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## Defining Hazing and The Immorality of Hazing By Sororities

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Abstract: In this paper I aim to question the morality of certain activities that sororities practice. The definition of hazing in this article came from several sources, such as university and national PanHellenic association websites. Hazing is any act that is intended to embarrass, humiliate, degrade or ridicule. These incidents can cause harm physically and even mentally. Research has revealed that when young college girls are put through such degrading activities that they have lowered self-esteem after the activity. A huge issue with hazing in Greek life has been correlated with alcohol abuse. You can see an example of the incident later from a testimony given by a young college graduate. In the article the argument is this, a woman should not be forced to participate in detrimental activities because these violate our own human rights. Others object this claim by stating that hazing activities are good for the young individual to grow and mature. The hopes for this paper is that it will start further research on the harm of these traditional hazing rituals practiced by sorority women on new members. Further research on the topic will hopefully lead to the end of hazing on college campuses all together.

# DEFINING HAZING AND THE IMMORALITY OF HAZING BY SORORITES

By: Hillary Schmalzer

## I. Introduction

The day has arrived to head off to college and move into your first home without any parents. You unpack, hug your parents, and say your goodbyes telling them everything will be great after you make all your new friends during recruitment. You think that you will make a bunch of friends and blossom into a new person. While these things do hold true for some, for others joining a sorority can bring a time of pain, humiliation, and ridicule. What brings all this harm to a young woman as she enters a sorority? The answer is hazing. The young woman is subjected to hazing from the first day of recruitment until the night after the initiation ceremony. The activities that pledges are put under are mortifying. How can campus life be considered safe when harmful activities are taking place among women? Because sorority women take a code of silence hazing incidents aren't apparent to outsiders.

Sororities use traditions such as initiation as a right of passage for young woman to become part of the sisterhood. Violent behavior and alcohol abuse can be involved in these rights of passage and make up serious campus crime that go unnoticed. Since 1990, more deaths have occurred on college and university campuses as a result of hazing, pledging, and initiation accidents than all recorded history of college related deaths. (Hollman, 2002). Hank Nuwer in his book *Wrongs of Passage* demonstrates that the recent epidemic of danger on college campuses are from hazing related activities. Nuwer writes that there was a dramatic increase from an average of 5.5 deaths per year in the 1980's to 18 deaths per year in 2000. His statistics show that hazing has become a problem on campuses nationally (Nuwer, 2001).

Hazing has become a serious issue and is harmful to young women. Causing harm to an individual is morally wrong. If hazing is considered morally impermissible and sororities are shown to participate in

these hazing activities then they are taking place in morally permissible activities. In the paper I will argue this statement by explaining what constitutes hazing in Greek life, why hazing is the wrong thing to do, and explain that sororities participate in activities considered hazing.

## **II. What is Hazing?**

First, we must attempt to think of hazing in terms of sorority life. Most would think this would include physical activities that include alcohol or physical abuse. The National Panhellenic Conference defines hazing as acts that embarrass, humiliate, degrade or ridicule. The NPC does not take hazing softly; they have a no tolerance policy for all of their 26 members. Since hazing is a very serious issue, it is not open to subjective interpretation and offenders are punished. Sororities are required to have advisors and executive members who look for and maintain hazing incidents. When a hazing incident does occur the NPC can remove their charter from the university.

Sororities don't only have consequences from their national organization but they also are under the rules enforced by their University. The hazing policy on my campus, Florida State University, is typical in its statement of hazing:

Any group or individual action or activity that inflicts or intends to inflict physical or mental harm or discomfort or which may demean, disgrace, or degrade any person, regardless of location, intent, or consent of participant(s). The actions of either active or associate members (pledges) of an organization may be considered hazing. Hazing includes, but is not limited to:

1. Interference with a student's academic performance
2. Forced consumption of any food, alcohol, other drugs, or any other substance
3. Forced physical activity, such as calisthenics

Sororities also have their Greek office on campus regulating their activities and watching for hazing activities. Hazing is a common discussed issue throughout college campuses. Most campuses don't enforce the policy until an unfortunate incident of hazing occurs.

Why does hazing occur today? According to Barbara Hollman hazing will continue until the

myths and realities are clarified and understood before it is seen as a problem (p. 14). If this doesn't occur hazing will continue to be accepted as a tradition or as a foolish prank gone wrong. Sorority's national organization and their university condemn hazing. Victims and their families also protest these detrimental activities. Websites such as StopHazing.org created by concerned students help provide information and resources on hazing. The website provides many definitions to educate individuals but most all it provides six questions that help highlight any misunderstanding.

“(1) Is alcohol involved? (2) Will active/current members of the group refuse to participate with the new members and do exactly what they're being asked to do? (3) Does the activity risk emotional or physical abuse? (4) Is there risk of injury or a question of safety? (5) Do you have any reservation describing the activity to your parents, to a professor or University official? (6) Would you object to the activity being photographed for the school newspaper or filmed by the local TV news crews?” (StopHazing.org, 2001).

If two or more of these questions are answered with a yes then the activity is likely to be hazing. With all these resources and guidelines for hazing you would think that the activity does not occur.

Campuses will have hazing activities until an agreement is made by students and campus personal on the definition of hazing. Later examples will show how events performed by sororities constitute hazing.

### **III.Hazing: Morality of the issue**

Humans are social beings. Collectively, we crave social interactions and actively seek them out whenever possible (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). College students strive to be the best in a competitive environment and find their niche. Sororities provide an environment that can serve as your niche and home away from home. Although the women are welcomed into an organization it doesn't mean that they won't have to work to become a member. Why should these pledges be required to go through hoops to become a member of the organization? Hazing in the eyes of anyone after reading a few

common definitions can determine that it is wrong to perform such acts on someone or a group.

The most powerful argument in support of anti-hazing is that it infringes on our human rights. Hazing denies college students the right of being apart of the organization without being harmed physically and emotionally. Violating these human rights is morally impermissible.

Victims of hazing suffer from pain and embarrassment. The incident can escalate to an unfortunate death, or can simple end in a night of humiliation. Since hazing causes pain and misery, it infringes on our human rights. Therefore the act of hazing is morally impermissible.

#### **IV. Sorority practices constituted as hazing**

After your week of small talk, excessive smiling, and high heels the recruitment process is over. Sorority members and potential new members participate in rush week every year. New members go through to find their new home away from home and future sisters, while members go through a week of rehearsed conversation topics and judgmental thoughts. The system requires a two sided impress system. Girls rushing try to impress the sisters who hold the bid into the sorority. While the initiated members strive to impress the potential new members (PNM's) to rank them number one on their voting list. The process is a matching system that works to match the girls with their top choices and the sororities with their top choices of PNMs. This scene takes place on campuses across the nation. The recruitment process may seem harmless but it is the first taste of hazing that the girls endure in their next few months. In this section I will explain how the period of a new member in a sorority is faced with activities that are considered hazing based on the guidelines you read in the second section.

As explained above recruitment is a time of selection into a sorority, but can this be considered a hazing activity? If you ask any young woman who has participated in the week of running down the street in heels from houses blocks apart she would say it was a painful and exhausting experience. These women are required to get from houses across campus in an allotted time to make the next

interview. During this week the women going through recruitment are judged based on academics, income, and looks. While academics are a fair indicator of a young woman's potential for success, their physical appearance and social standing are not. According to a study in the Journal of Applied Social Psychology results showed that attractiveness was more predictive of bid expectancy than any other criteria.(Krendl, 2001). Scoring a woman based on her attractiveness can decrease her self-esteem and can harm her mental health. Many people look past this small detail and think that once a PNM gets dropped from a high-status house because of looks that it won't affect them. Although it is a small infliction on their self-esteem it is still one and making a young innocent young college women feel inferior is hazing. This is why certain recruitment practices should be considered hazing because it is an activity that provides mental harm on young woman going through. If the process was changed and regulated better then later hazing incidents that come after recruitment would cease.

Next in the timeline of becoming a member of sorority is the pledge period. This time consists of educating the now called new members on the history of the sorority, participating in bonding activities, and attending social activities. Sisters during this time require the new members to do activities that are usually kept in secret because they are considered traditions. Unless the activity goes wrong new members and sisters don't usually speak about it in fear of the consequences. Although when the true stories of the events are leaked they are truly horrible and answer every question with yes when defining the activity as hazing. Here a sister explains a hazing incident during her pledging period:

“We have an event that has to do with ice cream. We think it is a bonding event that will be fun. You then get into a room and there's ice cream all over. It's all over the ground, and they tell you that you have to make it disappear but you can't eat it. You have to put it all over your arms and in your hair. You have to get rid of it” (Sprunk, 2013).

Even though you may think this activity seems silly and simple, the matter of fact is that this is hazing. These women are subjected to embarrassment and demeaning behavior in front of their peers and sisters.

Lastly the new members are initiated. Initiation can range from a week of events to a single night. Commonly among all sororities is that they perform a ceremony for the new members to become sisters in the chapter. This is an exciting event for the women and the chapters are advised to not perform any hazing activity whatsoever to keep the attention on the initiation ceremony. Events that occur during this initiation time that are considered hazing can range from singing silly songs to binge drinking. Nuwer wrote in his article “while hazing is a major societal problem and alcohol abuse is another. These two separate problems become even more troublesome when they are intimately linked” (Nuwer, 2001). Alcohol abuse has become more common in hazing activities among sororities. An example of a traditional hazing activity is making new members drink large quantities as a rite of passage. A recent college graduate Ravital Segal blogged about her near death hazing experience:

I was content with my decision until, one night during the rush process, I was blindfolded with two of my fellow pledges. We were guided into the back seat of a car and one of our future sisters commanded us to chug the alcoholic punch that had been pre-prepared for each of us in individual 64-ounce water bottles. Simultaneously, I was handed numerous vodka shots from the older sister sitting in the front seat. After what couldn't have been more than fifteen-minute drive, I was told to get out of the car. I did, but then lost all consciousness. To this day, I have no idea what happened that night. I woke up the following morning in the ICU. I wasn't alone. I later learned that three other girls had also been admitted, each having overdosed on alcohol due to hazing rituals. The doctor informed me that I had entered the hospital with a .399 blood alcohol content (Mulvey, 2013).

You would think incidents like this where a young woman was nearly one sip away from the deathly limit hazing incidents would stop. The problem is that girls protect their sorority and take the blame so no one gets into trouble.

As you can see sororities practice the act of hazing in numerous ways. They make girls go through mental harm and humiliation. They even put girls through uncomfortable situations and put them through pain. Some go as far as causing death and therefore causing the sorority to lose its

charter. These hazing incidents therefore prove that sororities take part in morally impermissible activities.

### **V. Objections**

A common objection to hazing being morally impermissible is that fact that hazing can be seen as a rite of passage and that the benefits outweigh the harmful results. In the aspect of the benefits of hazing it can be seen as an important element in human development. It can be seen as a time of transition from an immature pledge into a well-rounded member of the organization. To object the argument that hazing is wrong you must believe that the definition is subjective and depends on the situation and degree of hazing. Supporters of hazing do agree that the process helps unify them and make their sisterhood strong.

### **VI. Response to Objections**

Supporters of hazing may believe that the benefits outweigh the bad and hazing brings a closer bond among member of the organization. Many supporters however can't convey the benefit because they explain that it is an experienced based benefit that they cannot describe. Sisters even take an oath in a sorority to not harm one another and to protect their sisters. Hazing violates an organization's oath or symphony and therefore would make weaker bonds among sisters. Supporters claim that hazing helps an individual grow personally but hazing does no such thing. Hazing does not benefit the human development of an individual. Many victims of hazing report symptoms of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder during and after the time of the abusive behaviors they endure (Nuwer, 2001)

### **VII. Conclusion**

No young woman should have to endure the nightmares that hazing can introduce into her life. She should never have to be through such physical and mental obstacles to be accepted by her future sisters. The problem is the concern on hazing is focused on fraternities and not until a tragic event is the

focus centered on sororities. As shown in this paper the activities performed in sororities are considered hazing and hazing is morally impermissible. Since both hold true then sororities practice morally impermissible activities. The hazing events start with recruitment week and end on initiation night where the worse of the events can occur.

This paper opens doors into many different areas of further research. More research can be done on Greek life in general and how it affects a college student positively or most importantly negatively. Research of hazing seems to be focused on fraternity men and sports groups, but researchers should realize the same activities if not worse go on behind the closed doors of women's organizations. I hope my paper leads to further research on sorority life and hazing among members. I hope that as the years go on and awareness increases that hazing harms less young women. Hazing being the leading cause of deaths on college campuses should be reason alone to stop the incidents but we must first make everyone aware of these practices.

I offer a personal and final note. You may not be entirely convinced these events occur among college campuses because of the few events reported. Keep in mind though that these organizations are rooted in very deep history and many secrets are kept within their walls. As a member of a sorority I want to advise you that not every day do the extreme cases of hazing occur where death is the outcome. However small cases of hazing do occur and these incidents are what cause the decrease in self-esteem among young women. These women work for years to build themselves back up and do so by hazing the new members because it provides them superiority and confidence that was taken away from them when they were hazed. These attitudes can be changed if we work to stop the small incidents of hazing activity because these lead to the later harmful events. Until we all have a unified definition of hazing and believe that the act of hazing is morally wrong then it won't stop.

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