

Studying hazing as an anthropologist: The impact of mandatory reporting

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I am an anthropologist who specializes in the study of hazing initiations. Across human cultures, hazing initiations have taken many forms, including beatings and scarification, exposure to stinging insects, isolation and privation, and all manner of other dysphoric events (e.g., Butt-Thompson, 1908; Hayden, 2018). While I am interested in hazing practices around the world, my work focuses on hazing in modern college fraternities. College fraternity hazing can last for weeks or months, with commonly reported ordeals including intense calisthenics, the ingestion of nauseating substances or foods, heavy alcohol consumption, and paddling. My studies of hazing fraternities have yielded rare quantitative and qualitative insights and have begun to reopen seemingly settled debates about the causes and consequences of hazing (Cimino, 2016; Cimino and Thomas, 2022). These debates have practical importance because hazing in college fraternities has been an ongoing concern for decades. Some of the most serious and intense hazing rituals in the United States are performed by fraternities, and most hazing-related deaths in the country appear to derive from such groups (Nuwer, 1990, 1999, 2022). While these deaths are thankfully rare relative to the high prevalence of fraternity hazing (Allan and Madden, 2012; Allan, Kerschner, and Payne, 2019), their year-to-year persistence has understandably motivated administrators and legislators to curb hazing more broadly.

In discussing the current state of hazing among fraternities, it is worth considering the implications of studying such groups. I am certainly not the only anthropologist who studies populations engaged in activities that are illegal or morally dubious. Collectively, this work is important: In order to understand humans holistically, we cannot restrict our focus to only those behaviors that are safe from opprobrium or legal punishment. However, choosing to study such behaviors necessarily prompts serious questions for the investigator. In particular, the investigator must decide the best means of study that does not run afoul of ethical or legal obligations. These decisions can become more trying if the legal landscape shifts. For the study of hazing in my home state of Ohio, such a shift has now taken place with the passage of “Colin’s Law.”

Briefly, Colin’s Law specifies increased legal penalties for hazing when compared to Ohio’s previous antihazing law (Ohio Legislature, n.d.). Most importantly, with Colin’s Law, Ohio has joined a number of other states in including a mandatory reporting requirement (Chamberlin, 2014). As a faculty member, failing to report knowledge of hazing is now formally illegal and invites incarceration and fines. While performing in-depth fieldwork with any hazing fraternity has always been difficult, Colin’s Law has rendered it effectively impossible in Ohio. Again, the missed opportunities this creates are not merely those pertaining to abstract theory-building. There are serious implications for how researchers will attempt to understand and prevent some of the more consequential negative outcomes associated with hazing, including life-changing injuries or deaths (Finkel, 2002). For many fraternities, hazing practices are central to their culture and are treated with profound seriousness (e.g., Cimino, 2016; Leemon, 1972; Walker, 1968). Our understanding of why this is so is scientifically nascent and data-impooverished (Cimino and Thomas, 2022), as are commonly proposed solutions (e.g., Marchell et al., 2022). To put this in perspective, antihazing laws are present in the vast majority of states, all with little ostensible effect on the prevalence or severity of hazing (Chamberlin, 2014; Cimino, 2020), especially among fraternities and sororities (Allan, Kerschner, and Payne, 2019; Allan and Madden, 2012). This lack of efficacy has not lessened the desire for yet more legally punitive responses. Nor has it seemingly lessened the appetite for naïve antihazing policies, including ineffective “zero-tolerance” approaches (Parks, 2021). To make matters worse, modern antihazing programs are suffused with simplistic and dubious assumptions, such as the idea that hazers will accept the replacement of hazing ordeals with quotidian activities like watching movies or going bowling (e.g., Allan et al., 2018). Inside the larger community of Greek life advisors, administrators, and antihazing organizations, everyone seems to want to “transform” the culture of hazing. But few want to take the difficult steps necessary to understand that culture at the depth needed to produce such changes. Extended field efforts to systematically investigate and understand fraternity hazing are so rare that they attract press attention (Bellows, 2022).

Even if one believes that current antihazing laws and programs are going to suddenly start causing unprecedented reductions in hazing, mandatory reporting will make it harder to tell whether such reductions are an illusory product of increased secrecy. If members of hazing groups believe that they will be subject to such reporting, it provides them with the strongest possible motivations to lie to researchers, administrators, and other outsiders. Whereas before I might have been able to build rapport with local fraternities and gain knowledge of hazing with the understanding that I would protect their anonymity, that possibility has now been eliminated. In effect, the requirement has taken an already secretive hazing culture and erected a high cement wall around it, leaving us all to wonder what might be happening beyond.

While mandatory reporting requirements impinge on vital fraternity research in Ohio and other areas of the United States, the issues created by mandatory reporting are not unique to the study of hazing. For example, many universities mandate the reporting of sexual misconduct (e.g., UC Berkeley, n.d.). However, Holland et al. (2021) recently reviewed such policies and excoriated them for their problematic assumptions, questionable efficacy, harm to victims, and—most importantly for this essay—negative impact on researchers trying to work with these populations. Without laws and policies that clearly exempt IRB-approved studies from mandatory reporting requirements, the appetite for ever-more-strident institutional responses to deviant behavior will slowly crowd out crucial research on all manner of important topics. In the specific context of hazing, if we continue to attempt to eradicate or replace hazing while disallowing the very research needed to understand why it persists, we will imperil the efficacy of every attempt to manage it. And along with these foolish decisions will inevitably come the very outcomes we were trying to avoid: injury and death.

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