

The Label of Hazing and its Effect on the Perceived Severity of Peer Sexual Abuse

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Background

Hazing Trends

For research purposes, hazing has been defined as “any humiliating or dangerous activity expected of you to join a group, regardless of your willingness to participate” (Walsh, 2000, p. 14). Across the country, high-profile cases have been calling attention to the prevalent issue of dangerous hazing practices being used as a “rite of passage” (Johnson, 2011, p. 220) in order for young males to join a sports team, fraternity, or other member-based organization. In response, numerous reports have emerged detailing the sheer amount of high school and college level students who have experienced hazing. According to Walsh (2000), 48% of all high school respondents report having been subjected to hazing (p. 14). When Cantalupo (2014) measured just within organized groups, he found that 47% of high school participants and 55% of college participants had experienced hazing (p. 902).

While hazing can entail any form of abuse, the past decade has witnessed a dramatic rise in incidents that are sexually motivated in nature (Goodale, 2012). In comparison with about three incidents a decade ago, more than 40 high school athletes were sodomized with foreign objects by their teammates in over a dozen alleged incidents reported in 2014 (Cantalupo, 2014, p. 889). Furthermore, when administering a survey in which hazing incidents of a sexual nature were specifically left out, a number of students went out of their way to detail troubling sex-related hazing activities in the open-response section of the survey (Walsh, 2000, p. 14).

Additionally, among high school males, the Journal of Youth and Adolescence reports that 26% experience sexual violence from their male peers (Young, Grey, & Boyd, 2009, p. 1072). Other findings demonstrate that this abuse is often characterized by the targeting of younger students in hazing practices (Sawyer, Thompson, & Chicorelli, 2002, p. 23).

Sexual hazing scandals within schools present numerous consequences for both the victims and the schools where the incident occurred. Damage to youth victims can include experiencing symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (Lev-Wiesel & Besser, 2006, p. 46) and developing mental health problems in their adult life (Tewksbury, 2007, p. 28). Repercussions for schools can include intimidating prospective students (Chmelynski, 1997, p. 60) and facing backlash from negative publicity (DeMartini, 2016, p. 54).

Past Instances and How They Were Handled

Sexually abusive hazing incidents plague US schools, and it is important to address past instances and how they were handled. In a King County case, high school boys filmed the attempted penetration of a special needs student with a broom handle while other students held him down (Barnett, 2015, p. 3), resulting in second-degree rape charges against the perpetrators.

In a similar incident within the Mephram High football team, three older members assaulted three younger members with broomsticks, pinecones, and golf balls, resulting in at least one injury requiring surgery (Cantalupo, 2014, p. 934). According to Stuart (2013), the assailants carefully planned the attack by bringing the broomsticks used for penetration and stereos to muffle the sounds of the assault (p. 381). As of 2014, at least one of the Mephram High perpetrators had returned home on probation (Cantalupo, 2014, p. 935), sparking mass criticism regarding how the case was handled.

Another historically widely-criticized example of a failure to adequately punish sexually abusive hazers is the case of Alexander High School in Albany, Ohio, where eight freshmen were brutally “harassed and humiliated” in their locker room showers. After a four month investigation, assaulters were suspended from school, with the 18 year-old captain being ordered to perform community service (Chmelynski, 1997, p. 60). With instances such as these frequently resulting in suspensions and probation rather than felony convictions, questions have arisen as to why punishments tend to be so lenient in comparison with sexual assault cases unrelated to hazing practices.

Defining Hazing as Sexual Assault

Perpetrators often present the defense that the victim was a willing participant in the sexual abuse (Ruffins, 2006, p. 22); therefore, it is important to establish the legal classifications of sexually abusive hazing.

These hazing rituals should, according to numerous state laws, be punished by a judicial court and receive a harsh punishment. Hazing is illegal in 44 states, and research has demonstrated that sexual hazing specifically is likely to violate the law due to the fact that the consent of the participant is questionable, qualifying the incident as sexual assault (Allan, 2009, p. 37). Goodale (2012) describes homoerotic hazing as means of emasculating and humiliating the victim, establishing a hazer’s motivations as equivalent to that of a rapist. Under a 2005 law administered in Florida, consent need not be questioned when the hazer clearly sought to degrade and feminize the victim (Ruffins, 2006, p. 22). Furthermore, the level of emotional and social damage to the victim, as described by DeMartini (2016), equates sexual hazing victimization to sexual assault victimization (p. 54). Injuries sustained from sexual hazing, such as those that resulted from a University of Tennessee fraternity member being forced to pump wine into his rectum through an enema hose, are identical in terms of severity to those sustained from homosexual rape (Flanagan, 2014, p. 78). All of these contribute to the idea mutually agreed upon by hazing researchers that assaults such as these are not simply hazing incidents, but child sexual abuse (Khadaroo, 2014).

Perceptions of Hazing and the Lack of Sufficient Punishment

However, despite the fact that there is no distinction to be made between male-on-male sexual assault and sexual hazing, sexually abusive hazing incidents are rarely punished adequately. Even when cases have the rare opportunity of being taken to court, one quarter of the male victims failed to procedurally prevail (Stuart, 2013, p. 375).

Articles and studies have presented numerous insinuations as to why hazing often goes unpunished, and one of the most prevalent is that coaches, administrators, and other adults mishandle incidents at schools. Allan (2009) found that out of the hazing scandals that were discovered by officials, 25% of the coaches or organization advisors in charge of the program were aware of the group’s hazing behaviors (p. 2). Coaches contribute to the hazing culture by either dismissing cases as “harmless antics or pranks” or intentionally covering up alleged incidents by telling victims to “keep the issue quiet” and “not let this get out” (DeMartini, 2016, p. 53). Many have theorized that this is because hazing has become an expectation among staff (Johnson, 2011, p. 212), or even because the adults had experienced hazing themselves and

considered it a “rite of passage” (Goodale, 2012). Stuart (2013) claims that adults may rationalize hazing on an abstract level (p. 388), resulting in calls for coaches and administrators to be held accountable. However, in cases such as the previously mentioned King’s County sexual hazing scandal, the coaches were briefly placed on leave and then quickly reinstated (Barnett, 2015, p. 3). Actions such as these dissuade students from coming forward with information (Tkach, 2011, p. 13), demonstrating why it is necessary for researchers to understand why coaches and administrators minimize hazing; however, there is little to no research on this topic.

Additionally, administrators and schools as a whole contribute to the lack of resources for victims of sexual athletic hazing. Schools have historically defended themselves by claiming they have “no control” when it is off school grounds (Chmelynski, 1997, p. 60); however, studies show that school is the most common location of peer sexual victimization, rendering schools liable (Young et al., 2009, p. 1072). Consequences of adults mishandling hazing include their failure to report the crimes to the police. For example, when a locker room incident was reported as a sexual assault to high school officials on September 14th, the police were not notified until the victim’s grandmother called an officer on November 10th (Tkach, 2011, p. 13).

Furthermore, another theory that has been proposed as to why hazing seems to “operate above the law and beyond reproach” is that students themselves minimize hazing due to the tolerant atmosphere at school (Johnson, 2011, p. 203). First, victims face extreme social backlash when coming forward with claims of sexually abusive hazing. Schools often shift blame onto victims (Flanagan, 2014, p. 72), and as a result, victims can develop posttrauma due to the negative reactions of people around them (Yamawaki, Darby, & Queiroz, 2007, p. 41). Teams and groups also have “cultures of silence” (Cantalupo, 2014, p. 907) discouraging members from coming forward with allegations of sexual hazing. In fact, 13% of poll respondents report being forced to remain silent about their hazing experiences (“Officer charged”, 2005, p. 3).

As a result, victims often deny victimization (Tewksbury, 2007, p. 25) and make light of the situation (Johnson, 2011, p. 203) in order to avoid backlash. They may even see the situation as an opportunity to certify their masculinity and prove themselves worthy (Strawhun, 2016, p. 51), effectively misunderstanding the coercion at play and underestimating the severity of their own assault. Consequently, studies show that 95% of hazing victims did not report the event to officials (Allan, 2009, p. 2).

Essentially, multiple sources allege that there is an issue with students and the adults surrounding them minimizing the severity of sexually abusive hazing, but there is no research as to why this occurs. Clear sexual assaults are often viewed as a team matter, resulting in schools labelling incidents as “misbehavior” and “inappropriate physical conduct” rather than revealing that a student had reported being sexually assaulted, minimizing the severity of the attack (“Sex assaults”, 2017). The question then arises as to whether the label of hazing itself alters how students and school-employed adults perceive male-on-male peer sexual abuse, and whether these perceptions minimize the severity of the incident, thus resulting in a school atmosphere where incidents frequently go unpunished and are viewed as harmless antics or pranks. Thus, the purpose of this study was to measure whether students and adults tend to excuse sexually abusive behavior when it is referred to as hazing, and to isolate the variables that may account for why this occurs. Additionally, the study seeks to determine whether certain demographic subgroups are more likely than others to excuse the behavior.

Method

Measures

A questionnaire with 15 items was comprised of 7 demographic questions and a passage excerpt, followed by 8 questions measuring perceptions on the content of the passage. The demographic questions consisted of items such as gender, ethnicity, and school involvement. The following 8 items were statements in which participants could rate the level to which they agreed with the statement from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”, resulting in a 7-point Likert scale.

The control questionnaire consisted of a passage depicting an incident where an 18 year-old male sexually assaulted a 15 year-old male, while the experimental group was given the same passage but with the explanation that it was a hazing ritual to guarantee membership on the football team. Both included the fact that the 15 year-old was held down while the 18 year-old sodomized him with a broomstick and various other items. Questions measured perceptions including victim blame, perceived criminality of the incident, willingness to report, and whether the participant viewed the incident as sexually motivated.

Procedure

The questionnaire was distributed to approximately 200 high school students, aged 14 to 18, and approximately 100 school-employed adults. The location was Lewis and Clark High School in Spokane, Washington, and parental consent was obtained before distribution for all students. Prior to distribution, the questionnaire underwent an approval process with the school’s principal and an additional administrator. It was administered electronically and was completely anonymous. The link was provided to teachers, coaches, and other adult staff through a school-wide email. The link was provided via text to students only after they had submitted a written parental consent form that included a sexual assault trigger warning. Participants were randomly assigned to receive the link for either the control questionnaire or the experimental questionnaire.

Analyses

The purpose of this study was to address the gap in the research regarding the minimization of sexually abusive hazing. Thus, analyses were performed to measure whether the label hazing itself altered participants’ responses, as well as whether any demographic subgroups were more likely than others to excuse hazing behavior. Utilizing the software Statistical Package for the Social Sciences, the Likert scale responses (1 = *strongly disagree*, 7 = *strongly agree*) were coded to their corresponding point values. Additionally, the reverse scale questions were altered so that all 8 items were measured through points 1-7 (1 = *strongly agree*, 7 = *strongly disagree*). The control and experimental groups were coded as Condition 1 and Condition 2 in order to be able to measure the overall variation in responses between groups.

Results

Overall, 105 questionnaires were submitted online out of the approximately 100 adults that received the link and the approximately 200 students that received parent permission forms. Of these, 72 were students and 33 were school-employed adults. Among the adults, 31 identified as teachers, 2 identified as administrators, and 6 identified as coaches (respondents could mark more than one answer in this section). This translates to an approximate overall response rate of 35%. The response rate was low, as was expected, due to the fact that for the adults, the link was sent out in a mass email assigned as “optional”. For the students, they had to bring a signed parent permission form to school in order to receive the link, and most students did not have proper incentive to return the form. However, despite the low response rate, the sample size was still large enough to statistically analyze for results.

Utilizing the One Sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov test, the distribution was found to have departed from normal, as it was significantly skewed. As a result, a nonparametric approach was rendered necessary for proper analysis. The Mann-Whitney U test was used to test the effect of the study condition, which was including the hazing explanation in the sexual assault passage, on each of the 8 questionnaire items. After the Bonferroni adjustment for family-wise Type 1 error rates, the alpha level of significance was determined to be .006. Out of the 8 variables tested, a significant difference based on study conditions was only found for one variable-- the extent to which respondents viewed the scenario as sexually motivated. Control conditions had a median score of 5, while experimental hazing conditions had a median of 4, suggesting that adding the hazing explanation for the sexual assault resulted in people viewing the incident as less sexually motivated. Responding to the statement “The 18 year-old was sexually motivated to commit the act,” 34% of the experimental group either strongly disagreed or disagreed in comparison to only 19.2% of the control group. Thus, those that read the hazing passage were significantly more likely to minimize the sexual motivation behind the assault. It is also of note that there was greater variability leaning toward the lower end of the scale under experimental conditions. This suggests that a greater number of respondents were willing to rank sexual motivation as very low in the group that had the added hazing explanation in comparison to the group that did not.

When testing whether students, teachers, coaches, and administrators varied in their answers, administrators were left out due to the small sample size ($n = 2$). Utilizing the Kruskal-Wallis Test, it was found that there was a significant difference based on school role for the variable of sexual motivation. Teachers had a median of 4, or “neither disagree or agree”, when responding to “The 18 year-old was sexually motivated to commit the act”. Students had a median of 5, or “somewhat agree”, indicating that they were more likely than teachers to recognize the sexual motivation behind the act. Additionally, students were much more likely than teachers to strongly agree that the act was sexually motivated. As for the athletic department, 4 out of the 6 adults who identified as coaches either strongly disagreed, disagreed, or somewhat disagreed that the act was sexually motivated. Out of the groups of teachers, coaches, and students, the coaches were overall the most likely to believe that there was no sexual motivation behind the act.

The Kruskal-Wallis Test also unveiled another variable where responses were significantly different based on school role, and that was the likelihood to report the incident. Even though the majority of coaches did not view the incident as sexually motivated, all 6 of them strongly agreed that they would report the incident to their superiors. As for students, the

greater variability in their responses suggests that they would be more hesitant to report the incident to an adult at their school.

Additionally, several of the demographic variables were measured with the Mann-Whitney U Test, and none were found to have affected perceptions on the severity of the incident. There was no significant difference in responses based on gender, ethnicity, or sports participation. Spearman's Rank Order Correlation revealed that grade level also did not have an effect on responses. When testing the effect based on grade level for all 8 items on the questionnaire, the highest absolute value magnitude correlation coefficient was only .159.

Limitations

The small sample size was a limitation to this study, as a very small proportion of students returned their parent permission forms. However, these forms were necessary in order to protect the confidentiality of minors and to provide a sexual assault trigger warning for the passage. Future researchers should consider either providing an incentive for these students to return their signed forms or developing an online method for parents to give their permission. The small sample size of adults, specifically teachers and coaches, was also a limitation. In this study, the questionnaire was distributed to staff at only one school, and expanding this number could increase the sample size. Since only 6 coaches responded, future researchers should also consider providing the questionnaire directly to the athletic department rather than using the school as a mediator. Additionally, as a result of this small coach sample size, the finding that coaches failed to recognize the sexual motivation behind the act cannot be generalized to the population. The finding does suggest that coaches may minimize the sexual motivation behind the sexually abusive hazing rituals practiced by their players. However, much more research with significantly larger sample sizes must be published before coming to a conclusion on the matter.

Furthermore, the only statement that revealed a significant difference in responses when the hazing explanation was added was the question regarding sexual motivation. It is of note that this statement was the first item on the questionnaire following the passage. This may suggest that future research could benefit from counterbalancing questions in order to avoid latency and recency effects.

An additional limitation resides in the finding that there was no significant difference in responses based on gender. This finding is statistically significant, but it has limited generalizability due to the fact that a much larger number of females responded to the questionnaire than males. Out of the 105 participants, 75 were female and only 30 were male. This number is peculiar due to the fact that the questionnaire was distributed approximately evenly across genders.

Discussion

Minimizing Sexual Motivation

Past researchers have emphasized the idea that sexually abusive hazing is in fact sexually motivated, as the abuser often preys on a younger victim in order to humiliate and feminize them (Goodale, 2012). This type of behavior contributes to a culture of fear and assumed silence among sports teams, fraternities, and other groups in a way that is very similar to the

development of rape culture. Thus, the minimization of the sexual motivation behind hazing is a dangerous practice that can worsen the issue of schools failing to adequately punish sexual abuse incidents.

Multiple sources have alleged that students and adults alike fail to recognize male-on-male sexually abusive hazing as sexual abuse (Khadaroo, 2014), but up until this point there has been no research proving or disproving this idea. The results of this study indicate that when reading the details regarding a sodomy case, people view the incident as less sexually motivated when it is described as a hazing incident. In essence, the label of hazing itself alters people's perceptions on the severity of the incident, and makes them more likely to excuse the behavior. This finding suggests that labelling peer sexual abuse incidents within schools as hazing discounts the idea that the act was a sexual assault. Sexual assaults tend to be more severely punished in comparison with hazing cases that may not even be reported to the school or the police (Tkach, 2011, p. 13). Therefore, these findings suggest that people failing to understand the sexual motivation behind sexually abusive hazing exists as a reason why incidents at schools continue to increase and frequently go unpunished.

The implications of these results include that a possible way to combat sexually abusive hazing is to raise awareness on the sexual motivation behind the act. This awareness could help denounce the culture that calls a peer sexual assault case a "harmless antic or prank" (DeMartini, 2016, p. 53), potentially decreasing the number of cases that go unpunished and the victims that are often left with physical and psychological aftereffects. On a much more tangible level than working to denounce an established social and cultural norm among students and staff, these findings propose that simply labelling an incident as a sexual assault case rather than a hazing case can help combat sexually abusive hazing within schools. Staff members and administrators handling these cases should consider altering their language to match the legal terms of sexual assault rather than using colloquial terms such as "hazing" or "rite of passage". Potentially, recognizing certain hazing cases as peer sexual abuse can help schools work to denounce this harmful practice among their student groups.

Demographic Effects

In the majority of sexual abuse cases, males tend to assign less blame to the assailant and recommend less severe punishments than females do (Schneider, Mori, Lambert, & Wong, 2009, p. 418). It is important to note that although the results have limited generalizability, this study found no such difference in the way that males responded versus their female counterparts. This is a positive finding that indicates that males are no more likely to excuse sexually abusive hazing behavior than females, discounting several hazing stereotypes that suggest that males hold the majority of the blame when it comes to excusing inappropriate behavior.

Similarly, past research studies have found that high school students who participate in sports are more likely to excuse sexually abusive behavior (McMahon, 2015). However, the findings of this study indicate that concerning hazing behavior, the variable of sports involvement does not significantly alter responses. This implicates a much broader idea that preventative measures for hazing among sports teams should not be focused purely on the students and staff who are members of the athletic department, but on students and staff throughout the entire school.

Respondents' Role at School

Results of this study indicate that the students themselves are the most likely to recognize the sexual motivation behind sexually abusive hazing. This implies that although there is a harmful environment among students that promotes a code of silence in regards to hazing, students failing to recognize incidents as sexually motivated is not what contributes to its development. Future researchers should consider delving deeper into why students may minimize hazing practices.

In this study, it was the teachers and coaches that were less likely to view the incident as sexually motivated. The fact that the staff at the school were the ones who were most likely to minimize the sexual motivation behind hazing instances suggests that preventative measures must be addressed toward adults rather than just at students. Additionally, findings support the frequently claimed idea that coaches may excuse their athlete's hazing behavior. Additional research may be necessary to conclude why coaches fail to recognize the sexual motivation behind hazing and whether it is because the coaches were hazed themselves as students and consider it a rite of passage, as suggested by Goodale (2012). Nevertheless, these findings indicate that it may be necessary to educate staff members on how to recognize the sexual motivation behind sexually abusive hazing. As previously noted, this may be done simply by correctly labelling cases as sexual assaults rather than hazing incidents. However, it is important to take caution with these findings. Not only was the sample size small, but all 6 coaches indicated that they would not hesitate to report the case. This suggests that while there may be work to do in changing coaches' perceptions on the severity of hazing, the respondents still indicated that they would oblige with school policy and report the case to their superior. Further research should be done on this topic, as social desirability bias may account for these results as well.

Willingness to Come Forward

Findings suggest that students may be hesitant to report the event to an adult at their school. This certifies the idea that sexually abusive hazing may go unpunished due to the code of silence among students that discourages them from acknowledging their abuse. These results implicate that it is of utmost importance to determine a method that persuades students to report cases of hazing. Future research should attempt to reveal an effective prevention method that works to diminish the negative backlash that frequently accompanies a student reporting a hazing assault. The findings of this study imply that in order to combat the dangerous practice of sexually abusive hazing, students and adult staff alike must learn to recognize sexually abusive hazing as sexual assault. Simply referring to incidents as sexual assaults rather than labelling them as hazing may be the first step in condemning the culture that continues to enable this behavior.

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