

Running the yard?: The Post-Millennials' Catch-22

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Don't haze. Follow the rules. Stay out of trouble. These phrases along with many other slogans, campaigns and anti-hazing strategies have been in place for decades. No matter how logical, clear and consistent the message

one thing remains certain: *one cannot legislate cultural change*. Change requires more. It demands a deeper understanding, sensitivity and awareness of the hazing problem, especially as it relates to the unique history and dynamics challenges of Black Greek Letter Organizations (BGLOs).

Hazing prevention strategies vary and consist of a broad range of research and areas of practice. Organizational and student development theories; cultural and historical influences; and, of course, legal and policy considerations on both the state and local levels are all factors. Additionally, institution and organization rules and regulations and guidelines are all among the choices one has in developing an impactful approach. When considering this diverse array of concepts and best practices it is also important to incorporate social psychology into your strategy to shed insight into how to create sustainable organizational change in BGLO and some CBFO hazing cultures.

The "Why"? Breaking the Cycle

Social psychology is defined as the influences that people have upon the beliefs, feelings, and behavior of others. Additional topics that social psychologists evaluate include group processing and social cognition, or the mental activities involved with learning, remembering and using knowledge. For example,

are often examined from a political or cultural perspective, but social psychologists utilize a behavioral lens to understand why people choose to act this way and what influences them to do so. Similarly, utilizing this social psychology framework as it relates to the BGLO new member process will help one break some of the pledging political dialogue cycle about "what is right or wrong for the organization." Irrespective of one's position regarding this argument, an objective social psychology standard opens the door for a constructive dialogue and cultural exploration into whether people individually feel "pledging has value". Furthermore, the social psychology approach focuses on why someone would subject themselves to additional activities, outside of an official membership intake process. This may shed light and help us better understand the mentality that relates to individuals subjecting themselves to harmful activities to which they sometimes knowingly consent.

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Accordingly, social psychology generally categorizes respect in two different ways.

The first is *categorical respect*, where respect is granted based on one's membership in a group. For instance, if one served in a specific branch of the United States military, and one recognizes another person that has also served in a different branch, you usually grant them categorical respect. After substantiating and validating their experiences, you grant them respect because as a member of this group they have successfully completed a specific type of training, or a certain protocol, all in the name of protecting their country as a member of the military.

The second type of respect is *conditional respect*. This type of respect is based on one's standing in a group. In this example, in the same military branch, one may be looked upon with more respect because they are a member of that particular branch's special forces unit. Utilizing the prior military example, respect is different in this scenario. For example, serving in the special forces unit under the United States Army requires entrance training that is "rigorous and highly selective." Since these additional requirements surpass

the standard U.S. army requirements special forces members may be treated with a higher level of conditional respect.

Ultimately, categorical respect revolves around inter-group dynamics, in this example, observing service relative to different branches of the military. Conditional respect deals with intra-group dynamics, a person's experience measured *within* that specific group. In this case a special forces unit within that specific branch of the military, in this case the army, that is more rigorous and selective.

Acknowledged But Not Accepted

These inter- and intra-group dynamics are very helpful in understanding the impact they have on categorical and conditional respect through undergraduate BGLO new member processes. For example, categorical respect, normally granted on nature of ones membership in their respective organization shifted to conditional respect, which is now predicated on whether you "pledged" or not. For example, questions like, "How long did you pledge?" serve as a deeper examination to qualify one's conditional respect. After the above ground pledge process was eliminated in 1990 by the National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC) a higher burden of proof was necessary to ultimately qualify a person and further validate them as an "accepted" BGLO member. Categorical respect, just being a member, is no longer sufficient. It is now subjectively conditioned on a higher threshold of validation, which is premised on a special group within a group – those who "pledged" underground, particularly those who endured a more physical or emotional experience. This experience is like those who enlist in U.S. Army special forces who endured a more "rigorous" experience to become a member of this special group within a group. As a result, merely speaking about respect without developing an infrastructure and culture to support it will not be enough to effectuate a sustainable and impactful change in the BGLO hazing culture. In the example of the special forces their process is more vigorous, but it is also institutionalized as official protocol supplemented with policies and procedures to support this infrastructure and culture. In BGLOs, this is not

the case and sheds light to a related issue that revolves around how respect is earned.

Fear is Learned. Respect is Earned

"Respect is assimilated through language and modeling not through the traditional act of teaching." Since hazing and pledging have been institutionalized as a cultural component in BGLO's life the self-respect that interested members seek (which in turns grants them access to possible peer validation) is learned through what they perceive in the language and modeling of peer acceptance.

The modeling component of self-respect, is embodied in the difficulty, which is often measured by either the duration of the new member process or the emotional, mental, psychological, and physical aspects involved with it (or lack thereof). Those who make it through these challenges gain the social capital to create and trade "war stories" that they can potentially convert and leverage to garner peer respect. Consequently, phrases like, "you are made", "you are real" or conversely, "you are paper" or "you skated" serve as rhetoric that reinforces or negates one's validity in BGLOs.

The fact that Pryce-Mitchell states respect is not taught but assimilated through language and modeling is therefore profound in a BGLO hazing context. It again, reinforces the fact that no matter how many times regional and national officers of BGLOs attempt to "educate" their respective members through speaking to the fact that that "people will respect you" for participating in new membership alone is theoretically true. More often than not, however, the practical reality in both undergraduate and graduate chapters, is that fails to hold true.

Conversely, based on Pryce-Mitchell's definition, new members are actually learning respect through what they have seen and what they have heard from the dominant underground pledge culture "on the yard", which, more often than not is not necessarily accurate, positive or productive.

Hence, the post-millennials' catch-22, as it relates

to “running the yard,” is either doing what they can to gain their peers’ acceptance, which often includes underground pledging or following the rules of “traditional” membership intake. Therefore, when BGLO regional and national leadership hang their hats on the argument that other members should just accept you for who you are operationally is correct but fundamentally contradicts the social psychology that supports a much different conclusion. Ultimately, it is these individuals’ desires and beliefs that influences them to choose the former and not the latter.

The Leadership Privilege: Protection from Above

Moreover, the regional and national BGLO message “of universal acceptance”, while well-intended, may be difficult for their constituents, especially undergraduates, to apply. For example, by default, regional and national leaders have conditional respect inherently built into their respective positions. Serving in that capacity usually means individuals are old enough and significantly experienced to be elected, or selected, which historically has set an expectation for them to potentially benefit from a great amount of deference. This social capital expectation falls in-line with well-established protocol in BGLO culture. Moreover, separate and apart from their individual respect and reverence they garner, the very office they hold has an additional built-in conditional respect. Whether members agree or not with an officer, or the views or stances they hold on fraternal matters, the membership generally respects the BGLO office. Arguably the higher the office, i.e. National President, the more respect that position commands. Additionally, most BGLO regional directors and National Presidents, particularly of BGLOs, are well established and accomplished in their respective professional careers. As a person of color, that factor is particularly viewed as an accomplishment in and of itself. These factors, age in the organization, nature of the position and successful professional careers afford a triple protection of conditional respect for regional and national leadership to which most of their constituents are not privy. Therefore, while regional and national BGLO leadership are generating well intended messages about “universal acceptance”

through exclusive involvement in the official membership intake process, the application of that concept for most members is unrealistic. Undergraduates are being held to a standard that they realistically do not have the social capital or environmental support they need to consistently uphold the organization’s concepts, especially with the competing messages sometimes sent by others within the organization, on the yard, or in the community.

Ultimately, to tell undergraduate members to force themselves to be accepted by doing only the “right” thing by just participating in membership intake is inevitably setting them up for systematic failure. On one hand, organizationally, this approach legally covers the liability of the fraternity or sorority in hazing lawsuits. Clearly, this is necessary for legitimacy, viability and sustainability. Culturally, however, on an individual and chapter level, it is insufficient to cultivate and sustain a healthy brotherhood or sisterhood.

As a result, interests in undergraduate chapters may not may be able to specifically articulate categorical and conditional respect, but they do feel a sense of urgency, acceptance and belonging. These can often lead them to do whatever it takes to secure the receipt of those senses. This idea of acceptance and belonging, or mattering, among college students is a well-studied topic in student development theory commonly reference in the field of higher education administration. Moreover, this individual need for conditional respect is only compounded with the longing for family, either by upholding tradition (as a legacy); or conversely, being the first in their family to not only belong to a BGLO, but graduate from college. Even exposure to pre-collegiate hazing in high school athletics, clubs, band, etc. can magnify the intensity of this need for conditional respect.

Conditional respect also impacts BGLO members as well. Many members want their chapter to be respected and, while they personally struggle with the paper v. pledge dilemma, they ultimately succumb to the conditional respect in an organizational context as well. Organizationally, a change is warranted in order to break this cycle. In addition to the progress made in

reforming intake, these factors of conditional and categorical respect should be factored into re-conceptualizing a more comprehensive new member process. Here is what you can do to break the cycle of hazing in BGLOs:

Undergraduate BGLO members

Don't like the way things are with the new member process in your organization? That's ok. What is not ok is trying to take matters into your own hands to make those changes. If you individually don't agree with the way the new member process is now, abide by the current rules, do not haze, and couple that action with directing your constructive energy, concern, and dedication by channeling it through your organization. How? Join a committee that is related to your area of interest in your region/area. Whether it is an intake committee, hazing prevention/risk management or involves new member policies get actively involved to share what you see in an effort to change. If no committee exists, then start one. You may be pleasantly surprised by the reception you get, especially as a young, engaged undergraduate member. Your perspective and voice is needed. Many times, you can bridge communication gaps and conflicts by simply being present and actively involved. It won't be easy but it will be more effective, safer, and more comprehensive in scope. You may be new but your vote counts just as much as more seasoned members. Stop complaining, get involved, and exercise your BGLO vote.

This long-term approach can also be integrated with a short-term approach as it relates to how your chapter is being marketed. Instead of touting phrases like "bloody", "deadly" or "murderous" why not rebrand it built on positive values that are consistent with the overall mission and purpose of the organization. A universally applicable chapter moniker revolving around highest GPA, or most improved GPA, highlighting regional and national volunteers, or scholastic achievements will go far in changing the perspective and expectations as it relates to physically arduous new member processes and shatter the hazing stereotype.

Campus-based Professionals/Advisors

Continue to create supportive spaces that encourages constructive dialogue as it revolves around this issue. Through retreats, closed-door sessions, and campus-wide programs, bring hazing to the forefront to take a proactive stance on how to address your culture. Remember, hazing looks different in BGLOs, and some CBFOs, than it does in other fraternal organizations so be aware and plan accordingly. This means joint All-Greek anti-hazing sessions may not be the most effective way to get your students to open up. Utilize books, documentaries and movies as resources to start the discussion by asking them how they feel about what they read or saw and build from there. This is a difficult area to facilitate and it shows up differently on various campuses across the country so don't start with assumptions. Show your community you are aware, supportive, and open. This proactive approach will speak volumes in the long run.

BGLO Leadership

It is a difficult job for regional and national leaders. Often times there is much time spent on extinguishing fires as opposed to creative strategic vision planning for the future. One suggestion, in this area, as it relates to undergraduate new member experiences is considering not just the legal and operational considerations (which are vitally important for the sustainability of the organization), but the overall long term experience. For example, it has been 25 years since the National Pan-Hellenic Council changed from a sanctioned pledge process. While there has been collective work done around the area of enforcement more impactful results can occur when messaging, programming and financial resources are invested from the top. This comprehensive approach eases the burden from local and regional leaders and illustrates, first hand, the support, that the organization is offering.

An excellent example of this "top down" collective ownership change model, was showcased by Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. and Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc. These organized national summits were designed to examine not just the operational and

legal issues as it relates to hazing, but the cultural and emotional issues that are often overlooked. By inviting national hazing experts to speak at general sessions, hosting mock hazing trials, engaging workshop breakouts, and general educational sessions provide opportunities for deeper dialogue with chapter initiatives. These supportive spaces provide areas for members to collectively share their concerns and highlight positive initiatives that their local chapters can duplicate. Both summits, target participation from all around the country, and are powerful examples of how national leadership, councils, and colleges and universities, can utilize their resources to institutionally address the hazing culture.

Just like the individual accountability shift for BGLO members, as it relates to changing the hazing culture, BGLO leadership can implement similar short-term strategies. By redirecting their energies from primarily focusing on a “Don’t do this...” mantra to rewarding chapters who have not had any hazing related reports for a period of time is great for improving the overall brand. Additionally, organizations can also

acknowledge the academic performance of new member classes or new member classes that are five or more. In organizational and human behavior, in order to change behavior one must focus on the behavior that is desired. These tangible examples, along with an infusion of long-term institutional social psychology into a hazing prevention strategy is critical in resolving the post-millennials’ dilemma to do the right thing.

About the Author

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