

# DEFINING HAZING: WHY POPULAR DEFINITIONS ARE MISLEADING AND COUNTERPRODUCTIVE

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What is hazing? Merriam-Webster (2016) gives the broadest definition, characterizing it as “the practice of playing unpleasant tricks on someone, or forcing someone to do unpleasant things,” but especially an initiation “involving harassment.” This latter meaning—hazing in the context of an initiation—is what is typically meant by modern uses of the term “hazing,” and it is the subject of this paper. As concern about hazing has grown, researchers, advocates, policy makers, and other stakeholders have created more nuanced definitions of the phenomenon. But nearly all definitions of hazing currently in use are inadequate and are likely to create misunderstandings among student populations and the general public (e.g., Columbia Daily Spectator, 2013). The intent of this paper is to highlight the shortcomings of these popular definitions of hazing, and to provide a universally applicable definition of hazing that will improve education efforts and provide a coherent basis for constructive policy.

## **What is a Useful Definition of Hazing?**

A useful definition of hazing is: a) valid, in that it conceptually carves out the phenomenon and excludes irrelevant phenomena, b) generalizable, in that it is not specific to any one organization, and c) concise and easily understood. With these criteria in mind, I propose that hazing be defined as follows:

Hazing is non-accidental, costly aspects of group induction activities that: a) do not appear to be group-relevant assessments/preparations, or b) appear excessive in their application. Group induction activities are those tasks formally or informally required to obtain membership or participatory legitimacy for new or prospective members.

By this definition, induction activities that involve the demonstrable, straightforward preparation or evaluation of attributes necessary for membership are not hazing. For example, athletic organizations may require extensive physical fitness training or assessment. We do not commonly label such efforts hazing because we understand that effective organizations are created, in part, by careful, relevant recruitment protocols. If prospective firefighters are required to perform intense calisthenics, the induction activity is a direct, group-relevant preparation or assessment. If the same requirement is transplanted to social fraternities, however, it becomes less explicable (and likely hazing) because it lacks comparable relevance to the expected activities of the organization. Similarly, if a reading club requires prospective members to read several books prior to joining, it is not hazing. If the same club requires prospective members to read the same books unceasingly and without sleep for three days, it is hazing: Reading books is relevant to the group's task domain, but the marathon session is excessive relative to the group's actual activities.

The above definition (hereafter the "strict" definition) still requires careful judgment and is not without ambiguity (see Revisiting the Strict Definition). To understand its relative merits, we need to examine other definitions currently in use. This paper will focus on alternative definitions that are commonly used by anti-hazing advocates, well-cited in the academic literature, or simply highly visible to students (e.g., present on anti-hazing university web pages). Thus, this is not an exhaustive review of hazing definitions, but a targeted critique of those definitions most likely to have broad impacts on organizational policies and student education. (For more on hazing definitions, see Crow & Macintosh, 2009; Ellsworth, 2004; Hinkle, 2006.)

### **Common and Problematic Definitions of Hazing**

Perhaps the most common definition of hazing in current use is some variation of that given by Hoover (1999) or Hoover and Pollard (2000). Hoover's (1999) original definition was employed as part of a survey of hazing prevalence in the National Collegiate Athletics Association (NCAA): "any activity expected of someone joining a group that humiliates, degrades, abuses or endangers, regardless of the person's willingness to participate. This does not include activities such as rookies carrying the balls, team parties with community games, or going out with your teammates, unless an atmosphere of humiliation, degradation, abuse or danger arises" (p. 8).

Hoover and Pollard (2000) shortened and generalized the original definition to survey hazing in American high schools. Hazing was defined as "any humiliating or dangerous activity expected of you to join a group, regardless of your willingness to participate" (p.4). Hoover and Pollard's

definitions (or ostensible variations thereof) currently dominate research and scholarship on hazing (e.g., Allan & Madden, 2008; Crandall, 2003; Geisert, 2011; Holmes, 1999; Huysamer & Lemmer, 2013; Jeong, 2003; Lipkins, 2006; McGlone, 2005).

Most notably, the largest study of student hazing to date used the following variation of Hoover and Pollard : “Hazing is any activity expected of someone joining or participating in a group that humiliates, degrades, abuses, or endangers them regardless of a person’s willingness to participate.” (Allan & Madden, 2008, p.14). Given its landmark status, it is worth examining the conceptual problems with Allan and Madden’s definition, some of which are present in the entire Hoover and Pollard family of definitions:

1. Scope. Stating or implying that hazing can apply to someone joining *or participating* in a group threatens the coherence of the definition. If hazing applies to all members participating in a group, not just new or prospective members, then the term largely reduces to “mean things people do to each other.” Hazing becomes just a synonym for bullying. But hazing is qualitatively distinct from bullying, in that it typically has a mutually acknowledged end date, and is a process that ends with hazingees increasing their status and esteem within an organization (Cimino, 2011). Hazing also appears to be a distinct cross-cultural phenomenon, with a number of other recurrent characteristics (Cimino, 2013). As such, it should be kept conceptually separate from bullying.

2. Use of Danger. Is a dangerous activity expected of a newcomer “hazing”? Danger is a necessary component of certain student activities. For example, sudden cardiovascular-related deaths regularly occur in organized, competitive student athletics (~66 a year). Other causes of athletic death include blunt trauma and heat stroke (Maron, Doerer, Haas, Tierney, & Mueller, 2009). And this is setting aside the numerous non-fatal injuries that also occur. Ostensibly dangerous organizational activities are even more common outside student environments: Military live-fire exercises, police patrols, bomb disposals, bioterrorism research, on-location war journalism, etc. Newcomers endangered by these and many other activities are not, by default, being hazed. If we take the above definition literally, however, we might conclude otherwise.

3. Use of Humiliation. What about an activity expected of a newcomer that is humiliating? For example, imagine a rhetoric club that requires prospective members to present a speech in front of an audience. The rhetoric club is aware that nearly all applicants fail and experience humiliation. Public speaking, after all, can be difficult and stressful. Are prospective members of the rhetoric club being hazed? What about similar uses of humiliating circumstances? Stage actors, musicians, and

other performers may be required to place themselves in front of occasionally harsh audiences in learning or demonstrating aspects of their craft. Should we consider this hazing?

4. General Extremity. The overall effect of the descriptive terms used in the definition (especially “degrades” and “abuses”) is one of strong moral valence. The use of such terms in formal definitions may have far-reaching negative impacts. For example, advocates and researchers appear puzzled or disappointed that many students do not categorize their hazing experiences as “hazing” (e.g., Allan & Madden, 2008; Campo, Poulos, & Sipple, 2005). However, hazers and hazingees may refuse to adopt definitions that require them to morally incriminate themselves in harsh terms, or to endorse particular feeling states that may be absent (e.g., a feeling of degradation). Given that hazing describes a wide spectrum of behavior, some of which is undeniably mild, such refusals may be justified. More generally, any definition of hazing that tries to simultaneously define *and* apply harsh moral judgment is inherently less useful because it will be met with resistance and misunderstanding. As an example, imagine if one were to define “stealing” as “to abuse another person in a way that may be dangerous, humiliating, or degrading by taking something from them.” The task of convincing people that they are party to an instance of “stealing” will be hampered by the use of words with dramatically negative implications, especially if said instance is trivial and easily resolved.

The surveys that have used the Hoover and Pollard family of definitions have also included lists of induction practices that participants can indicate having experienced (e.g., yelling, sleep deprivation). Many of these activities are undeniably hazing in the context of the groups studied, regardless of how the researchers defined hazing. Thus, my critique is not that the associated research findings are automatically suspect, but that the definitions employed do not serve as useful descriptions of the phenomenon under study and may not always capture the appropriate class of behaviors. This is important, as it appears as though the Hoover and Pollard family of definitions is being embraced in anti-hazing advocacy efforts. For example, HazingPrevention.Org is a prominent anti-hazing organization that is focused on student hazing and runs both National Hazing Prevention Week and the Novak Institute for Hazing Prevention. Here is how they define hazing on their web page:

Hazing is any action taken or any situation created intentionally that causes embarrassment, harassment or ridicule and risks emotional and/or physical harm to members of a group or team, whether new or not, regardless of the person’s willingness to participate (HazingPrevention.Org, 2016).

This definition faces the same problems described above, in particular a broad scope that fails to exclude irrelevant phenomena. HazingPrevention.Org may be accustomed to this objection, as their definition is followed by a set of clarifying questions: (Bracketed numbers have been added for commentary)

If you're not sure whether or not something happening to you or to someone else is hazing, ask yourself these questions:

Would I feel comfortable participating in this activity if my parents were watching? [1]

Would we get in trouble if a school/college administrator walked by and saw us? [2]

Am I being asked to keep these activities a secret? [3]

Am I doing anything illegal? [4]

Does participation in this activity violate my values or those of this organization? [5]

Is this causing emotional or physical distress or stress to myself or to others? [6]

Am I going to be able to get a job if I have to put a criminal arrest on my application? [7]

[1] The universe of activities that people may not want their parents watching is exceptionally large, encompassing any number of private and social events. Further, the idea that people should employ simulated parental viewing as a hazing heuristic is both strange and patronizing.

[2] Getting in trouble with an administrator is possible for non-hazing reasons, and is additionally possible because the administrator may not understand what is occurring, given that he or she simply "walked by." Most importantly, the administrator's reaction is dependent on how hazing is defined, which is exactly what HazingPrevention.Org is supposed to be clarifying.

[3] Numerous non-hazing induction activities are also secret (e.g., McMinn, 1980), and secrecy is valued by all manner of organizations for non-hazing reasons.

[4] The question "Am I doing anything illegal?" besides being too broad, may also be circular in the 44 US states with anti-hazing laws.

[5] Whether participation violates personal or organizational values is irrelevant to determining whether hazing is occurring. Many organizations are, in practice, pro-hazing, making this question a possible contra-indicator of hazing.

[6] Simply causing emotional distress, as described above, is not a good indicator of hazing. Stress or distress is a necessary and unavoidable component of numerous organizational activities, any number of which might be employed in inductions.

[7] Regardless of whether hazing is present or absent, this question serves to create threat, not clarity.

One may object that HazingPrevention.Org is not trying to create a rigorous academic definition of hazing and is addressing a broad audience. But this is precisely the problem: A public-facing organization is communicating a conception of hazing that is overly broad and then following it with clarifications that target peripheral or misleading correlates of hazing.

Other anti-hazing efforts have similar definitional problems. For example, Dr. Susan Lipkins runs InsideHazing.com and is frequently called on by news organizations to comment on hazing phenomena, including student hazing. In her book “Preventing Hazing,” Lipkins (2006) initially cites the definition given by Hoover (1999) and Mothers Against School Hazing, but expands on them and suggests the following:

I believe that hazing is a process based on a tradition that is used by groups to maintain a hierarchy (a "pecking order") within the group. Regardless of consent, the rituals require individuals to engage in activities that are physically and psychologically stressful. These activities can be exhausting, humiliating, degrading, demeaning, and intimidating. They result in significant physical and emotional discomfort. More specifically, hazing

- Involves a repetition of a tradition
- Is a process
- Maintains a hierarchy within a group
- Intends to create closeness in a group
- Involves psychological and physical stress (p. 13).

There are several problems with Lipkins’ expanded definition:

1. Hierarchy. At present, researchers are not sure what on-average impacts hazing has on internal group hierarchy (Cimino, 2011; Keating et al., 2005). Hazing practices include hierarchical displays (e.g., forcing hazingees to act submissive) but whether hazing contributes to internal hierarchy post-hazing is not a settled matter. However, Lipkins has mixed this hypothesis into the definition of hazing itself. To understand why this is problematic, imagine once again modifying the definition of “stealing”. Defining stealing as “taking something from another person to maintain a hierarchy,” complicates an otherwise straightforward definition with a hypothesis about what *might* cause some instances stealing. Our theories about the cause(s) of such phenomena do not belong in the definitions themselves.

2. Closeness. Given the profound cross-cultural breadth of hazing (e.g., Schlegel & Barry, 1979; Webster, 1908), it is not clear that hazers always intend to “create closeness,” and even if they do, it

is not clear why such an intent should be a definitional element of hazing. If a hazer does not intend to create closeness, why should that modify our judgment of whether he or she is hazing?

3. Tradition and Process. Claiming that hazing “involves a repetition of a tradition” is necessarily false each time hazing is first performed within a new group. Further, Lipkins’ characterization of hazing as a “process” (by which she means a planned and lengthy induction) is often true, but hazing may also be brief and unorganized.

Finally, ostensibly because Lipkins’ definition is partially based on Hoover, it shares many of the same problems described above, including poorly qualified stressful activities as indicators of hazing.

The preceding discussion does not exhaust current definitions of hazing—others exist, and many suffer some combination of the problems described above. Here, for example, is how Cornell University (2016) defines hazing:

To haze another person, regardless of the person's consent to participate. Hazing means an act that, as an explicit or implicit condition for initiation to, admission into, affiliation with, or continued membership in a group or organization, (1) could be seen by a reasonable person as endangering the physical health of an individual or as causing mental distress to an individual through, for example, humiliating, intimidating, or demeaning treatment, (2) destroys or removes public or private property, (3) involves the consumption of alcohol or drugs, or the consumption of other substances to excess, or (4) violates any University policy.

Some of the problems with this definition should already be evident. Like other definitions, there are references to distress and humiliation, but they are not properly qualified, leaving open the idea that any induction that creates distress or humiliation is hazing (reasonable people can see non-hazing inductions as endangering physical health, causing distress, etc.). The Cornell definition also stretches hazing to include activities required for “continued membership” which means that hazing can be any number of disparate, unpleasant activities that happen to be expected of members during their tenure (e.g., mandatory cleaning of filthy bathrooms). Finally, Cornell’s definition ends with a surprising clause, stating that hazing can be any required organizational activity that “violates any University policy.” This would seem to stretch the definition of hazing to incoherence. Consider a fraternity that decided to hold mandatory meetings on campus, but failed to obtain permission to use a university meeting room: This lapse would meet Cornell’s definition of hazing.

To be fair, not all definitions of hazing are problematic. Consider Crow and Macintosh's (2009) proposed definition of athletic hazing:

Any potentially humiliating, degrading, abusive, or dangerous activity expected of a junior-ranking athlete by a more senior team-mate, which does not contribute to either athlete's positive development, but is required to be accepted as part of a team, regardless of the junior-ranking athlete's willingness to participate. This includes, but is not limited to, any activity, no matter how traditional or seemingly benign, that sets apart or alienates any team-mate based on class, number of years on the team, or athletic ability (p. 449).

These authors qualify the typical set of hazing adjectives (e.g., humiliating, dangerous) with the stipulation that such activities constitute hazing only if they do not contribute to the "athlete's positive development." Thus, unpleasant activities that *do* contribute to an athlete's positive development are not hazing. As such, Crow and Macintosh are approaching the strict definition within the confines of an athletic organization. While I have few objections to Crow and Macintosh's definition, the purpose of this paper is to propose a *universal* definition of hazing, rather than requiring that every organization create unique and inevitably conflicting definitions.

### **Do Definitions Actually Matter?**

Much of the discussion above may seem like nit-picking. Even if many definitions of hazing technically include activities that most would describe as non-hazing, does it actually matter? After all, people are not slaves to definitions, and stakeholders are capable of making nuanced distinctions. The consequences of poor definitions, however, are already evident among anti-hazing advocates and researchers. Consider Van Raalte, Cornelius, Linder, and Brewer's (2007) study of hazing and group cohesion. Van Raalte et al. surveyed 167 athletes using a standard scale of group cohesion. For each participant, they also tabulated the number of performed or witnessed hazing and non-hazing activities. Across a handful of different analyses, Van Raalte et al. found that the number of non-hazing activities was positively associated with one aspect of group cohesion, while hazing activities were not, and were sometimes negatively associated with aspects of group cohesion. Van Raalte et al.'s findings have been cited by a growing number of researchers and anti-hazing advocates as evidence that hazing reduces group cohesion (e.g., Crow & Macintosh, 2009; Fields, Collins, & Comstock, 2010; Groves, Griggs, & Leflay, 2012; Johnson, 2011; Maxwell, 2011; National Collaborative for Hazing Research and Prevention, 2010; Waldron & Kowalski, 2009;



Zacharda, 2009). The problem is that none of these sources appear to share Van Raalte et al.'s definition of hazing. Here is how Van Raalte et al. defined hazing in their study:

Those activities that were categorized by the majority of respondents as inappropriate were designated as hazing (inappropriate team building behaviors) and those that were categorized by the majority as appropriate were designated as appropriate team building behaviors (p. 498).

Thus, if most participants called an activity appropriate, it was not considered hazing. Van Raalte et al.'s compiled list of "appropriate team building behaviors" contained a subsection called "coerced deviant behaviors," which included tattooing, piercing, head shaving, branding, wearing embarrassing clothing, as well as "engaging in or simulating sex acts." So, by Van Raalte et al.'s definition, an athlete that is coerced into being pierced, branded, shaved, dressed like a clown, and then made to perform oral sex on a team member is engaging in an "appropriate team building behavior" and *is not being hazed*. Researchers and advocates have misunderstood Van Raalte et al.'s results because their definitions of hazing differ. Further, the collective desire to show that hazing does not increase cohesion has now proliferated a finding that, ironically, may indicate otherwise. Indeed, Van Raalte et al.'s results may suggest that some methods of hazing actually do increase cohesion, or simply that any "team building behavior" that is not accepted by a team may reduce cohesion.

Regardless, Van Raalte et al.'s definition of hazing is unstable and thus not useful at a policy level. All it would require for induction activities to be hazing is a majority of participants deciding that they are inappropriate. If the same majority were persuaded otherwise—for any reason—then the activities would instantly cease to be hazing.

Poor definitions of hazing may also lead to enduring distrust among targeted populations (e.g., fraternities, athletic teams). Colleges and universities appear incentivized to have an over-inclusive definition of hazing so as to prevent hazing behavior from escaping notice or punishment. But this goal is directly at odds with convincing students that there is any coherent definition of hazing other than what authorities might find objectionable. If hazing can be any member requirement that happens to violate any policy whatsoever, as in the case of Cornell University, this implies that the word "hazing" is just another way of saying "any behavior that we don't like, for any reason."

### Revisiting the Strict Definition of Hazing

It is worth revisiting the strict definition of hazing offered at the beginning of this paper, in light of the critiques given above:

Hazing is non-accidental, costly aspects of group induction activities that a) do not appear to be group-relevant assessments/preparations or b) appear excessive in their application. Group induction activities are those tasks formally or informally required to obtain membership or participatory legitimacy for new or prospective members.

The strict definition has the following merits:

a) It describes the many ways in which hazing can impact hazingees through the idea of “cost.” “Cost” encompasses negative impacts across all manner of currencies, including time, energy, money, reputation, injury, etc.

b) It excludes accidental costs (e.g., tripping during a training exercise) but avoids terms like “intentional.” By this definition, members of an organization can haze while being unaware that their induction activities are excessive or lack relevance.

c) It uses a flexible and ultimately evidence-based stance, appending the word “appear” in two places to describe its scope. If there is a legitimate dispute as to the relevance or extremity of a group induction task, experts can be consulted and studies can be performed.

d) It avoids extreme moral language and encompasses a continuum of severity from trivial to profound.

The task identified at the beginning of this paper was to describe a useful and universal definition of hazing, rather than an ultimate definition that cleared away all problems of judgment and application. One such problem is the nature of hazing itself: What if some of what we currently call “hazing” in a particular organization is actually group-relevant in a non-obvious manner (e.g., Precourt, 1975)? Assuming the impression of hazing is strong and widespread, I suggest we continue to label such activities with some variety of the term “hazing.” After all, the strict definition is already framed in terms of appearance. This could be made more explicit by modifying the language of the definition as follows:

*Actual* hazing is non-accidental, costly aspects of group induction activities that a) are not group-relevant assessments/preparations or b) are excessive in their application. *Nominal* hazing is costly aspects of group induction activities that falsely give the impression of a) or b).

For example, an enduring argument with respect to hazing rests on whether some forms of hazing are effective at generating group cohesion among hazingees. In the terms described

immediately above, this is an argument about whether certain forms of hazing are nominal or actual. For example, if fraternity hazing were effective in establishing subsequent strong cohesion, then said induction activities would move from the “actual” to the “nominal” category. I anticipate resistance to this dual classification. At present, the label of “hazing” is sometimes used to solidify opposition to certain induction practices and to shame their participants. If some hazing practices were re-labeled “nominal hazing,” this might sound like a statement of approval or harmlessness, neither of which is intended, and this potential misunderstanding would need to be met with education.

To be clear, under the strict definition, any opposition to hazing practices (whether we label them nominal or actual) would be based on the same concerns as are currently voiced: The potential for danger and abuse. Merely discovering that some hazing practices are cryptically relevant to organizations would not necessarily obviate such objections. It would depend on the means, outcomes, and safety associated with the nominal hazing activities.

Regardless, it is time for stakeholders to formally acknowledge that the term “hazing” should be taken as a limited claim. “Hazing” is a word that is best used to capture the observation that an induction activity seems both costly and arbitrary. It cannot simultaneously indicate how harmful an activity is, whether it is morally acceptable, its psychological causes, or similarly nuanced judgments.

### **The Way Forward**

Though one is entitled to one’s own definition of hazing, not all hazing definitions are equally useful. Some definitions may categorize disparate phenomena as being related, punish benign behaviors, motivate hazers and hazingees to redefine their experiences, or simply sow confusion among fellow stakeholders.

Organizations constructing educational materials about hazing should be mindful of the scope of their definitions and the false positives they may generate, focusing not just on describing the ways in which hazing might be implemented, but also the ways in which induction activities can be unpleasant *without* being hazing. Finally, stakeholders that wish to make use of scientific studies on hazing should affirm that the hazing definitions employed are coherent and compatible with their own.

The strict definition of hazing given in this paper is not without ambiguity—it does not solve all problems of clarity or judgment. But it succinctly captures hazing in two to three sentences, is

broadly applicable, and appears to exclude more false positives than other, common definitions. At the very least, it is a good start to a larger conversation.

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