

# Fraternity Hazing and the Process of Planned Failure

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American fraternities have long engaged in hazing, subjecting their prospective members to curious and painful ordeals. Many fraternities also appear to incorporate planned failure within their inductions: near-impossible tasks where failure is punished with hazing. This paper provides evidence for the widespread use of planned failure in fraternities, describing its application in a modern hazing fraternity and presenting evidence of planned failure in other fraternities using interviews and decades of scholarly and non-scholarly accounts of hazing. Discussion is focussed on possible explanations for the existence and persistence of this ostensibly core feature of fraternity inductions.

Hazing – the abuse of new or prospective group members – is a common cross-cultural phenomenon with a significant time depth.<sup>1</sup> For its recipients, hazing can be deeply unpleasant and may consist of torturous ordeals or servile labor. Hazing is defined here as the generation of costly induction experiences (i.e. some part of the sundry activities required to be recognized as a “legitimate” group member) that do not appear to be group-relevant assessments or preparations.<sup>2</sup> This definition exists to separate induction

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth J. Allan and Mary M. Madden, “The Nature and Extent of College Student Hazing,” *International Journal of Adolescent Medicine and Health*, 24, 1 (2012), 83–90; Jack Haas, “The Stages of the High-Steel Ironworker Apprentice Career,” *Sociological Quarterly*, 15, 1 (1974), 93–108; Gilbert H. Herdt, ed., *Rituals of Manhood: Male Initiation in Papua New Guinea* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1998); Carlos Linhares de Albuquerque and Eduardo Paes-Machado, “The Hazing Machine: The Shaping of Brazilian Military Police Recruits,” *Policing & Society*, 14, 2 (2004), 175–92; Robert S. McCarl Jr., “Smokejumper Initiation: Ritualized Communication in a Modern Occupation,” *Journal of American Folklore*, 89, 351 (1976), 49–66; Alice Schlegel and Herbert Barry, “Adolescent Initiation Ceremonies: A Cross-cultural Code,” *Ethnology*, 18, 2 (1979), 199–210; James Diego Vigil, “Street Baptism: Chicano Gang Initiation,” *Human Organization*, 55, 2 (1996), 149–53.

<sup>2</sup> This is an operational definition and not a claim about the “true nature” of hazing. Indeed, the hypotheses explored in this paper suggests ways in which hazing may be group relevant to fraternities. That said, hazing has attracted the attention of academics and policymakers because it appears unjustified and in need of explanation. This definition is an attempt to demarcate the induction practices that prompt such first-order intuitions.

experiences that appear necessarily unpleasant (e.g. enduring exhausting calisthenics to become a firefighter) from those that appear arbitrarily unpleasant (e.g. enduring exhausting calisthenics to become a college fraternity member). Within the social sciences, numerous functional and symbolic characteristics have been attributed to hazing and hazing-inclusive phenomena (e.g. formal initiations).<sup>3</sup>

This paper exists to advance the understanding of American fraternity hazing by (a) identifying a heretofore unexamined component of said hazing, (b) providing evidence of its widespread prevalence, and (c) offering principled speculations regarding its purpose and effects on hazingees. This is distinct from proposing an overarching theory of hazing or rites of passage,<sup>4</sup> or an overarching theory of fraternity hazing itself.<sup>5</sup> Note that hazing within fraternities is simultaneously common and poorly understood. There is a dearth of detailed, synthetic accounts of fraternity hazing that focus on establishing and explaining similarities in content or context across many different fraternity hazing processes.<sup>6</sup> Thus there is an abiding need to examine fraternity hazing systematically, unpacking and making a case for some important set of phenomena to be explained.

Using my fieldwork with a United States college fraternity, interviews with members of other fraternities, and a variety of accounts of fraternity hazing, I examine an ostensibly common feature of fraternity inductions: planned failure. Planned failure occurs when a task is assigned to a new or prospective member that is specifically designed to induce failure. Planned failure, for fraternities, may be one of the primary means by which hazing is deployed and justified.

<sup>3</sup> See review in Aldo Cimino, "The Evolution of Hazing: Motivational Mechanisms and the Abuse of Newcomers," *Journal of Cognition and Culture*, 11 (2011), 241–67.

<sup>4</sup> For example, Robert B. Cialdini, *Influence: Science and Practice*, 4th edn (Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon, 2001); Arnold van Gennep, *Les rites de passage*, trans. Monika B. Vizedom and Gabrielle L. Caffee (University of Chicago Press, 1960; first published Paris, France: É. Nourry, 1909); Frank W. Young, *Initiation Ceremonies: A Cross-cultural Study of Status Dramatization* (Indianapolis, IN: Bobbs-Merrill, 1965).

<sup>5</sup> Such as the creation of a masculinized identity. Brandy Taylor, *Disrupting Fraternity Culture: Folklore and the Construction of Violence against Women* (Boca Raton, FL: Dissertation.com, 2010); Peggy Reeves Sanday, *Fraternity Gang Rape: Sex, Brotherhood, and Privilege on Campus* (New York: New York University Press, 2007; first published 1990).

<sup>6</sup> For example, Alan Dundes and Lauren Dundes, "The Elephant Walk and Other Amazing Hazing: Male Fraternity Initiation through Infantilization and Feminization," in Alan Dundes, ed., *Bloody Mary in the Mirror: Essays in Psychoanalytic Folkloristics* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2002), 95–121.

## ALPHA AND THE NATURE OF FRATERNITY INDUCTIONS

“Alpha” is a pseudonymous United States college social fraternity. For approximately twenty months I maintained a research relationship with Alpha and was allowed to observe any weekly meetings that occurred as well the intense hazing process associated with new members. The initial goal of my project was to directly observe and survey multiple fraternities about their initiation practices. While I was aware of the avowed secrecy attached to hazing, I assumed that I could eventually earn the trust of many different hazing fraternities.<sup>7</sup> I advertised my project by putting up fliers, giving brief presentations at the beginning of classes, and personally inviting individuals in the Greek community to participate. Despite considerable effort, only a single fraternity agreed to be a part of my project: Alpha. (Non-Alpha fraternity members were continually surprised that *any* fraternity had allowed my presence.) Thus my project became a detailed, strict accounting of Alpha’s hazing process. Alpha agreed to allow me to observe their practices with the understanding that I would use no audio or video recording devices and make a monthly donation to the chapter (donations varied, but were typically a hundred or two hundred dollars). As such, my time with Alpha was observational: I did not participate in the hazing of pledges (i.e. inductees); I was not hazed myself; and prior to this study, I had no association with Alpha (or any other fraternity), formal or otherwise. I was allowed to observe all of Alpha’s pledging events, with the following caveats. (1) A few events were multi-chapter gatherings (I did not have permission to observe other chapters) or conflicted with available time or scheduling. (2) Parts of some events were straightforward calisthenics after a formal event had been completed (e.g. a run with a single member following the pledges). I did not directly observe these calisthenics sessions. (3) Although Alpha has a “standardized” induction process, there is variation across induction periods based on pragmatics and the opinions of whatever member is placed in charge of the induction.<sup>8</sup> Thus some events were not witnessed simply because they were not used during my observation period. Any events that I did not directly observe due to scheduling conflicts, multi-chapter gatherings, and so on were explained to me in detail by members of Alpha. Throughout this paper, any Alpha ordeal that I did not observe firsthand will have an asterisk(\*).

<sup>7</sup> In the manner of Milton Glenn Walker, “Organizational Type, Rites of Incorporation, and Group Solidarity: A Study of Fraternity Hell Week,” *Dissertation Abstracts International: Section A. Humanities and Social Sciences*, 29, 2 (1968), 689.

<sup>8</sup> According to my primary informant, Alpha’s induction process is orally transmitted and has no written, canonical version. (My primary informant, “Thomas” was the Alpha member with whom I had the greatest rapport: a senior member who talked to me at length about how the group functioned.)

Finally, it should be noted that pledging a modern college fraternity, including Alpha, cannot be fully encapsulated into formal, circumscribed pledging events. Especially as the pledging process reaches its climax, pledges are called in at odd hours by fraternity members, spend time with other pledges to prepare for ordeals, and manage many other aspects of fraternity life. I did not (and could not) directly observe all of these happenings.

Paradoxically, the mere fact that Alpha allowed my presence may suggest that it is not a good exemplar of fraternities or fraternity hazing. As such, the primary argument of this paper (that planned failure may be common among fraternities) does not rely exclusively on observations from Alpha. The second half of this paper contains supporting interview data from members of other, non-Alpha fraternities as well as numerous accounts of American fraternity hazing.

Hazing is presently illegal in most US states and is against the explicit rules of Alpha's associated university and national organization. As a result, my agreement with Alpha bars me from discussing identifying details of the fraternity, including its real name, precise location, racial makeup, and other demographic characteristics. (By extension, my agreement also bars me from generating any rich ethnography of Alpha, as doing so might inadvertently identify the chapter. Consequently, the discussion of Alpha's induction process will not be situated within a detailed description of the organization's day-to-day existence.)

Alpha shares many features common to United States fraternities, including the broad outlines of its induction process.<sup>9</sup> Like most modern fraternities, Alpha's induction process has two major stages: rush period and pledge period. During rush, the fraternity attempts to attract and preselect prospective members for the fraternity. Rush activities are typically parties or social gatherings that are designed to highlight the positive aspects of fraternity membership (e.g. male camaraderie and access to women). At the conclusion of rush, preferred rushees are given "bids"; that is, formal offers to join the fraternity's official induction process and become "pledges." The pledging process is divided into a number of events with the professed purpose of socializing pledges into the fraternity. (For some fraternities – including Alpha – pledging events are largely hazing events.) At the successful completion of

<sup>9</sup> See examples in James Allen Rhodes, "Selected Factors Related to the Scholarship of Undergraduate Men Living in Fraternity Houses at the Pennsylvania State University," at <http://search.proquest.com/docview/302361603>; John Svaan, "The Effect of Fraternity Hazing on College Socialization," *Dissertation Abstracts International: Section A. Humanities and Social Sciences*, 27 (1967), 3518; James Berlyn Whitehead, "Fraternity Objectives and Programs at Indiana University: A Description and Evaluation," at <http://search.proquest.com/docview/302544855>.

pledging, pledges are ritually initiated into the fraternity and become “actives” (i.e. non-alumni members).

Alpha’s rush period is approximately two weeks in length and consists of four to six activities, while its pledge period is approximately eight to ten weeks long, with two to three pledging events per week. The final week of pledging breaks from this schedule and consists of multiple pledging events each day. Every pledging event is mandatory for all pledges and lasts three to four hours, though there appears to be considerable variation. All active members are typically present for pledging events. One or more actives are designated as leaders for all or part of a given event. It is the job of the leaders to explicitly direct and assess the behavior of pledges. (Other actives may do so informally, however.) Alpha’s pledging events usually have a tripartite appearance:

1. Line-up. Garbed in identical, loose-fitting attire, pledges line up in front of actives. They announce their designated pledge class name (a set of Greek letters) and stand at attention. In doing so, they adopt a ritualistic stance called “Alpha stance.” (Alpha stance is mildly uncomfortable over long periods of time, but is not an ordeal.) During line-up, the event’s designated leaders may critique and punish the pledges for perceived social violations since the last event or may simply move directly to warm-up.
2. Warm-up. Various calisthenics are usually performed at the beginning of pledging events. These include common exercises (e.g. push-ups, sit-ups) and less common exercises that I am forbidden from identifying. The term “calisthenics” suggests mild and quotidian exercises, but the calisthenics used by Alpha can be profoundly exhausting and occasionally involve physical trauma. Additionally, because pledges are usually barred from consuming water during events, Alpha’s calisthenics can be particularly unpleasant.
3. Ordeals. Alpha’s ordeals show a great deal of variation across events. In brief, ordeals typically involve a host of difficult calisthenics and the ingestion of noxious food items, but may also include exposure to cold, water intoxication, and long running events. Most importantly for this paper, many ordeals are centered in some way around Alpha’s “pledge book.”

## PLANNED FAILURE

To reiterate, planned failure is when a task is assigned that is specifically designed to induce failure. The way in which “failure” is created, however, can be quite variable. For Alpha, the pledge book is where planned failure begins. Alpha’s pledge book enumerates the goals and ideals of the fraternity

and provides general guidelines for pledge behavior.<sup>10</sup> Pledges are required to memorize items from the pledge book, including other chapter names and founding dates, past presidents, pledge classes, and oaths or mottos. During ordeals, pledges may be tasked with reciting any number of items from the pledge book. Judging by the performance of pledges during events and by my conversations with actives, the memorization of pledge book items is difficult. (Many items are simply names and dates, and as such are difficult to retain in memory.) Perhaps the most telling demonstration of this difficulty is that actives often refer to the pledge book to check the answers that pledges provide them. Thus even members who have necessarily completed the pledging process – and have inducted pledges in the past – still require some assistance in recalling pledge book items.

Failure to correctly recite pledge book items within the patience of the leading active(s), usually a matter of seconds, leads to hazing of some sort – most commonly calisthenics and the loud, collective disapproval of the actives. A significant portion of the hazing experienced by pledges is explicitly justified by their failure to correctly recite information from the pledge book. However, “correctly” reciting information from the pledge book is made purposefully difficult and sometimes effectively impossible.

For Alpha, “correctness” has multiple dimensions. Pledges must speak the items loudly and clearly, and they must not mispronounce any word. Even a single mistake in a long series of correct recitations can be met with hazing. Further, recitation tasks are often split up between pledges, with mistakes from one pledge creating hazing ordeals for all pledges. Pledges must also announce their answers in the proper manner (e.g. with an appropriate honorific such as “sir”). During their recitation, they must sometimes perform calisthenics or simply adopt an awkward and tiring physical position. While meeting these criteria is difficult, the conditions are made more trying by the nature of the pledging process. Pledges are typically exhausted and thirsty, and are variably nauseated, confused, cold, sleep-deprived, or simply in the throes of pain. Thus, even if they “know” the answer to a question, they may be unable to produce the answer quickly or clearly. Any violation along any dimension of correctness may be cited as a justification for further hazing. Making matters more difficult, the dimensions of correctness are not uniformly enforced by actives. Some actives appear to ignore violations along one dimension while emphasizing violations along another. Because multiple actives are typically involved in any given pledging event, the

<sup>10</sup> These are common features of pledge books. See Alan Winthrop Johnson, “A Survey and Evaluation of Pledge Training in Three Undergraduate Social Fraternities for Men,” master’s thesis, University of California at Los Angeles, 1941.

idiosyncratic standards of actives can generate additional confusion and failure among pledges. Thus pledges may believe that they are reciting a pledge book item correctly, only to be faced with a different leading active who decides that the pledges have failed (e.g. they are not reciting items loud enough or fast enough).

If pledges manage too many successful answers, actives may increase the difficulty of the questions asked, if necessary going so far as to ask for the number of commas or periods on a given page of the pledge book. (These are not facts that pledges are asked to memorize.) Such extreme measures are rarely needed: pledging events are rife with incorrect recitations.

### THE ELUSIVE NATURE OF SUCCESS IN PLEDGING EVENTS

Even given the multiple dimensions of correctness and idiosyncratic preferences among actives, it is nonetheless true that pledges sometimes answer a string of questions correctly and that providing correct answers is preferable to incorrect answers. Correct answers are met with at least the brief approval of the actives. Further, because most pledging events seem to have an approximate target duration, providing correct answers can reduce the net time during which pledges are exposed to ordeals. This is especially true early in the pledging process, as early events are less difficult and actives are more willing to allow for a succession of correct answers.

However, in some cases correct answers only provide the appearance of reducing net exposure to hazing ordeals. For instance, one pledging event features an ordeal during which pledges must answer questions from the pledge book. Each incorrect answer requires a bite of a noxious food item as punishment.<sup>11</sup> This food item tends to generate intense nausea and vomiting, especially when bites are taken in quick succession. By correctly answering questions, pledges appear to be reducing the overall unpleasantness of the ordeal. Unbeknownst to the pledges, however, the event requires that all food items be completely ingested by its conclusion. Thus successful recitations only redistribute the eating process to the end of the event, wherein pledges are simply tasked with finishing whatever food remains. (By succeeding earlier in the event, pledges may be creating an ordeal for themselves that is more unpleasant, as doing so concentrates the inevitable eating into a shorter and more intense period.)

Another Alpha event uses a similar format with a different (though equally nauseating) food item. Again, in this event, the objective is to recite items from

<sup>11</sup> My agreement with Alpha requires that I withhold certain aspects of their hazing practices, including the specifics of the nauseating food fed to pledges.

the pledge book, with mistakes punished with bites of noxious food. In one performance of this event, I witnessed a visiting alumnus lecture a pledge. He emphasized to the suffering pledge that if the pledge had simply learned the pledge book – if he had performed well – he would not be suffering. Strictly speaking, this was untrue – the event secretly requires that pledges consume a nontrivial quantity of noxious food. The questions that pledges must answer are simply the method by which this predefined quantity is delivered and justified. Had the pledge in question provided only correct answers, the actives would have worked to make sure that he subsequently failed.

While most Alpha pledging events are designed to allow for at least some success, a few events allow only for failure. For instance, one event requires that pledges be brought into a room individually, surrounded by actives, and subjected to heavy calisthenics and intimidation. At multiple points during this event, actives question the pledge. Inevitably, all answers are wrong and the pledge is screamed at and punished. Another event requires that pledges cook a dinner for actives. No matter the quality of the dinner, the actives feign disgust and outrage at the poor dinner they have received from the pledges\*. Yet another event requires that pledges perform hundreds of push-ups in a single night\*. Even though this event is a mandatory component of the pledging process (and always occurs around the same time), the entire event is typically framed as a punishment for pledge misbehavior, even when such misbehavior is nonexistent and must be manufactured. Finally, during many events, actives will yell out incorrect answers or distracting statements, hoping to prompt a mistaken recitation from a pledge.

Within pledging events, failure is not merely what occurs prior to hazing. Even the hazing ordeals themselves have implied failure conditions, all of which may generate more hazing by actives. Recall that most of Alpha's hazing is inflicted via calisthenics or the ingestion of noxious food. Both hazing methods are dose-dependent in their severity and capable of generating relatively uncontrollable failure states (i.e. muscle failure and vomiting), and these failure states are sometimes punished by actives. But consider the precursors to these failure states: physical exhaustion leads to slow and ineffectual exercises, while food-driven nausea leads to a natural hesitance to consume further. Both precursors inspire the ire of actives, who are continually disappointed by pledges. Such disappointment appears an emergent theme of most pledging events and typically manifests itself in yelling or the application of additional ordeals. Actives commonly proclaim that the tasks given to pledges are simple and easy, making the pledges' performance all the more pathetic. Having witnessed some of these same actives struggle through their pledging process, I know that their claims are exaggerated. However, pledges are always given the impression that they are particularly incompetent.



Given all of the ways for pledges to fail and all of the seemingly recursive failures that may follow, it may appear as though there is a great deal of variance in hazing severity that is dependent upon pledge performance. However, as suggested above, each of Alpha's pledging events has an associated baseline severity level. That is, actives have a shared representation of how unpleasant each event should be, at minimum, and generally do whatever is required to obtain this severity level. Thus, while some events allow for poor pledge performance to increase the overall severity, there are no events that allow for good pledge performance to decrease the severity below the (usually significant) baseline. This fact is always kept secret from pledges.

### EVIDENCE OF PLANNED FAILURE IN NEIGHBORING FRATERNITIES

I have thus far described basic features of Alpha's induction process, which is rife with hazing and planned failure. But to what extent is Alpha representative of other hazing fraternities? Generally, fraternity members are deeply secretive about hazing, especially given the aforementioned legality concerns. Thus, while I was able to make an arrangement with Alpha to allow my presence, other fraternities I spoke to completely rejected the idea of my presence during their secretive pledging activities, even given promises of anonymity. I was, however, able to perform a number of semi-structured interviews with individuals associated with several neighboring, non-Alpha fraternities. These interviews were used to flesh out my understanding of life in other Greek-letter societies. Participants were recruited through anthropology courses and offered course credit to anonymously describe their experiences in Greek life (e.g. what they enjoyed, how their organization was run). One topic of the interviews was pledging and initiation.

Below are six interviewees from five to six different fraternities (one would not identify his fraternity). They were selected because they had been hazed by their fraternity and exposed to their entire pledging process, and had consented to be at least partially quoted (they are labeled as belonging to the pseudonymous fraternities F1–F6). One of these individuals ("John") was a student in an anthropology section I taught as a teaching assistant. Another ("Steve") was a student in one of my anthropology classes. Others were not my students (or I do not recall them as such). All interviewees agreed to speak with me with the understanding that their names, chapter names, and fraternity names would be kept confidential.

Because the interviews were semi-structured, the precise manner in which the topic of planned failure was brought up varied. It is important to understand that I am asking these interviewees about illegal and secretive activities. To build rapport and establish my status as an insider, I used slang from the

fraternity community, spoke as casually as possible, and employed expletives and humor. In all cases, I have given the immediately preceding question or discussion to add context. Keep in mind that the criteria for planned failure have been taken from Alpha. To be a probable instance of planned failure, pledges must be asked to perform a task that is likely to induce failure, because either the task is intrinsically impossible, the conditions of the task make failure nigh-inevitable (e.g. heavy intoxication, sleep deprivation), or the task's execution is evaluated in an arbitrary and punitive manner by actives.

"John", a student in one of my sections, described the hazing process of F1, outlining similar practices to Alpha:

- AC: So, for actual [pledging events], was it common for you to be quizzed during events [on the pledge book]?
- John: Yeah.
- AC: Would you say it was a small, moderate, or large part of each event?
- John: Probably moderate amount of each event.
- AC: Was it like, "Okay, you can avoid doing fifty push-ups or whatever if you recite this correctly?"
- John: Yeah, essentially yeah.
- AC: But then they like, try to fuck you up anyway?
- John: Of course, yeah, of course. Like you never get off easy. Doesn't matter whether you have the whole fucking [pledge] book memorized. You're obviously going to be doing some shit.

"Mark," of F2, indicated that planned failure was used in "every single [pledging] event" in his fraternity, and described one event in detail, where pledges were tasked with memorizing and then reciting the fraternity's creed in front of the actives:

- AC: So, do you ever set it up so they're bound to fail –
- Mark: Oh yeah.
- AC: at least once?

I did not have permission to publish Mark's direct quote that followed. But, to paraphrase, he described how his fraternity specifically designed the event so that pledges were guaranteed to fail multiple times.

"Adam" of F3:

- AC: Were you ever given tasks as a pledge that seemed like they were designed to make you fail?
- Adam: Um ... no, I don't think I was ever given anything that was too impossible. [Though] we once tried to build an indoor slide. [Recounts tale of being personally asked to build an indoor slide by the actives. Adam regarded this as very difficult.]

AC: So maybe I should elaborate then. By “designed to make you fail,” I mean that they are either so difficult that you cannot help but underperform, or evaluated in a way that is entirely unfair. Like, you told me that they were always telling you that you weren’t cleaning good enough, you weren’t performing well enough, so it seemed like there was a bar, and there was no way to actually reach it.

Adam: Yeah, yeah. They’re basically just a negative reinforcement, trying to make us clean better, act like we’re not good enough. And then basically at the end when you get initiated they’re like, “yeah, you made it, yeah”. [You say] “[What’s with] all that stuff you said I wasn’t good enough,” [and they say] “Yeah, we were just giving you a hard time.”

“Jeremy” of F4 also noted that planned failure was used in his induction process:

AC: Were you ever given tasks, as a pledge, that seemed like they were designed to make you fail? And let me explain what I mean. So one way that they could be designed to make you fail is if they ask you to do something that’s clearly impossible. Where it’s like, “okay, eat a fuckin’ thousand rabbits or whatever,” and you’re like “I can’t eat a thousand rabbits”... that’s one example. Another example of “designed to make you fail” is, alright, you’re sleep-deprived, it’s been three days, you can barely fuckin’ think coherently, and [the actives] are like “recite everything in the pledge book.” And you’re like “uhhhhh ...” you know, it’s clearly, your performance is not going to be optimal. That’s another way in which it can be designed to make you fail. Did you have situations like that?

Jeremy: There definitely are certain situations, yeah, that were designed to make us fail ... An example that I thought of from was, during my pledge quarter sometime, one active told me to do [something] to another active. And it was just a joke between them. But you know that, in the end, either you’re going to piss off that active by not doing it, or you’re going to piss off the other active by doing it.

AC: Right.

Jeremy: So that’s kind of, in a way, just causing you to fail, because you lose either way. But other than that, you know, during [the final week of pledging], there some things that ... they weren’t designed to make us fail, necessarily, they were just hard enough to where [the actives] know that a lot of [the pledges] are going to fail. They know a lot of [the pledges] are going to [succeed] also, but they know “oh, well, these amount of [pledges] are going to fail” and I think that’s kind of the mind game that they use. It’s because, if you [fail at] something, and your pledge brother [succeeds] ... [then you] just look like complete shit compared to your pledge brother. And it gives the actives an excuse to yell at the pledge or whatever.

“Steve” of F5 was a student in one of my classes. Steve knew of my interest in fraternity hazing and in planned failure prior to being an interviewee. (In this

particular class, I discussed fraternity hazing and mentioned planned failure.) He had completed a pledging process with multiple examples of planned failure, and offered up this example prior to me asking him about his own experiences with the phenomenon:

At one of the events, we had to take our red cup [from the fraternity house] and run to [a specific location], scoop sand and [run back to] fill up a bucket in the house. And we were timed for one lap, and we had to meet or beat that time for every future lap, until the bucket was filled. And every time you returned you had to fill up your red cup with beer and drink it ... So that was definitely set up so you would fail and get hazed further.

“Joe” of F6 suggested that some planned failure was used in his induction as well:

AC: Were you ever given tasks as a pledge – either impromptu or during formal pledging events – that seemed like they were designed to make you fail, or that they were, you know, basically impossible to do to the satisfaction of actives?

Joe: Yeah, I think there might have been a few. Just like, there were a few times where we had to do push-ups, right, and they would ask for, like, a ridiculous amount of pushups after we were already tired. And then

AC: Give me three hundred after you’ve done fifty?

Joe: Something like that, yeah. And then it would always be like [actives saying] “what kind of form is that?” and [we’re thinking] “we’ve already done like a hundred.” But other than that there was no like ... obvious “lose–lose” situations.

The above quotes suggest that a handful of neighboring, non-Alpha fraternities use at least some planned failure.<sup>12</sup> However, although fraternity members are secretive about hazing, it is logically possible that information has been shared among members of these different fraternities, directly or indirectly.<sup>13</sup> This might cause the hazing practices of Alpha and nearby fraternities to be correlated by virtue of their proximity, and unrepresentative of fraternities from other areas. One way to remedy this problem is to examine accounts of fraternity hazing across time and throughout the United States.

<sup>12</sup> Two interviewees not included here are worth noting. One appears to have been at least mildly hazed (he noted that he had to clean and run errands for actives). Though he seemed somewhat hesitant to discuss his induction, he stated nothing that directly indicated planned failure as part of his mild hazing. Another interviewee was from the same fraternity as Steve, and thus his inclusion would have been redundant. Like Steve, he indicated significant planned failure, noting that it was present in “pretty much everything” in his fraternity’s induction.

<sup>13</sup> For example, P. F. Piper, “College Fraternities,” *Cosmopolitan Magazine*, 22 (1897), 641–48.

## EVIDENCE OF PLANNED FAILURE IN FRATERNITY HAZING THROUGHOUT THE UNITED STATES

In unambiguous instances of planned failure in hazing, induction tasks are purposefully designed to generate failure which is then punished with hazing. However, this definition involves inferences about hazer intent – do hazers actually want hazees to fail? Most large-scale studies of hazing practices (including fraternities) have focussed on the relative prevalence of different ordeals.<sup>14</sup> While these studies have established that hazing is widespread, they do not allow for strong inferences about the context of hazing ordeals. This leaves scholarly and non-scholarly accounts of fraternity hazing. Such accounts do not typically have information about hazer expectations. Moreover, many brief accounts of hazing lack sufficient detail to even indirectly assess whether planned failure is present or absent (e.g. some indication of how pledges are evaluated). That said, in many cases the circumstances of hazing can be telling. The impossible tasks or arbitrary evaluations characteristic of planned failure seem to pop up throughout the relevant literature. Below I review a number of accounts of fraternity hazing that imply at least some use of planned failure. Because there is no systematic, representative sample of fraternity hazing accounts, the examples below are a convenience sample. The quotes given were taken from my reading of the available literature. Publication dates are given in brackets to show the time depth of each example.

[1941] Johnson surveyed a total of 136 chapters divided among Phi Delta Theta, Phi Gamma Delta, and Phi Kappa Psi.<sup>15</sup> The chapters were distributed widely in the United States, though three chapters were located in Canada. One section of Johnson’s survey queried the chapters on their methods of disciplining pledges. Johnson asked whether pledges were ever “urged or motivated to try to reach goals of any sort which are known to be utterly beyond the range of their abilities.”<sup>16</sup> Many chapters (~46 percent) indicated that they at least “sometimes” did so. In this case, the explicit connection to hazing is missing, as Johnson provides little information about the context of these disciplinary actions. However, there are other indications that fraternities of Johnson’s era were hazing with planned failure (see below).

<sup>14</sup> For example, drinking games. See Allan and Madden, “The Nature and Extent of College Student Hazing”; Nadine C. Hoover, “National Survey: Initiation Rites and Athletics for Ncaa Sports Teams,” Alfred University, at [www.alfred.edu/news/html/hazingpdf.html](http://www.alfred.edu/news/html/hazingpdf.html); Nadine C. Hoover and Norman J. Pollard, “Initiation Rites in American High Schools: A National Survey. Final Report,” at [www.alfred.edu/news/hazing\\_\\_study.pdf](http://www.alfred.edu/news/hazing__study.pdf).

<sup>15</sup> Johnson.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

[1946] Stone described the final week of pledging in a California chapter of Alpha Tau Omega, which may have included planned failure:

Pledges are instructed to do anything that members tell them. *The pledges are paddled for little or no reason.* They are made to appear as ridiculous as possible by various devises. There is continual loud shouting by members to keep the pledges in a state of anxiety and worry as to what they have done to anger the members.<sup>17</sup>

[1959] Butler examined pledge treatment in six anonymous Kansas fraternities.<sup>18</sup> In three of the fraternities, he noted that pledges found it “impossible to live up to the expectations of the active members.”<sup>19</sup> Butler explained that pledges of these groups were “often bewildered by the many actives’ various interpretations of the rules,”<sup>20</sup> and indicated the use of seemingly arbitrary punishments.<sup>21</sup>

[1965] Golburgh presented the experiences of an unnamed pledge at an unnamed fraternity.<sup>22</sup> The pledge seemed to summarize his general experience, writing, “I was on alert to carry out the next command that would be bellowed at me. *No matter how precisely I carried out the task, I would be wrong.* My words meant nothing . . . I was a pledge of a college fraternity.”<sup>23</sup>

[1970] Leemon described the pledging process of an unnamed fraternity in the Middle Atlantic.<sup>24</sup> Like Alpha, this fraternity used “line-ups.” In one such line-up, pledges were ordered to light the cigarette held by an active. The active made sure they failed (by blowing on the pledges’ lighters) and the group then hazed them for their failure.<sup>25</sup>

[1980] McMinn performed a content analysis of the ritual manuals of twenty-two college fraternities.<sup>26</sup> Such manuals rarely appear to codify any hazing practices. However, four of the manuals did specify a small ordeal that the pledge faced near his initiation into the chapter. Three of the four ordeals *required* that the pledge fail.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Robert C. Stone, “A Sociological Study of a Fraternity,” at <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?did=763926981&sid=2&Fmt=1&clientId=48051&RQT=309&VName=PQD.>, 42, emphasis added.

<sup>18</sup> William R. Butler, “Factors Associated with Scholastic Achievement in High and Low Achieving Fraternities,” *Personnel and Guidance Journal*, 38, 2 (1959), 134–41. <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 139.

<sup>22</sup> Stephen J. Golburgh, *The Experience of Adolescence* (Cambridge, MA: Schenkman Publishing Company, 1965), 1–6. <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 1, emphasis added.

<sup>24</sup> Thomas A. Leemon, “Fraternity Initiation as a Rite of Passage: A Description,” *Dissertation Abstracts International: Section B. Sciences and Engineering*, 31, 1 (1970), 31. <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

<sup>26</sup> Bobby Lawrence McMinn, “A Content Analysis of the Esoteric Ritual Manuals of National College Social Fraternities for Men,” *Dissertation Abstracts International: Section A. Humanities and Social Sciences*, 40, 7 (1980), 3815. <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 154–58.

[1988] Raphael interviewed a pseudonymous member of an unnamed chapter of Beta Theta Pi (“Joseph A.”).<sup>28</sup> Joseph described being subjected to periods of sleep deprivation while being made to memorize sets of arbitrary items (i.e. insulting nicknames). Any failure at recitation was punished by bites of raw onion, among other ordeals. Note that, like Alpha, the circumstances of recitation seem to guarantee high levels of failure.

[1990] Sanday discussed hazing in several unnamed college fraternities.<sup>29</sup> Part of her account included a seemingly impossible pledge race and an ostensibly rigged contest in which an exhausted pledge was challenged to do more push-ups than an active member.<sup>30</sup>

[1996] Wright observed a fraternity hazing event (ostensibly in California) wherein pledges were made to drink whiskey and then attempt to recite items of fraternity lore. Wright described a pledge being spat on for a seemingly inevitable recitation error.<sup>31</sup>

[1998] Arnold described an event from the pledging process of the pseudonymous “Iota Nu Sigma” of Indiana. Pledges were made to participate in “frog races,” two-person sprints around an impromptu obstacle course. Every race logically necessitated a loser, who would then be punished with further hazing ordeals. Frog races appeared to continue until all (or nearly all) pledges had failed.<sup>32</sup>

[2004] Nuwer interviewed an unnamed pledge of an unnamed hazing fraternity.<sup>33</sup> Regarding his general experience, the pledge stated, “One thing you learn right away as a pledge is that you will never be right whether you are right or not right.”<sup>34</sup>

[2004] Land recounted being hazed by a chapter of Kappa Sigma in South Carolina.<sup>35</sup> He described an ordeal that consisted of seemingly impossible questions, where all wrong answers were punished by the ingestion of heated beer.<sup>36</sup>

[2010] Taylor described fraternity culture in several unnamed southern and mid-western chapters.<sup>37</sup> She suggested,

<sup>28</sup> Ray Raphael, *The Men from the Boys: Rites of Passage in Male America* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988), 80–90.

<sup>29</sup> Sanday, *Fraternity Gang Rape*, 148–79.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 173, 76–77.

<sup>31</sup> Esther Wright, *Torn Togas: The Dark Side of Campus Greek Life* (Minneapolis: Fairview Press, 1996), 7–8.

<sup>32</sup> James C. Arnold, *Alcohol and the Chosen Few: Organizational Reproduction of an Addictive System* (Boca Raton, FL: Dissertation.com, 1998), 179.

<sup>33</sup> Hank Nuwer, “Cult-Like Hazing,” in Nuwer, ed., *The Hazing Reader* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 32–50.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>35</sup> Brad Land, *Goat: A Memoir*, 1st edn (New York: Random House, 2004).

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 123–24.

<sup>37</sup> Taylor, *Disrupting Fraternity Culture*.

The [pledges] are punished frequently because *the members make it impossible for the pledges to ever make the right choice*. Punishment is usually enacted on the initiate's body through intense exercise such as excessive push ups or through visual humiliation by forcing the pledges to wear certain clothes or crawl on the floor like animals.<sup>38</sup>

[2010] Westmoreland and Wolff interviewed an individual named John Burford, who was hazed by a New Jersey chapter of Sigma Alpha Epsilon. Regarding his hazing process, John stated, "We [the pledges] would do something exactly right, and they would make up something that we did wrong and haze us over it. You get worried that every time you're gonna do something, you're gonna get yelled at."<sup>39</sup>

Finally, I communicated with Dave Westol, alumnus and ex-chief executive of Theta Chi, past adviser to fraternities at Michigan State University, and consultant to Alpha Tau Omega.<sup>40</sup> Westol experienced, investigated, and had reported to him, numerous hazing events. When I described planned failure to him, he estimated that it was involved in some 75 percent of hazing events that he had had exposure to in his various roles. As examples, Westol told me that written tests were sometimes given to pledges and falsely scored such that all (or a majority) of pledges failed. He described labor activities given to pledges (e.g. house cleaning) that were impossibly evaluated, such that pledges were always judged to have under-contributed or to have completed the task in an unacceptable time (note the correspondence with Adam's account in the prior section). Westol also described Sisyphean events, such as one where pledges were tasked with putting out a fire in a fireplace, using only the water they could collect in their mouths from a floor above them. Pledges would run upstairs, collect water, and then run downstairs, futilely attempting to douse the fire. Another event Westol described appeared similar to practices used in Alpha:

Pledges are told that they have "screwed up" and they must report to the chapter house or another location, usually late at night. They are blindfolded (or not) and led into a room. The room is dark and members, some of whom have been drinking, are sitting in chairs. The pledges are lined up, blindfolds are/are not removed, and then members begin yelling questions at the pledges. No matter what answers are given to the questions, the answers are not correct or not recited correctly or not delivered in a manner that satisfies the members.

Note that, like Alpha, it appears that answers to questions are subject to multiple dimensions of correctness. Pledges may actually be providing a

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 42, emphasis added.

<sup>39</sup> Matt Westmoreland and Josephine Wolff, "In the Hot Seat: Hazing at Princeton," at [www.dailyprincetonian.com/2010/04/26/25997](http://www.dailyprincetonian.com/2010/04/26/25997).

<sup>40</sup> David Westol, email to author, 7 Nov. 2011.



correct answer, but inevitably fail by recourse to some meta-element of their recitation: rapidity, volume, formality, etc.

In sum, the evidence collected from Alpha, neighboring fraternities, and numerous accounts of fraternity hazing spanning over seventy years suggests that planned failure may be a common and enduring component of fraternity hazing.

## POSSIBLE EXPLANATIONS FOR PLANNED FAILURE

Why, then, does planned failure exist in fraternity hazing? Why do actives go to great efforts to frame their hazing as a kind of avoidable punishment for task-based failures, even though failure is both planned and inevitable? Below I will explore a number of possible contributors to the genesis and persistence of planned failure.

To begin, it is not clear that fraternity members typically have a conception of planned failure as a separable component of the hazing process. In Alpha, for example, it appeared to be understood that making pledges fail was simply how one hazed. No member of Alpha volunteered the logic of “planned failure” to me, and answers as to why they used hazing in the first place were along standard lines for fraternity members (e.g. bringing pledges together, getting pledges to show respect/commitment).<sup>41</sup> However, my primary informant in Alpha, “Thomas,” seemed more philosophical about hazing than anyone else in the chapter. I asked Thomas whether he had ever thought about planned failure, in any way, before I had pointed it out to him:

Yeah, all the time, because I think that’s where, like, hazing ... when I execute it, comes into play. Like, “Okay, we have to do a little bit of hazing tonight. They’re just gonna fail. And we’re just gonna keep on making them fail. Like there’s no way out of it. Like there’s gonna be, say, a set number of push-ups ... and then they’re just gonna have to do it. There’s no other way around it.” So yeah, there’s a lot of planned failure and a lot of times it’s set in to help them overcome an obstacle that we, again, that we set for them ... and a lot of times, I feel too, it’s to put ‘em in their place. Kind of like the inferiority, put them in the hierarchy between pledges and actives.

In describing what he thought of planned failure, Thomas seemed to mix traditional fraternity explanations for hazing (e.g. instilling a hierarchy) with practical concerns (i.e. making sure pledges could not somehow avoid

<sup>41</sup> Dwayne Joseph Scott, “Factors That Contribute to Hazing Practices by Collegiate Black Greek Letter Fraternities during Membership Intake Activities,” *Dissertation Abstracts International: Section A. Humanities and Social Sciences*, 68, 3 (2007).

ordeals). But again, the impression that pledges could, in principle, avoid ordeals is created by the fraternity itself. This makes planned failure an awkward “solution” to a problem that is entirely manufactured. Are there additional reasons why planned failure might seem intuitively preferable to fraternity members?

One possibility is that planned failure is an attempt to shift some of the responsibility for hazing. If hazees believe that they can avoid some hazing, but continually fail to meet the conditions for doing so, they may blame themselves or “the rules,” rather than the hazers. This is especially so if the rules of hazing are seen as pre-dating the hazers, who are themselves bound by tradition. Bitterness towards one or more hazers is a possible outcome of being hazed,<sup>42</sup> and individual hazers may strive to avoid being targets. Indeed, members of Alpha sometimes emphasize to pledges that the hazing process is “just business,” which may be part of such an effort. Similar concerns may contribute to the celebratory and loving atmosphere that typically accompanies the completion of fraternity hazing.

Another possibility is that fraternity members believe that pledges are likely to be entitled and arrogant due to past experiences, and failure is an intuitive means of correction. Consider Clark, writing in 1915, who quotes a letter from a fraternity member, stating, “The average freshman is young, un-tried, and usually fresh from high school triumphs; his ego is largely developed, he does not consider that the fraternity is conferring a favor on him, but that his presence is largely a condescension.”<sup>43</sup>

Compare Clark to Walker, writing in 1968, describing a near-identical sentiment among the fraternities at the University of Washington:

Pledges who were student body presidents are given no special recognition and high school heroes are forbidden to wear their letterman’s jackets. The pledges are often told: “Your previous life is past. Now that you are a pledge in this house you have to make a new life. You can’t draw on the past for your status now. You have to achieve it in a new system and with different people.” Such treatment is hard to take for many boys who have previously basked in the adulation of their entire high school as well as their own community, but from the fraternity’s viewpoint a reorientation of the pledge from high school achievements to those of college and fraternity is of utmost importance.<sup>44</sup>

Within Alpha, I asked my primary informant whether he was ever concerned that pledges might enter the fraternity with an inflated ego. Thomas

<sup>42</sup> See examples in Butler, “Factors Associated with Scholastic Achievement,” 138; Nuwer, 35–36; Ricky L. Jones, *Black Haze: Violence, Sacrifice, and Manhood in Black Greek-Letter Fraternities* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 78.

<sup>43</sup> Thomas Arkle Clark, *The Fraternity and the College: Being a Series of Papers Dealing with Fraternity Problems* (Menasha, WI: George Banta, 1915), 72.

<sup>44</sup> Walker, “Organizational Type, Rites of Incorporation, and Group Solidarity,” 164–65.

replied: “Oh yeah. All the time. And we pick them out so like, ‘Here’s the cocky ones, and these are the ones we’re going to break.’” Thomas went on to explain that all the pledges needed to be “broken,” not simply the cocky ones, but cockiness was among the devalued attributes in pledges. The sentiments noted by Clark, Walker, and Thomas may contribute to the intuitive sense that pledges should fail, as allowing them to do otherwise might inflate their sense of self-worth.

A related and more rarefied possibility is that planned failure is seen, intuitively, as having psychological utility for organizational socialization. Interestingly, this intuition may be correct.<sup>45</sup> Numerous real-world psychology studies suggest that different socialization tactics have measurable impacts on the attitudes and performance of incoming organization members.<sup>46</sup> By “socialization tactics” these researchers mean the general methods of performing an induction into an organization (e.g. inducing members collectively or individually, using a set or variable schedule of induction “events”). Some of these tactics (e.g. collective inductions) appear more likely to generate what Van Maanen and Schein call a “custodial” orientation (i.e. conformity to the expectations associated with one’s role as a group member) while others appear more likely to generate an “innovative” orientation (i.e. a willingness to change the purpose and procedures associated with one’s role as a group member).<sup>47</sup> Certain characteristics of incoming members appear to moderate the impact of socialization tactics. Individuals who expect themselves to be highly competent within their roles seem to be less affected by socialization tactics, including those that would otherwise engender a custodial orientation.<sup>48</sup> This raises the possibility that organizations that value the preservation of their traditions will adopt induction practices that can lower the expected

<sup>45</sup> Edgar H. Schein, “Organizational Socialization and the Profession of Management,” *Industrial Management Review*, 9, 2 (1968), 1–16.

<sup>46</sup> See review in Tayla N. Bauer, Todd Bodner, Berrin Erdogan, Donald M. Truxillo, and Jennifer S. Tucker, “Newcomer Adjustment during Organizational Socialization: A Meta-analytic Review of Antecedents, Outcomes, and Methods,” *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 92, 3 (2007), 707–21.

<sup>47</sup> John Van Maanen and Edgar H. Schein, “Toward a Theory of Organizational Socialization,” in Barry M. Staw, ed., *Research in Organizational Behavior* (Greenwich, CT: JAI Press, 1979), 209–64.

<sup>48</sup> Gareth R. Jones, “Socialization Tactics, Self-Efficacy, and Newcomers’ Adjustments to Organizations,” *Academy of Management Journal*, 29, 2 (1986), 262–79; Alan M. Saks, “Longitudinal Field Investigation of the Moderating and Mediating Effects of Self-Efficacy on the Relationship between Training and Newcomer Adjustment,” *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 80, 2 (1995), 211–25; Alan M. Saks, Krista L. Uggerslev, and Neil E. Fassina, “Socialization Tactics and Newcomer Adjustment: A Meta-analytic Review and Test of a Model,” *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 70, 3 (2007), 413–46.

competence of incoming members.<sup>49</sup> One such induction practice may be the repeated application of planned failure.

Planned failure is logically a subset of what Schein calls “upending experiences.” In discussing upending experiences, Schein is concerned with newcomers to businesses, but his insights are applicable to other cooperative organizations: “Upending experiences are deliberately planned or accidentally created circumstances which dramatically and unequivocally upset or disconfirm some of the major assumptions which the new man holds about himself, his company, or his job.”<sup>50</sup> Schein gives examples of assigned newcomer tasks that are exceptionally easy (and thus communicative of a lesser status) and assigned newcomer tasks that are impossibly difficult (and thus communicative of a lesser competence). The latter component thus overlaps with what I am calling “planned failure.”

Note that although planned failure may exist in other, non-hazing organizations, the intensity of planned failure used by Alpha and ostensibly other fraternities appears to be an outlier. Fraternities, however, may face several severe socialization problems, including (1) recurrent and unavoidably high attrition and (2) a population of prospective members who overestimate their future competence as actives. Given that members of fraternities seek to preserve their traditions (and thus desire and reinforce custodial attitudes in pledges),<sup>51</sup> these problems reduce the potential efficacy of their methods.

Consider, first, problems associated with attrition. Fraternities are constantly losing active members through graduation and other sources of attrition.<sup>52</sup> In the approximately twenty months that I studied Alpha, they lost (to graduation) most of their actives, who were replaced by incoming pledges. Rapid changes in group composition pose numerous difficulties for the perpetuation of the group qua group.<sup>53</sup> Newcomers, for instance, may have different ideas about the legitimacy of existing group discourses and practices. They may seek to undermine the current leadership, change the group’s symbology, or create any number of other perturbations. When attrition is

<sup>49</sup> Schein.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>51</sup> Arnold, *Alcohol and the Chosen Few*; Alan D. Desantis, *Inside Greek U: Fraternities, Sororities, and the Pursuit of Pleasure, Power, and Prestige* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2007); Walker.

<sup>52</sup> William Abbott Scott, *Values and Organizations: A Study of Fraternities and Sororities* (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1965), 176.

<sup>53</sup> See for example Matthew W. McCarter and Roman M. Sheremeta, “You Can’t Put Old Wine in New Bottles: The Effect of Newcomers on Coordination in Groups,” *PLoS One*, 8, 1 (2013), e55058; Georg Simmel, “The Persistence of Social Groups,” *American Journal of Sociology*, 3, 5 (1898), 662–98; Walker.

high and newcomers are constantly entering the organization, it increases the likelihood that at least one of them will create unwanted changes.

Second, consider issues of expected competence. Common experience and systematic research suggest that newcomers to organizations are often tentative and unsure of themselves upon group entry.<sup>54</sup> If such an initial stance were common to fraternity pledges, it would lessen the value of attempting to lower perceptions of competence. However, it is possible that prospective members of fraternities possess particularly high expectations of competence.<sup>55</sup> Such expectations may be quite rational: From the outside, it is not clear that social fraternities actually “do” anything in particular. Outsiders may see little reason why they could not succeed in a group of friends with a fancy name attached to it. Indeed, popular media portrays fraternity life as a long series of parties, casual sex, and pranks. There is comparatively little media showing fraternities logging hours at charity events, managing a house budget, dealing with conflicting personalities, or trying to coordinate group activities (e.g. house cleaning, multi-chapter gatherings). Several Alpha actives have remarked to me about the difficulty of “active life” and how they felt unprepared for its hardships. Within Alpha, it is sometimes said that “pledging is hard, but active life is harder.”

These problems, however, are not unique to fraternities, and should be operative in many organizations. Indeed, in my readings of the anthropological literature on hazing, I have come across indications of planned failure in other cultures.

For example, Loeb described the Kuksu cult initiation among the Northwest Hill Maidu of California. He noted, “During their confinement the [initiates] had their ears and noses pierced with cedar splinters (*bono um*). While this was said to have been done as punishment for infraction of the rules, it seems certain that all neophytes suffered the penalty.”<sup>56</sup>

Bateson seemed to suggest that planned failure was common among the *Iatmul* of New Guinea:

On another occasion [the initiates’] mouths are opened with a piece of crocodile bone and examined “to see that they have not eaten what they ought not”. They are not under any food taboos at this time, but the result of the examination is invariably the discovery that the mouth is unclean; and the bone is suddenly jabbed against the boy’s gums making them bleed. Then the process is repeated for the other jaw. In the ritual washing, the partly healed backs of the novices are scrubbed, and they

<sup>54</sup> See reviews in Connie R. Wanberg, *The Oxford Handbook of Organizational Socialization* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>55</sup> Golburgh, *The Experience of Adolescence*, 5–6.

<sup>56</sup> Edwin Meyer Loeb, *The Eastern Kuksu Cult* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1933), 168.

are splashed and splashed with icy water till they are whimpering with cold and misery. The emphasis is upon making them miserable rather than clean. *In the first week of their seclusion, the novices are subjected to a great variety of cruel and harsh tricks of this kind and for every trick there is some ritual pretext.*<sup>57</sup>

Turner implied that planned failure was used in at least some preindustrial initiations, stating:

The grinding down process is accomplished by ordeals; circumcision, subincision, clitoridectomy, hazing, endurance of heat and cold, impossible physical tests in which failure is greeted by ridicule, *unanswerable riddles which make even clever candidates look stupid, followed by physical punishment, and the like.*<sup>58</sup>

Boyer commented on the Beti of Cameroon, noting that “the [initiates] are for instance told to wash in mud puddles. If they oblige they are beaten up for getting dirty; if they refuse they are of course beaten up for staying unwashed.”<sup>59</sup>

Van Rooyen, Potgieter, and Mtezuka discussed the traditional initiation school among the Southern Ndebele people of South Africa, noting, “Initiation is a period during which the individual is continuously being tested and invariably even the best effort is judged by the supervisors of the initiation to be inadequate and deserving of a beating.”<sup>60</sup>

The above examples do not establish that planned failure is common within the extremely broad ethnographic record of hazing initiations. However, examples from such divergent cultures do suggest that hazing with planned failure can arise and persist independently of American college fraternities and any cultural peculiarities that may accompany them. Thus, while it may well be that something about American fraternities increases the frequency of hazing with planned failure, it is not the case that hazing with planned failure requires a theoretical explanation unique to American society or its relevant subcultures (e.g. universities).

<sup>57</sup> Gregory Bateson, *Naven: A Survey of the Problems Suggested by a Composite Picture of the Culture of a New Guinea Tribe Drawn from Three Points of View* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1958; first published 1936), 131–32, emphasis added.

<sup>58</sup> Victor Turner, “Variations on a Theme of Liminality,” in Sally Falk Moore and Barbara Myerhoff, eds., *Secular Ritual* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1977), 52–70, 37, emphasis added.

<sup>59</sup> Pascal Boyer, *Religion Explained* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 244.

<sup>60</sup> Linda van Rooyen, Ferdinand Potgieter, and Lydia Mtezuka, “Initiation School amongst the Southern Ndebele People of South Africa: Depreciating Tradition or Appreciating Treasure?”, *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth*, 13, 1 (2006), 13–41, 31.

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

This paper began with an exploration of planned failure in the pseudonymous fraternity “Alpha.” Planned failure is a persistent aspect of Alpha’s hazing process, ostensibly present in almost every pledging event: it is practically the heartbeat of their induction. And Alpha does not appear to be alone in its use of planned failure – other fraternities use the tactic to varying degrees, as suggested by interviews with insiders and independent accounts of fraternity hazing in the United States.

This paper has also suggested a number of principled reasons why hazing with planned failure may exist and persist in fraternities. This includes the reduction of personal responsibility for hazing, diminishing ostensibly “cocky” attitudes among pledges, and inducing a custodial orientation towards fraternity traditions. These explanations are not statements of naive functionalism – in practice, hazing with planned failure may create none of the aforementioned effects. Instead, these explanations are intended to capture some of the shared intuitions among fraternity hazers, which collectively increase the frequency of planned failure, regardless of its ultimate efficacy.

The collected evidence that hazing with planned failure is likely a common feature of fraternity inductions should assist academics in theorizing about fraternity hazing. The phenomenon captures more than the frequency of a given ordeal (e.g. drinking, calisthenics); it captures a generalizable *context* for ordeals that may have a significant time depth in Greek-letter societies. In determining the ultimate impact of hazing practices, how hazing is framed to hazingees may be as important as the content of the hazing itself.

## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

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