

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

Brotherly Love:
Constructing a Narrative of Fraternity
Initiation Experiences

By

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In the fall of 2017, Maxwell Gruver began his college education at Louisiana State University. His stay in Baton Rouge, however, would come to a tragic end only two months later, in September of 2017. Gruver had decided to join the fraternity Phi Delta Theta and thus began his pledging process toward initiation. The brother in charge of the pledge process was Matthew Naquin, who, according to Phi Delta Theta's former pledge educator Philip Clark, often took things too far when it came to hazing the pledges. For example, Clark noted that he shot pledges with an airsoft pistol while tailgating at a football game. Clark, an LSU graduate himself, warned Naquin on September 11th, 2017, that he was hazing too hard and that he should ease up on the pledges. Naquin, however, responded by ignoring the advice and telling Clark that "he would do whatever he wanted" (Gyan, 2019, July 15). Just two days later, Naquin facilitated the hazing ritual known as "Bible Study," during which pledges were asked to answer questions about the fraternity and recite the Greek Alphabet. If a pledge gave an incorrect answer, they were forced to chug 190-proof liquor. Gruver was pronounced dead the very next morning from alcohol poisoning and aspiration, with a blood-alcohol level of 0.495% and traces of THC found in his body. Multiple pledges and fraternity members testified that Gruver seemed to be targeted by Naquin and was made to drink more than the other pledges. In 2019, Naquin was convicted of negligent homicide and was faced with up to five years in prison. It was also discovered that Naquin had deleted almost 700 files from his phone during the investigation and following the issuing of a search warrant for the contents of his phone, which resulted in another charge against him for obstruction of justice. Philip Clark lamented the fate of his fraternity, saying, "It only takes one kid to bring down the fraternity... One bad apple can ruin everything" (Gyan, 2019, July 17). The LSU chapter of Phi Delta Theta has been banned from the campus until at least 2033.

Hazing does not, however, only manifest through the medium of alcohol. While on a fraternity getaway in the Poconos Mountains in 2013, Pi Delta Psi pledge Chun “Michael” Deng succumbed to injuries that he experienced as a result of a fraternity hazing ritual known as “Glass Ceiling.” During this ritual, the pledges from Baruch College were allegedly forced to run past the brothers while blindfolded and wearing a backpack weighed down with about thirty pounds of sand. During this ritual, the brothers repeatedly struck, pushed, and tackled Deng, resulting in damage to various parts of his body, including his head (Fuchs, 2018). Eventually, Deng fell down and was subsequently struck in the head and immediately fell unconscious. The brothers then took him inside and laid him on a couch while attempting to wake him up and searching the internet for his symptoms (Andone & Simko-Bednarski, 2018). An hour passed before the brothers decided to take Deng to the hospital, where he soon passed away. Deng’s autopsy indicated that he died of complications from traumatic brain injuries that he sustained during the hazing ritual. Court documents show that the forensic pathologist working on the case stated that the delay in the treatment of Deng’s injuries played a significant role in his death (Fuchs, 2018). As a result, thirty-seven members of Pi Delta Psi were criminally charged in court, with four of the thirty-seven members pleading guilty to felony charges of voluntary manslaughter and hindering apprehension (Boniello, 2019). The national fraternity organization of Pi Delta Psi was also found guilty of involuntary manslaughter and assault, while being acquitted of both third-degree murder and voluntary manslaughter. In addition, the national fraternity was banned from the entire state of Pennsylvania for ten years and was fined \$112,500 (Andone & Simko-Bednarski, 2018).

With stories like that of Maxwell Gruver and Chun “Michael” Deng popping up frequently in the media, many are left wondering why young men continue to join Greek Life if

they are going to be subjected to the same treatment that has claimed the lives of at least one promising young college student every year between 1959 and 2021, totaling at least 284 hazing-related deaths in the United States since the year 1838 (Nuwer, 2022). This question has spurred this study, which takes the form of an investigation into how fraternity brothers understand their time as new members prior to initiation and how they create a narrative about their experiences within the broader culture of fraternity life.

To explore the question at hand, semi-structured interviews were conducted with six initiated fraternity members who were asked to share their experiences and perspectives on fraternity culture and initiation processes. In order to protect their identity and to encourage honest dialogue, the names of the participants, their schools, and their fraternities have been replaced with pseudonyms. The participants each come from different fraternities and different schools of varying sizes all across the United States. The interlocutors include Abraham, a founding father of the Alpha Beta fraternity at a large university in the South, Dean, a brother of Gamma Delta at a large public university in the Midwest, Owen, a member of Epsilon Zeta Jewish fraternity at a large state university in the Midwest, Conner, a brother of Eta Theta at a small, private university in the East, Harry, a non-traditional student who joined the fraternity Upsilon Kappa at a mid-sized university in the Midwest, and Reggie, a brother of Iota Kappa at the same medium-sized private Midwestern university.

One of the most prominent issues that fraternities must deal with, especially when it comes to the recruitment of new members, is their reputation and the stereotypes surrounding fraternities in general. This is something that fraternity members and those debating joining Greek Life must take into consideration. The stereotypes that the public has attributed to fraternities are almost always negative, which leaves many people with a sour taste in their

mouth when it comes to any discussion relating to fraternities. Yet despite this negative reputation, students are still joining fraternities at high rates around the country. According to the North-American Interfraternity conference, between 2005 and 2015, the total number of fraternity members increased by an average of four percent each year, with close to one hundred thousand young men getting initiated in the 2013-2014 school year alone (Svrluga, 2015). To understand why this is the case, the participants were asked about how their own fraternity relates to the stereotypes that the public has placed upon them as a whole.

Five out of the six fraternity brothers I interviewed claimed that their chapter in no way reflects the stereotypes that fraternities are known for. Abraham explained that there were a few brothers in his chapter that wanted to make the fraternity into a more “fratty frat,” but for the past five years that he has been either a part of or in close contact with the fraternity, they have purposely stayed away from that mentality. He went on to say that they often had conversations about the future of their fraternity and what they, as a group, could do to prevent themselves from falling back into the wild and troublesome habits that fraternities are known for.

Dean gave credit to his school as the reason that his chapter no longer embodied the stereotypical attributed to fraternities. He explained that because of the poor reputation of fraternities and sororities on his campus, his university did an entire overhaul of Greek Life, starting with his fraternity the year before he joined. The national organization of Gamma Delta was invited to evaluate their chapter, and the representatives decided to remove the entirety of the fraternity’s active roster, creating a clean slate for the organization. They did this because of the fraternity’s reputation on campus as a house in which hazing, abuse, and other stereotypical actions that fraternities are known for ran rampant. The members who were expelled from the fraternity were upset by this and promptly protested the decision and unofficially founded their

own organization, but failed to receive recognition from either the university or their national fraternity organization. With a clean slate, the national organization recruited new members to whom they could teach their values without the corruption of the traditions that the previous members were known for. Dean went on to explain that the isolation of their location in a largely rural area in the Midwest allowed them to grow without the influence of other chapters on their new fraternity culture, but that isolation also acted as a double-edged sword, in that it provided a bubble in which the other chapters on his campus could continue their harmful traditions without the pressure of other chapters in the area. He continued on to say that “most of the flak [they] got was from other fraternities who hadn't quite turned that leaf, who were still kind of doing this stuff.”

For Owen and Conner, the answer was less emphatic. They both mentioned that they had a few members who embodied the stereotypes more than anyone else, but on the whole, the fraternity did not reflect the public perception of Greek Life. They both brought up the reputation of their chapter on their campus as proof that although some of their members fit the description, they were cognizant of the issues that the stereotypes brought with them and they tried to do what they could to fight back against them. For Owen’s chapter of Epsilon Zeta, this meant staying true to their Jewish roots and attempting to recruit genuine new members that they would be proud to call brothers. Conner emphasized the fight of Eta Theta against the specific stereotype that Greek Life is predominantly white by actively increasing their presence on campus and in minority circles in an attempt to bring the much-needed diversity to their chapter that fraternities in general tend to lack.

This is a strategy that the brothers of Upsilon Kappa employed as well, evidenced by their recruitment of Harry. Harry is a non-traditional student who went into the military after

high school and did not enter college until he was approaching his fifties. While Harry was undergoing the recruitment process for all of the fraternities on his campus, he felt as though most of the other fraternities were unwilling to even consider him as a prospective new member because of his age. The brothers of Upsilon Kappa, however, were actively attempting to diversify their brotherhood and they decided to recruit Harry. Upon joining, Harry realized that the stereotypes that he had grown up hearing did not actually apply to his new fraternity. He saw how the chapter was dedicated to personal growth, not only socially, but academically and personally as well. He explained that Upsilon Kappa's fraternity education process is less focused on the fraternity and more so focused on the values that the brothers are expected to embody. For example, Harry highlighted a weekly activity that both new members and initiated brothers participated in. For this activity, the new member educator leads the brothers and new members to a location of significance on or off campus where the brotherhood would proceed to engage in a discussion surrounding one of the fraternity's core values. For instance, Harry recalled a discussion of integrity that took place on a walking bridge in a park near campus. He explained that the bridge was chosen as a symbol of integrity because of the structural integrity that it needed in order to support everyone that relies on it, such as the entire brotherhood that had gathered that day for the discussion on integrity. Harry explained that it was events such as this that shifted his perspective of fraternities away from what he had grown up seeing in the media.

Reggie is the outlier in this situation in that he believes that his fraternity does in fact embody the stereotypes that are seen in the media. He explains that in his chapter, the majority of the brothers are white men who like to "wear tank tops and like to lift weights and drink crappy beer on a Saturday morning. [They] had a messy house where [they] broke stuff for fun."

He continues on, however, to explain that although the brothers of Iota Kappa might embody the stereotypical “frat dude” at face value, they are much more underneath. If you peel back the top layer, Reggie explains that there were a lot of deep friendships and mentorships that wouldn’t be seen from the outside, and that even though there are a lot of stereotypical characteristics that can be found within his chapter, his brothers are still multifaceted, dynamic human beings underneath what they might present as on the outside. The brothers are involved in many different campus organizations and each have their own unique passions, both academically and personally that are often overlooked because of their membership in Iota Kappa. Reggie shared that one of his fraternity brothers was heavily involved on campus as an orientation leader for incoming freshmen, a tour guide, and a member of numerous honor societies and social justice clubs, yet he was constantly characterized by his membership in his fraternity over all of the other groups that were integral to his personal identity.

Curiously, Reggie made it clear that he believes that the stereotypes exist for a reason. He claims that “most fraternities probably reflect the stereotype at least a little bit. Otherwise, it wouldn't be a stereotype if it didn't feel true on some level, it doesn't make it all encompassing, it doesn't make it exclusively true, but it exists for a reason.” What is interesting about this claim is that each of the other participants denied that the stereotypes applied to their own fraternities. Could it be that the stereotypes are more relevantly explored on an individual level, with each chapter being evaluated in isolation, or can these stereotypes be true for the community as a whole while simultaneously being denied by those who experience the individual fraternity’s culture firsthand?

If the stereotypes are not relevant to most of the fraternities that were studied, why are they still so prevalent in the society of today? The participants provided their rationale for why

this might be by discussing whether or not the stereotypes are warranted for fraternities in general, regardless their positions on their own individual fraternities.

A common thread between the answers that the participants gave is that the negative incidents get much more attention than the positive ones. Abraham touched on this by explaining that even though the positive acts that fraternity members perform greatly outnumber the negatives, the severity of the actions of the few bad chapters each year understandably produce outrage in the communities that captures the attention of the public. For example, Abraham explained that his chapter is heavily involved with philanthropy and fundraising for the nearby community. His fraternity “adopted” multiple families and fundraised for their medical treatments. He also claimed that another chapter of his fraternity on a different campus raised \$80,000 in one year for their philanthropy. Harry also highlighted some of the positive acts that his fraternity performed. Upsilon Kappa is partnered with a local food bank and each semester they hold a week-long competition dedicated to raising money and collecting food donations for the food bank. He even recalled how intense the competition became, as being the sorority that donated the most non-perishable food items during the food drive was something to be immensely proud of. Abraham continued on to say that there are countless fraternities, including his own, that are striving to move away from the negative incidents that cause people to distrust fraternities, but the actions of all of these chapters can be undone by one individual member of one fraternity who commits a heinous act and singlehandedly sets back the entire community.

Along the same lines, Dean claims that the stereotypes of fraternities as a whole, while being warranted, are often blown out of proportion. He clarified that this is because looking at it from the outside in, it is easy for things to become exaggerated and for rumors to spread that are often not entirely true. According to Dean, one of the biggest reasons that this happens is

because while about 25% of his campus is involved in Greek Life, the stories that come out of fraternities and sororities garner 100% of the attention on campus. He did make it clear, however, that the stereotypes were warranted in general, but also especially on an individual, chapter-by-chapter basis. If a specific fraternity on a specific campus has a poor reputation, Dean claims that, more often than not, that reputation is warranted. This is often due to the recruitment of only one specific type of person, whether that be only those that like to party all the time, those that never party, only members of a specific race or socioeconomic status, or countless other demographics and personality traits where a fraternity made up solely of members of that group stifles any attempt at diversification. This practice leads to the homogenization of ideas and an effective echo chamber where bad ideas are not challenged by others with differing viewpoints. Dean explains that a healthy brotherhood is one that embraces the diversification not only of race and background, but also of ideas and values. The prevalence of the phenomenon of homogenization of ideas is the reason that Dean admits that he thinks “the stereotypes are warranted. All the stigmas are pretty true. There's the frat bro joke you see in TikToks about how they act and that's just how it is. It's one of those stereotypes that really does stem from truth, and it's kind of unfortunate, but it is what it is.”

Owen and Conner seem to be in agreement that the stereotypes are warranted, but the community is moving in the right direction. Conner believes that they are deserved because of the sheer number of events that have taken place in Greek Life that seem to confirm the stereotypes, while Owen places more blame on the nastiness and toxicity within the community when it comes to masculinity, power, and relationships in general, both between brothers and in romantic relationships that fraternity members may be a part of. They both made it a point to claim that fraternities are doing a better job of combating the stereotypes and building their

image while being cognizant of and attempting to prevent any potential issues that may arise that could help to perpetuate the stereotypes, but they made it clear that at the current moment, the stereotypes are still warranted.

Reggie, the only participant to decide that the stereotypes do apply to his own fraternity, also believes that the stereotypes are warranted for fraternity life in general, but he makes a distinction between whether the reputation is warranted and if it is fair. Reggie points out that each fraternity on each campus has their own culture which is heavily influenced by its surroundings, whether that be the other fraternities on campus, the geographical area in which the school is located, or any number of other factors. He explains that because he attended a school that is much smaller than most of the universities where fraternities make headline news, the culture of Greek Life as a whole was much less intense in terms of the requirements placed on pledges in order to join. The majority of the students at his medium-sized, private school, are much more laid back because, according to Reggie, students do not have to try nearly as hard to stand out and to make a name for themselves as students at larger public institutions do. The fact that his school was a private institution also might have played a role in the fraternity culture, as the chapters were more closely monitored than they would be at a larger university with an enormous student population that would be more difficult to control. Therefore, Reggie explains that the stereotypes are warranted in general, but the overall fraternity culture and reputation is driven by the stories that come out of the larger schools with less control over the fraternities, but that does not mean that the same problems do not exist at the smaller schools across the country. He sums this up by saying, “Not to say we were perfect and things didn't go wrong; mistakes were made and toxic things did happen. But I do think some of the stereotypes are unfair now. As for whether or not they're warranted, there's a lot of sexual harassment issues that need to be

addressed that never get heard of on most campuses, there's a drinking culture where graduates have drinking problems and things like that because they developed it during their years in college and combine that with toxic male culture of dealing with women, homophobic tendencies, and Greek life largely being white, I definitely do think there's some problem areas that need to be addressed, so warranted? I'd probably say yes. I think stereotypes can be warranted and unfair at the same time. That's probably not mutually exclusive.” Reggie explains that this is the case because, to him, the stereotypes are warranted on a general level, yet applying the stereotypes to each individual chapter can be unfair to the chapters that genuinely do not embody them.

Harry once again provides a very different, yet equally important perspective on this issue. He explained that growing up in the 1970s, the exposure that he had to fraternity culture and the stereotypes that accompanied it came mostly from the popular 1978 film, *Animal House*. Harry believes that this film is a big reason that fraternities have the reputations that they do, especially among adults that would have seen that movie while growing up. He admitted that the culture that he saw in *Animal House* was what he expected to experience when he joined a fraternity, but to his surprise, he did not see anything remotely close to what he expected from the stereotypes he was exposed to his entire life. His experience was so different, in fact, that he no longer believes that the stereotypes are warranted. He said, “I think at the time that I grew up, they were deserved. Every story has a beginning right? And so in the past it may have been warranted, and maybe it's hard to kill those stereotypes because of that, ... but no, they are not warranted today in this day and age, and I think our leadership has actually gone a long way to ensure that that's not the case.” Harry drew comparisons between the reputation of Greek Life and that of the military, which he was a part of for many years of his life. He explained that

many people hold a distrust for sailors, soldiers, and marines because they are known for certain stereotypical behaviors, some of which Harry attests were true. However, he has seen this change throughout his life. He recalled that while he was in the military, there were certain demographics of people that were not allowed to be a part of the organization, such as women and gay men. He also remembered that officers would often abuse their powers for their own benefit, such as partying in Central America on the government's dime. Harry explained that he has seen these behaviors and norms change in recent years as equality has risen and the tolerance for abuse of power has plummeted. He said that these changes have been mirrored within Greek Life as the stereotypes that he saw while growing up became cautionary tales from the past that are now used as learning tools so that new fraternity members may learn what behaviors are acceptable and which ones are relics of the past that still haunt the community to this day. Importantly, Harry claimed that although he has seen a shift in the policies and culture of Greek Life, the stereotypes have remained stagnant.

Notably, the majority of the participants were of the opinion that although the commonly held stereotypes of fraternities do not apply to their chapter, they are in fact warranted for the community in general. There are several reasons that could explain why this is. Perhaps the most obvious explanation is that the participants are biased in favor of their own fraternity and are wary of how the reputation could affect how their chapter is perceived. They may be reluctant to share stories of how specific aspects of their chapter do reflect the stereotypes because of the judgement that would accompany it. Another possible explanation mirrors the observations that Harry had made throughout his life. It could be that individual fraternities have been effective at moving away from the stereotypical behaviors associated with them, yet the community has been unable to shake the long-held beliefs about their character that are

confirmed by a few individual members who have set back the entire community by their own actions. Because of the prevalence and longevity of these stereotypes, when a new member joins a fraternity that does not exemplify the reputation that they have grown up seeing, it may be easier to view their own chapter as an outlier than to try to grapple with how the community has changed as a whole.

Contrary to what the popular conception may be based on the stories that capture the public's attention, the brothers that I interviewed all seemed to look favorably upon their time as a "pledge." In an attempt to understand why, the brothers were asked to summarize their experiences and their perception of the purpose of the pledging process that they underwent to join their fraternity.

When asked to briefly describe his experience as a new member of Alpha Beta, Abraham began to eagerly recount the process that he took part in. He went through an eight-week process and made it clear that there was absolutely no hazing. He explained that the method that Alpha Beta used for education was positive reinforcement. They learned about the history of the fraternity through e-learning modules and were rewarded for correct answers, rather than being punished for an incorrect answer. Abraham looked forward to events because there was no threat of any potential discomfort or any pressure to do anything remotely close to hazing. For Abraham, the biggest factor as to why he was able to enjoy the process to the extent that he did is because he was a founding father. Because he joined when the fraternity was establishing itself, the pledging process was simple, containing only the educational modules that the organization required, without the added traditions that brothers typically tack on to the process. From Abraham's perspective, Alpha Beta's pledging process is built around the betterment of the new members and to give them a new lens through which to see the world. He learned things about

himself and others that he otherwise would not have even realized that he did not know.

Abraham explained that the purpose of the process is to provide opportunities for the pledges, whether that be opportunities for personal growth, interpersonal relationships, or academic and professional growth, as he made it clear that “because of these letters on my resume, there's millions of people that I could potentially have a connection with, whether that be a professional one or personal one.” Abraham elaborated by saying that his brothers have gotten opportunities that they never would have known about if it had not been for their membership in the fraternity. One of Abraham's friends in his chapter interviewed for a job and the interviewer was an alumnus of the same fraternity. Although he did not get the job, the interviewer took it upon himself to reach out to Abraham's friend with a handful of similar opportunities in the same field, simply because of the connection that they shared because of their fraternity. Abraham also highlighted how the fraternity can help academically while the brothers are still in school. He explained that in order to be considered an active brother, they each must maintain a minimum GPA and that they have a plethora of sources of help for whatever class a brother might find himself enrolled in, from “A History of Dance” to “Principles of Thermodynamics.” These sources take the form of brothers that have taken the class already or may also be taking it currently, notes from previous classes, and connections with professors and writing assistants who may be able to help the student earn a better grade.

Dean's experience was quite similar to Abraham's as it mostly pertained to learning about the history of the fraternity and how to operate one. A large part of Gamma Delta's process was dedicated to discovering which of the new members were actually trying to join for the right reasons, such as finding a group of friends, growing as a person, or creating connections with others in their field, as opposed to joining for the sole purpose of partying. Dean explained

that he had to read about the history of the fraternity and its founders, as well as the values that it stands for. He mentioned that he had to pass a couple tests and quizzes about the fraternity, but there was no punishment for not passing, unless someone repeatedly fails, showing a lack of initiative and dedication to the chapter which would result in a serious conversation with the fraternity's leaders about their participation in the chapter and, if the problem persists, expulsion from the fraternity. In this case scenario, the new member would not be physically punished, but instead might not be allowed to continue on in the process of joining the fraternity. The goal of this process is to weed out that exact type of person, so that the brothers can be certain that the new members that they initiate exemplify the values of the fraternity. It was at this point that Dean claimed most of the people that were trying to join for reasons other than to grow as a person and within a brotherhood typically dropped out voluntarily, or, if something came to light that the brotherhood disapproved of, those pledges were removed from the process and were not initiated. Much like Abraham, Dean was a founding father of his chapter's re-establishment, so he claims that his situation is a unique one because there were no older brothers above him to potentially haze him. The freshly reworked chapter did everything by the book and created their own culture where the new members can find purpose in being part of a brotherhood that is more than just the sum of its parts.

For Owen, the process was tailored more toward the recruitment of Jewish students before the initiation process even began than it was focused on the process between recruitment and initiation. Epsilon Zeta did a lot more targeted recruitment, such as searching for guys on Facebook and "a lot of stalking Jewish guys" to the extent that some people are on Epsilon Zeta's radar in their junior year of high school. New members could also just end up finding their way to an event or meeting the guys at Jewish cultural centers on campus. From that point

on, the process begins to pick up steam and the new members are roped in fairly intensely. If a potential new member meshes well with multiple brothers, he is quickly given an invitation to join and is contacted almost daily about events that the fraternity is hosting or opportunities to simply hang out or even go to the temple with the brothers. Upon the decision of the brothers that a potential new member would be a good addition to Epsilon Zeta, he is pursued heavily until he decides whether or not to join the chapter. Owen explained that the most important prerequisite to joining his chapter was to be Jewish. Outside of that, the criteria were relatively loose, to the extent that Owen claimed that “even if they don't really like you but think you could be a fit, they'll still probably try you out. You have to be a major a***** to not get it if you're Jewish.” The process itself consists mostly of classroom-style courses where the pledges were expected to read and memorize a handbook about the fraternity's history and how to be a successful chapter. Additionally, they were required to complete Interfraternity Council (IFC) training courses about substance use and consent, among other topics. Owen claims that the purpose of this process is to filter out the people that are not going to get along with the group, won't put in the effort, or are a public nuisance. The other goal is to simply educate the new members about the organization they are joining and how to lead it successfully.

Eta Theta, Conner's fraternity, ensured that the fraternities and sororities on his campus did not haze whatsoever, so he felt as though his process was much easier than that of many fraternities at other schools. He compared his six- to eight-week process to the stories that he heard from his friends and to him it seems as though his pledgship was about one hundred times easier. The goal of his process is to assimilate the pledges into the fraternity and make sure they're not joining just to party. It's to make sure that they actually want to be in the fraternity and have a commitment to it.

Interestingly, Harry's fraternity, Upsilon Kappa does not even use the word "pledge" as they consider it to be too closely associated with hazing. In much the same way, the "Associate Members" are given the same rights as the initiated brothers, including the right to vote, with the exception of matters relating to initiation or anything deemed secret. Harry explains that he thinks of it as a trial period. Once somebody has decided that Upsilon Kappa is for them and they want to come around and they want to start the initiation process, they are already considered a brother. Upsilon Kappa likes to say that they take good men and make them great. The process exists to grow more men. In his brotherhood, Harry believes that the main goal is to find like-minded individuals that could benefit from the group and that the brothers themselves could benefit from and to pass on that legacy to others.

Reggie declined to go into detail about the process that he underwent, but he explained that the process was meant to create a sense of community between strangers by requiring them to perform various tasks as a group. He views the process he went through as a 'prove yourself' process. He was extremely hesitant to use the term "hazing" to describe the tasks that he was made to do. He explains that "it's not the direct term hazing but it was like we were trying to join the fraternity by doing a bunch of odd tasks and requirements to show that you're actually committed to being a member of the organization." He understands that the process was attempting to create a sense of community among the guys who are about to join the organization. It was to give a sense of obligation and responsibility to an organization that the pledges had no previous loyalty toward. In essence, its purpose is to create a sense of brotherhood and camaraderie with people from different backgrounds and different walks of life in a new environment and to ensure that the new members will be committed and devoted to

each other. Reggie did, however, qualify the description of its purpose as being the positive end of the process, what it aims to accomplish in its purest form, which is not always realized.

It is important to note that not one of the participants included, as a goal of this process, the breaking down of morale or of a sense of individuality or self-importance, which has been thought to be a goal of these types of processes when examined from the outside. For example in a discussion of military hazing, Gia DiRosa and Gerald Goodwin explain that hazing in the military began as a means to enculturate new recruits by breaking down their pre-existing traits. They claim that “it was felt that socialization required that the existing principles and habits of new recruits be ‘broken down’ and eliminated for the principles and norms of the group to be instilled in them” (DiRosa & Goodwin, 2014). It seems as though the shared objectives between the fraternities included the filtering out of any new members who might cause problems for the chapter or simply may not fit in and the creation of the bonds of brotherhood that the fraternities are built upon. It is also worth noting that none of the interlocutors were readily willing to admit that they were hazed during their pledgship, which is something that the stereotypes would have you believe is incredibly common.

Hazing has long been a staple of fraternity culture and is possibly the most well-known stereotypical action of fraternity members. The *Merriam Webster Dictionary* defines “haze” as: a: to harass by exacting unnecessary or disagreeable work; b: to harass by banter, ridicule, or criticism; 2: to haze by way of initiation (Merriam-Webster). The behaviors that have made their way into the news definitely fit each of these criteria. Yet, in discussions with initiated brothers, it quickly became apparent that each individual participant has their own definition of what constitutes hazing. Each of the participants provided their own definition of hazing as follows:

Abraham: Hazing is physical or mental exertion to the point that it crosses normal bounds.

Dean: Hazing is once you cross someone's boundaries without them being okay with it.

Harry: Hazing is when you treat people like they are less than you and like they have to follow directions or face consequences that aren't applied to everyone else. Anytime you make somebody feel less than others.

Conner: Hazing is a process of initiating a member through a series of difficult tasks and tests.

Owen: Hazing is like what you see in the movies and the stuff that actually is both nonconsensual and is gonna either cause harm or major discomfort.

Reggie: (Defaulted to his university's definition of hazing) "Hazing is a broad term encompassing any action or activity which does not contribute to the positive development of a person; which inflicts or intends to cause physical or mental harm or anxieties. Hazing can also be defined as any action or situation which intentionally or unintentionally endangers a student for admission into affiliation with any student organization"

To get a better understanding of where the participants draw the line between hazing and non-hazing, they each gave examples of situations that would be borderline hazing; something that could be considered hazing in its lightest form or could just barely be considered not to be hazing, according to their own personal definitions.

For Abraham, hazing could take the form of repeatedly calling the pledges at 3:00 in the morning and telling them to run around, or it could be forcing someone to do one hundred pushups when it is clear that they are unable to do so. Another clear example for Abraham is anything to do with alcohol. Forcing pledges to drink or even to not drink at a party is hazing.

He was uncertain whether or not he would consider asking the pledges to drive the brothers around to be hazing.

Dean's definition focuses around the spectrum of voluntariness. If a pledge is made to do something and they are reluctant to do so, it shows that it is not an entirely voluntary decision, but if one volunteers to perform a task, then it is less likely to be considered hazing by Dean's definition. He did make it clear that the line between hazing and not hazing can become blurred at times, specifically when a new member "voluntarily" performs a task but not because they actually want to. They do so because they feel as if they have to. Dean shared an example of this scenario that his chapter experienced firsthand. He says, "we actually had an issue with one of our pledge classes. They had an event and during it, they all went up to a little secret space we had in our Event Center and they had a bunch of alcohol and they were partying together, and we caught wind of it. Our thoughts were like, 'if they're all up there, they want to be up there.' But then it turns out a few of the guys were pretty uncomfortable with being there and they felt like they had to be in order to be accepted. And so that was something where nobody was forced to do anything, and nobody really did anything that they didn't want to do, so can you call it hazing? I'm not sure, but we treated it as hazing."

Harry's definition of hazing was shaped by his time in the military, where he states he was regularly hazed. The examples of light hazing that he shared seemed to revolve around the idea of separation or the othering of the new members as different from the initiated brothers. To Harry, selective dress codes in which the associate members might be forced to dress up while the brothers do not would be considered to be hazing. He elaborates that any type of activity where not everyone is included and treated the same is borderline hazing, such as if the new members were required to set up before or clean up after meetings.

Both Conner and Owen's perceptions of light hazing took the form required activities outside the pledge's typical behavior or schedule. Conner's example of something that exists along the threshold of hazing is something that he personally had to do during his process. For him, being forced to wake up early and do chores, such as cleaning the brothers' rooms, was right on that line. The example that Owen gave fit right along with his definition in that it is a stereotypical hazing practice that is nonconsensual and can result in serious harm. His example was forcing pledges to drink or perform embarrassing acts in public.

At first thought, Reggie's example of light hazing was forcing someone to drink more after they've said that they do not want to drink any more alcohol and making their membership contingent upon them continuing to drink or even physically assaulting the new members. After a brief moment of thought, however, he decided that those behaviors would cross his threshold into being considered hazing. His example of borderline hazing was then changed to verbal abuse and yelling at new members.

At this point it is important to evaluate the relationship between the respondents' definition of hazing and the experiences that they were subject to as new members in their fraternities. Both Abraham and Dean were adamant that they were not hazed whatsoever and they both attribute it to the fact that they were founding fathers of their fraternity's re-establishment. Harry also claimed that he was not hazed at all by his fraternity, but he was hazed when he was in the military. This could have affected his definition of hazing and how he viewed hazing before joining the fraternity.

Owen believes that he was also not subjected to hazing by Epsilon Zeta. He did, however, share an experience that would fit into a couple of the definitions of hazing that were presented by the other participants. Owen explained that his pledge class was blindfolded and

led to a set of train tracks near his university in a single file line with one hand on the shoulder of the person in front of them. This event took place on a Friday night after the trains had concluded all of the routes, so Owen claims that it was therefore not a dangerous event, but the train tracks were chosen because they were in a highly visible location where passersby could observe the event. Situated in a very public location with people walking by almost every minute, the pledge class was told that they would have to recite the Greek Alphabet in order, one by one and they could not leave until they reached Omega, the final letter. Each time one of the new members made a mistake, they had to start back at Alpha and continue doing so until they got the entire alphabet correct. While Owen believes he speaks for his entire pledge class when he claims that this does not fit the criteria to be hazing, other participants may yet consider it to be.

Conner maintains that he was not hazed for the most part, although he did highlight a few experiences that some might consider to be hazing. He explained that it was a common practice for pledges to have to wake up early to do chores that the older brothers did not want to do, such as cleaning their bedrooms and the bathrooms. The pledging process also focused on educating the new members about the organization and the pledges were expected to memorize facts about the fraternity for tests that they were subjected to on a weekly basis. If a pledge answered a question incorrectly, he would be punished one of several ways, including being yelled at, being forced to do push-ups, and being required to be a sober monitor at the next event that the fraternity held.

Finally, Reggie, although he did not go into much detail, seems to have had the most exposure to hazing out of the participants interviewed. Reggie picked his words carefully as he described an event that took place on a Thursday or Friday not long before initiation. They were

told that this event was extremely serious, to the extent that if they missed it they would not be allowed to join the fraternity. He went into detail about the state that he and his fellow pledges found themselves in, as they seemed to have had an event the night before that they were all still extremely hungover from the next evening. When they arrived at the house, they were all incredibly disheveled, wearing ill-fitting pajama pants, shoes ranging from Crocs to Sperrys, some without socks, none matching with their outfits, and everyone's hair was greasy or hidden under a hat because they had not been able to shower since the night before. The serious event turned out to be a night where the pledges were actually allowed to relax and enjoy time with the older brothers without any outsiders being involved. Whether or not this event could be considered some form of mental hazing is up to the individual's discretion, but it does seem as though there was something important about the night before this event. Reggie hinted that the pledge class as a whole may have been nervous for this event, likely due to the serious nature that the brothers advertised it as, but they could have also been apprehensive because of their previous experiences. The physical state of the pledges also points toward a night of potential hazing. However, each time the term "hazing" was used, Reggie became visibly uncomfortable and insisted on refraining from using that word because of the connotation associated with it and claiming that his experience was nothing compared to the stories that he had heard from friends at other universities.

The answers provided by the participants highlighted a pattern that is central to understanding how fraternity members perceive their experiences. Seeing as everyone has their own unique definition of hazing, it is not surprising that they each also draw the line at which an act is or is not considered to be hazing at different points. However, there is also a relationship between the amount of hazing or hazing-adjacent activities that a brother was exposed to during

their pledgship and where they place this threshold at. Evidenced by placing the examples that the participants gave for behaviors that could or could not be considered hazing with the stories that they shared about their experiences with hazing, it becomes evident that the more hazing one is exposed to during their pledging process, the higher their threshold for what constitutes something as hazing. In other words, the more behaviors that could be considered hazing a brother is exposed to, the less likely they are to actually consider those experiences as hazing, even though the behaviors easily exceed the threshold of hazing for other fraternity members that experienced less hazing or hazing-adjacent incidents.

Although it may not be possible to know exactly why this phenomenon occurs, there are several factors that might affect how fraternity members understand their pledging process. It is possible that the line gets pushed further because the individual's perception of normality shifts as they experience more similar behaviors. When they engage in conversation with friends at other schools that have had similar or even worse experiences, they are further validating the normalcy of their experience, even though it may not be representative of the vast majority of fraternity members' experience. This is a common phenomenon among domestic abuse victims, as shown in a 2001 study titled "Enduring Love: A Grounded Formal Theory of Women's Experience of Domestic Violence," so it is not surprising that its application could translate to another form of abuse. In her discussion of the findings of this study, Margaret Kearney explains that rationalization is a commonly used cognitive strategy for enduring abuse in which the victim seeks logical explanation's for the abuse that they are experiencing and why they are unable to control it. Kearney continues on to say that "this cognitive strategy could function only in the context of the diminished sense of self. Women who did not resort to shrinking-of-self ended the relationship rather than using rationalizing to make sense of it" (Kearney, 2001). When victims

of abuse converse with other victims of abuse, their experiences are reflected in the other person, creating an echo chamber that can make it seem as though the abuse that they have been subject to is normal, even though to those on the outside it is anything but normal.

Another possible factor that could contribute to the shifting threshold is a reluctance to view their future brothers as the “bad guy.” Reggie touched on this when he spoke about the motivation behind enduring his pledge process. He claimed that one of the reasons that he was able to push through is because of his fear of letting down the brothers that came before him. Rather than attributing his own actions to those that potentially hazed him, Reggie viewed hazing more as a personal weakness rather than attributing it to the people who actually perform the actions. Could it be that the new members who experience this are simply attempting to justify their treatment from the perspective of the initiated brothers and to minimize in their own minds the effects that their experiences had on them?

Finally, justification for one’s experiences with hazing comes through the comparison between one’s own fraternity and what he hears of others, both from the media and from friends. Reggie contrasted his experience with what he has heard from others and argued that the incidents that he is reluctant to label as hazing pale in comparison to the experiences of others in a reversal of the classic adage that the grass is always greener on the other side; in this case, the hazing is always worse in another fraternity. Reggie explained it in the following manner: “Anything we went through is just kind of like not that bad, because if you think about it, we had friends that went to larger schools, and you hear the stories about that and you're like, ‘Okay, well, this is definitely not that bad. It’s definitely not getting physically assaulted or sexually harassed or anything like that. And so for the things that we had been through, we just decided that we could get through it. That was the mentality we all adopted for sure.”

Professor Steven Sweet, examined the phenomenon of hazing following the death of a 17-year-old pledge of Theta Chi through the lens of symbolic interactionist theory. This theory looks at how “people in groups gain shared meanings of culturally derived social matters created primarily through face-to-face social interactions” (Sweet, 1999). He argued that hazing was not a result of immaturity, nor was it illogical, but instead is the product of an individual’s desire to belong to a group that has a culture that views hazing as a necessary means through which to initiate new members (Sweet, 1999). In an evaluative literature review, Amy Perkins, J. Daniel Zimmerman, and Steven Janosik examined how Sweet studied twenty fraternity brothers through the means of unstructured interviews about their beliefs regarding hazing, and came to the conclusion that hazing was not the result of sadistic tendencies of those that perform the hazing, but rather a result of groupthink (Perkins, Zimmerman, & Janosik, 2011).

The responses of the participants in the current research, both exemplify and refute this claim. Reggie explains that one of the primary reasons that he decided to endure what he is reluctant to label as hazing is because “there is this notion of how hundreds of years of fraternity members have gone through these things, and so to be the one to complain is such an alienating process. But at the same time, you're going through some of these experiences with dozens of other people. So there's this collective notion, like everyone just says ‘f*** it, we'll just keep going through it.’ That’s the mentality.” Reggie continued on to say that when joining an organization that is very identity-based, the way that the shared bonds are forged is through collectively performing difficult tasks. In line with Sweet’s findings, he claims that those shared experiences form a sense of identity both on the individual and collective levels.

Reggie himself, however, also claimed that the hazing experiences that make it to the news likely do not foster the same sense of identity through shared experiences. He expounds

that “the more toxic things, the more personally- invasive things, are not so much about fostering a sense of collective identity. It may be someone living out some narcissistic bullying fantasy because they had to go through it too. They're continuing that toxic behavior that they experienced as a member of a previous class because now they're in a position to do so. It's more like a sick, cruel, addicting process that can be harmful to students' physical and mental health.” This seems to be in opposition to Sweet's findings, at least in terms of the type of hazing that the popular media represents, which points to the idea that Sweet's assertion may apply to mild hazing but not to the extreme hazing that results in the deaths that make the headlines.

A significant pattern that came to light in my research is that the participants who come from chapters that have been recently established or rechartered described much less of a culture of hazing. Consequently, those that experienced some form of hazing made no mention of their chapter having been recently re-established or remodeled. The members of chapters that have been recently re-established were Abraham, Dean, and Harry.

Abraham repeatedly highlighted his status as a “founding father” of his chapter as one of the reasons that he enjoyed his time in his fraternity as much as he did, and attributes that as the reason why he did not experience any hazing whatsoever. He explained that one of the best parts about being a founding father is that he had the opportunity to help create the fraternity culture and the traditions that they will use going forward. In regard to why hazing is still such a common practice, Abraham explained that tradition can be an incredibly difficult thing to break, especially as the particular practice gets older. But just because a practice has been used for years does not mean that it is a positive practice, or one that should be continued. Abraham painted a picture of a future where all fraternities embrace change and move on from their

problematic pasts, but he acknowledges that the longstanding traditions of older institutions may pose the biggest threat to the realization of this vision. To exemplify this, he said, “I couldn't even imagine going to a chapter of my fraternity at a big state school that's had the chapter for 150 years. I know for a fact if I went there and tried to have this conversation, they'd be like, “get out of here,” they wouldn't listen to me. But it's a change that people need to make within themselves and realize that it's okay to shift from tradition if it makes your fraternity better; if it makes the brotherhood better.”

Dean echoed many of the same sentiments as Abraham. Interestingly, he also qualified his experience by claiming that his situation was unique in that he was part of a chapter that was being re-established, even though Abraham seems to have had an extremely similar experience. He explained that there was nobody above him to haze him because the people facilitating his pledging process were middle-aged men from the fraternity's corporate office.

Although Harry was not a founding member of Upsilon Kappa's recharter at his university, his chapter was re-established only ten years prior to Harry's initiation. He explained that they were kicked off campus in the 1970's because of a lot of the stereotypical fraternity behaviors, including hazing and drug use, abuse, and sales. However, they were brought back in 2008 and Harry believes that nationals did a great job at recruiting the right guys because there was no hazing at all. He stated that being a newer chapter plays a big role in that because the guys that restarted it were able to start their own traditions and not include those that led to the chapter's removal from campus in the first place.

Depending on one's personal definition of hazing, Conner may or may not have been hazed. However, when faced with a situation in which he was founding a new fraternity, he made it clear that even though he might have been lightly hazed in his process, hazing would

have no place in his newly founded fraternity. Instead, Conner would use a classroom-style education system to encourage the new members to learn about the history and values of the fraternity. He stated that he does believe that there should be some kind of medium through which a new member could be evaluated on whether or not they would be a good member of the fraternity, but hazing would by no means be employed to do so.

Based on the experiences of Abraham, Dean, and Harry, as well as Conner's sentiment toward hazing in a newly founded chapter, it is clear that the fraternities that have been recently re-established or reworked may be less likely to install any form of hazing as a new tradition. This pattern was present across the country in schools and fraternities of vastly different sizes and provides evidence for a shifting perspective in which the benefits of hazing are diminished as chapters create new, less harmful means by which to evaluate their new members.

Continuing along the path of anti-hazing, when asked how their experience would have differed had they been hazed, the participants that claimed they were not hazed all stated that they would have dropped out of the fraternity, rather than being subjected to hazing. Abraham claimed that he would have left as soon as he was told to do anything that even remotely resembled the hazing that is portrayed in the media, especially if alcohol was involved. He would even go so far as to report the fraternity, not caring that he would be taking the risk of being blacklisted from Greek Life as a result.

Dean believes that he would have dropped out as soon as he felt uncomfortable. He explained that he is not the type of person to stick around when put in a situation like that, but he laments for those who feel as though they do not have that choice, who feel like they need to remain and endure the poor treatment that they were subjected to. He also claimed that most of the people in his fraternity would agree with him and follow the same path.

Harry's entire associate member class agreed that if any one of them felt as though they were hazed at any point throughout the process, they would all drop the fraternity together. He explained that a few of them were nervous when their initiation ritual began that they would be hazed, but there was absolutely no hazing that took place, so everyone went through with the ceremony. Harry elaborated as to why he and his class made that agreement, saying that his first and foremost obligation is to get an education and, although he would enjoy being a part of a brotherhood, he will not sacrifice his dignity to belong to anything. That was something that he did as a member of the military and it has never worked out to be a good thing for him to do.

Owen also claimed that he would have dropped out of the pledge process if he felt hazed at any point, although he did experience a few instances of what some of the other participants may consider hazing. He said that there were already times when he was considering not joining his fraternity without the pretense of hazing, so having to undergo something like that would definitely push him over the edge into quitting before he was initiated. He also touched on the reputation that his fraternity had on campus and that if he had been treated poorly, he would have said, verbatim, "f*** you guys, I'm not gonna let this loser house haze me," and he would have dropped out of the pledge process on the spot.

It is important to focus on the fact that Owen did experience a light amount of what could be hazing, yet he decided to stick with the fraternity and did not quit like he said he would. However, would he have actually dropped out or would he have reconciled with what he experienced and consequently raised his threshold of what he considers to be hazing so that he would not feel as though he had actually been hazed? It is easy to say that you would quit when looking from the outside in, but if the participants that experienced no hazing had gone through

what they would now consider to be light hazing, would they still consider it to be hazing, or would their definition shift to not include their experience in the category of hazing?

The limited scope of this research means that I do not claim to offer the entire truth about fraternity pledge processes in the United States. Moreover, my interlocutors may not have shared the entire truth or may have misrepresented their experiences in order to paint their fraternity in a better light. It is also possible that the sample that was interviewed could have simply happened to have experienced only limited amounts of hazing. In this case, more research on a broader scale will be necessary to paint an all-encompassing picture of fraternity culture, how it has shifted, and how it relates to the stereotypes portrayed in the media and popular culture.

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