

Orange, Blue, and Shades of Gray:

UF Student Government and the Moral Psychology of Oligarchy

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1. Introduction

In my previous paper I used press stories, existing academic literature, my own experiences and a series of semi-structured interviews to paint a picture of the Student Government system at the University of Florida (UF). To recap, the Student Government at UF has an annual budget of around \$19 million, funded by mandatory fees levied on all students enrolled at the university. The institution is dominated by a coalition of fraternities, sororities, and large student organizations who are involved in a complex patronage system whereby different “blocs” negotiate for their members to receive prestigious positions. This coalition is additionally influenced by Florida Blue Key (FBK), an exclusive “leadership honorary” society on campus of which membership has historically been a virtual prerequisite for anyone with an ambition to hold public office in the state of Florida. Above all else, the main goal of this coalition (known as “the System”) seems to be maintenance of its members’ permanent dominance over campus politics: whatever internal jockeying for position happens in the build-up to a Student Government election, the System has been remarkably effective over a number of years at presenting a united “party” to the student body come campaign season. It has also been ruthless in leveraging the advantages of incumbency against any opposition and has become renowned for its willingness to utilize aggressive and threatening tactics against anyone who dares to challenge it. The result is that UF appears to have only the veneer of a democratic system within its Student Government – in reality, the System and its dominance of campus politics has created a microcosm of a one-party state at UF.

As I explained in the introduction to the first paper, I think the case of UF’s Student Government is worth studying for at least three reasons. First, there is evidence to suggest that UF is far from unique in the nature of its student politics – conclusions drawn from this study may well be applicable to other campuses around the country. Second, the fact that success in the System often depends on a student’s willingness to participate in a ruthless system of patronage seems important when one considers that UF Student Government has historically been a “training ground” for the state’s political elite – to whatever extent the lessons learned in college carry over into later professional life, the UF case is relevant to the way politics is conducted in the state of Florida as a whole. Third, it strikes me that UF is a crucible in which often-idealistic young people are first confronted with a political system that rewards pragmatism and ruthlessness; the way in which these youngsters deal with the temptations to compromise their principles in exchange for professional advancement presents a fascinating case study in moral psychology which may yield some interesting lessons about human nature.

Although I will briefly revisit the first and second of these reasons at the end of this work, it is the third of them that forms my main focus. In the course of my experiences as a participant in Student Government I have come to know many students who have been key players in the System, and one of the things that has most consistently interested me is that in many cases they do not come across as the ruthless political opportunists that their opponents in the rival “independent movement” sometimes depict them as being. Admittedly, some of the people I met seemed to match the description of that caricature rather well, but there were many others whom I actually found I quite liked: they were friendly, intelligent, and seemed to have a genuine interest in making a positive difference on campus. I found this puzzling: the same people were also System party leaders whom I knew to be active participants in a style of politics that I find abhorrent. The personal impressions I had of these people simply did not fit with their behavior in Student Government.

Two examples might serve to illustrate this conundrum. The first relates to an incident from September 2012 that I recounted in my first paper, in which an Associate Justice of the Supreme Court of the Student Body claims he was pressured by a leading member of Florida Blue Key to change his opinion on a controversial case. The Court had decided to approve the text of a proposed referendum question for the upcoming Student Government election, but the Blue Key executive apparently demanded that the decision be reversed because FBK donors did not approve. This alone seemed shocking: the notion that a Florida Blue Key leader would try to subvert the process of allowing the student body to express its democratic will appeared to confirm the worst rumors about the organization’s involvement in campus politics. However, an extra detail that I learned about the executive in question was one that I found truly mind-boggling: according to the Associate Justice who told me about this incident, the same FBK member had spent the previous summer in Washington D.C. working for the Democratic Party’s task force against voter suppression! Of all the double standards I had encountered among participants in the System, this was surely the most outrageous: how could someone rationalize to themselves or anyone else that the democratic values for which they fought during the summer should be cast aside so readily in the fall?

The second example involves a conversation I had earlier this year with a friend who has been heavily involved in Student Government at UF with the majority party and is also an active member of the Democratic Party. This person was telling me that during his years of involvement inside the System he had always been uncomfortable on some level with the way in which students in fraternities and sororities (or “Greek” houses) and major student organizations are coerced and threatened into voting for the “correct” candidates. On the other hand, he believed that if he was to make a positive difference in the world then he needed to progress within the Democratic Party – he looked at some of the young people who had risen to high positions within the state party apparatus and perceived that almost all of them had been members of FBK. He explained to me that he had thus made a decision some time ago that he had been able to rationally justify to himself: he needed to be in Blue Key to make a positive difference in the long term, so he would compromise his principles while at UF in order to achieve that goal. As he told me this, he started to cry. It was one of the most revelatory moments I have had about the conflicting dynamics that are at work on students involved in the System: the psychological discomfort

caused by trying to justify participation in a corrupt political regime can be extraordinarily intense, and yet this is what many ambitious students on the UF campus routinely do.

With stories such as these in mind, I decided that I wanted my research into Student Government to include some investigation into the psychological processes that serve to facilitate willing participation in the System among people who presumably profess to hold democratic and meritocratic values. I think that an understanding of how participants overcome such an incongruence might lead to some intriguing conclusions about human nature and the psychology of politics. My aims in this work are therefore as follows: first I will review the existing literature on moral psychology and development, focusing on the pioneering work of scholars such as Piaget, Kohlberg and Rest. Then, having used their research to propose a model of moral psychology, I will analyze the extent to which the responses I collected from my interviews with members of Student Government at UF support the validity of such a model. Having done this, I will explore the ongoing debate in social psychology about the extent to which individuals' decision-making processes can vary according to situational factors – this may help to explain why students seem to make different moral choices within the System than they do in other circumstances. In particular, I will ask whether the characteristics of “Greek culture” on campus might prime students in some way to accept the legitimacy of the System. Finally, having offered some tentative conclusions based on my interviews and observations, I will suggest avenues for further research.

2. Theories of moral psychology and development

Arguably the two most important names in the history of research into moral development during the twentieth century are Jean Piaget and Lawrence Kohlberg. In his seminal 1932 work *The Moral Judgment of the Child*, Piaget conducted interviews with children of different ages about their understanding of rules and developed a theory that younger infants, up to about 8 years of age, tended to obey rules simply because they were tradition. Rules were commands that were passed down by adults and the children were thus aware that any transgression against those rules constituted misbehavior. As they aged, children were generally subject to more rules imposed by adults but were less likely to blindly obey them. Rather, children from about 10 years upwards saw rules more as being mutually agreed guidelines that were agreed for the greater good of every player in the game. Interestingly, when asked about their views on lying and stealing, younger children tended to focus more on consequences while older children were more likely to pay attention to the motives of the offending party. Piaget argued that adherence to rules depends more on empathy and cooperation as children age, rather than depending on fear of sanction by adults.¹

Partly inspired by Piaget's work, Lawrence Kohlberg researched adolescent boys and created a model of moral development under which all individuals are at one of six stages of development, described as follows:

Stage 1 – Heteronomous Morality: “Individuals justify actions based on avoidance of punishment and the superior power of authorities.”

¹Piaget 1932

Stage 2 – Individualistic, Instrumental Morality: Individuals “understand that people have needs and interests that may conflict with their own, so right is defined by what is fair, an equal exchange, or an agreement.” However, the individual’s chief concern is still the fulfillment of their own needs and wants.

Stage 3 – Interpersonally Normative Morality: Individuals are primarily concerned with “meeting the expectations of those to whom one is close and carrying out appropriate, acceptable social roles (for example, son, friend).” In this sense, “shared feelings, agreements, and expectations [have begun to] take precedence over individual interests.”

Stage 4 – Social System Morality: “Individuals view the social system as made up of a consistent set of rules and procedures applying equally to all people.” At this stage the individual is viewing morals from a societal perspective, rather than solely from that of himself or his immediate circle of family and friends.

Stage 5 – Human Rights and Social Welfare Morality: Individuals evaluate laws and social systems “based on the extent to which they promote fundamental human rights and values.” Rather than obeying rules simply because society has established them, the individual at this stage will assess whether those rules are appropriate or not.

Stage 6 – Morality of Universalizable, Reversible, and Prescriptive General Ethical Principles: Individuals consider “the points of view of all involved in a moral situation. Decisions are based on universal generalizable principles that apply in all situations.” The individual includes the perspective of others in his evaluation of whether the rules are appropriate or not.²

After its initial publication in 1958, Kohlberg made several minor revisions to his theory and developed a measurement instrument known as the Moral Judgment Interview (MJI). By the late 1970s, a group of scholars had emerged who were sympathetic to the fundamental premise that individuals develop through a number of stages of development that each involve an increasingly empathic approach to moral judgment. However, many of these “neo-Kohlbergians” felt that the original theory was insufficient, and sought to build on it by proposing a number of methodological and theoretical revisions. Among the most prominent of this group was James Rest, a developmental psychologist at the University of Minnesota who made three main critiques of Kohlberg’s work.

First, Rest envisioned the placement of individuals on the six-stage scale as a more fluid process than did Kohlberg. Each stage of development in Kohlberg’s model can be described as “hard” because it constitutes “the ruling program of a person’s mind, is pervasive and consistent across situations, and follows a strict invariant sequence of development.”³ In other words, individuals are seen as progressing through the various stages in a fixed sequence, and as being entirely situated in only one stage at any given moment; they are assumed to follow the same pattern of moral reasoning regardless of the situation; and it is assumed that “each successive stage is more highly developed than the previous one because it incorporates aspects of all earlier stages.”⁴ By contrast,

²All quotations in the description of Kohlberg’s six stages are from Evans et al 2010, pp. 103-105.

³Rest 1986, p. 199

⁴Evans et al 2010, p. 102.

Rest's version of the model can be described as "soft", with each stage acting as "a type of heuristic for determining which of a number of actions is morally right; a person can have and use various 'stages' of thinking, depending on many situational factors."⁵ Given the convincing evidence for the importance of situational factors which I explore later in this work, Rest's acknowledgement that individuals might utilize different stages of moral thinking in different circumstances is a welcome revision.⁶

Rest's second critique of Kohlberg stems directly from the first: given his preference for a model in which a subject's position on the development scale can be simultaneously distributed among several of the six stages, Kohlberg's MJI was no longer an adequate measurement instrument. The latter was an interview in which subjects were presented with various moral dilemmas and asked to explain the moral principles that would form the basis of their decisions about how to act – the subject was then labeled as being at a certain developmental level depending on the highest stage of which he demonstrated consideration through his answers. For Rest this was insufficient not only because it ignored situational factors that might help to determine behavior, but also because it might underestimate the thought processes of subjects. In such a test the subject "is not credited with an idea unless [she] explicitly and articulately verbalizes the idea... The problem here is that some of a subject's thinking may be in advance of the ability to express it sufficiently."⁷ Consequently, Rest developed a different instrument called the Defining Issues Test (DIT) – a survey in which subjects are presented with a list of possible considerations that may factor into their decisions about how to act in particular moral dilemmas, and are asked to identify the four considerations that they consider to be most important to their eventual decision. The list of possible considerations encompasses thinking from all six of Kohlberg's stages, allowing subjects to choose options that they might not have been able to express had they been asked to produce considerations of their own rather than identifying options from a list. Of course, the DIT could potentially suffer from a different problem, namely that subjects could rate items from the list as important even if they do not actually understand their meaning. In an attempt to counter this, "a number of meaningless but complex-sounding items are interspersed throughout the DIT. If too many of these items receive top rankings by a subject, we infer that the subject is not attending to meaning, and consequently invalidate that subject's questionnaire."⁸ Having used this technique to reduce the risk of inaccurate responses, the DIT is scored using a complex algorithm that proportionally distributes a subject's moral thinking across the six stages. In recent years the DIT (and an updated version called the DIT2) has proven hugely popular in developmental psychology, having been used in thousands of studies and produced fairly consistent findings.

⁵Rest 1986, p. 199

⁶One important criticism that could be made of Kohlberg, Rest and all of the "neo-Kohlbergians" is the assumption that moral judgment advances along a linear path of development, with "more" developed stages of judgment being seen as objectively superior to others. This is clearly contentious, if not dangerously ethnocentric, although Rest (1986, pp. 91-93) partially addressed the critique by arguing that underlying commonalities across cultures are far more substantial than individual acts that are seen as moral in some places but immoral in others. I think this is an important critique that strikes at the heart of debates about objectivism and relativism. However, for the purposes of the present work I have decided to put that question to one side and proceed on the basis that the Kohlbergian understanding of moral development is a valid one.

⁷Rest 1986, p. 198

⁸Rest 1986, p. 197

Among the most pertinent to my own work are that higher stages of moral development are significantly associated with older age, higher levels of formal education, and more liberal beliefs and ideologies. Interestingly, there was no significant discrepancy in scores across gender lines.⁹

Given how well established the DIT has become as a measure of moral development, I strongly considered employing it in my own research, but I eventually decided that so much work had been done using the DIT that I was confident I could predict the results it would produce if I tested it on participants in UF's Student Government. In particular, Rest notes that a wide range of studies involving college students have shown "subjects with higher moral judgment scores tend to be better read, more knowledgeable and involved in academic experiences, and more socially active through their freshman year. As seniors, people with higher moral judgment scores remain more involved socially, politically, academically, and culturally."¹⁰ Given the fact that students who are involved in Student Government at UF are generally those who are actively involved in fraternities, sororities and other student organizations, it seems highly probable that these students would do well on a survey that tests moral judgment in hypothetical scenarios.¹¹ I decided instead that I wanted to investigate how these students had acted in real life situations, and as such I chose to focus my attention on qualitative answers about their experiences in Student Government, as collected in my interviews with participants.

Rest's third critique of the original Kohlberg theory helps to explain how it might be that students who score highly on the DIT might nonetheless engage in behaviors that do not exhibit the higher stages of moral judgment. He argued that one of Kohlberg's biggest mistakes was to assume that the abstract moral considerations such as those recorded by the MJI could alone serve as an accurate indicator of eventual behavior. Rest himself was somewhat more cautious about the predictive power of the DIT, claiming that it could help to predict the outcome of only one out of four key cognitive processes that contributed to eventual moral behavior. The DIT is designed as a partial measure of moral *judgment* – in other words, it measures the degree of empathy towards others of which an individual might be capable when judging which action would be the most morally justifiable for her to take in a given situation. It does not measure any other factors (besides empathy) that might contribute to that eventual moral judgment; nor does it measure the likelihood that the subject will act in accordance with her moral judgment in a given situation. Rather, there are three other processes that contribute to the eventual behavioral outcome. Together they comprise a "Four Component Model" of moral psychology, which Rest and his colleagues described as follows in 1999:

1. Moral *sensitivity* (interpreting the situation, role taking how various actions would affect the parties concerned, imagining cause-effect chains of events, and being aware that there is a moral problem when it exists)

⁹Rest 1986, pp. 176-178

¹⁰Rest 1986, p. 40

¹¹Granted, not all of the findings from studies using the DIT suggest that students would score highly. In particular, the fact that almost all participants in the study are young adults makes them more statistically more likely to receive a low score than older people would. However, the studies cited by Rest tend to show that age counts for a fairly small proportion of the variance in DIT scores. In any case, the fact that most of the students are of similar age means that age is a variable that would essentially be held constant if I used the DIT.

2. Moral *judgment* (judging which action would be most justifiable in a moral sense – purportedly DIT research has something to say about this component)
3. Moral *motivation* (the degree of commitment to taking the moral cause of action, valuing moral values over other values, and taking personal responsibility for moral outcomes)
4. Moral *character* (persisting in a moral task, having courage, overcoming fatigue and temptations, and implementing subroutines that serve a moral goal).¹²

When seen in the context of this model, the six-stage theory of moral development measured by the MJJ and the DIT is actually just one piece of the moral-psychological puzzle that might hold the answers as to why people ultimately behave the way they do. Indeed, it may not even provide a wholly reliable answer to the component of moral judgment – although Rest claims that studies using the DIT have generally have been strong predictors of moral judgment, they are not always accurate because other values factor into moral judgments besides those measured by the survey. For example, a study in 1987 found that a group of radically fundamentalist seminarian students showed signs of empathic understanding consistent with the fifth and sixth stages of the Kohlbergian scale. However, most of their eventual behavior did not reflect these stages. Upon further examination it emerged that although each student was intuitively inclined to act based on his conception of empathy, he consciously overrode these feelings if they contradicted his understanding of what the Bible taught was the right thing to do. For these students, religious teaching was a more important determining factor in moral judgments than were the concepts of empathy measured by the Kohlbergian scale.¹³

Despite exceptions such as the seminarian case, the widespread use of the DIT has ensured that of all of the four components, moral judgment has been the one that seems to have been the most systematically researched. None of the other components have the benefit of a measurement instrument that has been widely used and refined over a number of years. That is not to say that no work has been done in relation to the other components: for example, Muriel Bebeau has developed an instrument for measuring moral sensitivity among dentistry students that has consistently produced results that are only moderately correlated with DIT scores, suggesting that sensitivity is indeed a variable that is discrete from judgment.¹⁴ However, her survey is specifically tailored to moral issues that arise in the dentistry profession – to my knowledge, no instrument with broader appeal has been frequently used in studies of moral sensitivity, nor in studies of moral motivation or character.¹⁵

Given that the components of moral sensitivity, motivation and character have been far less thoroughly researched than moral judgment, it struck me as being particularly important that

¹²Rest et al 1999, p. 101. It is worth noting that other authors and even Rest himself have at times labelled the components slightly differently. I chose this wording from his 1999 work because I think it provides the most suitable and succinct definition of the four components that I have found.

¹³Rest et al 1999, pp. 104-105

¹⁴Rest et al 1999, p. 102

¹⁵Among the relevant academic literature I have found one attempt by David W. Chambers (2011) to create an instrument that can measure all four components. However, like Bebeau's work, it is specific to the dentistry profession and has not been used widely enough to draw conclusions about its reliability.

I search for evidence of how these three factors might play into the behavior of participants in UF Student Government. That is not to say that moral judgment should be ignored. I certainly approached my interviews with the intention to take note of any sign that members of the ruling coalition might be less empathic in their moral calculus than one might assume from the DIT results reported by Rest, and aware of the fact that empathy is not the sole consideration in decisions of moral judgment. Presumably, concepts derived from the individual's religious and political views (such as their ideas about justice, equality, authority, and so forth) also play into moral judgment. I also still believe that utilizing the DIT or a similar instrument in a study of student politicians might be an interesting task, but given my limited time and resources, I decided to focus my efforts elsewhere for the purposes of this study.

My working assumption is therefore that participants in the UF Student Government system would most likely comprehend and profess support for “advanced” concepts of empathy on the Kohlbergian scale, and that it consequently stands to reason that one or more of the other three components in Rest's model must be operating in such a way as to produce behavior that might seem improbable if the subject's moral judgment was used in isolation as a predictor. How might it be that the cognitive processes of moral sensitivity, motivation or character might override moral judgment? The available literature that might help to answer this question is vast and it would take years to read even a tiny fraction of it, but there are nonetheless some tentative possibilities suggested by the works I have encountered. Perhaps the most promising of these relate to how the first component – that of an individual's sensitivity to the existence of a moral problem – might vary according to the outcomes of the other three processes. For example, through engaging in moral judgment, a person may conclude that behavior *x* is the most morally appropriate in a given situation. However, she might nonetheless want to select behavior *y* as her course of action, perhaps because of competing moral motivations (for example, her political ambitions would be better served by choosing behavior *y*) or because of a failure of moral character (for example, being scared of the consequences she will suffer if she chooses behavior *x*). Assuming that the person places some value on seeing herself as a moral being, there is an inevitable tension between her judgment that behavior *x* is what she *should* do and her awareness that behavior *y* is what she *wants* to do. Schwartz (1977) explains this tension as follows: “Compliance with activated personal norms can satisfy feelings of moral obligation only at the risk of incurring substantial social, physical, and/or psychological costs. One way to escape this conflict is to neutralize the feelings of obligation, to deactivate the norms by redefining the situation.”¹⁶

This kind of tension is known in psychological scholarship as “cognitive dissonance”, and was first brought to prominence in the work of Leon Festinger (1957), whose theory was based on two basic hypotheses: “1. The existence of dissonance, being psychologically uncomfortable, will motivate the person to try to reduce the dissonance and achieve consonance; 2. When dissonance is present, in addition to trying to reduce it, the person will actively avoid situations and information which would likely increase the dissonance.”¹⁷ For example, if a regular smoker learns that smoking is bad for their health, he might try to reduce the dissonance between his knowledge of the ill health

¹⁶Schwartz 1977, p. 255

¹⁷Festinger 1957, p. 3

effects and his desire to continue smoking by finding reasons to disbelieve the medical evidence against cigarettes and by actively seeking information to the contrary.¹⁸ He actively changes his interpretation of the available evidence until it is such that he can comfortably conclude that what he *should* do and what he *wants* to do are the same thing.

In terms of Rest's Four Component Model, we might say that the way to resolve cognitive dissonance is for a person to adjust his sensitivity to the evidence available in a given situation until he perceives the reality of that situation in such a way that his moral judgment, motivation and character all favor the same course of action. The extent to which he is able to convince himself that the reality of a situation is different to that which he was originally inclined to believe is the extent to which he is able to override his initial moral judgment. If such a phenomenon does indeed exist then presumably there are different methods by which the individual can distort the reality of a situation to suit his needs – this begs the question of whether some such methods seem to be particularly common. From my reading of the literature on the subject it seems as though there are at least three types of redefinition that are often employed in resolving cognitive dissonance: I will call these redefining consequences, redefining responsibility, and redefining victims.

Redefining consequences involves persuading oneself that the negative consequences of one's actions are not as negative as they might seem, and that there might be greater positive effects of those actions than some might assume. For example, Gibbs (2010) cites a number of studies that found aggressive adolescents who believed that people who got beaten up “probably don't suffer a lot” and rapists who believed that their victims enjoyed the experience.¹⁹ Some equally shocking examples can be found in Christopher Browning's work *Ordinary Men*, which investigated the psychology of the Nazis' Reserve Battalion 101, a squad of middle-aged German men who massacred thousands of Polish Jews on orders from their commanders during World War II. Browning found that the squad's major tried to rationalize an impending killing spree by redefining the mission as a just one, asking his men to “remember, when shooting Jewish women and children, that the enemy was killing German women and children by bombing Germany.”²⁰ This conflation of Jewish civilians in Poland with “the enemy” against whom the German forces were fighting a war is an obvious logical fallacy, but was used in all seriousness as a means of justifying mass murder. Meanwhile, some of the individual soldiers involved in the massacre minimized the consequences of their own involvement via “the easy rationalization that not taking part in the shooting was not going to alter the fate of the Jews in any case.”²¹ One even employed the extraordinary logic that he was still acting morally so long as he only shot children whose mothers had already been shot – he reasoned that they would not be able to survive without their mothers so he was acting honorably, “saving” them by killing them.²²

¹⁸Mills and Harmon-Jones 1999, pp. 4-5

¹⁹Gibbs 2010, p. 140

²⁰Browning 1992, p. 73

²¹Ibid., p. 72

²²Ibid., p. 73

Redefining responsibility entails finding reasons to believe that one is less responsible for the negative consequences of their behavior than might be assumed, or that they are not responsible at all. Numerous studies have found that people are less likely to act in accordance with their moral judgment if they are able to find people with whom they can share the responsibility of inaction – for example, one experiment by Latané and Darley (1970) found that bystanders in New York City were less likely to come to the aid of a victim of a street crime when more people were nearby. The victim was therefore less likely to receive help if a hundred people were in the vicinity than if only one person was nearby. The researchers concluded that “the more people present who might help in an emergency situation, the more we assume that someone else will step forward, so we do not have to become energized to take any personal risk.”²³ Meanwhile, Browning argued that this kind of diffusion of responsibility was a major factor in the administration of the Holocaust. The mass killing of Jews and others at extermination camps required the participation of thousands of people, but almost all of their jobs “consisted of tiny steps in the overall killing process, and they performed them in a routine manner, never seeing the victims their actions affected.”²⁴ In essence, this was murder by bureaucracy – the office workers who merely scheduled trains or compiled lists did not see themselves as morally responsible on any significant level, but the cumulative contribution of so many administrators was fundamental to the creation of one of the most evil acts of genocide in human history.

Redefining victims consists of convincing oneself that the victims of one’s acts somehow brought their fate onto themselves, or that the victims are not worthy of the same moral consideration as other human beings. One way in which this rationalization might come to pass is suggested by Kaufman (1985), who argues that one of the most important psychological discomforts that people seek to avoid is the feeling of shame – a sense of inadequacy caused by some feature of how they perceive themselves or how they think others perceive them. In an attempt to be deemed adequate by both themselves and by the social groups in which they wish to be included, people avoid shame by projecting their negative feelings onto someone or something else.²⁵ If Kaufman is correct then shame might be an important reason for the aversion that people seem to have towards cognitive dissonance, and the idea of projection might help explain why such dissonance is often remedied by disparaging victims. The Nazis’ anti-Semitism certainly aimed to persuade Germans that the Jewish people were to blame for the way they were being treated, while another clear example can be found in the build-up to the 1994 genocide in Rwanda – in that instance, the Tutsis were described in radio broadcasts as “cockroaches” that needed to be “exterminated”.²⁶ By dehumanizing victims in this way, it becomes much easier to avoid empathizing with them in the same way that one might empathize with someone who is considered to be just as human as the perpetrators.

A particularly interesting study by Bandura et al (1975) simultaneously demonstrated the behavioral effects of redefining responsibility *and* redefining victims. In Bandura’s experiment, 72 male college students were each asked to administer electric shocks to people taking a test whenever

²³Zimbardo 2007, p. 315

²⁴Browning 1992, p. 162

²⁵Kaufman 1985

²⁶Zimbardo 2007, p. 14

they got answers wrong, supposedly with the intention of helping the test-takers to learn from their mistakes.²⁷ The students were all told that they could decide on the severity of the shocks administered each time, on a ten-point scale, but there were two important ways in which different students had different experiences: first, some of them were solely responsible for administering the shocks while others were part of a three-person panel in which the average severity of shock suggested by all three students was the level of shock administered. Second, in some cases the students were “accidentally” exposed to hearing the experimenters commenting that the test-takers were acting “like animals”, while others overheard the test-takers described in more compassionate, human terms. A control group heard nothing about the test-takers. Unbeknownst to the students, the test-takers were actors and no real shocks were administered, which is just as well because the results were remarkable: the test-takers were given much more severe shocks when responsibility was diffused among a group of three students, while test-takers who had been described as being animal-like “were treated more than twice as punitively as those invested with human qualities and considerably more severely than the neutral group.”²⁸ The researchers’ findings clearly supported the idea that people acted in a less empathic way (and thus in a less developed way according to Kohlberg’s scale of moral judgment) when they were able to diffuse responsibility for their actions and when their “victims” were dehumanized.

The literature on cognitive dissonance described above certainly provides some theoretical explanations of how moral judgment can be overridden by a change in the moral sensitivity component of Rest’s model, but what of the literature pertaining to the other two components? Although I did not find such a large amount of work on these as I did on the subject of cognitive dissonance, two works in particular have struck me as interesting with regard to moral character and motivation – not least because they help to introduce a wider debate about *why* people sometimes override their moral judgments while sometimes they do not. With regard to the fourth component, that of moral character, Kristen Renwick Monroe’s work *The Heart of Altruism* offers some fascinating conclusions. Monroe conducted in-depth interviews with several people who have performed actions that could be described as altruistic, including a woman who stepped in to stop another woman from being assaulted in her neighborhood and a man who continuously hid Jews from the Nazis during World War II. Monroe finds that a common thread among her interviewees is that they did not consciously think about the decision to act in the way they did – it generally seemed obvious to them that there was only one acceptable course of action. This leads Monroe to conclude that “the prime force in ethical acts is not conscious choice but rather deep-seated intuitions, predispositions, and habitual patterns of behavior related to our central identity.”²⁹ Although Monroe concedes that various factors may contribute to whether a person acts altruistically in a particular situation, her central claim is that humans have differential capacities for

²⁷This experiment is obviously similar to a famous one conducted by Milgram (1974), in which subjects were told by an authority figure to progressively increase the severity of shocks administered to a test-taker. Despite the fact that the recipient of the shocks appeared to be in considerable distress, most subjects still obeyed the researchers’ demands to increase the shocks. This obedience to perceived authority seems to support the findings of Kaufman about the need to avoid being shamed, and also the conclusions of Zimbardo (explained below) about the power of rules and systems to dictate behavior.

²⁸Bandura et al 1975, p. 266

²⁹Monroe 1996, p. 218

altruistic behavior depending on the make-up of their self-identity at a given time in their lives. In short, she is claiming that for reasons we may not fully understand, some people are simply more likely to be altruists than others.

Although altruism and morality are not the same thing, Monroe's argument seems applicable to the present discussion about student government because it potentially helps to explain why some students might be less likely than others to tolerate the more undemocratic and corrupt elements of that system: some people simply have a more developed form of moral courage that is deeply embedded in their self-identity. While for some students it might be very difficult to stand up to unethical behavior when the possible consequences of doing so are severe, for others it would simply be unthinkable *not* to stand up. A similar point could be made in relation to the third of Rest's components, moral motivation. One of the more interesting works I have read in relation to that process is *Blind Ambition*, an account of the Watergate scandal by John Dean, who served as President Nixon's Counsel throughout the crisis and played an active role in the criminal efforts to cover up the involvement of the White House. Dean recalls that as the conspiracy became ever more involved, "everyone betrayed a sense of guilt in meetings. I had managed for a while to evade it by contemplating the startling boost that Watergate had given me into the inner councils. My adult life had been calculated blindly and shrewdly, I had always thought. I was now reaching the pinnacle."³⁰ Dean's account is one of a young man whose ambition and lust for power had consistently trumped moral judgment as a motivating force in his behavior during the first several years of his adult life, and continued to do so until he had become a felon and fundamentally reevaluated the values by which he was living. Although not stated as explicitly as in Monroe's work, Dean's memoir seems to imply that some deeply held predispositions drove him to consistently prioritize other motivations over moral judgment. Both authors can thus be said to offer mostly "dispositional" explanations of how it is that other components of moral psychology can come to override that of moral judgment.

When applied to the case of student government, this type of explanation suggests that it might be the people who shape the system rather than the other way around. Even within the limited literature available about student governments there is evidence to suggest that this is how such institutions tend to develop, at least in their early stages: for example, Lyndon Johnson's time in college politics, as described by Caro (1982), was transformative to the system on that campus: his college did not have a political system of which to speak until Johnson imposed his personality and transformed the culture into one of contested elections and political "parties".³¹ On this account, any undemocratic or corrupt features of the student government system at UF (and indeed any positive features too) exist because of the personalities of the people who choose to participate in it – people who are predisposed towards undemocratic values and corrupt practices naturally gravitate towards a system where such values and practices thrive. This kind of theory served as the foundation for a number of studies in the post-war era that attempted to make sense of the rise of authoritarian governments in Europe during the 1930s. Among the most prominent is *The Authoritarian Personality* by Adorno et al (1950), which posited that some people have deep-

³⁰Dean 1976, pp. 124-125

³¹Caro 1982

seated personality traits that make them more likely to behave in an authoritarian fashion. In this regard, their conclusions mirror those of Monroe with regard to altruism; however, Adorno et al go further by developing a means of measuring various different traits that they associated with authoritarianism including submissiveness to authority figures, aggressiveness towards out-groups, preoccupation with power and “toughness”, and rigid adherence to conventional values.³²

As interesting as these “dispositional” accounts of behavior are, I have significant reservations about their applicability to the present study. While it may be true that (as in Johnson’s case) personalities shape institutions during their infancy, UF’s Student Government is a firmly established body that has been in existence for many decades. As I explained in my previous paper, the way in which the ruling party’s power self-sustains and deters rebellion suggests that the only way to “get along” in the System is by adhering to its norms – this implies that anyone entering the system is under tremendous pressure to adapt to its rules, regardless of their predispositions before participating. Furthermore – and perhaps most importantly – the fact that many of the active participants in the system espouse democratic values in their off-campus political activities suggests that it cannot be their predispositions that make Student Government behave in the way it does. I am strongly inclined to believe that in the case of UF Student Government, the system shapes the people far more than the people shape the system.

There is considerable support for such a position among the literature from social psychology which discusses dispositional and situational explanations. Zimbardo (2007) has become one of the most well-known advocates of situational explanations for behavior since his infamous Stanford Prison Experiment in 1971. In that study, Zimbardo created a mock prison in the basement of a building on the Stanford campus and asked nine male college students to be “prisoners” for two weeks, although they were obviously free to leave at any time. A further nine students acted as “guards”, who were permitted to run the prison as they saw fit, provided that they did not physically abuse the prisoners. Within less than a day of the experiment starting, the guards became sadistic in their approach and maintained order by forcing the prisoners to engage in a series of humiliating rituals. For their part, the prisoners became gradually more passive and submitted to the guards’ orders. Soon two of the prisoners had broken down and had to be released early, even though no prisoners ever demanded to be released from the experiment. Everyone involved in the experiment was becoming so immersed in their roles within the mock prison that their personalities had changed entirely – this included Zimbardo, who was acting as prison superintendent and had become more concerned with the maintenance of order in his “prison” than he was with the well-being of his research subjects. It was only when Zimbardo’s girlfriend (herself a psychology professor) visited the prison and expressed horror at the conditions that Zimbardo closed the experiment down, less than a week after it began.

On a number of well-developed tests (including a version of the authoritarianism instrument created by Adorno et al), neither the prisoners nor the guards exhibited any signs of personality traits that were outside of a “normal” range.³³ Certainly, throughout the experiment there were signs of some of the techniques in cognitive dissonance that I described above: the guards used

³²Adorno et al 1950, pp. 222-279. Also summarized in Browning 1992, pp. 165-166.

³³Zimbardo 2007, pp. 198-200

degrading, dehumanizing language towards the prisoners, were protected by the anonymity of sunglasses and the diffusion of responsibility among their entire group, and could rationalize that the consequences of their actions were not severe because the prison was not “real”. However, there is little evidence that any of the guards would have behaved in the same way in a different situation. Instead, Zimbardo concluded that their behavior was caused by the situations in which these individuals were placed and, in a broader sense, the System in which those situations were produced.³⁴ According to Zimbardo:

*The System includes the Situation, but it is more enduring, more widespread, involving extensive networks of people, their expectations, norms, policies, and, perhaps, laws. Over time, Systems come to have a historical foundation and sometimes also a political and economic power structure that governs and directs the behavior of many people within its sphere of influence. Systems are the engines that run situations that create behavioral contexts that influence the human action of those under their control. At some point, the System may become an autonomous entity, independent of those who initially started it or even of those in apparent authority within its power structure.*³⁵

The implications of this claim are really rather mind-boggling. Zimbardo observed that none of the students were the proverbial “bad apple” that turned the rest of the apples in the barrel bad. Rather, the System was a “bad barrel” that would poison any apple that entered it. To extend this logic to the wider world, Zimbardo’s claim is that “any deed that any human being has ever committed, however horrible, is possible for any of us – under the right or wrong situational circumstances. That knowledge does not excuse evil; rather, it democratizes it, sharing its blame among ordinary actors rather than declaring it the province only of deviants and despots – of Them but not Us.”³⁶ If Zimbardo is correct then students who willingly participate in the Student Government system at UF, even those who know about its more ethically dubious practices, cannot be wholly “blamed” for the way they behave. More broadly, such a conclusion would presumably require a fundamental reassessment of what it means to be “guilty” of a crime, and indeed what we understand by the concept of free will. Clearly such a discussion is beyond the scope of the present study, but it is certainly an interesting thought.

With all of this in mind, I will now attempt to apply the literature discussed here to the UF case: I present evidence that some System party activists take other values into account when making moral judgments besides those of empathy and justice which are measured by the DIT; then I show that even if participants in the System reach the moral judgment that there is something unethical about the way in which it operates, this judgment does not necessarily dictate behavior because it can be overridden by other motivations and a lack of moral character. Next, I find a range of examples suggesting that System participants use the techniques described in my discussion of cognitive dissonance above to redefine situations and thus alter their moral judgments to align

³⁴It is an interesting coincidence that Zimbardo speaks of a “System”, using the same term as is used to describe the ruling coalition in UF’s Student Government.

³⁵Zimbardo 2007, pp. 179-180.

³⁶Ibid., p. 211

with the actions prescribed by their motivations and (lack of) courage. I then use all of these findings to explore the conflict between idealism and pragmatism which I believe to be at the heart of the battles between independents and the System. Finally, I explore the norms and values of the Greek community at UF, and ask whether these help to create a System in which democracy and meritocracy are undermined.

3. The moral psychology of participation in the System

As I explained earlier, there is good reason to believe that students who are active in Student Government would score highly on the DIT, thus indicating an advanced comprehension for empathy as measured by the Kohlbergian stages of development. Although I have not formally tested this, I have found in my experience of Student Government that this is the case – during my year in the Senate, for example, members of the System party would often frame their arguments for or against legislation and resolutions in terms of that concept. I found no evidence to suggest that participants in the System lacked awareness of the feelings of others, or of values commonly associated with justice such as meritocracy and democracy. On the contrary, as I explain later, individuals often used tortured reasoning to redefine their actions as noble or at least harmless. In this respect, then, there is nothing to suggest that the calculus involved in making moral judgments is any different for participants in the System than it is for other college students. However, I was surprised by the emphasis that some interviewees placed on another value that seemed to contribute to their thinking – namely, that of loyalty to their “in-group.” For example, former Student Body President Ben Meyers clearly took the view that patronage is a fact of life but said he was “undecided” when I pressed him on whether that *should* be the case from a moral perspective. Interestingly, he sought to explain his answer as follows: “If you can’t get your friends jobs then what’s the point of attaining success? There are folks who helped you and supported you. In my opinion you’re obligated to help and support them, so if you can do so and they’re not egregiously unqualified then you should.”³⁷ I asked him if this meant that he would always support a member of his fraternity, Theta Chi, even if he felt another candidate for a position was advocating policies that he thought were ethically superior. In response he said that “if a Theta Chi was running, I would support that Theta Chi... Obviously there is a line drawn with everything and if [the Theta Chi member was espousing] racist views or things like that, then that would be different. But the previous Theta Chis said that no matter what they would be there to mentor me and get me through the process, and they were. So out of loyalty to that process obviously I’d be inclined to support the Theta Chi.”³⁸ Nick Stinnett, a fraternity brother of Meyers, also seemed to prioritize loyalty to his house, saying that “these people [your predecessors] helped you to get where you are. Older people gave you positions and told you how to get where you are; now you’re doing the same for younger people. It’s a mentor-mentee relationship.”³⁹ Note that Stinnett places great emphasis on the virtue of loyalty here, but expresses no particular moral reaction to the fact that positions were “given” rather than earned. Loyalty to his fraternity seems a much more important consideration than any distaste for nepotism in his process of making a moral judgment.

³⁷ Author interview with Ben Meyers, Oct 2013

³⁸ Author interview with Ben Meyers, Oct 2013

³⁹ Author interview with Nick Stinnett, Oct 2013

What about the other parts of Rest's Four Component Model? How, for example, do moral motivation and moral character contribute to a person's decision to participate in the System? With regard to motivations, there are clearly some in the System who are aware that the actions they take in office are not in the best interests of their constituents but consciously choose to prioritize their own professional advancement. Stinnett told me frankly that everyone who succeeds in the System cares about their own careers over the welfare of the students whom they represent. "If they say different they're lying to you," he said. "I've seen it with my own two eyes."⁴⁰ Meyers was also candid on this subject, saying that he saw Student Government as a means of pursuing political ambition far more than he saw it as a means of promoting any particular moral values on campus:

"Frankly I don't really understand anyone who joins Student Government without wanting to be Student Body President. The amount of funding that we actually have control over is actually much less than it seems, so it's not like you're debating passionate political issues most of the time... You don't join Student Government for the issues. You join it for practice. SG [Student Government] for me was basically a way to practise and hone my skills. It's much like how I see city politics nowadays - you're always trying to move on to the next step, to prepare you for the step after that. It's a learning laboratory: you learn how to put together coalitions; you learn to interact with people and make sure they know that you value them so that they give support to you; you learn ways to be politically correct; obviously you have public speaking practice, writing practice, dealing with administrators, and so forth. But what people don't realize is that that's really unique to the Student Body President and maybe to the rest of SG exec. The average cabinet director is never going to deal with the UF president."⁴¹

Interestingly, no-one who spoke to me for the specific purposes of this project admitted to a lack of moral character or moral courage when explaining the reasons for their participation in the System or their acquiescence to it, but in the past several people have told me that they simply could not defy the System because they were too afraid of consequences for themselves and for the organizations of which they were members. In my previous paper I gave three examples of students whose student organizations had been threatened with defunding unless they desisted in particular activities that displeased the System leadership: in all cases the targets of those threats rapidly agreed to comply even though they admitted that they knew they were the victims of unethical treatment. Some of the people in question had a strong record of advocating for the advancement of women, minorities or LGBT people through the activities of their organizations, yet even they could not find the strength to stand up against a state of affairs on campus over which they could have had direct influence.

For the most part, though, I think the moral choices of participants in the System are only possible after resolving cognitive dissonance – I found an enormous amount of evidence that suggested people had redefined their interpretation of reality (or their moral sensitivity, to use the name of Rest's first component) in order to reduce the shame they would otherwise have

⁴⁰ Author interview with Nick Stinnett, Oct 2013

⁴¹ Author interview with Ben Meyers, Oct 2013

felt as a result of not acting on their moral judgments. By reinterpreting the facts of the reality with which they are presented, many System members seem able to conveniently reach a moral judgment whereby the prescribed course of action is the same course that has the least negative consequences for themselves. As explained earlier, I have grouped the methods by which they generally reinterpret reality under three headings: redefining victims, redefining responsibility, and redefining responsibility.

With regard to the first of these three methods, I found some evidence from my interviews that the “victims” of the System’s behavior – in this case their opponents in the independent movement – are cast as being inferior in some way. Often this was not presented in terms of non-System members being unworthy of involvement in campus politics per se, but rather that the System – or, more specifically, members of the Greek community – were special in some way. I say more about this in the later section on the culture of that community, so for now I will focus only on specifically negative descriptions of the independents. There were a few hints of such negativity in Ben Meyers’ interview, mostly in references to the lack of social skills that he perceives a majority of them to have. When I asked Meyers about his perception of the independent movement, he said: “I think very low of it. To take a compelling moral case for their election and botch it so continuously shows an amazing lack of self-awareness. I think, on average, they are less socially versed and so therefore they have more time to spend on petty things... It leads to them applying importance to things that really aren’t important, like thinking that elections are rigged... I just don’t find them practical - they’re irrational.”⁴² At a couple of other moments he claimed that the independent movement had a “hatred” for the Greek community and a desire to persecute its members.

However, much stronger sentiments about the independent movement and its intentions have been recorded in the relatively recent past. As I mentioned in the previous paper, a recording was made in February 2010 of an apparent meeting between System party house reps during the spring Student Government elections. The recordings attracted significant press coverage because they seemed to document System leaders praising two sororities who had offered their members alcohol in exchange for votes and had withheld food from “pledges” until they voted. However, the tapes were also notable because of the disturbing ways in which the System’s opposition was described. One of the female voices on the tape, identified by several sources as being current Student Body President Christina Bonarrigo, reportedly said at one point:

“This is ridiculous, these people [the independents] don’t have friends. Like you think I’m kidding, these guys don’t have friends. It’s not funny, like these kids are the kids that want to take down the Greek system. They don’t want Sorority Row buses. They don’t want Fraternity Row buses. They don’t want block special [inaudible]. They don’t want parking privileges that we have on Sorority Row where you get your house parking, or [inaudible]. They want everything gone for us. It’s not a joke, they want to see every letter that we have stripped away from us. They don’t want us to live the life that we have. I’m being serious, guys, like, you may not realize this now, you may not realize the impact of these elections, but this can alter every single way

⁴² Author interview with Ben Meyers, Oct 2013

*that we live... this is so scary, because I'm in Senate. I see what these people do. It's horrible, literally horrible.*⁴³

At another point in the tapes, a male voice says calls the independents “stupid kids”, accuses them of cheating to win the election, and says “I hate these guys”.⁴⁴ Both voices embark on extended diatribes against their opponents, apparently designed to depict them as being unsavory, vindictive and socially abnormal. The messages are strikingly similar to the dehumanizing techniques used so effectively in the Bandura experiment and the Browning account of rhetoric that was fed to Reserve Battalion 101. Johnny Castillo, a former System party house rep who ran for president with the independent party in 2013, told me that these types of meetings were typical of the attitude that System leaders tried to instil in the membership of fraternities: “The Greek community has convinced its members that these GDIs [shorthand for 'God Damn Independents'] are not going to let you party anymore, not let you fuck girls and get hammered.”⁴⁵ However, although Nick Stinnett admitted that such rhetoric might be used to motivate lower-ranking members of the System at election time, he doubted that this was unique to his party: “I'm sure at an independent party meeting you could find they're saying things like 'The fraternities and sororities beat their members until they go vote' and that they 'want to make it illegal to wear cargo shorts on campus', things like that.”⁴⁶ To some extent, he is correct: in my experience, it is true that independents assume the worst of the System and spread exaggerated rumors about the methods that it uses to coerce people. Of course, as I have previously explained, those rumors are rooted in truth because the System really does use some pretty aggressive tactics, albeit not to the extent that independents sometimes assume. In the same way, there is a seed of truth to the stereotype of independent party activists being less “socially versed” than those in the System – while there are plenty of articulate, sociable people within the movement, there are a few who patently lack the skills to relate to a wide range of people in different social settings, and who attack the System with relentless zeal on even the most inconsequential of issues. I found these people to be damaging to the cause for which they were fighting, because they helped support the caricature of independents that the System leaders were trying to foster among its supporters.

I found little evidence through my interviews to suggest that System members redefined responsibility as a means of overcoming cognitive dissonance, although this might be in part because I did not speak with many System members who were below the top tier of leadership – presumably the people who could most plausibly claim to lack responsibility for the more ethically questionable methods employed by bloc leaders are those who do not have the power to pressure them into behaving differently. However, I did find an important case of moral responsibility being a central consideration in the decision-making of a key figure in the independent movement: Alex Cornillie's account of how he was finally persuaded to run for the Student Body Presidency is fascinating because he was vehemently against the idea until a leader of the independent party called Yevgen Sautin appealed to his sense of responsibility. At that point, Cornillie seemed

⁴³Pillow 2010

⁴⁴Pillow 2010

⁴⁵Author interview with Johnny Castillo, Oct 2013

⁴⁶Author interview with Nick Stinnett, Oct 2013

to go through a process that was the opposite of someone in the System who might diffuse responsibility so that they do not feel any obligation to act on their moral judgment. Instead, Cornillie seemed to concentrate responsibility on himself, putting himself under an acute amount of pressure to carry the burden of acting on his moral judgment about the System, and persuading himself that no-one else was in a position to mount the kind of challenge to that System that he could. This feeling can clearly be shown in his account of the conversation with Sautin:

“Yevgen said something that really affected me. He said, ‘If you don’t do this you will regret it for the rest of your life.’ And I was thinking to myself, ‘That’s awfully serious!’ And then I thought about it and I was like, ‘... oh no, he’s right. I’m gonna regret this, if I say no to this right now, in this moment, I’m going to regret this. (sighs).’ So, I just sat there for a little while and I thought about it. And I really thought about regret... I thought about myself, and a lot of the positions that I’d had where I had been the best candidate and I got it, and I was like, all of those positions, if I hadn’t applied for it... things in general would have been worse off for someone somewhere... I was thinking to myself that I know a lot of people at UF, and I could probably get a lot of people to vote, and I know how to get the word out about things on campus. That’s really what I know how to do, and if I don’t do this, there is not a person who is going to really do it the way that I would.”⁴⁷

If my interviews produced little evidence of System members redefining responsibility, the same could not be said of the third method of resolving cognitive dissonance. The redefining of consequences seems to be the most common of the three methods I listed above – there are countless examples of people within the System redefining ethically dubious actions that they wanted to take as being inconsequential or even noble in some way. One of the most memorable personal experiences I had of this type came in the fall of 2012 when I was serving as campaign manager for the independent “Students Party” against the System-endorsed “Swamp Party”. The latter had changed its name from “Unite Party” following a scandal the previous spring in which its members were caught throwing away copies of the newspaper on election day to suppress positive coverage of the Students Party. On Monday September 24th, the *Alligator* (the independent student-run daily newspaper of the UF campus) published a letter I wrote, in which I twice referenced the fact that the Swamp Party was really a rebranding of the Unite Party.⁴⁸ I felt this was important because members of the Swamp Party were trying to wash their hands of the Unite Party legacy, despite the fact that its leaders and membership were virtually unchanged except for the usual turnover caused by people graduating. At the end of the Senate meeting the next day, Swamp Party spokesperson Daniel Landesberg asked to speak with me, and lambasted me for misrepresenting the facts in my letter. I found this astonishing because he seemed to be saying it sincerely, and was raising it in a relatively private conversation – I understood why his party had chosen to rebrand, even if I thought it was doing so in a dishonest way, but to claim in a conversation with me that he had genuinely started a new party beggared belief. I remain convinced that Landesberg had persuaded himself that the patent falsehood of his “new party” was in fact the truth, in order that

⁴⁷ Author interview with Alex Cornillie, Oct 2013

⁴⁸ Bradshaw 2012

he did not have to live with the psychological discomfort of knowing he was being dishonest. He was convinced that he was involved in the noble endeavor of creating a new party to represent the student body, and any evidence exposing the ridiculousness of this assertion seemed to be disregarded.⁴⁹

This kind of mindset, whereby System members are genuinely convinced that they are the better side, seems to guide a good deal of their behavior. In discussing the 2012 election in which he nearly beat the System to become Student Body President, Cornillie recalled breaking the news of his candidacy to Ashton Charles, the System-endorsed president two years earlier for whom he had served as press secretary. Despite the personal friendship she had with Cornillie, Charles still chose to support the System-backed candidate, reportedly even flying back to Gainesville from Europe to help in the latter stages of the campaign. When I asked Cornillie why Charles would not support him, he said he suspected that she felt the independent movement could not competently run Student Government: "I think maybe part of it was that Ashton was afraid that the whole of Student Government would just collapse," he said.⁵⁰ As noted earlier, Ben Meyers had a similar view about the superior abilities of the System side. He emphatically claimed during our interview that "part of what the System does is to prepare people well. We prepare Student Body Presidents... frankly, if I had to pick as a student between being represented by the System candidate or the indie candidate, almost always [I would pick] the System candidate."⁵¹ Nick Stinnett concurred, saying "it's only upon reflecting back that I realized how bad things had gotten. At the time we justify [our methods] in different ways - we think we run things much more efficiently. Look at something like Gator Growl⁵²: do you think something that wasn't as brutally efficient as the machine could run that?"⁵³ Carly Wilson, a former System party senator who broke away to join the independent movement and ran for Student Body Treasurer on Cornillie's ticket in 2012, told me that this kind of justification for the System's behavior is problematic. "It's really disturbing to think that some people see it and say, 'Well, it's all for the greater good. We're the better party.'" According to Wilson, the underlying logic beneath such a position is that the ends justify the means – something about which she fundamentally disagrees. "The means matter! The means are a very important part of the process," she told me.⁵⁴

This question of the relative importance of ends versus means seems to be at the heart of the difference in philosophy between those leading the System and those leading the independent movement. In fact, one incident involving Cornillie and Meyers on the eve of the spring 2012 election epitomizes the nature of that divide. Wilson – who was friends with Meyers despite their different party allegiances – had asked him to speak with Anthony Reynolds, the incumbent

⁴⁹As an amusing aside, the Swamp Party actually complained about my letter in the *Alligator*, and the Elections Commission handed me an official warning! Thankfully, this was quickly overturned by the Supreme Court, which ruled that the Students Party was well within its rights to give its opinion on the make-up of the Swamp Party.

⁵⁰Author interview with Alex Cornillie, Oct 2013

⁵¹Author interview with Ben Meyers, Oct 2013

⁵²Gator Growl is a huge pep rally organized by Florida Blue Key each year. It takes place in the UF football stadium on the night before the Homecoming game every November, and has been known to attract as many as 60,000 people in the past.

⁵³Author interview with Nick Stinnett, Oct 2013

⁵⁴Author interview with Carly Wilson, Oct 2013

Student Body President and an influential leader in the Asian American Student Union (AASU). Wilson's hope was that Reynolds might be persuaded to either endorse Cornillie or at least to quietly encourage members of AASU to vote for him. Reynolds was apparently reluctant but eventually agreed to discuss the idea, so Wilson tried to persuade Cornillie to call him. According to Meyers, the decision should have been a "no-brainer". He said, "all that had to happen was that Cornillie had to call [Reynolds] and give him assurances that his people [AASU] would be treated favorably... and that he would consult with him as he was making cabinet choices, and he would have won the election."⁵⁵ Wilson remembers phoning Cornillie and telling him he should make the call, arguing that there was nothing to lose in doing some peacemaking with the incumbent president, and saying that it need not require any specific promises of positions for AASU members. "We fought on the phone for half an hour," she recalled. "Both of us ended up getting really angry, and we both hung up angry. I punched a wall made out of cement, and I had to go to the doctor the next day! I was pissed off about it too because it was election day, but my roommate said 'If you don't get your hand checked out, I'm going to call your mother!' So I missed part of the day because I was at the doctors!"⁵⁶ Meanwhile, Cornillie remembered the episode as follows:

*"Carly wanted to get [Reynolds] on board with us in exchange for something, and I just kept saying 'No. They can support us if they want to support us but I am not going to trade them some powerful position so that we get 10 votes or whatever. I'll get those 10 votes, I'll go talk to AASU and I'll get those votes, because I don't need them to do it.' So eventually they just stopped asking. Eventually they were like, 'This is pointless.' And it was. It was pointless for anyone to ask. If they weren't going to get anywhere with me, no-one was going to get anywhere with me. And I think most people knew that because I wouldn't have been sacrificing my whole reputation if I was willing to cut some deals. If I was willing to cut some deals, I could have just cut a deal and been vice president! I could have cut a deal I could have been producer of Gator Growl or something. If I was a deal cutter there were plenty of deals for me to cut."*⁵⁷

Meyers believes that Cornillie's refusal to make the call to Reynolds was probably what cost him the election: he eventually lost to TJ Villamil by 114 votes out of over 10,600 cast. Meyers believes that Cornillie's decision shows that he would not have been a good choice as Student Body President:

"By making a phone call he could have made himself a historical figure in Student Government. He would have defeated an overwhelming favorite, improved his future political prospects, resume prospects... enormous personal benefit for himself after months of sacrificing personal relationships, time, money and effort. For me that's a no-brainer decision. So when he's in the office of [UF] President Machen, who says 'Just give me 10%, give me some public cover and I'll go with you for 90%.' At that point is the answer going to be No? The rigidity is amazing to me."

⁵⁵ Author interview with Ben Meyers, Oct 2013

⁵⁶ Author interview with Carly Wilson, Oct 2013

⁵⁷ Author interview with Alex Cornillie, Oct 2013

*I find that by and large, personal qualities are universal to people across different situations. So if someone is rigid in a situation like [the one with AASU], I have all the belief in the world that they would be rigid in a situation dealing with the administration or the Board of Trustees. His universal [stance against] deal-cutting concerns me. For me it's an end-game situation, it's the greater good. I would say to Alex, 'If you made this deal, you would be able to achieve the vast majority of your agenda and be able to appoint all the rest of the positions in SG.' As far as I know he hadn't cut any deals aside from that, and Anthony wasn't even asking for specific positions. So Cornillie took an incredibly irrational position, and if I had known that that would be his response then I wouldn't have even entertained the idea of supporting him. I was extremely disappointed... If you ask anybody high up in the administration or anyone who has been successful, I think they would confirm my assessment of how ridiculous that stand was. Principle is an admirable quality. Dogma is not."*⁵⁸

From Cornillie's perspective, Meyers' criticism of his position is based on flawed reasoning: Meyers seems to think that by taking a minor detour from one's principles that it is possible to get on a fast track towards having greater power, which can then be used for good. Again, this is essentially an argument that the ends justify the means. But for Cornillie, such a path constitutes a slippery slope:

*"The problem is that the incentive to do bad things and to take bribes is always there when you have power. So thinking that you'll just take some bribes now to get more power, so that then when you have the more power that you'll use it for good – that doesn't make sense. If that's what you're willing to do then you'll always trade up for more power. And until you get ultimate power, which I guess would be a dictatorship over the whole planet, you'll never be satisfied."*⁵⁹

Meanwhile, from Meyers' perspective, Cornillie's inflexibility proves he would be ineffective in "real-world" politics and thus his position is ill-advised. Meyers explained that "deal-making is a part of everyday life. I'm not preparing to enter a fantasy world." This seemed to be the main reason for his willingness to participate in the System and to not take the ethical consequences too seriously. On several occasions in our interview he played down the importance of Student Government and insisted that it was folly to become too obsessed with it: "The System itself needs to be changed and I tried to change it. But it's SG, and I'm not going to maintain a holy war against a student government."⁶⁰ Whereas Cornillie thought it was important to stick to his principles even in the relatively unimportant world of campus politics, Meyers thought that behaving in a more pragmatic way was inconsequential. On that basis, he was often prepared to use concepts like merit as a weapon rather than as a principle. He told me that rather than appointing all positions by merit, he would use the concept selectively when it helped him to provide an excuse for denying someone a position that he had already decided he did not want to give them – "merit by convenience", he called it.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Author interview with Ben Meyers, Oct 2013

⁵⁹ Author interview with Alex Cornillie, Oct 2013

⁶⁰ Author interview with Ben Meyers, Oct 2013

⁶¹ Author interview with Ben Meyers, Oct 2013

I think this Cornillie-Meyers debate neatly encapsulates the differing mentalities between those in the independent movement and those in the System. From the independent perspective, Cornillie should be commended for his idealism while Meyers should be condemned for seeming to have no principles at all. From the System perspective, Cornillie is naïvely rigid while Meyers is a shrewd pragmatist who gets results. So who is right? Certainly, in the time I have known Cornillie I have always admired his integrity and the fact that he has a clear concept of the meritocratic values for which he is fighting. That being said, I also developed an unexpected respect for Meyers as I got to know him: it seems to me that if one accepts his premise about patronage and deal-making being inevitable facts of life then most of his actions in Student Government can be understood, if not condoned. Meyers' behavior may be based on a particularly cynical view of the world, but he is at least consistent in that view and surprisingly frank about his ambition for power. Oddly, considering his emphasis on ends over means, I think the main thing that I do not understand about Meyers is whether he has an ultimate end in mind, and what that end might entail. In my conversations with Cornillie there were constant clues to the values that mattered most to him, but with Meyers I rarely heard talk about the ultimate reason he was interested in a career in politics. What is this "greater good" to which he referred? Does he have particular social goals that he wants to achieve, or does he simply consider power to be an end in itself? My fear about Meyers and others like him is that by "temporarily" loosening his grip on his principles to facilitate his pursuit of power, he might lose touch with those principles altogether. As Zimbardo wrote in the introduction to his book about the Stanford Prison Experiment, "Too often we look to the stars through the thick lens of personal invulnerability when we should also look down to the slippery slope beneath our feet."⁶²

Regardless of its merits, the process of minimizing negative consequences and emphasizing the "greater good" in their activities seems to be the principal way in which members of the System seek to legitimize their participation in it – I found that it was through an emphasis on ends over means that participants were generally able to reach moral judgments in concordance with the behavior expected of them by the System. Most used this type of rationalization more than the processes of redefining responsibility and redefining victims. However, I think that almost all System participants were concerned that they be able to persuade themselves of the moral legitimacy of their actions – only a few admitted that they knew their actions to be morally wrong but proceeded with them anyway because of competing motivations or a lack of moral character.

There is, however, an important question that remains: does this emphasis on the "greater good" really constitute a *redefinition* of the consequences of behavior? Thus far I have assumed that anyone using this style of reasoning is doing so as a way of ameliorating cognitive dissonance that would otherwise exist between one's moral judgment and one's moral behavior, but is it always the case that such dissonance existed at all? Certainly, Ben Meyers, Nick Stinnett and several other System members with whom I have spoken in the past two years seemed to be confident that their emphasis on ends over means was a deeply held conviction rather than a kind of psychological trick that they were playing on themselves to reduce their feelings of shame. On the other hand, all of them seemed to think that they were behaving in such a way because

⁶²Zimbardo 2007, p. 5

that was what the System dictated was necessary in order to be successful. Put another way, I am asking the following: is the “greater good” mentality that drives people like Meyers and Stinnett a result of their predisposition to think in those terms or, as Zimbardo would surely claim, a product of the System in which they are acting? I am not sure that I can answer that question definitively; however, it might be possible to shine some light on the subject by looking a little more deeply at the norms and values promoted by the System at UF. In particular I found during my research that, to my surprise, some sections of the Greek community have distinctive cultural norms that may help to explain why UF has developed the kind of political system that it has. It is these norms that I will now examine in more detail.

4. Loyalty, hierarchy and exceptionalism: UF’s Greek community

Before going any further I think it is important to note that, much like “the System” is not really a single coherent entity in which all members have identical interests, the term “Greek community” is something of a misnomer. My research focused mostly on fraternities because the majority of my contacts in the Greek community are male, so I cannot confidently assert much about the cultural differences between sororities and fraternities; however, even by focusing solely on fraternities I found hints of considerable diversity in the norms that governed different houses. As I will explain, members of Delta Upsilon and Pi Lambda Phi seemed to have fundamentally different outlooks on a number of issues from their peers in Kappa Alpha or Alpha Tau Omega. The most influential political houses, Theta Chi and Sigma Phi Epsilon (before its suspension in December 2012), had different norms again. There is no single “Greek culture”, so it is difficult to generalize too much about how the “Greek community” differs from the rest of the student body. I also want to be clear that, as a non-Greek, there is a limit to how much access I have been able to have into this part of campus life – many fraternities continue to place a high premium on secrecy about their activities and, in any case, I think it is almost impossible to develop a full understanding of a place without being immersed in its lifestyle for an extended period of time. With that in mind, my findings in this section are very much intended to be taken as tentative rather than definitive. That being said, I think that my interviews suggested some important commonalities that I would be remiss not to mention in the context of the present work. I apologize in advance if the clues from those interviews lead me to false conclusions. Nonetheless, these are my initial impressions of a community that I am only just starting to understand.

I first became interested in the possibility that Greek cultural norms might be relevant to the study of UF’s Student Government as I came to learn more about the effectiveness with which the System party is able to mobilize Greek voters during elections on campus. Through the use of sticker-boards and house reps, the System seems able to ensure that a majority of Greeks vote, and in most cases they apparently vote loyally for the System-endorsed party even though they could easily choose to do otherwise in the privacy of the voting booth. In my previous paper I explained that some specific incentives tend to be offered to Greeks for voting: sometimes the party’s house reps buy a bottle of liquor and raffle it among the house members who have brought home an “I Voted” sticker from the polling location; other times, disinterested Greeks will vote simply to stop the house reps from continuing to harass them. However, it seemed to me that hard liquor and freedom from harassment might not be sufficient explanations for the consistently

high Greek turnout at elections, particularly given that most of my interviewees agreed that there would probably be no serious consequences for any house member who had not voted by the end of polling. I was therefore eager to learn more about the dynamics at work in parts of the Greek community that might help to explain why the System can count on them to be a reliable base of voters.

One obvious reason is self-interest. Given that the System is largely dominated by three blocs of Greek houses, it makes sense that a member of that community might have an interest in maintaining that status. In fact, some students specifically choose to join a fraternity or sorority because they believe it will help them to make contacts or to succeed in particular areas of campus involvement such as Student Government. Ben Meyers and Nick Stinnett both told me that they chose to join Theta Chi particularly because of its reputation for being a political powerhouse – in Meyers’ case, his parents also strongly encouraged him to join for this reason. Roger Austin, an alumnus of Delta Upsilon who now serves as its academic adviser, told me that the patronage system at the heart of campus politics gave a specific incentive for ambitious brothers to vote for members of their house who ran for office: sometimes a member who is running for office might explicitly say that if he gets elected to a particular position then he will have the political clout to insist that one of his brothers is given a cabinet position. That cabinet member can then appoint several more brothers as undersecretaries, and so on. More influence in Student Government also means that house members can promise that other brothers’ favorite student organizations will get funded. There are a range of reasons why, in theory at least, house reps can claim that it is in members’ self-interest to go and vote.⁶³ However, I found that narrow self-interest was only a small part of the reason that most Greeks chose to vote. There were at least three other features of the Greek community that might increase the likelihood of its members voting: I have called these loyalty, hierarchy and exceptionalism.

On a basic level, the type of loyalty that seems to drive Greeks to vote is simple reciprocity – as former Kappa Sigma member Matt Michel told me, house reps and candidates would often encourage their brothers to vote by “tugging at the heart strings” and saying how important it was for members of the house to help each other out.⁶⁴ Austin agreed, saying that it is sometimes pointed out in the Delta Upsilon house that brothers attend each other’s charity events and sports games – therefore, especially given that the election takes place over two days and votes can be cast in one’s own college, it really would be disappointing if they did not take the time to vote.⁶⁵ For some the reciprocity is not simply an immediate transaction between current brothers, but comes from a sense of responsibility for passing on the same support for younger members of the house that was given to them by older members when they first joined – for example, I mentioned in my first paper that Theta Chi apparently used to keep a book with advice for wannabe campus politicians from brothers who had been successful in the past. Almost every Greek interviewee to whom I spoke felt a sense of loyalty to their house. Johnny Castillo, a former member of Sigma Phi Epsilon (Sig Ep) who was ejected from the fraternity shortly before its suspension in 2012,

⁶³ Author interview with Roger Austin, Oct 2013

⁶⁴ Author interview with Matt Michel, Oct 2013

⁶⁵ Author interview with Roger Austin, Oct 2013

told me that despite everything that had happened to him, he still felt a deep sense of loyalty to his chapter: "I love the people and I love the house - it was a shithole, but it was our shithole! I also love the tradition associated with the place."⁶⁶

I got the distinct sense from Castillo and others that the emotional bonds felt between brothers in a fraternity house ran deeper than mere reciprocity. One possible reason for this is the intense shared experience that brothers go through when "pledging", or going through the initiation process required to become a member of a house. As with all other aspects of Greek culture, it seems that the pledging process varies from house to house: Chris Spears, president of Pi Lambda Phi, told me that his fraternity's pledging process was largely centered around preparing for an annual game of flag football that the house plays against a rival fraternity. For other houses, there appeared to be more emphasis on learning about the traditions of the organization and forming relationships with the existing brothers. However, in many cases, the exact nature of the process is traditionally a very secretive affair. Several sources told me that this is in part due to the fact that "hazing" of pledges is still a common occurrence in some houses: this can include forcing pledges to drink excessive amounts of alcohol or to endure painful or physically grueling challenges, and can even involve sexual humiliation. Hazing is strictly prohibited by the university, and any fraternity found guilty of engaging in such practices can be in serious trouble with the administration. Nonetheless, I heard from various people that hazing activities in some houses can still include activities such as ordering pledges to perform push-ups with their knuckles resting on bottle tops or broken glass, and I was told of one incident in which pledges had to separate M&Ms into different colors while their hands were covered in butter and other brothers were screaming in their faces. However, contrary to some rumors I heard about hazing practices at other universities, Castillo told me that he was unaware of any pledges being branded or otherwise burned at UF.

Some interviewees were very clear that their houses do not engage in hazing: for example, Spears told me that Pi Lambda Phi would never risk doing such a thing because they got in trouble with the university for an incident in 2010 and would not want to risk the future of their organization; Austin said that Delta Upsilon prides itself on its non-hazing policy and has not hazed at UF since at least the 1960s; Alex Cornillie told me that he did not experience any hazing when he pledged for Kappa Sigma. Others told me that although some hazing incidents take place, they are often blown out of proportion and grow in legend over time: Nick Stinnett said "you'll hear horror stories from people once they get out... once they're done with it, everyone likes to exaggerate and say 'back in my day it was so much worse'. But it's really not that bad, it's actually kind of fun. If you like to drink beer and hang out with your friends, you can make it through pledging."⁶⁷ Other interviewees admitted that hazing happened in their houses. Castillo said the following of his experience as a pledge in Sig Ep:

"We had a lot of hazing. The reason I joined Sig Ep was that, even before I joined, they said 'There will never be gay shit here'. You'll never do anything that makes you feel gay; you'll never be

⁶⁶ Author interview with Johnny Castillo, Oct 2013

⁶⁷ Author interview with Nick Stinnett, Oct 2013

asked to touch another man.’ And I liked that. Do other places do gay shit? Who knows, I can’t say. But [at Sig Ep] the hazing was mainly physical exercise. We had to check in at 2.30am and 7.30am, so I used to just stay at the house.”⁶⁸

Castillo thinks that the hazing process was a good thing because it helped to toughen up pledges before they became brothers – he said at one point in our interview that “the reason Sig Eps are good is because they’re not pussy-pants babies.” He also explained to me that Sig Ep has two types of houses across the country: the first, known as “traditional” houses, engaged in hazing and put high emphasis on pledges knowing the history of the organization. The second type of house, known as “Balanced Man”, does not allow hazing and does not like members to do as much partying. The Florida chapter, prior to its suspension, was one of the last “traditional” houses in the country, and Castillo regretted that they were a dying breed because he felt that they made for a better fraternity: “as a human being you get closer with someone when you go through shit with them,” he said.⁶⁹

Clearly, then, fraternity pledges can have very different experiences of the pledging process depending on their house, but to some degree it seems plausible that the bonds that brothers feel for each other come from that shared experience. However, pledging is not the only bonding experience that seems to happen in fraternity life. As suggested by Castillo’s comments about Sig Ep opposing “gay shit”, I found several examples of a kind of hyper-masculinity in the process by which some houses seemed to bond. Much of the emphasis at Sig Ep was apparently on womanizing: Castillo told me that on his third night in college he attended a Sig Ep party and there was a “sea of women” there – a theme that continued through much of his career in the fraternity. One of the biggest events they held each year was “Safari”, a tropical-themed party that *Playboy* rated as one of the best college parties in the nation, at which “everyone had sex in the pool.” Brothers bonded over sexual exploits such as these, but there were also events at which brothers asserted their machismo by fighting with each other: one such occasion was known as “Creek”, in which brothers would wrestle each other and attempt to hurl their opponents into a creek at the rear of the house. Castillo dislocated his shoulder at one of these fights and had to have surgery.⁷⁰ An alumnus of another fraternity told me that his house had “boxing nights” at least once per semester, at which brothers who had an issue with each other would settle their differences by donning gloves and fighting while surrounded by their brothers.

Clearly, these are extreme examples and there are undoubtedly many more mundane events that help brothers to bond with each other. I focus above on the most intense stories as a means of demonstrating the ways in which fraternity bonding can sometimes extend beyond the typical activities of friends who live together. These examples may help to form an understanding of why brothers develop particularly deep bonds with people in the same fraternity. Whatever the source, it is clear that this kind of loyalty bears a close resemblance to the extreme bonds that members of the political System sometimes seem to have: when TJ Villamil was caught in his close presidential race with Alex Cornillie, several former Student Body Presidents and other high-ranking Student

⁶⁸ Author interview with Johnny Castillo, Oct 2013

⁶⁹ Author interview with Johnny Castillo, Oct 2013

⁷⁰ Author interview with Johnny Castillo, Oct 2013

Government alumni traveled to Gainesville specifically to help him campaign on election day. As mentioned earlier, one of them apparently traveled back from a trip to Europe especially for that purpose. It seems quite possible that this kind of loyalty in Student Government stems from the loyalty instilled in people via the Greek system.

A second interesting feature of the Greek community seems to be its respect for hierarchy and the deference that younger members show to their elders. I mentioned in my first paper that there seemed to be little complaint about the fact that bloc leaders in the System appoint their own successors – such is the respect for predecessors that this kind of nepotism only rarely seems to raise any complaints from rejected members who feel like they should have been given the role. For Ben Meyers, this hierarchy seems to be a good thing and is one of the reasons that the System is superior to the independent movement: during our interview he told me that if the independents listened more to their predecessors then they might not make the same mistakes repeatedly when they tried to challenge the System. In fact, the establishment of a hierarchy seems to be an important rationale for the pledging process in some houses: Castillo said that at the philosophy at Sig Ep was that “they bring you down so they can build you back up”⁷¹, which he liked. I thought it was interesting that this kind of logic resembled the type often associated with military boot camps – obviously, the military is another very hierarchical organization that likes to instill in its recruits an absolute respect for authority. Even more interestingly, Ben Meyers mentioned Zimbardo and the Stanford Prison Experiment when talking about the pledging process – the comparison he was making did not appear to me to be a negative one, but rather he seemed to be suggesting that the kind of authority shown by the prison guards at Stanford reflected the way in which pledges learned to respect and defer to their older “brothers”: it is meant to “solidify the hierarchy,” he explained.⁷² To an outsider, the social interaction between brothers of different statuses can seem unusual: for example, I was recently drinking with a Greek alumnus at a party in his old fraternity house – as we were talking, a pledge approached him and meekly asked him if he needed another beer. It was as though the alumnus had his own servant – he explained to me that pledges are expected to treat alumni with that level of reverence.

This kind of paternalistic respect for elders within a Greek house seems to carry over into Student Government in a couple of ways: for one, I got the impression from several interviewees that one of the reasons they voted in campus elections was because the leaders of their house told them that they needed to do so. Moreover, there seems to be a connection with the pledging process for people who want to be politically active in the System. Ben Meyers said:

*"If you have high aspirations in Student Government, in many ways your pledge process continues. In your early roles you are meant to do whatever you're told: doing someone's laundry, running errands, you name it... Later on you have more pledges to control, and they have to submit to your will. 'Dictatorial' is the wrong word because there is more than one decision-maker, but there are levels. The parallels with the pledging process are intentional."*⁷³

⁷¹ Author interview with Johnny Castillo, Oct 2013

⁷² Author interview with Ben Meyers, Oct 2013

⁷³ Author interview with Ben Meyers, Oct 2013

The third feature of Greek culture which I think merits mentioning is a phenomenon I have labelled as “Greek exceptionalism” – by this I am referring to a sentiment that seems to be held in some parts of that community that Greeks constitute a special or elite group on campus, separate from the rest of the student body. The belief that some Greeks hold such views is a relatively widely-held one in the independent movement, so I was interested to find out in my interviews whether that belief reflected what people in fraternities and sororities really think. In truth, I found that such an opinion seemed to be fairly rare among those with whom I spoke. Having said that, some people told me that Greek exceptionalism was a real belief insofar as it relates to the idea that Greeks are generally more proactive and driven than independents. Castillo told me that “there’s definitely an attitude that ‘we’re better than you’. Generally the most ambitious people are in fraternities.”⁷⁴ Whether or not Greeks have higher ambition or not, there is certainly some evidence to suggest that many rise to success in American society: in 2007 (the latest year for which I could find statistics), 76 percent of US senators were Greek, as were 85 percent of Fortune 500 executives. 85 percent of all Supreme Court Justices since the year 1910 had also been in a fraternity, as had 11 of the 17 US presidents who served during the same time period.⁷⁵ Despite these facts, other interviewees did not agree with Castillo’s claim that an elitist attitude existed in their houses. For example, Cornillie said that he “didn’t experience any of that [attitude]... I mean, there’s pockets of different types of personality in any sort of organization you’re in, regardless of what its stated mission is. But the people I found myself associating with really made me feel it was an inclusive and fair-minded organization.”⁷⁶ Roger Austin thought that most people did not join fraternities because of any sense of elitism. In his view, a lot of freshmen “come to campus wanting to get drunk and get laid. If they are under the age of 21, where can they get access to girls and booze? They go to a fraternity house.”⁷⁷

For the most part, then, a sense of superiority among Greeks seems to be rare, or at least only felt in a vague sense with regard to being “go-getters” who are driven towards future political success. However, I certainly found some reasons to believe that parts of the community – and I emphasize that this may only be a small section of the overall Greek population – seemed to hold views that were not as inclusive as Cornillie’s comments above suggest. Ben Meyers told me that fraternity members often dress relatively smartly – often in polo shirts – and he has sometimes heard fraternity members mocking their brothers for wearing scruffy clothes that are “geed” – a slang term that is short for GDI, or God Damn Independent. There is perhaps a hint of elitism in such taunts – Meyers noted that “Greeks on average are from wealthier families. A lot of independents can’t afford polo.”⁷⁸

More sinisterly, I was surprised to find possible evidence of racism and homophobia in a few of the incidents that people described to me. Again, this was the exception rather than the rule: Chris Spears emphasized that in Pi Lambda Phi there is a zero tolerance policy for any kind of discrimination, while several members of Delta Upsilon were eager to point out the diversity of

⁷⁴ Author interview with Johnny Castillo, Oct 2013

⁷⁵ DeSantis 2007, p. 7

⁷⁶ Author interview with Alex Cornillie, Oct 2013

⁷⁷ Author interview with Roger Austin, Oct 2013

⁷⁸ Author interview with Ben Meyers, Oct 2013

ethnic backgrounds among their brothers. However, Roger Austin told me that this is not the case in all houses: he claimed that Kappa Alpha fraternity still dresses up in confederate uniforms occasionally, and told me “they’re a bunch of redneck southern boys. They don’t have blacks.” He also told me of a conversation he had in about 2009 with the chapter adviser for Alpha Tau Omega (ATO) fraternity, who told him that “things are changing there [at ATO] now. We got us a brown boy now, and if this kid works out we might get us a black in a year or two.”⁷⁹ As recently as October 2013, ATO attracted negative press coverage when one of its members was suspended for yelling racial and sexist slurs at a black female who was passing by the fraternity’s house.⁸⁰ This incident came just a year after another controversy on campus in which two members of Beta Theta Pi fraternity wore dark paint on their faces and bodies as part of their costumes at a Halloween party. At a town hall meeting to discuss the offence that this had caused, “one speaker said she was followed on campus before being called a racial slur. Several others said they were racially profiled by university police or treated differently by classmates or instructors because of their race.”⁸¹

DeSantis’ 2007 study of Greek communities across the United States argued that “the social Greek system remains almost as segregated today as it was in 1776. No real interest in or commitment to the idea of integration, whether gender or racial, has been demonstrated. It can be argued, in fact, that the social fraternity/sorority remains the most segregated institution in America.”⁸² My impression of the UF Greek community is certainly that the most powerful houses are still predominantly white, but I am not sure if I would go quite as far as DeSantis – certainly, none of the Greeks with whom I spoke showed any sign of thinking that discrimination was acceptable, and most were eager to point out the progress that has been made in the community. However, as I explain in the next section, it certainly appears to be the case that Greek houses at other universities continue to suffer from racist incidents.

Again, I want to emphasize that I have mostly found Greeks at UF to be no different in their world-views than most other students. However, I think there is some interesting preliminary evidence here to suggest that particular values are emphasized in the Greek community, albeit to different degrees according to the culture of individual houses. These values include loyalty, hierarchy, and a sense of exceptionalism that can occasionally be exclusionary to minority groups. In some ways, these Greek values reflect the values of the dominant coalition in Student Government: the System certainly demands loyalty and deference to authority, and it has exceptionalist views in that it incorporates a belief that the System candidates are clearly the most qualified to hold the most important leadership positions on campus. Whether by accident or by design, the System can also be exclusionary at times: it almost always prioritizes the interests of the mostly-white Greek community and rarely (if ever) places a non-white student on the ballot as its candidate for Student Body President. Given all of these values, the Greek community seems like an effective target for a voter mobilization campaign that relies on peer pressure, paternalism and appeals to a sense of community solidarity when trying to maximize the turnout of its base.

⁷⁹ Author interview with Roger Austin, Oct 2013

⁸⁰ Schweers 2013

⁸¹ Crabbe 2012

⁸² DeSantis 2007, p. 6

5. Directions for further research

None of the conclusions I reach in this work should be considered definitive – ultimately, these two papers have been the end product of a small-scale project that only carried out interviews with a limited number of people. Although I have been as thorough as possible with my use of historical press stories and other documents to support my claims, there are many more interviews that could have been conducted and many provisional conclusions that merit further investigation. With regard to the three reasons I gave at the start of this work for the importance of studying the politics of a university campus such as UF, there are particular reasons to believe that more work could be fruitful.

The first of these three reasons was that the style of government described here is far from unique to the University of Florida – a “System” dominance of student government seems to be common to a number of campuses across the United States, particularly those with large Greek communities. Perhaps the most notorious of these is at the University of Alabama, where the ruling coalition is known as “The Machine” and consists of a number of all-white Greek houses. The Machine has been linked to a sordid list of incidents through the years, including a knife attack on an independent party candidate in 1993 after which the entire Student Government was suspended by the university administration for three years.⁸³ There have also been accusations of racist episodes involving the Machine, including a night in 1976 when some students apparently burned crosses after the election of the first and only black Student Body President, and an incident in 1999 when another black presidential candidate received a note saying “We are going to hang you from a tree.”⁸⁴ Most recently, the Machine made national headlines in fall 2013 when the New York Times reported on its alleged interference in a city election in Tuscaloosa, the home of the university’s campus. According to the report, sorority members were promised limousine rides to the polls and free drinks, while a number of fraternity brothers listed their chapter’s house as their residence even though they no longer lived there.⁸⁵ The Alabama example might be the most extreme one, but it is only one of around a hundred “secret societies” on US college campuses which have been accused to varying degrees of exerting influence on campus politics.⁸⁶ It would certainly be interesting to conduct a comparative study of some of these cases, to see how the operation of student governments varies by college size, Greek population, amount of supervision from university administrators, and so forth.

The second reason I cited at the start for conducting this study was that the lessons learned in college student government may carry over into the professional political careers of future leaders who “cut their teeth” in a system such as that which exists at UF. I think this would be a fascinating thing to study, but to do so would be very difficult: presumably it would entail a longitudinal study in which student politicians were assessed somehow at various stages throughout their

⁸³Harwell 1993

⁸⁴Jacobs 2013

⁸⁵Robertson 2013

⁸⁶Wikipedia. “Collegiate secret societies in North America.” <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Collegiate_secret_societies_in_North_America#List_of_notable_North_American_collegiate_secret_societies>, accessed Oct 12th 2013. In some cases these societies’ existence is supposedly a secret. In other cases, such as that of FBK, the organization’s existence is public but its alleged political activities are clandestine.

college career and in the decades after, measuring for their professed political values and how these translate into the way they behave in public life.

Finally, I think there is a great deal more that could be said in the ongoing debate about the relative importance of dispositional and situational factors in determining behavior. I asked several interviewees about how they think System participants rationalize their participation in a system that contravenes the democratic and meritocratic values in which they presumably believe. One respondent, Roger Austin, gave a particularly interesting answer to that question: he rejected its premise, denying that people who want to become politicians have democratic values at all. In his view, all politicians are “power-hungry bastards” who are predisposed towards wanting to tell other people what to do. I don’t agree with him, but he nonetheless raises an interesting point: might it be optimistic of me to assume that all participants in the System held democratic or meritocratic values? If some people are indeed predisposed towards the kind of authoritarian values promoted by the System at UF then it does not really make sense to speak of cognitive dissonance or a “redefinition” of situations. I am unsure how this could best be tested – perhaps by more rigorous personality testing of participants in Student Government, although Zimbardo conducted those kinds of tests with the volunteers in the Stanford Prison Experiment and found little evidence of a connection between predispositions and behavior in the prison environment.

On the day I conducted my first interview for this project, UF’s Student Government announced the results of its fall Senate elections: the System party won 48 of the 50 available seats, and seems as powerful as ever in its role on campus. Whether or not this dominance remains intact over the long term remains to be seen, but as long as it persists, the questions raised by this work will continue to be ones that are faced by aspiring campus politicians: how far are they prepared to compromise on their principles to succeed in the System, and will they be able to justify their decisions to themselves? As Matt Michel said in our interview, “ethics are what you do when no one else is watching.”⁸⁷

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