play a role in perpetuating rape culture, my case study is limited to fraternities within the InterFraternity Council (IFC) and InterSorority Council (ISC) (Stanford Fraternity and Sorority Life, 2023). In addition to IFC and ISC organizations, Stanford also hosts Greek organizations within the African-American Fraternal and Sororal Association as well as the Multicultural Greek Council. These organizations play a role in campus culture but function differently and with a more limited scope than ISC and IFC organizations. Additionally, although fraternity members are often at the center of these conversations, many advocates cite the entire Greek system, including sororities, as being complicit in Greek life's relationship with sexual violence (Robbins, 2015). Thus, my case study and interviews focus on Stanford's IFC and ISC organizations.

With the goal of facilitating a comfortable and honest environment, I began interviews with context about the project. I assured students that their name and organization would not be included and gave them the opportunity to provide details off the record. To respect this agreement, each interviewee was given a label corresponding to their role and chronological order for citation purposes (for example, "Fraternity Member 1" or "Non-Greek Student 2"). In addition, any name used to refer to an interviewee in my writing is a pseudonym.

In the sections that follow, I will discuss the major themes that arose in my interviews. To provide insight into these conversations, each section will begin with a particularly salient quote from my interviewees that represents the theme I seek to explore.

Belief in Stanford exceptionalism

"Do you think you would have rushed at a state school or at another school that wasn't Stanford?"

"Oh hell no, absolutely not" (Fraternity Member 2, 2023).

Among the students I interviewed, many believed that Stanford Greek life is different (and better) in terms of its relationship to sexual violence than other Greek systems. The quote above is one example of many in which fraternity and sorority members I interviewed enthusiastically declared that they would not have joined a Greek organization or considered

rushing at another school. There are a few reasons why my interviewees subscribed to this belief in Stanford exceptionalism.

Many fraternity members displayed a belief that the typical forms of toxic, violent masculinity encouraged in most Greek organizations are not present within Stanford fraternities. Instead, fraternity members told me that they are encouraged to be authentically themselves and not to play into ideas about what a man should do or be interested in. In fact, their organizations attempt to promote healthy, supportive communities among their members. In speaking about the culture of his fraternity, one member said, “There’s been a real cultural shift toward an emphasis on how we embody the good things of a fraternity — the spirit you get, the community, brotherhood — in a setting that doesn’t necessarily always have to be a traditional fraternity setting of parties, drinking, substance use, that kind of stuff” (Fraternity Member 3, 2023). Without the toxic components of fraternity culture, he argued, Greek life can serve a valuable function.

In addition, Stanford Greek life’s decreased presence on campus plays into this belief. Members referred to a Greek scene at Stanford that is less active and involves less “buy-in culture,” which they argue makes the culture around Greek life generally healthier (Fraternity Member 1, 2023). According to this line of reasoning, because students are less committed to their organizations and have identities that exist separate from their organizations, there is less toxic allegiance to organizations, so fewer problems arise within them.

Finally, members referred to the genuine nature of fraternities’ concern about sexual violence and creating safe, accountable communities, a trend they say is not present at other schools. Interviewees spoke about how deeply their fraternities care about sexual violence prevention, and many also spoke about believing that their organization cared more deeply and genuinely than others on campus. A fraternity member offered his perspective: “A lot of people, like myself before Rush, have this conception of Greek life as traditionally associated with sexual violence and sexual assault ... We’ve tried very hard to be aware of that and to approach situations from the lens of ... we inherently, as hosts of the event, have a power dynamic, perceived or not, that exists. So when we think about our interactions with people, we’ve really tried to talk about how you break that down ... instead of making it the fraternity above all and the traditional ‘We can do whatever we want to’” (Fraternity Member 3, 2023). This level of self-awareness isn’t generally expected of fraternity members but is common among members of Stanford fraternities, contributing to the belief that Stanford fraternity members are less sexually violent.

Exceptionally *what?*: Stanford’s unique flaws

“You have some of the most powerful families in the world in Stanford Greek life, and you have immediate access to them through those channels” (Sorority Member 2, 2023).

Even though many of my interviewees purported to believe that Stanford’s Greek system is exceptionally safe and healthy, these same conversations revealed the many flaws within

Stanford Greek life — in fact, some of their statements demonstrated that Stanford Greek life may be exceptionally problematic.

As demonstrated by the quote above, members of Greek life emphasized the importance of the extreme amounts of wealth present within these organizations. 17% of Stanford students belong to the top 1% of the wealth distribution in the United States, and 66% of students belong to the top 20% (“Economic Diversity and Student Outcomes at Stanford University,” 2017). Students at Stanford, perhaps unlike students at schools without this extreme amount of wealth, cite networking opportunities as key reasons why they decided to rush. For example, one fraternity member emphasized that he decided to join his organization because of the networking opportunities that it presented (Fraternity Member 1, 2023). This student referred to an instance where he witnessed problematic behavior from a member of his organization but hesitated to speak up because he knew that doing so would sever a potentially beneficial connection. Because students at Stanford see their participation in Greek life as having professional as well as social benefits, there is a heightened sense of loyalty to one's organization and increased fear associated with deviating from the group.

In addition to this individual incentive for secrecy, interviewees argued that Stanford Greek organizations and their leadership often explicitly encourage silence around scandals and wrongdoings. Students pointed to Greek life's dependence on approval from the University as a key factor that promotes this desire for secrecy. Due to the nature of campus housing, no off-campus Greek houses exist at Stanford. Instead, these organizations need approval from the University for housing as well as the ability to host social events and facilitate the official Rush process. At other universities, Greek organizations are in charge of their own housing and exist largely independently, creating a decreased sense of accountability to the school and perhaps a less urgent imperative to cover up instances of violence. When asked about how the culture of Stanford Greek life differs from other universities, a fraternity member answered, “It has a survivor's mentality. It does what it needs to do to survive ... We have to be in [good standing] with the University so we can get housing next year or we can still get chefs instead of going to a dining hall. So it's just tip-toeing all the time ... because we're afraid of being punished by the University” (Anonymous, 2023). Tip-toeing, according to him and other interviewees, often takes the form of leaders of Greek organizations telling their members not to tell others about problems within the organization so the University won't learn of these issues.

Above all, my interviews confirmed that despite the rhetoric of exceptionalism, Greek life perpetrates and remains complicit in sexual violence at Stanford. Again, questions about what accountability in an ideal world would look like arise here. However, students cited numerous examples of no action being taken whatsoever to hold perpetrators accountable through consequences, to promote growth and change away from assaultive behaviors, or to support survivors of sexual violence. This problem is not limited to fraternities — sorority members emphasized that their organizations often maintain relationships with fraternities that have assaulters within their ranks. One fraternity member provided an illuminating example: “There was this guy who should not ever be allowed in any sort of public space who was [at another fraternity's party]. Even at our frat he's on the blacklist ... I was definitely disappointed ... People in the frat were defending him and also people in sororities were defending him ... It's this inability to speak out” (Anonymous, 2023).

A dangerous cycle: The impact of Stanford exceptionalism & the Greek system

“Fraternity men that I’ve spoken with will try to convince me that their frat is not the issue rather than acknowledge the problem at hand. There’s something worse about that, because they’re denying that it’s actually happening” (Non-Greek Student 2, 2023).

As demonstrated above, many Stanford students believe that Stanford Greek life is safe, yet the same interviews demonstrated that violence is certainly a problem within the system. Here, we see the first two steps of a dangerous cycle. Stanford Greek life has the appearance of being better, safer, and healthier than Greek life usually is. At the same time, violence is still perpetrated by members of Greek life, and the Greek system remains complicit in this violence. However, because of the image of Stanford Greek life as safe, survivors of sexual violence are silenced and advocates are gaslit. With this image, members of the community have a hard time believing that Greek life has a sexual violence problem. Thus, there is very little (and often no) accountability in any form for Greek life, and they are able to maintain their positive image. The cycle continues. More violence is perpetrated, but nothing changes. This is the dangerous impact of the belief in Stanford exceptionalism.

How can we address this cycle of violence? We must look to the point in which the violence occurs. Fraternity members provided a few answers when asked what they are doing to prevent violence in the first place. First, they said that they’re working to hold members of their organizations accountable through implementing zero tolerance policies for sexual violence and promoting cultures of accountability and sexual citizenship. In addition, they’re aware that not all violence at fraternities comes from its members. To prevent violence at parties, they’re implementing blacklists to keep known assaulters out, utilizing sober monitors to ensure that people are acting responsibly, and enforcing consent signs at the doors. Finally, they say they’re working to build trust within their organizations among the Stanford community. They want students to come to them with concerns so that they can handle them appropriately, and they want to continue to promote an image of Stanford Greek life as safe.

Based on my interviews, these solutions aren’t enough to prevent violence and aren’t always occurring in the first place. As quoted above, students cited numerous examples of fraternities refusing to enact any form of accountability for members who have perpetrated sexual violence. They repeatedly refuse to remove perpetrators from social situations, whether they are a member of the fraternity or otherwise. All of this has led to an extreme, irreparable distrust among the community.

The violence in Greek life comes down to factors that are inherent to the Greek system as a whole — the same factors that scholars point to when explaining disproportionate levels of perpetration of sexual violence among fraternity members. The extreme levels of power, incentives for in-group loyalty and secrecy, and lack of accountability work together to create a system in which violence is perpetrated repeatedly. The nature of these organizations is such that members have no incentive to do better. In fact, members would have to step out of this system and away from the loyalty it explicitly encourages to change the culture, break codes of silence,

and foster accountability. That is an unrealistic ask for anyone, especially college students. It is the system itself that facilitates the relationship between Greek life and sexual violence, not the school or individual members. This is how Greek life is designed to function. Stanford is no exception.

Future directions

“Perhaps there is no merit to this system of how we find community” (Fraternity Member 2, 2023).

I entered this project with real questions about whether it is possible for Stanford’s Greek system to exist separately from the problems that typically plague Greek life. My research answered this question with a resounding *no*. Though this project is concluding, there is still much to be done.

It is important for this research to continue, particularly through interviews. Many of the students interviewed for this research volunteered to be interviewed knowing the nature of the project or were recommended based on the subject. Hence, they likely represent a portion of the student body that is more in touch with issues of sexual violence in Greek life and beyond. This selection of students is by no means a representative sample of the Stanford Greek life population or the Stanford undergraduate population. In order to draw more generalizable conclusions about the state of Stanford Greek life, a more comprehensive sample would be important. Each interview added valuable information to the picture and complicated my understanding — there is still so much to learn from those both in and outside of this system.

Based on these interviews, it is clear that Stanford must reevaluate its practices that put the entire student body at a disadvantage by incentivising students to rush and building a campus culture that favors Greek life. Students cited Stanford’s restrictive housing, alcohol, and party policies as key reasons why they chose to join Greek life. As they see it, Greek life lets them circumvent these restrictions by allowing them to live with their friends and have a fulfilling social life. Perhaps if Stanford altered its policies, the campus wouldn’t depend so strongly on Greek life and students would become more comfortable with abandoning this dangerous system.

Despite claims from fraternity members that they’re working toward making the system safer, my interviews have made it clear that it is impossible to reform the system to the point where it is no longer violent. Simultaneously, though, Stanford has strong financial and public relations incentives to maintain its Greek system, so it seems unlikely that the University would abolish Greek life in the near future (Kiersznowski, 2021). Therefore, we must work toward creating safer conditions and preventing violence in the meantime while we continue the long term push for abolition. This statement presents a multitude of new questions: What can be done to prevent violence in the meantime? What would abolishing Greek life actually look like? How can we support the creation of a positive, vibrant social atmosphere outside of Greek life? Would the violence in the Greek system be recreated in other organizations? There is much to consider

as we approach abolition, but it is clear that anything other than abolition will simply lead to more violence.

Greek life is just one part of the complex, intertwined network of systems and practices that prop up rape culture. We have a long way to go to create a world free of sexual violence. Abolishing Greek life is one part of this journey. In doing away with the notion of Stanford exceptionalism, we are taking the first step.

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