Conformity and Hazing Within our Fraternal Communities
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“The insights of symbolic interactionism reveal that fraternity hazing is not illogical, beyond reason, or the product of immaturity. I suggest that hazing is the result of group interaction processes that are linked with students’ needs for belonging, their isolation from other social relations on campus, and subcultural definitions that [legitimize] hazing events as a necessary component of fraternity initiation rites.” -Stephen Sweet, 1999

The following narrative is a direct reflection from a student who recognizes the importance of creating positive change in our fraternal communities. Together we provide an insight into the culture of hazing and provide dialogue around why hazing exists on today’s college campus.

We stood in a room together for the first time that night, not knowing what was going to happen next. Earlier that day we received a text from a brother, just like we had for the last few weeks of recruitment. Instead of inviting us to a “sweet party” or “sick dinner,” all they said was to be at the chapter house at 5 pm in a coat and tie. Each of us knew that this was the first night of pledging, but none of us knew what that really meant. When we arrived, a couple of brothers asked us to wait in a room until we were told otherwise. Before entering, they asked us for our cell phones and watches, taking away our contact with the outside world and any sense of time. That first night would be a brief introduction to what the next few months of our lives would be.

As we stood in the room for what seemed like hours, we all started to understand that we were no longer in control. Sure, we could leave the room at any moment, but would we ever be able to come back? Bid night was a time when the pledge class first met the men who would potentially become their brothers. My initial sense of uncertainty while standing in that room was the same feeling that I had for the rest of the process. We never really knew what to expect, and, looking back, we were better off not trying to guess either. That initial fear that built up while standing shoulder to shoulder with my pledge brothers came to an end when we were introduced to our pledge master. We were told the rules of the game, when our presence would be expected at the chapter house, expectations for our behavior while there, who we should talk to if we had problems as well as a general overview of the pledging process. Above all, the number one rule for any pledge was secrecy.

Secrecy, secrecy, secrecy…

After meeting our pledge master, we were “presented” to the general brotherhood before undergoing a number of chapter traditions that “have been done since the beginning of the chapter.” The real Ritual, the installation of the new pledge class written into Ritual books, was conducted but was hardly the most important part of the night. Once the ritual was complete, the celebration began. We were encouraged to celebrate a little more than the current brothers because this was our night. The celebration continued at a party where members and non-members celebrated our entry into the chapter. Each of us, while on the dance floor or drinking one more beer, knew in the back of our minds that this would probably be the last time we would be celebrating anything for a while.

Over the next few weeks, we slowly became more integrated into the everyday life of the chapter. We began to understand our place in the chapter and what we should or should not do or say. The pledge master asked each of us for a copy of our class schedule and any other commitments so that pledge
education events could be scheduled. During this time, our pledge class got to know each other as well as the brothers in the chapter. We began to mold into a single unit, working together to complete tasks, helping each other with homework, and making sure that everyone was accounted for when a brother asked.

The day to day operations of our pledge class would periodically be supplemented with “events.” These “events” or “special nights” were carefully planned and executed. We were told that they had been doing these certain events for many years, as it was part of the tradition of the chapter. Everything seemed to be a tradition. The events would usually involve all of us completing certain tasks or obstacles either individually or as a unit with consequences for not being able to accomplish the almost always impossible task. Afterwards we would talk with brothers about our experience during the events, creating a sense of togetherness through shared experience. We were told that these events were one more way for our pledge class to become more cohesive as we completed obstacles together as a single unit.

The whole process was a constant struggle between the pledge class and the brothers. We were encouraged to help each other at every possible time to build a sense of camaraderie. There were very few times throughout the process that we were able to feel equal to the brotherhood; we always felt inferior because we were not initiated. We had to earn our spot in the chapter, and only brothers would decide if we were deserving of that spot. We also felt a constant sense of fear that something would go wrong, someone would get hurt, someone would talk back to one of the brothers, or, worse, someone from outside of the chapter could have found out what was really happening. After all, secrecy was our number one rule: no one could know what we were doing, why we were going to the chapter house at odd times during the day, and why we were constantly exhausted and never had time to hang out with friends. We knew that if we ever slipped up and told someone or led someone to the truth, the life of the chapter, and certainly our time as pledges, would be in jeopardy.

The end did finally come, and it couldn’t have come soon enough. As a pledge class, we began to argue and became more irritated with each other. The uncertainty of the end goal led to many people questioning why they were making this commitment. Was being a member of this fraternity worth all of the long nights, stress, and anxiety? I remember initiation day being filled with anger, fear, excitement, and relief. We had finally earned our place as brothers in the chapter. The process that began many months prior during recruitment finally came to a close.

The excitement of the night and the future of being a brother in the organization was only slightly diminished by the realization of what our brothers had just put us through.

But was it worth it?

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Years after his semester of pledging concluded, Chris¹ and I sat down to have a very real conversation about his experience and how it changed him as a person and as a leader. Why would someone with such a strong moral compass allow others to tear him down, both mentally and physically, to be a member of a fraternity? During our conversation, we discussed some of the reasons he thought that he allowed such behavior to continue to exist, not only while he was pledging, but throughout the rest of his

¹ The student’s name has been changed to protect his identity.
years as an active member of his fraternity. I was able to narrow down his thoughts and comments to a major topic that many of our student leaders are dealing with on a daily basis: the pressure to conform.

Social conformity is a type of influence that results in a change of behavior or belief in order to fit in with a group. The desire to fit in (normative conformity) and the desire to be correct (informational conformity) are two different ways of conforming, but both can be noted within our fraternity and sorority communities (McLeod, 2007). For the purpose of this article, we will focus on the idea of normative conformity.

Normative conformity involves conforming in order to be accepted or liked by a group, but not necessarily because one actually believes the things that are being done or said (Fournier, 2010). This type of conformity usually involves compliance whereas one may externally accept the views of the group, but internally rejects those views. In 1951, Soloman Asch held an experiment to test social conformity. In his experiment only one person was actually participating while the others in the room, aware of the experiment, purposely stated the wrong answer to obvious questions to see if the participant would conform to the group or state his own correct response. Of those participating, 25% conformed most of the time while 50% conformed at least once. When asking participants why they decided to conform to the group, many of them stated that they had a fear of not fitting in with the group or being ridiculed (Long-Crewell, n.d.).

Like those in Asch’s experiment, many of our students are experiencing the same fear and anxiety about fitting in with their peers. When I asked Chris about the pressures to fit in, he mentioned the desire began in the recruitment process. During recruitment, he was looking for a group of men who had similar values, traits, and backgrounds. He was looking for a place that was comfortable even if that meant enduring a more intense pledging process. He mentioned, “I knew that I had found a place where I did fit in, and didn’t want to give that up, even if I was told to do things that I didn’t necessarily agree with.” Chris recognized his morals and values would be tested, but the desire to conform and to find his fit within a fraternity was the ultimate goal.

It is important not to confuse conformity with obedience. Conformity is a response to a group whereas obedience is a response to authority. In Chris’s situation, many of his decisions revolved around fitting in, but he was obedient when told to perform certain tasks by a pledge master. Chris mentioned, “The ‘success’ of our pledge program relied on our ability to go along with whatever we were told to do. Sure, sometimes the brothers were just asking us to do them a favor, but it really was never an option to say no. We could have, at any time, walked out of the chapter house or the pledge process, going against the chapter’s wishes and disobeying the brothers. We also knew that if we didn’t do what they were asking or telling us to do, there were always consequences.”

So the question is: how do we help our students resist the overwhelming power of group conformity? Sweet (1999) mentions a full understanding of why new members willingly participate in their own degradation involves delving into the sources of new members’ identities and their relationships with fraternity brothers. As fraternity and sorority advisors (campus-based and headquarters staff), it is imperative that we focus on our potential new members and general membership in separate contexts.

New members have a tendency to lose their “old self” during the new member education process, as they are given new identity kits, social relations, definitions of self, and shift to a new reference group (Sweet, 1999). I am a huge proponent of the deferred recruitment process because of the ability to have
meaningful conversations with potential new members before they are immersed in the fraternity culture. By having conversations with potential new members about identity development, we can challenge these students to think about what they value and what they desire in a Greek-letter organization. Additionally, we can help these students to understand the power of conformity and the importance of thinking for themselves.

It would be a disservice to not also address the behaviors of the general membership. We are quick to host a guest speaker or develop a program that focuses on hazing, but it is important that we step back and actually assess why our students are hazing. Hazing occurs because organizations sometimes define it as a necessary part of their initiation rites, and they package it carefully to new members so as to produce compliance (Sweet, 1999). We have the ability to be agents in redefining hazing so that members recognize the need for change. To do that, though, we need to be able to have open and honest dialog about the situations occurring in our organizations.

As Chris mentioned, secrecy is a large part of how our fraternity and sorority organizations operate. This reality is problematic for college administrators and headquarters’ staff members because we cannot get to the root of hazing without honesty. Chris commented that “[w]e can’t talk about what is really going on without feeling an immense fear of losing everything that we had worked for. Sure, the things that are happening should not continue, and we know that they are wrong, but what are the other options?” We have to provide our students other options. It is vital to the life of our organizations that we develop relationships which allow for open and honest dialog without the fear of dissolution. We can continue to provide educational workshops and speakers, but we won’t address the problem until we have relationships built upon trust and openness.

References


