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Book Review: Pledged: The Secret Life of Sororities

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Pledged: The Secret Life of Sororities. By Alexandra Robbins. New York: Hyperion, 2004, 380 pp., \$23.95 (cloth).

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In her book *Pledged: The Secret Life of Sororities*, journalist Alexandra Robbins provides an insightful examination of gendered interactions within the sorority system. While much of what Robbins finds is not surprising and in many ways supports stereotypes and pre-conceptions about life within the sorority system, her book can be useful for social scientists insofar as it comprises a detailed and rich set of field notes that can be drawn on to make more substantive claims about women and sororities.

Robbins spent an academic year observing two historically white sororities on one college campus, focusing on four main participants and their sorority sisters. During this time, she was “under cover,” and her role as a researcher was hidden from all of the sisters except for these key informants. Her observations reveal a highly gendered system of hierarchy operating within the Greek system. She finds that the status of each sorority on campus is based in gendered categories inscribed on bodies and coded in their fashion; for example, attractiveness, thinness, and even blondness are categories utilized as determining attributes in the hierarchical ranking system. The operation of gender as an embodied property and as produced through interaction is evident throughout her study, as the women struggle with eating disorders and social acceptance within the group. The process of differentiation and stratification based on the women’s bodies and categories of appearance occurs during the rush period as the women are segregated (and self-segregate) into different sororities and as the sisters labor to maintain their social status within the sorority. Diversity within the mostly white sororities, Robbins also finds, is not conceived in terms of cultural or racial diversity but rather, as one girl so aptly put it, in terms of having “blond girls, red-haired girls, and a lot of brown-haired girls” (p. 230).

Some of the most interesting data in her study provide an account of the regulation and management of sisters’ sexuality. Since the collective reputation of the sorority is predicated on the conduct of the individual member, Robbins finds that sisters are expected to follow strict social rules concerning sexual behavior, despite the reality of high levels of sexual activity. The institutional influence of the national organizations of sororities plays a part in this process; Robbins argues that for the national organization, the protection of its reputation often comes before the protection of its members, as is evident in rape cases involving fraternity men. One of the principal messages of her research is that relationships with men dominated the thoughts and activities of the sisters. For example, Robbins describes a ritual that many sororities still practice: The lavalier ceremony, in which a girl announces to her sisters that she has been “lavaliered” (asked to be a girlfriend), “pinned” (pre-engaged), or engaged. This old-fashioned and regressive custom reveals the centrality of women’s romantic relationships for the sorority. Robbins highlights this paradox within the plethora of contradictory and confusing messages concerning sexuality, in which sorority women are expected to be romantically involved and simultaneously uphold institutional standards of sexual propriety.

Proponents of the sorority system celebrate it as an organization promoting leadership and self-confidence for young women, but Robbins finds that this is inconsistent with much of what she observes. She concludes, this conflict “breeds an attitude that I call ‘fake feminism.’ Under the guise of propelling women forward, sororities also tug them backward—with dress codes, male-centered activities, ideas of proper comportment, and a subjugation of self to the group” (p. 321). Ultimately, she is critical of the ethics and values of sororities

and argues that they should be recognized merely as social groups unworthy of institutional privilege on college campuses.

While this book provides comprehensive and meaningful data on the daily lives of sorority women, Robbins's journalistic style of presentation lends itself to novelistic prose and sensational accounts of events, with stories of romantic relationships and the trivialities of sorority life abundant throughout the text. In addition, Robbins's unwillingness to provide details of her methodology and her role within the Greek system for fear of revealing her key informants leaves many questions unanswered about her relationship to the sorority women and the potential influence on her data. Her book lacks the analytical rigor required of a sociological study on sororities, yet it compensates in part for this weakness in its ability to capture the indigenous meanings and local logic that emerge from an in-depth descriptive account of sorority life.

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Emotional Trials: The Moral Dilemmas of Women Criminal Defense Attorneys. By Cynthia Siemsen. Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2004, 207 pp., \$50.00 (cloth), \$20.00 (paper).

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In *Emotional Trials*, Cynthia Siemsen examines the ways that women defense attorneys manage ideological conflict and emotional stress at different stages of their careers. Although she was initially interested in how women could defend men accused of rape and other violent crimes against women, she quickly realized that her respondents were hesitant to respond to direct questions about this topic. She shifted her approach by rephrasing her question: "How do you respond to people who question your work by asking, 'How can you defend that guy?'" (p. 6). As a comparison group, Siemsen interviewed eight African American male prosecutors who face similar criticism from their communities for frequently prosecuting African American men.

Building on past scholarship, Siemsen defines ideological work as the "activity of working through tensions that arise when our ways of viewing the world are challenged by competing values that come up in the course of our everyday lives" (p. 10) and emotion work as "the conscious efforts of individuals to bring their feelings in line with the demands of a particular social context" (p. 10). She argues that scholars exploring the concept of ideological work typically focus on men, while scholarly writing on emotion work tends to focus on women. In this book, Siemsen demonstrates the interrelatedness of ideological work and emotion work and argues for the need to examine how both men and women utilize these dual strategies.

Siemsen deftly shows the complexity of ideological and emotional work in the defense attorneys' narratives. She demonstrates the strategies women defenders use to balance feminist ideologies with professional ideologies such as "everyone deserves a defense." She also shows the emotion work strategies used by women defenders such as avoiding identification with the client, being "angry at the system," and either avoiding crying or employing public