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Using Student Development Theories to Explore Hazing within the Greek System

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Abstract

Hank Nuwer explores the rituals and traditions that have become a part of today's fraternity and sorority hazing activities in his 1999 book *Wrongs of Passage*. In this article we examine these rituals as they relate to college student development. With the help of existing development theories, we are able to investigate the reasoning as to why students continue to participate in such dangerous activities, as well as examine why institutions may be reluctant to step in and take action against the Greek system.

Hazing has been a part of initiation rituals since the Middle Ages and fraternities have been using hazing as an initiation tool since they gained a place on university campuses. Once sororities appeared on campuses they too began to enact these rites of passage. Hank Nuwer (1999) explains the severity of these traditions in his book *Wrongs of Passage*. With the help of modern social theorists such as Schlossberg (1989), Tinto (1993) and Josselson (as cited in Evans, Forney, and Guido-DiBrito, 1998), we can seek to explain why these traditions continue and why administrative staff may be reluctant to step in and take action against the Greek groups who haze.

Throughout his book Nuwer (1999) describes the horrific deaths of college students that resulted from hazing incidents across the country. After learning of these deaths, Nuwer is left with one question: why are students still willing to be part of Greek life? Nancy Schlossberg (1989) makes one reason very clear in her theory of marginality and mattering.

Schlossberg (1989) states that involvement, including involvement in Greek life, “creates connections between students, faculty, and staff that allow individuals to believe in their own personal worth” (p. 5). This becomes relevant in the story of one fraternal death described by Nuwer (1999) in *The Wrongs of Passage*. In the first chapter, Nuwer discusses Chad Saucier, a first year student from Mobile, Alabama. As a senior in high school, Chad applied to Auburn University (AU) with hopes of becoming a veterinarian. Unfortunately, Chad was not offered admission because of his mediocre grade point average. Chad was told by AU he would need to get his grades up in order to be accepted as a transfer student and was advised to enroll at the local community college. When Chad was unable to attend AU he began to experience feelings of marginalization; he was

inferior to the student who had already been admitted to Auburn. Despite these feelings he was determined to persist.

Chad quickly enrolled at Southern Union Community College confident that he would transfer to AU as soon as possible. He rented an apartment near the AU campus with two of his high school friends who were attending AU. He was happy about the classes he was taking at the community college and talked excitedly about the possibility of opening up a veterinary clinic of his own someday. However, Chad was unable to gain the feelings of belonging he desired among his community college classmates.

Chad became interested in the Phi Delta Theta fraternity after attending a couple of their parties with his roommates. Nuwer (1999) states; “like the members of other fraternities, the Phi Delts displayed a readiness to accept a member so long as he did whatever was required to get into the group” (p. 3). To the Phi Delts, it did not matter that Chad attended a community college; as long as he was willing to participate in their activities, they were willing to let him. Chad started to feel like he was part of the fraternity and decided to pledge.

Schlossberg (1989) would define Chad’s feeling as the first of four aspects of mattering. Chad and his fellow pledgemates were receiving attention from the fraternity brothers. Schlossberg describes attention as “the feeling that one commands the interest or notice of another person” (p. 9). Despite acquiring a back injury due to all of the physical tasks the fraternity required Chad to complete, he continued to pledge. He felt that the work he was doing made a difference to the fraternity and he wanted to do whatever he could to please the fraternity members. Schlossberg’s theory defines these feelings of desire for acceptance as the second aspect of mattering, importance.

“Importance is the belief that the other person cares about what we want, think, and do, or is concerned with our fate” (Schlossberg, p. 10).

During the last night of the pledging process, Chad and his pledge mates attended the Phi Delta Theta traditional party. This party was meant to celebrate the end of the term as well as all of the tasks the pledges had accomplished. Schlossberg (1989) would describe the party as a way to experience the third aspect of mattering, ego extension. “Ego extension refers to the feeling that other people will be proud of our accomplishments or saddened by our failures” (p. 10).

During the party a traditional bottle exchange occurred where pledges exchanged bottles of liquor with one of the fraternity brothers in the house. Nuwer (1999) describes fraternal traditions as a way to:

provide a new member with a sense of connection to past and present members...

It is these traditions, whether rites of passage or a family party at Thanksgiving, that keep us from getting lost, give life meaning and maintain our sanity to the extent that they can (p. 8).

Schlossberg (1989) included rituals and traditions in her theory describing marginality and mattering. Schlossberg stresses rituals as ways to help people move from one phase of life to another. In this case, Chad was moving from a pledge to a fraternity member. The pledging experience parallels the stages of rituals that Schlossberg defines.

Schlossberg theorizes that first a person is segregated, then the individual moves into a feeling of being between the old role and the new role, and finally the individual reenters society with a new identity. Chad and his pledgemates had already been forced to give up many of their other commitments and outside interests in order to pledge the fraternity.

They had been subjected to feelings of liminality: feeling like they were not full fraternity brother but not without connections to their new brotherhood. They were ready for their new identities as full brothers; however Chad would never get to experience life as a member of the Phi Delta Theta fraternity. The party and traditional bottle exchange ultimately cost Chad his life.

What Schlossberg's (1989) theory does not include is any mentioning of the responsibility of the group (in Chad's case the Phi Delta Theta fraternity) or person that makes another person feels like he or she matters. Schlossberg's theory only explains the feelings that marginalized people feel on their way to feeling like they matter. Schlossberg fails to include the importance of the intentions and/or feelings of the people creating this sense of mattering. This is a flaw in Schlossberg's theory when it comes to its application in Greek life.

Chad and his pledge mates might have felt like they were beginning to matter to the fraternity, but did the fraternity feel like the pledges mattered to them? Chad found out how much he mattered to the members Phi Delta Theta the night of the party, when he was left to die in one of the rooms inside the fraternity house. Despite showing signs of labored breathing, no one checked on him that night. By the time partygoers realized the severity of the situation, Chad had already died as a result of binge drinking.

By pledging a fraternity, Chad was attempting to become involved in the AU community, a community that had initially rejected him and he was desperate to pledge his allegiance to, no matter what the cost. In general, institutions such as AU encourage their students to become involved in various aspects of the college community. For some students this means joining a sports team or participating in student council, others find

themselves becoming involved through the Greek system on campus. Vincent Tinto (1993) addresses the idea of involvement with respect to student persistence in his theory of individual departure. Tinto's theory of individual departure is complex and multifaceted. It is composed of many integral parts, including some borrowed from other researchers. Tinto's longitudinal model of institutional departure helps to explain why students take part in hazing practices in order to gain membership in the Greek community.

When Hank Nuwer (1999) turns his critical eye on hazing practices among fraternity members, he is quick to write these celebrated rites of passage and the brotherhoods they create off as dangerous, degrading and often deadly. He is disturbed by what he perceives to be an unsolvable mystery: why do new pledges subject themselves to dangerous rituals in order to simply belong to a social club? Nuwer is also troubled by the apparent lapse in college administrator oversight with regards to the matter. While Nuwer's confusion and frustrations are valid, he might have been able to develop a more thorough analysis of the situation using Tinto's (1993) developmental model. At the heart the model is the recognition that a student's "intellectual and social integration reinforce persistence through their impact upon heightened intentions and commitments" (Tinto, p. 115). While the Greek system, with its rigid pledging process, may not be the ideal way to solidify a student's intentions and/or strengthen one's commitments, it cannot be completely overlooked as a system that provides a strong sense of social integration.

In Tinto's (1993) model, formal extracurricular activities and informal peer group interactions are key components in determining what degree of institutional commitment a student will have. Based on this model, it is reasonable to conclude that the quicker and

easier it is for a person to become socially integrated into the college system, the easier it may be for them to persist in getting a degree. The question that begs to be answered is: why does the Greek system outshine many other social groups in this area? Perhaps it has something to do with the fact that the pledging process has a set of strict, regimented rules for incorporation. In exchange for agreeing to follow a prescribed set of expectations, pledges are guaranteed lifelong brotherhood and friendship as well as opportunities to get involved in the leadership and philanthropic activities. Few other social circles offer such a complete, long-term integration after a relatively short initiation period. For example, it can take upwards of one year for collegiate athletes to overcome their rookie status and a student's integration into a residential hall floor often lasts for only one year. Another advantage to Greek membership is the reputation of the Greek system as a central element of college life. The Greek system has a long storied history on college campuses around the country and imagines of Greek life continue to make their way onto popular media including TV shows and movies. Tinto's theory confirms that "the closer one's community is to the center of the system, the stronger the forces which bind the individual to the institution generally" (p. 123).

Tinto's (1993) model identifies some of the reasons why students may choose to pledge fraternities and why student administrators may choose to support their decisions, however the model can also be used to support some of Nuwer's (1999) critiques of the Greek system. One of Nuwer's main concerns is the isolation that many pledges are forced to endure during the initiation process. Nuwer cited examples of students being instructed to avoid talking to family members and old friends. Several of these students were "told to take to no old friends outside the group... and in general, to give up their

independent lives as they submit to the control and influence of the group they hope to join” (Nuwer, p. 45). Tinto’s model includes external attributes, like family and community backgrounds, as essential elements in determining a student’s persistence. A frequent critique of the Greek system is that it prevents students from giving equal attention to these commitments. In addition, Tinto’s model considers academic integration to be as important as social integration in determining student persistence. Students cannot persist without some degree of success in their formal academic pursuits and/or informal interactions with faculty and staff. The Greek initiation process requires a large time commitment and often takes place during a student’s first term on campus. It can therefore act as a deterrent in getting students to form these important academic connections early on in their college careers.

With all this being said, it is important to identify the pitfalls of Tinto’s (1993) theory as it relates to the issue of involvement. First, it never addresses the quality or quantity of integration that is necessary to succeed and persist in getting one’s degree. Student affairs professionals are left wondering if Greek involvement can produce a high enough quality and large enough quantity of integration to positively influence student persistence on its own. Secondly, Tinto is unable to clearly establish which needs to be more developed: a student’s academic or social integration. It therefore leaves student affairs professionals to consider whether the strong social integration students feel within the Greek system is enough to offset a lack of academic involvement.

It is important to recognize the multiple facets to Tinto’s (1993) model. His research can be used to understand and recognize the benefits of the Greek system’s clear and concise rites of passage as a way to fully integrating new members into a celebrated,

centralistic, college community. This model can also be used to confirm some of the valid critiques of the Greek system and in turn one is able to critique Tinto's model after examining the Greek system more thoroughly. While Tinto and Nuwer might be operating from two different perspectives, both are committed to fostering the best possible learning environment for college student. The questions that remain involve finding the best ways to create this safe, supportive space. Perhaps this environment could be achieved if student affairs professionals develop new rites of passage that provide some or all of the benefits of fraternity membership. However, even if all students could participate in large-scale rites of passage, they will still need to have ways to break down the college setting into smaller, more intimate parts; therefore fraternities may still be seen as practical. If fraternities are here to stay, then universities must educate Greeks on student development theories and help them recognize the importance of developing the academic integration of members in addition to their social integration.

Often student development theorists create models absent of the details that define the various populations of college students; Schlossberg and Tinto are no exception to this finding. The college population is comprised of many groups, each of whom has the potential to develop in separate and unique ways. Female students make up one of these groups. A person's gender is one of the many factors that can help shape how he or she comes to create a personal identity. The idea that female college students' identity develops differently from that of their male counterparts is a relatively new view amongst theorists. Ruthellen Josselson (as cited in Evans et al., 1998) explored the development of

female college students in terms of the identity groups developed by Marcia (as cited in Evans et al.).

Hank Nuwer (1999) specifically examines the rates and occurrences of hazing amongst female sorority members and comes to find that sororities still play a significant role in the lives of many college women. However, he doesn't analyze what types of women are most likely to engage in sorority hazing activities. This important piece of the puzzle can be further explored through Josselson's (as cited in Evans et al., 1998) examination of identity groups. The differences in the development of college females may help to explain Nuwer's findings that "hazing deaths are far less likely to occur in local and national female sororities than are hazing deaths in male fraternities and athletic groups" (p. 158). While female students join sororities for many of the same reasons other students join fraternities or spirit groups, involvement and/or a connection with other students, sororities tend to haze differently than these other groups. Examining Josselson's (as cited in Evans et al.) four identity groups may offer some explanations as to why these differences exist.

Women in the first identity group are described as foreclosures. "Foreclosures are psychologically tied to the centrality of family in their lives and their role in this tightly knit group. Few have relationships outside the family" (Evans et al., 1998, p. 58). Developing relationships outside of one's family circle is part of the draw for students seeking involvement in the Greek system. College students described as foreclosures would be unlikely to become involved with the sorority system; they would also be unlikely to become involved in other social groups. As such, the incidents of sorority

hazing, as described by Nuwer (1999), would be unlikely to be committed by females falling under this description.

Identity Achievement women comprise the second group in Josselson's (as cited in Evans et al., 1998) identity theory. "What matters to these women is feeling pride in themselves, not seeking others' pride to affirm their self-worth" (p. 59). Women who are described as Identity Achievers may join sororities, but because of their pride, would be unlikely to agree to others requiring them to participate in hazing rituals. In contrast to their male counterparts, these women are unlikely to see hazing as a necessity for acceptance into a group. Identity Achievers are said to place a high value in their relationships as well. Sororities that do not haze offer a sense of family away from students' immediate families. This structure may appeal to Identity Achievers, because these sororities "provided members with a sense of identity" (Nuwer, 1999, p. 149), don't require them to give up their other identities and provide them with a new venue to form new, supportive relationships.

The next group identified by Josselson (as cited in Evans et al., 1998) was given the label of Identity Diffusion. Individuals falling under this categorization vary widely in their characterizations and descriptions. "One commonality among them is a tendency to withdraw from situations (Bourne as cited in Evans et al., p. 61). Women in this stage find it difficult to establish relationships and are unlikely to make commitments to any person or group. As such, Identity Diffusers are unlikely to involve themselves in activities such as the Greek system and even if they begin the pledging process, are likely to drop out at the slightest mentioning of commitment to the group. Those who do find themselves joining sororities would be unlikely to become heavily involved in the rituals

described by Nuwer, because these rituals are primarily meant as a way to show commitment to a sisterhood.

The identity development group least likely to resist hazing and therefore accept it as a necessity for acceptance into a group is the Moratoriums. A Moratorium is a woman who “desperately seeks others to define and differentiate her” (Evans et al., 1998, p. 61). Females who can be labeled as Moratoriums are described as being unstable, guilty, and conflicted. Moratoriums presented with the rituals of sorority hazing would be unlikely to speak out against it due to their need for approval and acceptance. Moratoriums are likely to have “omnipresent guilt” (p.61), which often plays in to their conformity to sorority demands. They don’t want to disappoint their sisters or let down the other pledges. While Moratoriums may be more likely to participate in hazing rituals, they are also may be the most likely to benefit from the close-knit atmosphere a sorority provides. Becoming a member of a sorority may give a Moratorium her first chance to fully commit to something and thereby help her to develop a more stable identity based on a structured set of values.

It is important to realize that just because certain women are more likely to seek out and/or benefit from participation in the Greek system this does not mean that violence similar to that found in fraternity hazing would be accepted by Moratoriums or other women likely to pledge sororities. While female students may recognize and seek activities related to involvement and ritual, the groups described by Josselson (as cited in Evan et al., 1998) do not leave room for violence or over-the-top rituals. The development of female college students differs from their male counterparts and this

leads to differences in their experiences within the Greek system. Differences including the fact that:

Female students' involvement consisted mainly of the creation of kangaroo courts, shoving matches over class flags, the wearing of silly costumes, and servitude. No known class-hazing incidents involving female students approach the level of violence of those that collegiate males participated in regularly (Nuwer, 1999, p. 104).

The four groups described by Josselson (as cited in Evans et al., 1998) notably lack the aggression and persistence we typically associate with fraternal hazing. We can therefore assume that because women's development lacks these traits we have an explanation as to why sororities behave differently from their fraternal counterparts. Josselson does not offer an explanation as to why these women engage in the hazing rituals, but rather she identifies why they do not engage in other rituals. This is where her theory fails in offering a specific explanation for Nuwer's findings.

Nuwer (1999) is able to offer insight and examples into the modern day Greek systems we see on college campuses today. He even offers an array of solutions to end the deaths, injuries, and psychological damage pledges experience when trying to join fraternities and sororities. After examining theorists such as Schlossberg (1989), Tinto (1993), and Josselson (as cited in Evans et al., 1998), we can see that the problems associated with hazing, as identified by Nuwer, are embedded in the development of these students. Students need to feel like they matter; they need to be involved and integrated in academic and social circles. College administrators try to provide and support student organizations that fill the needs of their members and for better or worse

many students join Greek groups to fulfill these needs. The question that remains is whether or not the dangerous, deadly rituals mentioned by Hank Nuwer are so deeply embedded in our society that changing or eliminating them would destroy all the benefits to Greek membership.

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Appendix A

Book Information

Nuwer, H. (1999). *Wrongs of Passage: Fraternities, sororities, hazing, and binge drinking*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press

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Appendix B

About the Author

Hank Nuwer graduated from Buffalo State College in 1968 with a Bachelors degree in English secondary education. He then went on to attend graduate school in Nevada and New Mexico. Nuwer's research on hazing began with "The Dead Souls of Hell Week", an article he wrote in 1978 for *Human Behavior*. He wrote his first book on the issue in 1990, a book entitled *Broken Pledges: The Deadly Rite of Hazing*. Nuwer hoped this first book would have a significant impact on the hazing that had been occurring on college campuses. Despite his efforts, deaths resulting from hazing continued at alarming rates.

Nuwer concluded that hazing was something that should be examined not only by those within the Greek system, but also by college administrators and the public. This conclusion led Nuwer to write *Wrongs of Passage* in 1999.

I saw a need for a volume that parents, educators, and Greek leaders could use, either individually, or collectively, as a basis upon which to form a plan of action for reducing the risks associated with belonging to a social club (Nuwer, 1999, p. xii).

Nuwer hoped that his new book would inspire educators and community members to search for ways to put an end to hazing and alcohol abuse in the college communities.

Since writing *Wrongs of Passage* Nuwer has written two other books on hazing entitled *High School Hazing: When Rites Become Wrongs* (2000) and *The Hazing Reader* (2004). Nuwer has also written several books for young adults, including one for young adult writers titled *To the Young Writer: Nine Writers Talk About Their Craft*. Nuwer was acknowledged for his work by his alma mater, Buffalo State College, receiving an honorary Doctorate of Humane Letters in 2007. Nuwer's manuscripts are part of the Hank Nuwer Collection in the college's library.

Nuwer enjoys participatory journalism and has appeared in many publications including *Harper's*, *Outside*, *Saturday Evening Post*, *The Nation*, *Toronto Globe & Mail*, *Montreal Standard*, and *Boston Magazine*. He now lives in Indiana and travels around the country speaking to colleges and universities about the dangers of hazing.

Appendix C

Book Summary

Hank Nuwer (1999) is mad; he's mad because at least one young man or woman has died during a fraternity or sorority pledge event since 1970 and no one is doing anything about it! Nuwer began investigating the dangerous rites of passage known as Greek hazing in 1990 with his first book *Broken Pledges*. *Pledges* told the story of the alcohol-related death of Chuck Stenzel, a student at Alfred University. This time around

Nuwer takes a much broader look at the history, laws, traditions, and ramifications that surrounding hazing. In his second book, *Wrongs of Passage*, Nuwer investigates the underlying reasons why otherwise bright, articulate, and civil minded students lose all common sense when it comes to participating in Greek initiation activities. What compels students to participate degrading and dangerous rituals in order to merely belong to fraternities and sororities? Is the answer deeply connected to the national epidemic of college binge drinking or is there something deeper than alcohol abuse at play? And why, after so many deaths, severe injuries, and psychological damage both to the hazers and hazingees do college administrators continue to allow such practices?

Nuwer begins his investigation by taking an in-depth look at the hazing tradition beginning at the roots in English penitentialism through to its current status as the number one cause of alcohol-related deaths on college campuses. The author then breaks down “Greekthink” which he defines as the nearly delusional feelings of invincibility, failure to heed moral qualms in the interest of group unanimity, and disregard for a newcomer’s stress and safety that seem to come about as a result of Greek membership. Nuwer analyzes the role that alcohol plays in most deadly hazing incidents and draws distinctions between the hazing done by fraternities compared to that done by sororities. Towards the end of *Wrongs of Passage*, Nuwer considers the impact that inconsistent national, state, and local laws along with incompetent Greek governing bodies have had in the perpetuation of hazing practices. In closing, Nuwer provides a long list of strategies for cutting down if not completely eliminating hazing deaths. His list is directed at student administrators, fraternity leaders and members, communities, parents, and

lawmakers, and pulls no punches in placing the responsibility for the future health and well being of college students in the hands of his readers.