

“That Ain’t Cool Bro”: Critical Gender Conversations and Bystander Intervention Education

Jacob A. Oppenheimer, Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Dylan C. Howser, The Pennsylvania State University

Hazing is a fundamental challenge to the fraternal movement. Efforts to prevent hazing are varied, but a recent trend towards bystander education has shown positive results. Bystander education by itself has not yielded fundamental changes to hazing cultures in higher education. We will argue that adding critical gender conversations into hazing prevention curriculum can foster increased likelihood of individual interventions as well as help foster culture shifts away from hazing. In this article we will provide an exploration of bystander intervention, give a brief introduction to the theory of hegemonic masculinity as exemplified in harmful rites of passage, and provide some examples of what critical gender conversations might look like. Our focus will be on hazing in social fraternities; however, bystander interventions can be used in most harmful situations and in other student communities.

The term “bystander” refers to a third party witness to a harmful event who has agency to intervene to change the outcome of the given situation in some way. Bystander intervention programming has demonstrated effectiveness in reducing other harmful behaviors such as alcohol consumption, physical violence, and sexual assault (Berkowitz, 2011; Casey & Ohler, 2012; Dimeff, Bae, Kivlahan & Marlatt, 1999). Research has identified three major reasons why bystander interventions provide higher rates of change than other approaches (Berkowitz, 2009). First, bystander education approaches all individuals as potential agents of change for the better. For example, every student has a voice to speak out against hazing behaviors, and no one is assumed to be “the bad guy.” Second, bystander intervention programming is a skills-based programming philosophy that can be taught and practiced repeatedly. Evidence suggests that previous experiences with successful interventions are likely to promote interventions going forward (Banyard, Plante, & Moynihan, 2005). These skills can serve multiple purposes; programs designed to identify, target, and disrupt hazing can also be repurposed to disrupt other harmful behaviors on campus. Third, there are various intervention strategies in which students can engage. They range from direct interruptions of hazing behavior to indirect interventions of hazing behavior, such as anonymous reporting. Interventions can also be “after the fact” responses, e.g. building a chapter coalition to reform new member education practices to prevent future incidences of hazing or supporting victims of hazing. The overall goal is to move students from silence to action.

The challenge in using bystander education as a means of hazing prevention is not in the efficacy of students who want to intervene, but rather it is in the attitudes of students leading up to a decision to intervene. The bystander model is built broadly on the following core elements: noticing a potentially harmful situation, interpreting it as a problem, feeling responsible to help, possessing the necessary skills, and performing the intervention (Berkowitz, 2009). However, traditional notions of masculinity have informed fraternity men what is and is not “appropriate” behavior. Even when students acknowledge that their chapter is hazing, they may see it as necessary or essential. While many men might not agree with what their chapter is doing, they do not realize their fellow brothers are also in disagreement, or they may believe that loyalty to their chapter means not speaking out in opposition (Berkowitz, 2011). Thus, no intervention occurs.

We know a lot about the history of men, but we have rarely asked what makes men *men*. Recently, literature has been springing up about the effects of masculinity on American men and college males,

such as Michael Kimmel's *Guyland* (2009). Kimmel describes manhood as something that must be proven repeatedly in exclusively male environments. These rules are known colloquially as the "bro code" or "man law." These rules often encourage and enforce hierarchical and often unhealthy masculine behaviors. The biggest fear for men abiding by the guy code is appearing feminine. Therefore, they must find ways to prove their manhood.

However, there are few culturally acceptable initiation rituals that help define when a boy becomes a man. Instead, young men create their own rituals, e.g. hazing. The rituals are provided by other young men and can take a quick destructive turn (Kimmel, 2009). These rituals are protected by cultures of silence that have been developed by generations of men who have endured the same developmentally stunting initiations. These cultures are most prevalent between ages 16 to 26, or what Kimmel (2009) calls, *guyland*. The socially constructed rules of *guyland* contribute to the barriers facing fraternity men when it comes to intervening against hazing. These rules at best foster a fear of speaking out against their brothers and at worst create acceptance of hazing as an integral part of becoming a man.

This is why we believe engaging men in critical gender conversations is an important addition to the ongoing bystander intervention courses being taught to help fraternity men prevent hazing. We should explore and deconstruct hegemonic or hierarchical masculinity with students instead of stereotyping and shaming men for performing masculinities that they have been culturally and socially conditioned to find acceptable (Laker, 2011). Hegemonic masculinity is broadly defined as masculine identity driven by a need for hierarchy and fear of being feminine. It is a reflection that modern masculinities are often deficit based and thus benefit from pro-social and critical exploration (Klobassa & Davis, 2009). We value pro-social and critical exploration for three reasons. First, men engage multiple (sometimes competing) versions of masculinity. Masculinity can be shown through solidarity, physical strength, intelligence, wealth, creativity, etc. Second, we see hegemony reflected in the strict adherence of fraternity men to organizational structure for decision-making, recruitment, as well as conduct cases involving values incongruent behavior. Third, hegemonic masculinity is predicated upon a performed identity that inhabits harmful spaces and is propagated by the life long journey of proving one's manhood. If we can promote authentic conversations about gender within our fraternities, then we can challenge serious issues wholeheartedly, e.g. why it is the responsibility of all brothers to speak out against hazing.

These conversations take place in many ways. Some conversations can be built in explicitly as part of a hazing prevention workshop as is the commonly used "[Man in the Box](#)" activity. This activity provides a good sense of the ways that society reinforces unobtainable and contradictory notions of gender while discussing the ways that men reinforce these ideals through derogatory, misogynistic, heteronormative and violent language. By exploring these norms and the methods through which they are enforced, you can engage fraternity men in describing how they see themselves and their role models for the purposes of promoting more authentic and nuanced understandings of themselves while negating the hierarchical notions of masculinity that underlie unhealthy rites of passage and hazing in general. Other potential conversation venues include values and ritual conversations during new member education and as part of larger discussions about recruitment, leadership programming, and events where competition is a key element (such as Greek weeks or philanthropy competitions). Essential elements of the conversation are open dialogue, self-reflection on privilege and oppression, and mindfulness of cultural assumptions. They also challenge a host of offensive behaviors (such as homophobia, transphobia, racism, and discrimination based on ability). These elements ought to be built around inclusive, pro-feminist frameworks that encourage respect, equity, inclusion, and care for all in the community.

Fraternity men demonstrate an adherence to social codes of masculinity that are unique to their campuses, cultures, and upbringings. Bystander education is an important tool in interrupting hazing and other negative behaviors, but it is through critical gender conversations that we can empower our students to act authentically, be vulnerable with each other, and overcome the many barriers to speaking out. In a world where boys have been told to “man up,” we have a tremendous opportunity to empower our communities through these larger conversations especially since many fraternities are by definition single sex organizations. From our own experiences, we have seen that the “[Angry Sorority Woman Letter](#)” and the “[Save the Sluts](#)” emails are not representative of our groups but instead serve to reinforce gender norms that are unhealthy, disrespectful, and offensive. Once we have these conversations, our bystander programs will be much more effective, and we can begin to challenge the roots of hazing culture.

References

- Banyard, V. L., Plante, E. G., & Moynihan, M. M. (2005, February). Rape prevention through bystander education: Bringing a broader community perspective to sexual violence prevention. In *National Criminal Justice Reference Service (Department of Justice)*. Retrieved from: <https://www.ncjrs.gov/pdffiles1/nij/grants/208701.pdf>
- Berkowitz, A. D. (2009). *RESPONSE ABILITY: A complete guide to bystander intervention*. Chicago, Beck & Company. www.alanberkowitz.com
- Berkowitz, A. D. (2011). Using how college men feel about being men and ‘doing the right thing’ to promote men’s development. In J. A. Laker & T. Davis (Eds.), *Masculinities in higher education: Theoretical and practical considerations* (pp. 161-176).
- Casey, E. A., & Ohler, K. (2012). Being a positive bystander: Male antiviolence allies’ experiences of ‘stepping up.’ *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 27(1), 62-83
- Dimeff, L. A., Baer, J. S., Kivlahan, D. R., & Marlatt, A. G. (1999). *Brief alcohol screenings and intervention for college students (BASICS): A harm reduction approach* (pp. 9-11). New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Kimmel, M. S. (2009). *Guyland: The perilous world where boys become men*. (1st ed.). New York, NY: Harper.
- Klobassa, V., & Davis, T. (2009, March). Masculinity at the intersections: An exploration of hegemony, oppression, performance, and self-authorship. ACPA Standing Committee for Men. Research Brief. Retrieved from <http://www2.myacpa.org/resources/scm-briefs>
- Laker, J. A. (2011). Inviting and inspiring men to learn: Gendered pedagogical considerations for undergraduate teaching and learning environments. In J. A. Laker & T. Davis (Eds.), *Masculinities in higher education: Theoretical and practical considerations*. (pp.63-78). New York, NY: Routledge.