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Intersecting Hazing and Moral Development: Examining Sorority Women's Behavior and Progression of Thinking

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With the advent of the inaugural National Hazing Prevention Week, the topic of hazing has been on the minds of many fraternity and sorority advising professionals in recent months. While college administrators, scholars, representatives from national headquarters, and collegians alike once struggled to define hazing, FIPG, Inc. offers a commonly accepted definition of hazing as "any action taken or situation created, intentionally whether on or off of fraternity premises, to produce mental or physical discomfort, embarrassment, harassment, or ridicule" (FIPG, 2003, p. 45). This definition incorporates both physical and emotional effects of hazing.

However, when discussing occurrences of hazing in women's fraternal organizations, it is also important to consider gender differences noted in hazing actions. Research has indicated that men are more likely to utilize physical hazing acts, whereas women often show a preference for more psychological and emotional hazing acts (Nuwer, 1999). Acts of psychological hazing may be more difficult to recognize since they typically do not leave observable effects in the way that acts of physical hazing often do. Perhaps this points to the role fraternity and sorority life professionals can play in focusing energy on efforts to educate our women's groups on not only what constitutes psychological hazing, but also the effects that one might experience as a result of this type of event. For example, sorority women often struggle to understand why a new member may feel hazed if she is made to perform a dance before fraternity men. With typically two or more semesters separating them from their own new member experience, often involving the same sort of emotional hazing, it is easy for them to forget the anxiety and embarrassment they may have felt when they were in this same position. An additional explanation supported by much of the hazing literature suggests the initiated women may feel a need to seek revenge for the emotional hazing they endured during their own new member period and thus are compelled to take it out on others (Nuwer, 1999; 2000).

As we continue to reflect on ways and means to educate students on the physical, mental, and legal aspects of hazing, it is also important to consider the ways in which issues of hazing intersect with student development theory. Traditional theories of moral development provide an obvious lens through which we can view hazing as it relates to students' growth and development. In particular, this review will focus on Carol Gilligan's (1982) Theory of Moral Development. She surmised that "the sequence of women's moral judgment proceeds from an initial concern with survival to a focus on goodness and finally to a reflective understanding of care as the most adequate guide to the resolution of conflicts in human relationships" (p.105). It is this ethic of care voice that women use in their moral judgment processes that differs from the way many male students reconcile the moral issues they face.

In Level I: Orientation to Individual Survival, individuals are engrossed in self-interest and survival (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1999). The goal for women in this stage is to have their own personal desires fulfilled. While Gilligan's (1982) theory is not necessarily relegated to

age specific constraints, it could be said that many students find themselves in this stage upon entering their college years. The transition from high school to college is a familiar issue for most student affairs practitioners. As students break away from their parents, high school friends, and previous way of life, they may initially mourn this loss; however most will soon look for ways to fill this void. For entering students, issues of survival and self-interest often revolve around creating a new network of belonging within their new environment, for many this means joining a sorority. With this assertion in mind, it is not difficult to understand why a young woman might allow herself to undergo emotional or physical hazing if it means she is connecting with others and feeling a sense of inclusion in her new environment.

In the First Transition: From Selfishness to Responsibility, women begin to shift from independence and concern for self to a need for connection and responsibility to others (Evans, et al., 1999). As students move through this transition the possibility of doing the right thing is a consideration. Doing the right thing may appear in the form of preserving the other. However, this perception may vary from member to member. For example, an active member in this stage taking part in hazing new members may view the right thing as acting to preserve the new member and her well-being and therefore put an end to the hazing activity. Another active member may view the right thing as acting to preserve the entire sorority. For students who view hazing as an important part of the sorority's culture, preserving the sorority means continuing the cycle of hazing. The difference between these two members is not how they think, but the conclusion each of them reaches. Using Gilligan's model, they reached entirely different conclusions, but the process they used to determine the correct path of action was the same. Both students in this example considered the needs of another over their own individual needs. Clearly, one student exhibited a more desirable behavior; that of recognizing acts of hazing as harmful to another person. Simply put, theory does not predict behavior rather it is useful in describing patterns of thinking.

Someone in Level II: Goodness as Self-Sacrifice may surrender her own judgment in order to reach consensus and continue a connection with others in the group. A student may experience internal conflict when hurting others becomes an issue. However, for this internal conflict to occur, it would naturally follow that the student would need to be cognizant of what may or may not be harmful to another. In other words, students in this stage are not going to change their behaviors if they do not even recognize their actions as hurtful to the other person. This is especially important when one considers the type of emotional hazing acts women's groups often participate in today. An issue on many campuses simply becomes that women do not comprehend that their actions are hurting another person.

Students experiencing the Second Transition: From Goodness to Truth in this model may suddenly question why they sacrificed their own needs and desires for the sake of another. One may begin to examine her own needs and work to integrate them with the needs of others rather than forego her own needs altogether. The third and final level that Gilligan (1982) suggested, termed The Morality of Non-Violence, marks a student's ability to acknowledge competing choices while keeping her wishes as a possible choice. In this level, one may begin to hold her own choices or desires on an equal playing field with the desires of another or of the group.

It would appear that students in these final stages of this moral development framework would have the most potential for influencing a culture change away from pre-established hazing norms. However, changing a culture is no easy matter. Many functional areas within student affairs such as wellness education, academic advising, and first year experiences have worked toward culture changes by making use of the powerful influence that peer culture has on influencing the general student body. The challenge we face as fraternity and sorority professionals comes in identifying those fraternity and sorority students who have the potential to serve as influential peer educators for hazing awareness causes. As we continue to educate students about the consequences and perils of hazing, this moral development theory may provide a road map to guide our interactions with sorority women as we help them bring about the culture changes they so desperately need.

References

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