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## "It's Just a Prank, Bro!": Examining College Hazing with Constructivist Grounded Theory and Qualitative Research Methods

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## "It's Just a Prank, Bro!": Examining College Hazing with Constructivist Grounded Theory and Qualitative Research Methods

### Abstract

There is a lack of in-depth, qualitative research into college hazing, particularly into groups such as sport club teams, creating gaps in understanding why hazing persists despite its risks. This project seeks to answer the questions: How do students in fraternities, sororities, and sport club teams experience hazing and how do these experiences shape how they perceive hazing? To answer these questions, I conducted semi-structured interviews with members of these groups on a college campus, and analyzed these interviews using a grounded theory approach, as per Charmaz (2006, 2017). I find that a slight majority of hazing occurs in recruitment settings, is prevalent among fraternity men's experiences, and tends to involve alcohol consumption. Importantly, students believe hazing achieves group goals, and they minimize and normalize their experiences, creating much work for policymakers and university officials to change the conversation around prosocial group behavior and the potential harms that can emerge from hazing activities.

### Keywords

Hazing, Higher Education, Victimization, Interpersonal Violence, Qualitative Methods

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### Acknowledgements

Thank you to my participants and to the reviewers who helped strengthen this manuscript.

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## Introduction

Attending a four-year university is a staple in the lives of many young adults in the United States. While college is traditionally a milestone experience that we associate with learning, growing, and preparing for a future career, it also comes with certain risks. Despite dozens of media accounts surfacing alleging hazing at institutions across the U.S., ranging from forced alcohol consumption, physical abuse, and even death, the phenomenon remains generally understudied in sociological literature. Further, most research on hazing uses quantitative methods, such as anonymous online surveys, to understand the frequency of these activities (Ellsworth 2006; Hoover & Pollard 2000). In contrast, there are relatively few studies that use qualitative means to investigate hazing on college campuses, leaving gaps in our knowledge, especially around the context and nuances of these behaviors (although see Allan & Madden 2008; Massey & Massey, 2017; Pershing, 2006). This research contributes to this gap by using in-depth interviewing and a grounded theory approach to understanding how students experience hazing at a four-year mountain-west university in the United States.

While there have been several quantitative assessments of collegiate hazing, there is a lack of in-depth, qualitative analyses into this subject matter. Further, much sociological research on collegiate hazing focuses on students who are members of fraternities, sororities, and varsity athletic teams. Also, the scope of many existing studies is limited to what kinds of activities students identify as hazing and often rely on survey methods to determine what practices occur in which groups on campuses. The current project contributes to these gaps by drawing on in-depth interviews with students in fraternities, sororities, and members of club sports teams to examine how students experience hazing and how they respond to these experiences. I use a grounded theory approach to help avoid bias or relying on stereotypical

understandings of these groups to accurately describe what behaviors students experience or encounter on campus, as well as to illustrate attitudes towards the severity of different hazing activities. Based on this discussion, I also explore implications for hazing prevention on campuses and offer suggestions based on these findings.

## **Literature Review**

### **College Hazing in the United States**

Hazing is a widespread problem with over half of students in clubs, teams, and organizations reporting experiencing at least one form of hazing at least once during their time in college (Allan & Madden, 2008, 2012; Allan, Kerschner, & Payne 2019; Owen, Burke, & Vichesky, 2008). Generally defined as, “Any activity expected of someone joining or participating in a group (such as a student club or team) that humiliates, degrades, abuses or endangers regardless of a person’s willingness to participate,” these behaviors occur across several groups on college campuses, and are not limited to the stereotypical organizations like fraternities and sororities (Allan & Madden, 2012; Ellsworth, 2006). Hazing can include activities such as forced participation in drinking games, forced sleep deprivation, as well as physical acts such as paddling, whipping, or physical beatings related to obtaining or maintaining membership in a student group.

There are many risks associated with college hazing. Hazing can lead to psychological or physical ramifications for students who are hazed, as well as those who inflict hazing on others (Finkel, 2002; Haaf, 2018; Hollmann, 2002; Hoover & Pollard, 1999). There has been a stark increase in deaths and serious injury caused by hazing over the last few decades (Hollmann, 2002; Nuwer, 2020). Up to the 1960s, hazing injuries and deaths largely came from outdoor physical activities, such as being blindfolded and abandoned in a forest, or being forced to swim across fast-moving bodies of water (Nuwer, 2020). However, starting in the 1960s, hazing-related deaths and injuries increased in the U.S. due to the rise of alcohol consumption on college campuses. There have been at least two hundred deaths due to hazing in the U.S. throughout history, and there were at least five documented fraternity deaths in 2019.

Despite the risks, college students continue to engage in hazing. One national study of college students found that 74% of varsity athletic team members reported experiencing hazing behaviors, 73% of members of Greek-letter organizations, 60% of club sports team members, 56% of those in performing arts, and 49% of intermural sports club members (Allan & Madden 2008). Clearly, hazing is widespread and more prevalent than previously assumed. Because hazing is a stigmatized and usually covert activity, there is a lack of qualitative analyses to illuminate the prevalence and persistence of these behaviors.

### **Theories on Hazing**

Social scientists have developed a few theories to explain these behaviors, however research studies have not identified one specific theory or framework that can explain hazing, alone (Jones, 2015; Morman, 2007; Nuwer, 1990). The first theory posits that hazing is perceived to achieve positive outcomes. More specifically, researchers suggest that it serves as a tradition of initiation or a rite of passage, that hazing exists to foster group cohesion, and that hazing maintains group hierarchy (Campo et al., 2005; Cimino, 2011; Hoover & Pollard, 1999; Keating, Pomerantz, Pommer, Ritt, Miller, & McCormick, 2005; Kirby & Wintrup, 2002; Nuwer, 1990; Waldron & Kowalski, 2009). From the first perspective, scholars suggest that hazing serves as a rite of passage where members are socialized into group norms and values (Nuwer, 1990; Hoover & Pollard, 1999; Waldron & Kowalski, 2009). Although many groups

have special ceremonies or rituals that are important for members, these activities become hazing when they humiliate, degrade, or physical harm members.

The second leading theory suggests that hazing is used to establish group solidarity or cohesion, which helps explain why these behaviors are a mainstay of modern student organizations (Campo et al., 2005; Cimino, 2011; Keller et al., 2015). This research suggests that hazing may be pervasive throughout colleges because those activities allow participants to signal commitment to the group. Those who display commitment, such as through enduring unpleasant, embarrassing actions, can receive more group rewards and prosocial feedback from their peers (Henrich, 2009; Keller et al., 2015; Levine & Moreland, 1994; Sosis, Kress, & Boster 2007). Finally, in this vein, hazing is more acceptable in groups that are strongly cooperative (such as Greek organizations and varsity athletic teams) than those that are weakly cooperative (such as car enthusiasts; Cimino, 2011).

The third major perspective suggests that these behaviors maintain group hierarchy in which older established members hold higher positions than new or potential group members (Cimino & Delton 2010; Cimino 2011; Kirby & Wintrup, 2002; Keating et al., 2005; Waldron & Kowalski, 2009). These studies imply that hazers establish or reinforce a dominant position within a group. For example, Cimino and Delton's (2010) research suggests that new members of a group are viewed more negatively than senior members.

However, other research complicates these perspectives. For instance, some researchers conclude that the more hazing behaviors student-athletes experience or witness, the less cohesive they perceived their group to be (Keating et al., 2005; Van Raalte, Cornelius, Linder, & Brewer, 2007). Researchers have also found a negative relationship between severe initiation processes and the perceived attractiveness of group membership to new members (Lodewijkx & Syroit, 1997). Lodewijkx and Syroit, for example, (1997) found that group initiations with a high level of severity (like initiations where members are embarrassed, shamed, or harassed) led to negative feelings like frustration, loneliness, and depression, along with members feeling less close to their group. This contradictory research implies a gap between how students perceive hazing (thought to create cohesion) and the reality of hazing (which as demonstrated above, can lead to less cohesion among group members).

To consider this topic, I use constructivist grounded theory to guide my research process, using sensitizing concepts such as abstract ideas like the debates above, to open inquiry rather than trying to mold data into pre-existing theoretical frameworks (Blumer, 1969; Charmaz, 2020).

Despite its danger and prevalence, hazing is largely understudied by sociologists and other social scientists. Therefore, this study uses semi-structured interviews with college students in fraternities, sororities, and club sports teams to evaluate what kinds of behaviors students often experience or hear about on college campuses, how the experience occurs, and whether they perceive these activities to be severe or not. I use these findings to make policy and prevention recommendations in the final section of this paper. Before doing so, it is important to address my positionality and role as a researcher and how they may influence this study. I am a white female researcher in the fields of crime, deviance, and law, and my interests in theories of victimization led me to begin studying college hazing more specifically. I conducted this research as a member of a hazing prevention work group to help better understand how students experience these behaviors, with the intentions that these findings are used to inform and improve hazing policies and programming on college campuses.

## **Method**

This article is based on data gathered from 15 qualitative semi-structured interviews with college students in student organizations at a mountain-west public four-year university (Alexander 2018). I was interested in how hazing occurs in organizations, and whether students

reported hazing that they witness or experience. This qualitative research was part of a broader campus-wide group project involving campus administrators, health educators, faculty, and student leaders. Affiliation with this group facilitated entrée into the communities of study as they approved us to recruit their students and provided routes to reach potential participants through email listservs.

Prior to conducting research, I underwent a full board review to obtain IRB approval from April 2016 to October 2016. Recruitment for this portion of the project began in November 2016, and the first round of recruitment was completed in May 2017. I recruited participants by sending an IRB-approved recruitment email through listservs through the Fraternity and Sorority Life Office and the Sport Clubs Office. Students directly responded to researchers to express interest in participating in the study. This was done to ensure confidentiality and to maximize the student's agency in the research process. I also used concurrent snowball sampling to access other individuals in student organizations who were willing to participate. After the interview, participants were asked to forward the initial recruitment email to other students in their groups and clubs, and this sampling technique yielded some success in recruiting participants (n=3, of which I am aware). I conducted a total of 15 interviews in this exploratory study.

Interviews lasted just under an hour on average and were conducted in a private conference room on campus to ensure the confidentiality of the respondent. The age of participants ranged from 19 to 23 years old, and the median age of respondents was 21 years old. I interviewed 9 women and 6 men, and all identified as white. In terms of college class, many respondents identified as seniors (n=8, 53%), followed by juniors (n=27%), sophomores (n=2, 13%), and freshmen (n=1, 7%). All interviews were audio-recorded with the consent of participants, and I transcribed interviews into Microsoft Word. I tape recorded interviews to maintain the vividness of speech and to use direct quotes from participants in the final write-up of findings.

I took several steps to maintain participant safety, privacy, and confidentiality. Interviews were conducted in a private conference room and participants were provided with contact information for resources such as mental health resources, sexual assault reporting and support, as well as hazing resources and reporting information. All names that appear are pseudonyms and identifying information of the participant's organizations were removed with some details changed to protect the identity and confidentiality of respondents.

Lofland, Snow, Anderson, and Lofland (2006, p. 15) write that qualitative research allows researchers to, "Collect the richest data possible," without constricting participants to a pre-determined set of responses. I used a grounded theory approach as per Charmaz (2006) to inform this study. I chose this method and approach to study a contentious topic that can elicit stereotypes, as well as preconceived ideas and beliefs which could bias a study that does not take measures to avoid these pitfalls. This method also emphasizes gathering rich information from data, and avoids reliance on predetermined ideas, beliefs, or hypotheses that researchers may have about hazing (Charmaz, 2006). A constructivist grounded theory approach also, "Fosters making connections between... meaning and actions, and individuals and social structures that otherwise may remain invisible," which is useful in answering my research questions (Charmaz, 2017, 2020, p. 167).

In asking respondents how they experience and understand the prevalence of a behavior such as hazing, open-ended dialogue allows us to draw conclusions that are empirically rooted in the respondents' answers. This technique also fosters control *and* flexibility to increase the analytic incisiveness of the resulting analysis. In addition to these benefits of grounded theory, this method allows respondents to describe their experiences and perceptions in a way that feels comfortable to them, and helped establish rapport with most respondents interviewed, which facilitated insight into a topic that is usually shrouded in secrecy or stigma.

The interview guide directed the topics and direction of the interview, and allowed in-depth discussion of the respondent's hazing experiences. The semi-structured interview guide included 13 open-ended questions and a variety of sub-questions that allowed researchers to probe deeper into the question topics. I also included a list of common hazing behaviors as a reference for students during the interview (See Appendix A for this list). Researchers concluded the interview with demographic questions that are used for classification purposes. Risks associated with the study were assessed as minimal, but I did not expect participants to answer questions that they felt uncomfortable or did not want to talk about. No respondent opted out of any question during the interview. At the end of each interview, I provided respondents with a short resource sheet that included information regarding services related to mental health, sexual assault reporting, and hazing reporting, should they ever experience or witness any of these behaviors. Participants were also given a \$20 Visa gift card as compensation for their time after the interview was completed.

I performed three rounds of coding to identify primary patterns and themes that told an analytic story based on the data. Initial data analysis involved line-by-line open coding; I also performed one round of focused coding and axial coding each as I moved from general to more specific themes (Saldaña 2016). Charmaz suggests that researchers should rigorously explore theoretical codes over several rounds (2006). Further, these codes identify potential relationships between categories of broader codes, and move an analytic story based on the data into a theoretical direction. I performed three rounds of formal coding using NVIVO software to determine themes and identify codes that describe the analytic story in the data. I also wrote engaged in memo-writing after interviews and throughout the data analysis process to help me develop a clearer analytic picture. My approach to theoretical saturation drew on Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006), and once themes became relatively stable and firm, I transitioned to analysis across code categories. The findings I present throughout the remainder of this article provide rich description of hazing experiences reported by respondents, based on this analysis.

## Results

To explore how students experience hazing, I present direct evidence as examples of how hazing occurs on college campuses in fraternities, sororities, and club sports teams. This includes discussion of the kinds of behaviors that respondents have seen or have heard about from their peers, and whether students considered these experiences to be minor, serious, or somewhere in between. I include these secondhand accounts because friends' experiences and susceptibilities to hazing can also influence how one thinks about hazing. Ultimately, the belief that peers approve of hazing is a significant predictor of participation in hazing activities (Campo et al., 2005). Based on this analysis, I suggest that students predominantly experience behaviors that include being forced to drink large amounts of alcohol, and that they do not perceive their experiences to be particularly severe, harmful, or dangerous.

### Hazing Encounters

Of all participants, 67 percent (n=10), reported either personally experiencing or witnessing behaviors that they considered hazing. There are respondents who experienced multiple hazing activities within the context of their organization (e.g. being kidnapped by older members *and* being forced to consume large amounts of alcohol in the context of the same group). To more clearly communicate these patterns, I calculated frequencies of these experiences, which are available in Table 1 and Table 2. These tables illustrate the forms of hazing that participants in the current study reported experiencing.

Table 1. Description of Reported Experiences of Hazing

Relationship to Hazing Experience		
Self-Experience	Secondhand Account	Both Self & Secondhand
7	6	3

Table 2. Hazing Experiences or Secondhand Accounts

Organization	Experience or Account	Form of Hazing Behavior
Fraternity	Experience	Forced to drink a large amount of alcohol
Fraternity	Account	Kidnapping/transporting and abandoning others
Fraternity	Account	Forced to drink a large amount of alcohol
Fraternity	Experience	Forced to drink a large amount of alcohol
Fraternity	Account	Being forced to associate with specific people and not others
Fraternity	Account	Being forced to sing or chant
Fraternity	Experience	Being yelled/cursed/sworn at
Sorority	Experience	Being yelled/cursed/sworn at
Sorority	Account	Being forced to sing or chant
Club Sports Team	Experience	Being forced to wear embarrassing clothing
Club Sports Team	Experience	Being forced to wear embarrassing clothing
Club Sports Team	Account	Forced to drink a large amount of alcohol
Club Sports Team	Experience	Kidnapping/transporting and abandoning others

As these tables suggest, around 31 percent of hazing experiences or accounts involved forced alcohol consumption. Following this behavior, there are four activities that are indicated by similar numbers of respondents: being yelled/cursed/sworn at (15.3%), kidnapping or transporting and abandoning others (15.3%), being forced to sing or chant (15.3%), and being forced to wear embarrassing clothing (15.3%). This research demonstrates that forced consumption of alcohol is a prevalent hazing activity, which replicates existing understandings of hazing (Allan & Madden, 2008; Campo et al., 2005). These findings also suggest however that contemporary hazing behaviors are not limited to alcohol consumption, but also include activities that may seek to embarrass, berate, or physically harm others. Fraternity members reported experiencing hazing through forced alcohol consumption more often than members of sororities or club sports teams, a trend that is evident in hazing literature (Allan & Madden, 2008). Finally, this data also shows that while experiences of hazing are prevalent in fraternities, they also exist in sororities and club sports teams. Because the current study also



focuses on an organization outside of Greek life – club sports – these findings help fill a gap in the research which has historically been limited to Greek organizations and varsity athletic teams.

### **Hazing During Recruitment**

Many experiences of hazing occurred during recruitment or initial processes of joining the desired group, which is unsurprising considering the organizational membership component of hazing. Steven who has been in his fraternity for three years, had the most pervasive and detailed experiences of hazing in the context of recruitment and initiation of all interviews thus I discuss his experience at length here. He stated he had multiple encounters with hazing throughout his own fraternity recruitment and initiation process. As he recounted, during their rushing semester, all recruits must pass multiple tests, with subjects ranging from fraternity history to core values. These tests, per Steven, are very high stake events, and recruits are often reminded that, “Everyone needs to get a 70 percent or there will be problems,” indicating that negative consequences will occur for all recruits if they do not pass this threshold. Steven then described the psychological stress that recruits endured as they prepared for these tests. Recruited members are yelled and cursed at about passing these tests, often being told, “You’re not going to fucking make it,” “Why the fuck don’t you have a pass? I told you to fucking do it,” throughout this time. Steven emphasized the pervasiveness of this harassment as he mentioned that this occurred at weekly meetings for potential members during their rushing semester.

Steven explained that in addition to passing tests, all recruits must receive signatures from at least 90 percent of active members in the fraternity before gaining admission. To obtain these signatures, recruits must engage in a multitude of activities, which are determined by the active members. This requirement alone sets up a power differential that creates the potential for hazing activities. Specifically, by requiring new members to earn current members’ signatures, the latter are in a position of power or dominance over new members and can influence new members to do whatever it takes to obtain their signature. Steven describes this process by stating:

There's like incentives too... Now pledges are like, “Hey I have like a meal swipe<sup>1</sup> if you want an interview. But I rushed as a sophomore so I couldn’t offer meal swipes. So, I had to find other time to do it. But my meetings were usually in the library, so I’d sit down with them. It depends, like if they were in a rush, though, there’ll be like asking four or five questions... Other brothers are pretty stingy though, like, “No I want good questions.” And some are like, “Just go through and talk to me and I’ll sign.”

Finally, and most troubling, Steven recounted the pinnacle of his recruitment process, or the last hurdle before his recruitment cohort was initiated. To describe the week leading up to the main recruitment event, Steven stated:

The Tuesday before was [our] last meeting and [we] took the tests. And then they’d be like, “Everyone needs to pass this test or you guys aren’t getting in.” But the next day, the pledge educator will text like, “You guys are trouble, three of you failed,” or something like that like where you know, like don’t talk to

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<sup>1</sup> Meal swipes are a way to pay for a meal at a dining hall. A meal plan may include a certain number of swipes for a week, month, or semester.

[the pledges] or associate with them like throughout the rest of the week. If we see him you know, no eye contact the whole week, like “Shit. What the fuck. What did we do?”

The last day of the recruitment process for Steven was a night up in the mountains in which his recruitment class must go through multiple stations of questions while being harassed and berated. Steven described this by saying:

[Active brothers] are like “Show up at the house in two hours and dress warm[ly],” so you’re like, “Okay, what is that?” ... And it's like snowing out...And then we would just go up to the mountains and then like do our like, ritualized thing...So it’s just like, go up to the mountain and then you’re paired with another brother and you just go through, I guess these, stations are what they're called and at each station, there’s brothers there and they like, say one of our core values or ritualistic things and then you go through this process like at the top of the mountain. And they're just like, yelling at you, like, “We told you like to get it, like you didn’t. You failed!”

When considering this high-stress event when he was going through the initiation process, Steven states, “I was really scared as a pledge... Am I going to get in? Like the active brothers aren’t my friends,” indicating that this process made him feel fear, uncertainty at the prospect of being admitted, and even alienated from the active members of the fraternity. However, this event did not dissuade Steven from engaging in hazing behaviors during his active membership in the fraternity. Later in our interview, he describes a night in which he and other members kidnapped a new member of the fraternity, which is prohibited by the university hazing policy and the national fraternity policy of his organization. During this night, he and other members engaged in several tasks with the kidnapped new member, including drinking alcohol on the steps of a university building and trespassing onto university property after hours.

While Steven’s experience with hazing should be considered more extreme because of his repeated experiences, April also experienced hazing during her recruitment process. April, who has been in her sorority for three-and-a-half years stated that through the course of Work Week (another term for their Recruitment Week), her Recruitment Chair often yelled at sorority members. April also mentioned that sorority women engage in ritualistic singing and chanting throughout the recruitment and initiation process. During our interview, I asked which, from a list of hazing behaviors, she had experienced. She responded by stating:

Definitely the singing and chanting; it happens all the time for all sorts of things. Most of it isn't bad stuff, mostly performances. Um, I guess we get yelled at, Work Week, it's like "Ladies, shush, get in line!"

April considers being yelled at to be a hazing behavior and identifies that she has experienced this behavior. However immediately after describing her experience, she suggests that it is within the broader context of recruitment and is not necessarily harmful or derogatory in her mind (“Most of it isn’t bad stuff”). Both April and Steven’s experiences highlight hazing as part of the learning process of being in a student organization: Recruitment Chairs provide discipline and show new members “how to be” in a fraternity or sorority, including their typical norms, rules, and procedures. This can lead to acts of hazing to achieve these goals. In this way, normalization (e.g., “Hazing as a tradition”) is a factor for hazing.

Laura, another sorority woman, reported witnessing and experiencing hazing as part of recruitment. During the weekly mandatory dinners throughout her three-and-a-half years in the

sorority, fraternity recruits visit the dinners and must sing to the sorority women before they are allowed to eat dinner. In these instances, new member educators from the fraternity introduce the hopeful fraternity members and then the pledging members sing to the sorority women. Once they are finished, they introduce themselves by name and often hand the women roses before leaving the sorority house. In this instance, both men and women are forced to participate in this hazing behavior, as the men must serenade the women and the women must sit and receive the serenade and rose before they can eat dinner.

This activity also highlights the gendered relationships and stereotypes that exist between fraternity pledges serenading sorority women before they may eat. Fraternities and sororities often emphasize heterosexual masculinity and patriarchal relationships between genders, and in this event, those who may not identify as heterosexual could feel marginalized (Harper & Harris, 2010). However, in the context of seeking admission to their organizations, they may feel pressure to participate and the need to suppress their sexuality to gain acceptance by their peers (Harper & Harris, 2010; Nuwer, 2004). The constructivist grounded research paradigm helps highlight the intricacies of heteronormativity within hazing activities. Here, the broader structural conditions in which students exist (such as heteronormative patriarchy) influence their local context (the college organization) and creates opportunities for hazing and the perpetuation of gender stereotypes among students (Charmaz 2020; Harper & Harris 2010).

Like Laura's account of hazing that is very tied into societal notions of masculinity, Ruth, a senior who has been on a club sports team for three years has witnessed acts of hazing between members of another club sports team. She told me that during social events, the men on the team, "Are always forcing each other to drink more," and often challenge one another to consume more alcohol when in group settings. However, Ruth discounts the seriousness of these activities due to stereotypical nature of men, by stating that "I feel like they're just boys and they're just playing," drawing on notions of the patriarchy that dismiss the seriousness of men's actions and naturalize masculine aggression and engagement in potentially harmful activities like excessive drinking (Harper & Harris, 2010).

Travis echoed this idea of hazing associated with excessive drinking when providing an account of a close friend's night of hazing. Travis, whose group membership included being a fraternity member for over two years and a club sport's team member for a year drew on an account that a close friend had divulged to him. This discussion centered on a night of hazing that one of his fraternity brothers had experienced as part of another fraternity's initiation. This event ultimately influenced his friend to end the initiation process with the other fraternity, before seeking out Travis's current organization. When describing this event, he stated:

They hazed the hell out of him... The only thing I was able to really get out from him was, "They got us really fucked up (intoxicated), they drove out to the woods, they dropped us off..."

I asked him to elaborate more fully on the event and wanted to know how he perceived his brother's emotions regarding the event. He continued:

He sounded very frightened. He isn't one to be shaken but he was pretty shaken by it. With a group of people that you trust and they're like, "Hey, put this bag on your head," and then it gets really serious. "I thought we were having a good time here," and they're like, "Oh we're going to have a good time. Put this bag on your head," kind of thing.... Middle of the night, threw him in a van, car whatever, and took him up into the mountains. They were like, "Alright, you guys need to survive the night. Here's a bunch of booze, you need to have that killed by the time we get back." And of course when they (pledging brothers)

get back and they're like, "Fuck you guys, what the hell is this?" They're (active brothers) just like... "It's just a prank, bro!" Like, "We didn't mean that you actually had to do it!"

In this description, Travis's friend was kidnapped and transported to another location and told that they had to drink a large amount of alcohol. However, when confronted by the recruited members, active members discounted the entire event as a "prank," and shirked responsibility for the incident. After this event, Travis's friend dropped out of pledging this fraternity and instead joined Travis's current fraternity.

### **Hazing in High School**

While the majority of personal accounts of hazing occurred during college (n=9), this was not the case for all respondents. Martha's account of a hazing tradition for new members of the softball team during her junior year of high school, well before attending college. Martha, a member of a club sports team, told me that her parents had been aware of the activities, which started by the veteran team members blindfolding and kidnapping new members in the middle of the night. The softball team recruits were then dressed up in baggy clothing to resemble "hobos" with coffee grounds and Vaseline smeared on their faces to resemble beards, which they had to wear at school until their afternoon softball practice. In addition to the outfit, the recruits wore disparaging signs around their necks. Martha's sign read: "Feed me, I have no money," because the coach knew that she "loved food." Further, Martha stated that the event was posted on social media and was, "All over Facebook the whole day," including numerous pictures of the new members dressed up as vagrants with their signs.

### **How Do Experiences of Hazing Influence How Students Think About Hazing?**

Directly experiencing or witnessing hazing behaviors did not seem to have an adverse effect on respondents in this study. For instance, Martha, who was hazed during high school as part of her membership on a sports team stated that "Looking back, it was just as harmless as it felt," and she explained that she was not negatively emotionally or psychologically impacted by the event. This experience and the lack of harm that she associates with it could influence how she perceives other acts of hazing, particularly when thinking about her susceptibility of harm in further hazing activities (Campo et al., 2005). This means that based on her own experience of hazing, which she considers to be harmless, she could be acceptable of more dangerous hazing in the future. In addition, this could lead her to perceive future hazing events that others experience as benign or harmless, as well (Campo et al., 2005). In a future situation of hazing, this belief could impact whether she formally reports the incident or if she even seeks help in dangerous hazing situations.

Similarly, Steven who had experienced pervasive hazing throughout his recruitment and initiation experience, still chose to subject new members to hazing behaviors, perpetuating a cycle in which those who are hazed later become hazers to new recruits. This finding is supported by and reinforces the existing literature that documents the cyclical nature of hazing (Campo et al., 2005; Keating et al., 2005; Nuwer, 1990; Sweet, 1999).

While these narratives are similar in their assessment of the harmfulness of hazing, this is not true for all respondents. While those who personally experienced hazing generally did not indicate they were strongly negatively harmed or affected, many who provided secondhand accounts of hazing were unsure whether what they had witnessed actually constituted hazing. Laura, who described experiencing fraternity serenades at her sorority dinners, displayed uncertainty regarding what she had witnessed and experienced throughout the years with her

sorority. She stated, "I can't decide if it's hazing or not though... it's just been kind of a tradition for a lot of fraternities." In this statement, Laura exemplifies the idea of hazing as tradition, yet is clearly conflicted about whether this activity, which she has witnessed multiple times, should be considered hazing.

More concerned than Laura is Ruth, who witnessed male sports club team members challenging each other to consume more alcohol during their initial membership celebrations. She highlighted her uncertainty in what was considered typical group antics and what crossed the line into hazing territory. Ruth described these feelings by saying:

I think there is a very fine line between knowing [what hazing is and what hazing is not] and I wish that I knew better. What that line is of when you need to call and get him actual help, or if it's just one of those things where it's like, "give him a lot of water, he needs sleep."

This description indicates that Ruth is uncertain regarding what behaviors should be classified as hazing, and that she wants to "know better" and that she would potentially be receptive to receiving additional education and information about hazing. Laura and Ruth's narratives together show an uncertainty of what behaviors should be classified as hazing and problems students can experience when trying to spot hazing in real-life settings.

These narratives together show that respondents who have been hazed or have accounts of hazing do not feel strongly about their experiences in a particularly negative way. Ruth, the respondent who felt conflicted about the hazing that she witnessed, felt so out of confusion of what she should consider typical banter and horseplay and what is considered hazing and dangerous alcohol consumption. This finding may inform how those invested in hazing prevention and education should frame their tactics. It may not be enough to have a speaker discuss their own negative experiences of hazing, as these do not seem to strongly resonate with students, because their own experiences with hazing can negate or neutralize perceived harm associated with hazing. Instead, it may be useful to focus on the ways that "less harmful" or "benign" hazing activities create a foundation where more severe forms of hazing behavior can flourish.

Respondent narratives featured in this paper indicate that hazing ultimately take many common forms for students in fraternities, sororities, and club sports teams. Those in all three organizations indicate that they have either experienced or witnessed forced alcohol consumption; this prevalence echoes existing literature findings on this topic (Allan & Madden, 2012; Hoover & Pollard, 1999). However, there are also activities that seem to be specific to the organization type, such as being yelled/sworn/cursed at in Greek organizations, and being forced to wear embarrassing clothes in club sports teams, which supports existing literature on the behaviors common to certain groups (Workman, 2001). As the interview narratives suggest, those who experienced hazing do not consider their own experiences to have been harmful. Those who only witnessed hazing activities were not sure whether to classify the activity as hazing at all. This uncertainty replicates what exists in hazing literature (Allan & Madden, 2012; Hoover & Pollard, 1999; Kimbrough, 2007; Silveria & Hudson, 2015; Waldron & Kowalski, 2009). As such, no respondent who witnessed or experienced hazing reported it to their group's representative or another campus official, which is troubling due to the risks associated with hazing, especially behaviors like forced alcohol consumption.

## Discussion

In this study, I used a constructivist grounded theory paradigm to analyze qualitative data from respondents who are members of fraternities, sororities, and club sports teams. To

address a gap in the literature, I describe how students experience and understand hazing behaviors, as well as illuminating aspects of hazing in club sports teams which are generally understudied in research on hazing. This research contributes to the growing body of literature on this widespread and prevalent danger on college campuses. This project is unique however, as it is one of the few deep and nuanced studies of hazing in student organizations.

These narratives of hazing experiences demonstrate that hazing manifests as several common activities and that it exists in a variety of student organizations. Respondents who are in fraternities or sororities report being screamed, yelled, or cursed as part of their group, while those in club sports teams are forced to wear embarrassing clothes as part of their hazing activities. This build on and extends previous studies on fraternities and sororities (Allan & Madden, 2008, 2012; Campo et al., 2005) and also contributes to research on sports team hazing (Bryshun 1997; Hoover & Pollard 1999), specifically for club sports teams which is generally understudied.

Fraternity members (n=7) indicated experiencing hazing behaviors more so than those in sororities (n=2) or on club sports teams (n=4). Many hazing experiences (54%) were associated with group initiation or recruitment, which reinforces and contributes to hazing literature on rites of passage (Hoover & Pollard, 1999; Nuwer, 1990; Waldron & Kowalski, 2009; Sweet, 1999). Finally, forced alcohol consumption is a primary physical hazing activity, with over half of reports indicating this activity (57%; Allan & Madden, 2008; Campo et al., 2005).

Interestingly, most students who either directly experienced or witnessed hazing did not perceive their experiences harmful or dangerous. Instead, most respondents considered their hazing experiences as benign or harmless, which may influence how they respond if they witness hazing in the future (Campo et al., 2005). Importantly, this finding sheds light on a documented theme in hazing literature which Campo and colleagues (2005) describe as, “A clear discrepancy between self-identification as participating in hazing and participating in hazing as defined by university policy” (p. 146). Even when students experience distinct hazing, they do not consider themselves to have been hazed (Allan & Madden 2012; Campo et al., 2005; Hoover & Pollard, 1999; Kimbrough 2007; Silveria & Hudson 2015).

Similarly, no student who witnessed or experienced hazing reported this to their group’s leadership, university officials, or to authorities. This mirrors previous findings which suggest that reporting of these activities is quite low (Allan & Madden 2012; Hoover & Pollard 1999; Iverson & Allan 2003; Silveria & Hudson 2015). To explain their actions, respondents normalized and minimized the behaviors (e.g., “I didn’t consider it hazing,” “It was just as harmless as it seemed,”) as justifications for their participation in hazing and non-reporting of these behaviors to group or campus officials or leadership (Alexander & Opsal, 2020; Silveria & Hudson, 2015).

There are several key limitations of this research study to consider for future research. The first limitation of this kind of study is that it is not generalizable to the student body and therefore this study must be considered within its own context. However, my findings are valid as they correspond with many other studies looking at hazing in similar populations, as noted above. A second limitation relates to the demographic composition of this study, which was an entirely white sample. While the university of interest had a student population that was over 70 percent white during data collection, it is prudent to extend this kind of study to individuals from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds. Finally, while this was an exploratory study into Greek organizations and sports club teams, researchers must also investigate other groups on college campuses, such as marching band, ROTC, multicultural groups, and religious organizations to understand the similarities and differences in hazing behaviors that occur in these groups.

Because the majority (54%) of hazing experiences occurred as part of initiation or recruitment, policymakers and university officials must put their efforts to target these activities and opportunities early in the semester, or even before the semester which is the case for fraternity and sorority organizations. However, these efforts must also be sustained throughout the academic year as 46% of respondent hazing experiences occurred as part of continued membership and after the initial recruitment period was over.

University officials and stakeholders should also work to support and bolster student understanding of hazing policies and definitions, as well as how to navigate hazing reporting. As no students in this study who witnessed or learned of hazing reported the behavior to their university, this training and dissemination of hazing information must be coupled with clear reporting policies and procedures. Similarly, these findings suggest that universities should develop broad prevention strategies that target students in groups, as well as those who are not in student organizations, since witnessing or learning about hazing secondhand is also prevalent among respondents in this study. Finally, these findings suggest that using activities that are new for the entire group, such as supervised outdoor adventure courses are a way to achieve goals like team bonding and tradition without creating space for hazing behaviors to achieve these goals (Johnson & Chin, 2016).

Overall, this paper illustrated how students in organizations experience hazing in their groups on a college campus, and draw on these experiences to determine how they influence student perceptions of hazing, especially whether they consider it to be a harmful behavior that the university should work to prevent. This up-close perspective demonstrates how students understand their own experiences and accounts of hazing, and can yield more effective hazing prevention, particularly in highlighting behaviors that students often encounter or experience. Based on these results, I also provided specific policy recommendations for campus officials and policymakers who work to keep their campus communities healthy and safe and free from this kind of interpersonal violence.

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### Appendix A: List of Hazing Activities

1. Singing/chant by self or with select others in public in a situation that is not related to an event, rehearsal, or performance.
2. Forced participation in a drinking game.
3. Deprivation of sleep.
4. Being forced to eat or drink large amounts of food or nonalcoholic beverage.
5. Drinking large amounts of alcohol to the point of getting sick or passing out.
6. Being forced to perform or simulate sex acts with the same or opposite gender.
7. Being forced to wear embarrassing clothing
8. Forced participation in physical activities not related to the group's function.
9. Acting as a personal servant to other members.
10. Forced participation in the destruction or theft of property.
11. Tying up, taping, or confining members in a small space.
12. Paddling, whipping, or physically beating others.
13. Kidnapping or transporting and abandoning others.
14. Being forced to associate with specific people and not others.
15. Being yelled, cursed, or sworn at.

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