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Descriptive Finding

**Dating across and hooking ‘up’:
Status and relationship formation at an
elite liberal arts university**

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Dating across and hooking ‘up’: Status and relationship formation at an elite liberal arts university

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Abstract

BACKGROUND

Demographic research on assortative mating underplays the role of social status in shaping partnering behavior, yet qualitative research suggests social status is critical in shaping partner desirability and structuring opportunities for partners to meet.

OBJECTIVE

This study investigates how social status of sororities and fraternities shapes relationship formation between women and men on a college campus.

METHODS

We draw on data from an online survey of sorority women at an elite liberal arts university about their romantic and sexual lives.

RESULTS

While status homophily is the dominant pattern in romantic relationships (dating ‘across’), sorority women up and down the status hierarchy are more likely to hook ‘up’ with high-status fraternity men. Concern about status is also associated with dating and hooking ‘up’ the status hierarchy.

CONCLUSIONS

Social status shapes the desirability of potential romantic and hookup partners and opportunities for potential partners to meet. Results also highlight gender differences in the operation of social status in cross-sex relationship formation.

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1. Introduction

Demographic research finds that people tend to partner with others who share their racial/ethnic background, as well as other social characteristics, such as religious affiliation, educational attainment, and class background. This is important for understanding the inter- and intra-generational perpetuation of inequality and population change (Kalmijn and Flap 2001; Schwartz 2013). Yet, research on assortative mating often overlooks a key sorting metric: social status – or “inequality based on differences in esteem and respect” (Ridgeway 2014). Social status operates alongside differences in power and resources to shape interactions and relationship formation between people. However, few studies have systematically examined the role of social status in shaping cross-sex relationship formation. This article draws on an extreme case to reveal how social status shapes relationship formation between women and men: In particular, we examine how the status hierarchy among Greek organizations structures the platonic friendships, hookups, and romantic relationships sorority women form with fraternity men at an elite liberal arts university.

Sororities employ a number of strategies to increase their social status in the (1) highly stratified (DeSantis 2007; Robbins 2004; Waller 1937) and (2) gender unequal (Martin and Hummer 1989; Martin 2016; Sanday 2007) context of Greek systems. These include recruiting physically attractive and socially adept women as members and policing the sexual behavior of ‘sisters’ in order to maintain a positive “collective sexual reputation” in the heterosexual marketplace (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; Handler 1995; Risman 1982; Strombler 1994). Less research has focused on how organizational stratification and unequal gender relations within the Greek system shape individual sorority women’s cross-sex relationship formation. Moreover, studies of assortative mating among college students largely focus on “master status” characteristics such as race or class background (Laumann et al. 1994; McClintock 2010) rather than local status characteristics. This gap in the literature is especially notable given that college students frequently note characteristics such as fraternity and sorority status in assessments of others’ sexual and/or romantic desirability and tend to view their own Greek membership as either an aid or detractor in attracting members of the opposite sex (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013; DeSantis 2007; Handler 1995; Holland and Eisenhart 1990; Risman 1982).

To fill this gap, we draw on an original survey of 321 sorority women at Elite University (a pseudonym). Elite University is an excellent site for this research because the striking homogeneity of the student body enables us to isolate local social status from master status characteristics. First, we use survey data to establish the local status hierarchy on campus. Next, we examine how women’s platonic, hookup, and romantic relationship formation is shaped by their position in the status hierarchy. While our

study findings are based on a single case, our research sheds light on the importance of considering (1) local social status alongside master status characteristics in studies of partner matching, (2) the ways status operates differently across relationship types, and (3) gender differences in the operation of social status in partner matching.

2. Data and methods

We draw on data collected through a 2007 online survey of heterosexual sorority women attending a small, selective private liberal arts university in the United States with fewer than 2,000 undergraduates enrolled. The survey was designed to examine the role of the Greek system and the influence of status in shaping heterosexual sorority women's romantic and sexual lives.

In 2007, roughly 80% of women and men at Elite University were members of sororities and fraternities. Greek members were more homogeneous than the student body at large, which was overwhelmingly wealthy (80% came from households with annual incomes exceeding \$100,000) and white (roughly 90%).

We received permission to survey the maximum number of students allowable per university policy. This number (500) fell short of, but nearly captured, the target population of the study: women enrolled in any one of the five National Panhellenic Council-affiliated sororities on campus. Using the preceding criteria, the university registrar selected a random sample of students for participation in the study. Of the 500 surveys distributed, 321, or 64.2%, were returned. This is a high response rate for an online survey, suggesting that the topics covered were salient to respondents. Freshmen were slightly over-represented in the sample, and there were slight differences in the representation of women by sorority. Analyses utilizing weighted data were not significantly different than analyses using unweighted data (presented here).

Our analyses draw on sorority women's perspectives of the status hierarchy among Greek organizations. Respondents rank-ordered the sororities on campus. Then they assigned each fraternity to one of five status designations, from 'very low status' to 'very high status.' We also draw on respondents' self-reports about their relationships with men in Elite University's fraternities. Respondents were presented with a list of fraternities on campus and asked to indicate if they had ever engaged in any of the following relationship types with at least one member of the fraternity: (1) a platonic relationship, (2) a hookup, or (3) a romantic relationship. Hooking up was defined as including "everything from kissing to sexual intercourse" (Paul and Hayes 2002), reflecting the broad range of behaviors that students list when asked to describe a typical hookup scenario. Our data does not enable us to distinguish whether women

formed multiple relationship types with the same fraternity member or engaged in the same type of relationship with more than one member of a fraternity.

Additional questions assessed the extent to which respondents attached social significance to an individual’s membership in a Greek organization, in general (“Knowing what fraternity/sorority someone is in tells me a lot about what that person is like”) and in the context of selecting hookup and romantic partners (“Before I date/hook up with a member of the opposite sex, I take into consideration what fraternity he belongs to”). Finally, we assessed peer pressure to date members of specific fraternities (“Do you feel encouragement by other members of your sorority to date members of a certain fraternity or fraternities?”).

First, we use respondent data to establish the local social status hierarchy among Greek organizations. Next, we examine the association between sorority women’s status (as determined by sorority affiliation) and the status of the men (as determined by fraternity affiliation) with whom they formed platonic, romantic, and hookup relationships. Finally, we assess various explanations for these patterns using mixed methods. We test the associations between social status concerns and perceptions of peer pressure and relationship behavior (ever dating or hooking up with a high-status man) using multivariate logistic regression, controlling for sorority status and year in school. Finally, we summarize qualitative survey data to understand sorority women’s perceptions of the influences on their cross-sex relationship formation.

3. Results

Table 1 examines the status associated with each of the five sororities on Elite University’s campus. Despite subtle differences in how members and non-members ranked sororities – suggesting ego-buffering (Gordon and Wilson 1969) – there was a high level of agreement regarding the distribution of status among sororities: 83% of respondents ranked Tau the highest status sorority and 91% of respondents ranked Zi the lowest status sorority.

Table 1: Sorority status and cross-sex relationship formation

Sorority	% sample	Mean status ranking (SD)	MSR, members	MSR, nonmembers	% reporting romantic relationship	% reporting hookup relationship	% reporting friendship
Tau	19	1.3 (0.74)	1.2	1.3	84	97	86
Nu	19	2.2 (0.71)	1.6	2.4	61	89	86
Rho	21	2.9 (0.66)	2.4	3.0	56	87	85
Epsilon	25	3.8 (0.66)	3.2	3.9	61	86	90
Zi	16	4.8 (0.75)	4.4	4.9	48	70	96

Table 2 examines the status respondents associated with each of the 14 fraternities on campus. Respondents with romantic and/or sexual ties to members of a fraternity were slightly more favorable in their assessments. Again, there was a high level of agreement regarding the distribution of status among fraternities. To simplify analyses, we assigned each fraternity a ‘high,’ ‘medium,’ or ‘low’ status category. Cut-off points for inclusion in a status category were based on (1) the mean status rating (priority) and (2) responses to an open-ended survey question. A majority of respondents attached significance to sorority affiliation (54%), while 61% felt that “knowing what fraternity someone is in tells me a lot about what that person is like.”

Next, we examined what percentage of respondents in each sorority had ever participated in a romantic relationship, hookup, and/or platonic friendship with a fraternity man on campus. As seen in Table 1, women in Tau (rank 1) were most likely to have ever participated in a romantic relationship with a fraternity member, while women in Zi (rank 5) were least likely to have ever participated in a romantic relationship with a fraternity member. We find a similar trend for hookups. Notably, 86% of women surveyed reported having hooked up with a fraternity member. Women in lower status sororities were slightly more likely to report having platonic friends in fraternities.

Table 2: Fraternity status rating by sorority members

Fraternity	Mean status rating (SD)	MSR (partners only)	Status category
Alpha Pi	1.28 (0.59)	1.08	High
Beta Phi	1.48 (0.89)	1.14	High
Chi Rho	1.55 (0.79)	1.28	High
Delta Omicron	1.71 (0.62)	1.63	High
Epsilon Psi	1.83 (0.68)	1.78	Medium
Eta Iota	2.53 (0.69)	2.59	Medium
Gamma Tau	2.95 (0.61)	2.80	Medium
Iota Zeta	2.98 (0.69)	2.89	Medium
Kappa Omega	3.38 (0.83)	3.25	Medium
Ksi Tau	3.70 (0.82)	3.46	Medium
Lambda Mu	3.80 (0.72)	3.57	Medium
Mu Kappa	4.16 (0.63)	4.03	Low
Nu Rho	4.56 (0.61)	4.45	Low
Omega Upsilon	4.79 (0.44)	4.67	Low

Figure 1 displays the share of respondents, by sorority affiliation, reporting relationships with low, medium, and high-status fraternity members across three relationship types. In each table, cells are shaded to represent matches that were more (darker shading) or less (lighter shading) common. We find a slight pattern of status homophily in the platonic friendship formation between respondents and fraternity men.

By contrast, there was a strong pattern of status homophily in the romantic relationship formation between respondents and fraternity men. A unique pattern, however, emerges when we examine hookups. High-status women tended to hook up with other high-status men, but they almost never hooked-up with low-status men. Lower status respondents, on the other hand, not only hooked up with men in a similar position on the social status hierarchy, they also hooked up – or hooked ‘up’ – with high-status men.

Figure 1: Percentages of respondents reporting relationships with low-, medium-, and high-status fraternity members, by sorority and relationship type

	Romantic relationships			Hookups			Platonic friendships		
	Fraternity status			Fraternity status			Fraternity status		
	Low	Medium	High	Low	Medium	High	Low	Medium	High
Tau	2	47	57	0	71	84	36	79	79
Nu	0	30	49	2	60	88	28	84	82
Rho	3	42	21	10	81	63	53	84	71
Epsilon	11	49	10	17	83	49	71	87	70
Zi	24	28	0	30	59	22	85	87	63

Note: Romantic relationships, hookups, and platonic friendships are not mutually exclusive categories. Darker shades indicate more frequent pairings.

Table 3 supplements Figure 1 by presenting the full results of statistical significance tests of the association between sorority status and the probability of reporting relationships with fraternity men of different statuses. In general, there was a significant positive association between sorority status and reporting relationships with high-status fraternity men, except when it comes to friendships, and a negative association for relationships with low-status men. Relationships with medium-status men were only weakly associated with sorority status.

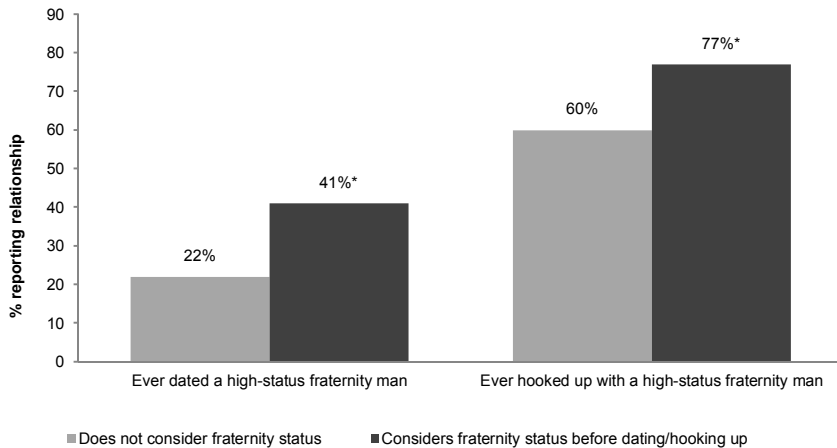
Table 3: Results from statistical significance tests of differences between sororities in cross-sex relationships with men in high-, medium-, and low-status fraternities; corresponds to heat map shown in Figure 1

	Romantic relationships			Hookups			Friendships		
	Fraternity status			Fraternity status			Fraternity status		
	Low	Medium	High	Low	Medium	High	Low	Medium	High
Sorority status	1. Tau	5		3, 4, 5	4, 5		3, 4, 5	4, 5	
	2. Nu	5	4	3, 4	4, 5	3, 4	3, 4, 5	3, 4, 5	5
	3. Rho	5		1, 2, 5	5	2, 5	1, 2, 5	2, 4, 5	
	4. Epsilon		2,5	1, 2, 5	5	2, 5	1, 2, 5	1, 2, 3	
	5. Zi	1, 2, 3	4	1, 3, 4	1, 2, 3, 4	3, 4	1, 2, 3, 4	1, 2, 3	2

Note: Numbers in cells indicate differences between groups that were statistically significant at the $p < 0.05$ level. For example, the share of women in Zi who reported a romantic relationship with a member of a low-status fraternity was significantly different from the shares that did the same in each of the top three ranked sororities (Tau, Nu, and Rho).

How did the social significance attached to Greek affiliation and peer pressure impact the likelihood sorority women hooked up with or dated high status men? Respondents who placed importance on Greek affiliation were twice as likely as other women to have participated in a romantic relationship with a high-status fraternity man. This positive association was statistically significant after controlling for sorority status and year in school. This pattern held true for hookups as well. Figure 2 displays the predicted probabilities of reporting ever dating and ever hooking up with a high-status fraternity member by status consideration from logistic regression models, holding sorority status and year in school at their mean values. In addition, women who felt pressure to date members of specific fraternities had more than twice the odds of reporting a hookup relationship with a high-status man (Table 4). This positive association persisted after controlling for sorority status and year in school. However, there was no association between peer pressure and ever dating a high-status fraternity member.

Figure 2: Predicted probabilities of respondents reporting having ever dated/hooked up with high-status fraternity members, by status concern



Note: 'Status concern' refers to the particular relationship type; e.g., for romances, status concern reflects whether the fraternity status of potential partners matters for romantic relationships only. Predicted probabilities are calculated from logistic regression models that controlled for status concern, sorority status, and class year. * indicates that the difference is statistically significant at 0.05 level with controls.

Analyses of responses to the open-ended question “Do you feel encouragement by other members of your sorority to date members of a certain fraternity or fraternities?” provided insight into the pathways through which status shaped women’s cross-sex relationship formation. While the Greek system had an open-door policy, such that any student on campus (including non-Greeks) could attend nearly any Greek event, 26 respondents (out of 63) reported that belonging to a sorority shaped their peer group, leading to an increased likelihood they would date certain men:

I don't feel that my sorority pressures me one way or another, but being in a sorority affects who you hang out with and what parties you attend.

When all of your friends hang out with a certain fraternity or don't hang out with certain fraternities, there is an implied pressure to date members of the organizations you spend the most time with.

Table 4a: Coefficients from logistic regression models predicting romantic relationships with high-status fraternity members

	Ever dated a high-status fraternity member					
	M1		M2		M3	
	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE
Considers fraternity status before dating (1 = yes)	2.398*	(0.89)			3.222**	(1.33)
Feels encouraged to date members of certain fraternities (1 = yes)			0.781	(0.27)	0.503+	(0.20)
Sorority status (ref = Tau)						
Nu	1.063	(0.43)	0.983	(0.39)	1.114	(0.45)
Rho	0.251**	(0.11)	0.203***	(0.09)	0.240**	(0.11)
Epsilon	0.101***	(0.05)	0.087***	(0.04)	0.095***	(0.05)
Zi (lowest)	---		---		---	
Class (ref = freshman)						
Sophomore	2.748*	(1.25)	2.343+	(1.04)	2.631*	(1.21)
Junior	3.382**	(1.55)	3.065*	(1.37)	3.626**	(1.69)
Senior	3.050*	(1.37)	2.409*	(1.04)	3.093*	(1.40)
Model fit statistics						
-2 log likelihood	244.5		249.7		241.4	
Pseudo R ²	0.19		0.17		0.20	
N	242		242		242	

Note: Members of Zi were dropped from romantic relationship analysis because none of the members interviewed reported a romantic relationship with a high-status fraternity member. † p<0.1 * p<0.05 ** p<0.01 *** p<0.001

Table 4b: Coefficients from logistic regression models predicting hookup relationships with high-status fraternity members

	Ever hooked up with a high-status fraternity member					
	M4		M5		M6	
	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE
Considers fraternity status before hooking up (1 = yes)	2.172*	(0.77)			1.726	(0.64)
Feels encouraged to date members of certain fraternities (1 = yes)			2.656**	(0.93)	2.296*	(0.84)
Sorority status (ref = Tau)						
Nu	1.284	(0.71)	1.253	(0.70)	1.220	(0.68)
Rho	0.344*	(0.16)	0.338*	(0.16)	0.358*	(0.17)
Epsilon	0.169***	(0.08)	0.166***	(0.07)	0.168***	(0.08)
Zi (lowest)	0.053***	(0.03)	0.053***	(0.03)	0.055***	(0.03)
Class (ref = freshman)						
Sophomore	2.142*	(0.83)	2.035+	(0.78)	2.208*	(0.87)
Junior	3.170**	(1.30)	2.822*	(1.16)	3.124**	(1.31)
Senior	2.765**	(1.08)	2.716*	(1.07)	2.891**	(1.15)
Model fit statistics						
-2 log likelihood	302.2		298.9		296.7	
Pseudo R ²	0.21		0.22		0.22	
N	287		287		287	

Note: † p<0.1 * p<0.05 ** p<0.01 *** p<0.001

In other words, the local status hierarchy mattered to partner matching because it placed men and women of similar status into more frequent contact with one another.

Twenty-nine respondents reported experiencing pressure to date or hook up with men from certain fraternities – either to gain social approval or to avoid negative social appraisal:

You get looked down at if you date a Omega Epsilon or a Nu Rho, sometimes [men at the military academy], too. You are 'cooler' if you date someone in the Big Four.

It was suggested that I hook up with members of certain fraternities to help us get mixers with them.

From this perspective, the local status hierarchy mattered because it placed women in a position to seek status through the relationships they formed with men in order to maintain or increase their individual and group social standing. Seven respondents mentioned both pathways in their responses.

4. Summary and conclusions

We found social status, and in particular sorority or fraternity status, played an important role in patterning cross-sex relationships. Moreover, status played a stronger role in structuring romantic and sexual relationships than platonic friendships.

Our data suggests gender differences in the operation of status across relationship types. Low-status fraternity men rarely formed romantic relationships or hooked up with sorority women, even those who were low status. Low-status women, however, were able to hook 'up' with higher status men, but did not form romantic relationships with them. The latter pattern is suggestive of a possible gendered "beauty-status exchange" (McClintock 2014). Indeed, hookups – given their short-term and often public nature – may offer the perfect setting for such a transaction (Armstrong and Hamilton 2013). As Wade (2017) found through qualitative interviews, students can in fact be quite blunt about their use of hookups to gain status (34). In addition, Hamilton (2007) found that college women weigh the level of men's erotic interest heavily in their assessments of self and others.

The status game our data reveals is troubling. Over the past decade and a half, scholars have identified numerous drawbacks to hooking up for college women. These include a "sexual double standard" for women (Allison and Risman 2013; Armstrong, Hamilton, and England 2010; Sweeney 2011); reduced sexual pleasure (Armstrong,

England, and Fogarty 2012); and feelings of confusion, disempowerment, and regret (Glenn and Marquardt 2001). While some research suggests that hooking up may be experienced as a form of empowerment for class-privileged women (Hamilton 2014) like the ones in our study, these relationships nonetheless tend to form on men's terms and, often, men's turf. The tendency of hookups to take place in settings that involve alcohol use in party environments (LaBrie et al. 2014) means that women may be at increased risk of sexual assault and violence (Nicholson et al. 1998).

Our study has several limitations. We do not have individual-level data on the men with whom sorority women formed relationships. This would offer a more complete picture of the patterns we observed, particularly around hookups. This study needs to be replicated in universities that differ in student body size, location, Greek life, and class, racial/ethnic, and age diversity. While research suggests that 'hookup culture' has become central to the meaning of the 'college experience' (Allison and Risman 2014), there is considerable variation in who is likely to participate in the type of status game exposed in this research. Indeed, research suggests important differences among college students in how they construct and conceptualize their romantic and sexual lives (Allison and Risman 2014; Brimeyer and Smith 2012; England and Bearak 2014; Kuperberg and Padgett 2015, 2016; Ray and Rosow 2010, 2012; Uecker, Pearce, and Andercheck 2015). While there is a need for further study of this topic, our research takes an important step forward in exploring the link between social status and cross-sex relationship formation.

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