

The Problem at Hand

To say that no one has known that hazing has been a problem in BGFs would be false. The last few decades have seen a growing concern in the U. S. media, public, and at colleges and universities with the practice.¹ Unfortunately, the Davis tragedy in Missouri was not the result of atypical violent behavior in BGFs. The belief that violence in these groups is not isolated is further supported by the near death of Shawn Blackston at the University of Louisville in 1997, two additional incidents at the University of Maryland-Baltimore County and Kansas State University (Manhattan) in 1998, injuries to students at Grambling State University (Louisiana), Mississippi State University (Starkville), and Georgia State University (Atlanta) in 1999, and a death at Tennessee State University (Nashville) and injuries at Norfolk State University (Virginia) and Louisiana State University (Baton Rouge) in 2000. These are only a few examples of BGF transgressions in recent years.

Hazing's perseverance continues to baffle college and university administrators, BGF officials, and an increasingly concerned community at large. The fraternities have been taken to task in these diverse mediums, but hazing

incidents continue and remedies remain elusive. This book not only recounts hazing incidents, but also explores possible historical, organizational, individual, and societal factors that lead to them. Normatively, the “end” of building the complete fraternity man through ritualized physical and mental rigor should seemingly dissipate when the ceremonial “means” reach such a level not only to present life-threatening motifs, but also actually to cause death. In such instances, potential fraternal initiates can no longer be viewed as pledges; they must be considered victims. This victimage, however, does not begin or end with individual initiates or their pledge leaders. It is a social, cultural, and political process that involves people in a multilevel network of relationships leading to reification of belief in the BGF pledge/haze process as necessary and generative.

CONCERN, CHANGE, AND QUESTIONS

In response to elevated concern with hazing, BGFs have conducted several internal organizational studies since the late 1980s seeking to explain its continuance in many chapters. I contend, however, that the motivations behind some of these studies and the data they have yielded are questionable. The changes BGFs have made within their organizational structures regarding recruiting and initiating new members are also debatable. The aforementioned studies and changes are suspect because one may certainly submit that a good percentage of the membership of these organizations on the national, regional, and local levels has been reluctant to change the way in which they actually conduct the business of initiation. Most statements BGF national offices issued contend that hazing continues because of a few “renegade members” who have no true allegiance to the ideals of the organizations. But, although initiation procedural policy has been altered occasionally, behavior has remained constant.

The very fact that hazing continues in many BGF chapters lends credence to the idea that a significant percentage of black fraternity members condone the practice—actively or passively. Some perceive the internal studies, supposed changes in the pledge processes, and executive orders mandating cessation of this behavior as little more than smoke screens for public and legal defenses. Kappa Alpha Psi, for example, changed its initiation ritual (strong opposition from its membership notwithstanding) in 1993. The rationale behind this change was that the previous version of the fraternity’s ritual had many gray areas and statements that could be construed as promoting hazing. Unfortunately, this and other internal changes were obviously for naught because Michael Davis was killed the very next year. The fact that the groups’ attempts at self-study and regulation have not been successful in

promoting real change brings two possibilities to the fore: one concerns utility and the other control. Either the national offices of the organizations are intentionally misleading in their reports on where their members stand regarding hazing in an effort to relegitimate the fraternities, or they are out of touch with the members' beliefs and practices and have lost control of a good percentage of the brethren.

No matter which of these scenarios is true, three questions arise when considering the indisputable fact that hazing still exists in BGFs. First, did these organizations autonomously construct the activities and purposes of BGF pledge processes? Second, why is physical hazing regarded as such an integral part of black fraternity initiation? Finally, why do individuals continuously submit to this unsanctioned and sometimes dangerous process? My work here revolves around the belief that the more physically violent type of hazing encountered in BGFs must be addressed sternly because this type of abuse poses an immediate threat to black life. Consequently, in a practical and moral effort to save lives, the mortal risk inherent in such a process must be regarded as unacceptable. Unfortunately, whereas most people in the main have reached this threshold of intolerance, we are far from the historical moment when BGF members themselves submit to the cessation of hazing.

To elaborate on why I support the hypothesis that hazing in BGFs is more physically violent than that found in similar organizations, let us refer to Hank Nuwer's *Broken Pledges*, still considered the best work on Greek hazing.² The accompanying table contains statistics from Nuwer's appendix, which I have separated into categories that compare BGF hazing to white Greek-letter fraternity (WGF) hazing and military hazing. The military institutions cited in Nuwer's work include the U.S. Military Academy, U.S. Naval Academy, U.S. Air Force Academy, and the Citadel.

Black Greek, White Greek, and Military Academy Hazing since 1838

Total cases of hazing	441
Cases involving military academies	31
Cases involving WGFs	241
Cases involving BGFs	31
Hazing deaths at military academies	4
Hazing deaths involving WGFs	47
Hazing deaths involving BGFs	4
Cases of physical hazing at military academies	7
Cases of physical hazing in WGFs	13
Cases of physical hazing in BGFs	29

Importantly, hazing is a very secretive activity and the numbers presented in the accompanying table only represent "reported" cases at the time

Broken Pledges was published in 1990. Unfortunately, the majority of cases are probably dealt with within fraternal orders and educational institutions without public scrutiny, so the actual instances of hazing are probably significantly higher than statistics indicate. The reported numbers suggest, however, that hazing has historically been and continues to be a problem in white fraternities and military academies as well as black fraternities. What the quantitative analysis does not reveal is the fact that hazing usually has very different manifestations in these groups. Although WGFs have the highest number of reported hazing cases as well as deaths, their most extreme abuses have most often been alcohol and food related. No cases of white pledges dying from physical abuse have been reported. All forty-seven reported WGF deaths were caused by choking on raw food (for example, liver), alcohol poisoning, accidental falls (for example, from roofs, cliffs), or car accidents (for example, pledges attempting to return to campus after active members abandoned them in some remote area). Of the 241 cases involving white Greeks, slightly more than 19 percent of them resulted in death and only 5 percent involved any physical abuse at all.

The fact that only thirty-one reported cases involve military academies probably speaks to the fact that information concerning hazing at these institutions has always been even more difficult to access than details on fraternal transgressions at civilian colleges and universities. Some also regard hazing as a necessary tool to prepare men mentally for war. This preparation has served as one of pro-military hazers' justifications for hazing practices at military academies and Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) units throughout the country. An interesting link also exists between military and fraternity hazing. Nuwer cogently points out the potential impact of the military on fraternity hazing as we know it today when he cites the case of young Douglas MacArthur, who was commanded to testify at a congressional court of inquiry that President William McKinley ordered in 1900. "The hearing had two purposes: to deduce whether the unwritten code of hazing had caused the recent death of a young cadet named Oscar Booz of Bristol, Pennsylvania, and to determine if hazing was a significant problem at West Point."³

In the end, MacArthur "steadfastly refused to name the upperclassmen who had hazed him, yet he tried to appease the select committee by giving them the names of several men who had already quit West Point for one reason or another. He downplayed the convulsions he had experienced after being seriously hazed, and he most certainly lied on the stand when he said that he could name with certainty only those hazers who had already left the service academy, a Mr. Dockery and a Mr. Barry."⁴ Nuwer concludes:

The importance of this study, in retrospect, is the striking similarities revealed between many latter-day hazing practices and West Point abuses.

These similarities raise the possibility that military academy drop-outs introduced hazing practices into the colleges they later attended and, thus, played a leading role in the history of hazing on American college campuses.⁵

Just as we may reasonably assume that military academy dropouts may have influenced hazing at civilian colleges and universities, we may also quite logically conclude that military academy graduates helped reinforce the hazing of soldiers, sailors, and Marines as they went through boot camp. A Kappa Alpha Psi member commented on this historical progression:

A lot of people wonder how hazing started in our groups and why it looks like it does today. I'm old enough to have been initiated before all of our founders died. I also know people who were pledged by some of the founders. From what they tell me, most early members were not overwhelmingly concerned with physical hazing or an extensive pledge period. Remember, even though our fraternity was founded in 1911, there was no official pledge club until 1919. Even then, physical hazers were of a particular type. This was even true when I was made in 1963. There were three basic types of guys. The smart ones made you remember a lot of information. The athletes exercised you a lot, but they did that stuff along with you. Then there were the guys who weren't very smart and weren't athletic either. These guys were usually the hazers. It was their claim to fame. Also, activities in the process changed a lot after World War I and again after World War II. This is because a lot of guys went to the military and then returned to school after the wars. They brought things like dressing alike and walking in line, along with a few other "unmentionables" back with them.⁶

Although the military may have contributed to hazing in all fraternities, BGF hazing seems to have become the most physically intense variation of the practice. The first of the 241 WGF cases Nuwer reported occurred in 1873 at Cornell University (Ithaca, New York). The first military case was the 1900 case cited involving MacArthur. The first BGF cases do not appear until 1977. Glaringly, between 1977 and 1990, BGFs are cited for the same number of hazing cases as military academies are in a ninety-year span. Furthermore, only 23 percent of the reported military cases involved physical abuse. In contrast, almost 94 percent of the black cases involved physical abuse—with all four deaths caused by physical hazing.

Clearly, I do not contend that physical hazing only occurs in BGFs. Nuwer's study illustrates that this is not the case. Additionally, men who seek to join organizations such as fraternities and the military through violent means probably belong to a particular personality group. Admittedly, membership in this personality group crosses racial and organizational lines. I

want to emphasize that men who seek affiliation with hazing fraternities or even high-risk units of the military are not totally coerced, but are largely self-selected. The striking point of departure is that, at least where fraternal orders are concerned, a higher frequency of this type of personality seems to be found among black men than any other group under consideration here. If true, this helps to explain why the prevalence of physical hazing in BGFs is much higher than in WGFs or even the military. Certainly, an important epistemological question must follow such an assertion. If, in fact, more black men are in this personality group, how did they come to be this way? This is an issue of paramount importance that chapter six engages in depth.

THE INFLUENCE OF THE ANCIENT AND MODERN WORLD ON BLACK GREEK VIOLENCE

Regardless of the answer to the aforementioned question concerning the personality types of black men who engage in hazing, the theory of BGF violence offered here posits that the pledge process is not a phenomenon unique to (or invented by) BGFs, but finds its true roots in the ancient world. Black collegians created BGFs in an effort to provide the interpersonal, social, educational, and professional support denied to them in many U.S. social and political structures, but they did not autonomously create the process of violent initiation. The manifestation of violence found in BGFs is really another form of sacrifice that has been passed down to black fraternities through multiple ritualistic traditions. As chapter four illustrates, ancient sacrificial ritual was usually mortal and public because it was regarded as affecting the entire community. These rituals were established to intervene in what was seen as inevitable violent social interaction so that violence could be redirected and even legitimized. In societies where the notion of human sacrifice was considered “uncivilized,” the tenets of sacrificial ritual were transferred to social and secret organizations, which ultimately served many of the same purposes.

Although the underlying purpose of sacrificial ritual never changed, it was presented in different guises. These altered avenues for sacrifice usually appeared as secret and semisecret orders such as the Egyptian Mysteries, Eleusinian Mysteries, Orphic Mysteries, Mithraism, Freemasonry, and the military. According to some thinkers, these structures (whether secret or not) always serve a societal purpose. By legitimating violence through ritual, one “can precipitate the forging of new social forms that address violence as an autonomous, culturally generative, and meaning-endowing practice.”⁷ Although all sacrificial rituals demand some form of sacrifice, they all do not demand death in the literal sense. This does not mean that the notion of

death is absent from any sacrificial ritual. Contrarily, it is forever present. All sacrificial ritual hinges on the expectation of some type of death and subsequent rebirth. In modern times, this death-rebirth process is usually symbolic. This is the case in fraternities, but it does not change the purpose of the ritual.

Violence of this type has become integral in BGFs because it is now regarded as an important tool in the construction of black male identity and manhood. The overriding problem with BGFs is not rooted in the fact that they are Greek-letter organizations with unique practices or that their written rituals somehow mandate violent behavior (as is evidenced by the death of Michael Davis in spite of ritualistic alterations). BGFs have historically been concerned with the construction of a particular black American male identity that affirms and continuously reaffirms black manhood. Unfortunately, violent physical struggle has come to be regarded as a key ingredient in building this manhood. The dependence on the physical often occurs because many black men feel (rightfully or wrongfully) that they are not privy to the same opportunities to define themselves as their white counterparts in U.S. society. This perception (and reality) is explored in depth in later chapters. Before reaching these passages, however, I hope the reader will temporarily accept my hypothesis that social and political marginalization helps to promote the black man's search for alternate arenas in which he can be regarded as a man. One way to define manhood that has emerged, particularly in black intraracial interaction, is to be physically dominant or able to withstand physical abuse. In this manner, physical toughness eventually can be equated with manliness and this phenomenon carries over into BGFs.

This reality helps to explain why many individuals continue to submit to hazing—they feel that it affirms their toughness and manhood. Note, however, that BGFs do not force black men to join their organizations. Contrarily, a large number of men exist who go to great lengths to gain membership. Many of these men submit to, and even seek, pledging and hazing because modern BGFs have developed an interaction of domination that largely centers on the narrativity of the pledge process. This phenomenon is rigorously engaged in chapter five. The hegemonic struggle between pro- and anti-hazers within BGFs has effectively established parameters that define individual fraternity brothers as legitimate or illegitimate. The criteria for legitimacy are primarily based on whether a member has participated in the traditional BGF pledge process. Many black men see membership in a fraternity as one way to respond to negative societal factors and carve out space that truly belongs to them. Along with this space comes some degree of (or perception of) power and comaraderie not easily accessed by the majority of black men in U.S. society. Some of these men see the traditional pledge

process, which includes hazing, as the only way to gain uncontested admittance into this zone of power and brotherhood.

Although the pledge process may have its roots in sacrificial ritual, the unique identity of many modern black American men, be they Greek affiliated or not, augments the current extreme nature of violent hazing in BGFs. Some believe that this identity may be a historical construct of conscious and unconscious oppression of this group by Anglo-American-centered structures of governance and determinants of social and political power. Louis Knowles and Kenneth Prewitt described this system as *institutional racism*.⁸ They saw it as one in which the institutions and rules of U.S. society were based on the values of the dominant white racial group and society's goods and services were distributed according to these values. They subsequently concluded that continuing discrimination against African Americans has been one of the most powerful expressions of institutional racism in the society and the most devastating legacy of the white supremacist ethos.

Following this admittedly contested logic, the black male Self that these realities have created is further fragmented by the assault of modernization and the economic and psychological problems it brings to bear. This phenomenon changed the realities and life-chances of most Americans during the twentieth century in that old familiar social forms disintegrated before the new and highly aggressive forces of urbanization and industrialization. In relatively quick succession, family links in the United States weakened, religious authority waned, competitive, atomized city life replaced face-to-face communal life, and the cold, brutal rationality of the modern marketplace displaced custom and tradition.

Black Greek-letter fraternity hazing and the particular black male identity that leads to it are bound up in the upheavals of these various trends in general rather than with the dynamics of fraternal interaction in particular. The historic psychic trauma of black men resulting from chattel slavery and continued post-Civil War marginalization increases the toll of modern U.S. society, which often occasions painful dislocations economically, socially, and psychologically. This book examines and grounds the hypothesis that it is in the societal realm, rather than the fraternal, that we can locate the realities that will allow us to understand violence among black men in BGFs.

FALSEHOODS AND FAILURE: THE EPISTEMIC DOMINO EFFECT AND ETHICS IN GREEKDOM

Although often ignored or misunderstood, inquiries such as this ultimately must be concerned with the intersection of epistemological engagement and axiological shifts in cultures. Often experts attempt to separate these matters

of the mind into distinct, disconnected entities. The reality, however, is that if one interrogates a culture's epistemic modes of inquiry while disregarding its conclusions concerning values and ethics, a critical link that can help explain behavior is lost. Clearly epistemology is not simply the authority by which one purports to base his or her knowledge. Certainly, the questions of "What do I know?" and "How do I know it?" are asked in epistemological inquiry, but the real power of the engagement does not end there. Once people draw conclusions about what they know and how they know it (whether the answers are right or wrong), they use this knowledge to construct, affirm, and reaffirm individual and group modes of behavior and traditions. These behaviors and traditions are ultimately based on, and subsequently help to create, ethical constructs.

Troubling questions rise out of this progression. What if the answers to the initial epistemic questions are wrong? What if an individual draws conclusions and inferences from skewed, flawed, or even outright false information? Beyond this, the possibility exists that the formation of identities and the axiological foundations on which they necessarily rest could be exposed to an identity domino effect. Such an effect occurs if inquiries and answers concerning the authoritative legitimacy of knowledge is not grounded in fact, but in fiction. Carried far enough and reified for long enough, not only do the answers to questions become wrong, but also the questions themselves become flawed.

If epistemological inquiry is necessarily related to the construction of ethical systems, then it may very well be mandatory that our study of the subject at hand be rooted in epistemological means with the purpose of influencing axiological and ideological ends. To be sure, our charge here is not only to encounter, know, and understand, but also to impact practically the behavior, politics, and power structures within the groups in question. Ultimately, difficult challenges must be presented and answers demanded. What is the purpose of BGFs in the modern age when the black community continues to face overwhelming forces of negativity? We must acknowledge that black Greeks have built a great historical legacy of placing powerful black men and women at the forefront of the black freedom struggle. The list of names is endless: from W. E. B. DuBois to Martin Luther King, Jr., from Jessie Jackson to Johnnie Cochran. If twenty-first century black Greeks, however, lose sight of the fact that the community looks to them to behave with decency and integrity—the groups have lost their way.

We must understand that the mission and meaning of black Greekdom can only be respected and needed insofar as they speak to the mission and meaning of black life in general. Black Greeks' worth must ultimately be affirmed by the people they produce and the communities they serve. If some members of the community now hold Greeks in disdain, there is a reason

why. The perspective that many people (on campuses and in communities at large) have distanced themselves from Greekdom completely out of ignorance and jealousy simply does not hold under critical analysis. At some point, BGFs not only must address what they are doing right, but also what they are doing wrong. Such intellectual exchange, unfortunately, is largely emptied of its quality by a lack of direction and courage to speak to issues of import to BGFs and the larger community with strength, clarity, and purpose.

When engaging activities within BGFs, we must recognize the strong possibility that what members actually do today is largely a result of the manipulation of identity construction from within as well as from without. The result of this manipulation is often the production of people who do, what many consider, wrong. This is simultaneously a simple and a difficult admission. We would be hard pressed to find someone who would not admit that the violence, damage, and death visited on young men like Joel Harris, Michael Davis, and Shawn Blackston is wrong. Regardless of this fact, we see an almost immediate attempt by many Greeks to convolute the issue by shifting blame and refusing to take responsibility for their personal involvement in similar violent activities.

When crimes are committed in these organizations, a project is mobilized that is almost totally dedicated to the maintenance of the fraternal structures. These structures are often maintained through the use of blatant lies and the deception of other members, educational officials, and legal authorities. Often, this deceit is undertaken because of the ethical orientation of members largely borne of epistemic questions and answers provided during their own pledge periods. The ploys are often successful, not because they are well thought-out or believable, but because many of the investigators either tacitly condone the actions of the Greeks (sympathetic fraternity officials) or seem not to really care whether groups of black men beat one another to death. The deceptions and those who allow them must be stopped. There is no room for neutrality on this point. Our bias, however, must be guided by care and concern for the construction of healthy organizations rather than degenerative judgment grounded in misunderstanding and contempt. Certainly, prejudice fueled by blind rage and folly is negative, but so is the ineffectual stance of the neutral observer in instances such as this. Stands must be taken and this work is intended to be one.

Consequently, the following pages move beyond simply condoning or condemning the BGF pledge process and the hazing that usually accompanies it. I will endeavor to transcend the traditional questions whether hazing or pledging are morally right or wrong; whether they need to be eradicated or maintained; whether fraternities have outlived their usefulness. The thrust of this work is to question why the particular type of violence in BGFs exists,

how it relates to the political situation of black men in the United States, and what can be done to counter it. As a consequence of this engagement, I hope fraternities, university officials, and individual members will revisit their approaches to hazing and their organizations in general. This is, no doubt, a political project and process.

When speaking to the “political” here, I address the process by which any group or society of people decides who gets what, when, and how.⁹ The political, therefore, moves quickly from its colloquial position of referring to electoral politics and distribution of material resources. It is, critically, the process by which not only the allocation of economic and material resources is determined, but also which dictates how groups in a society see themselves and others and subsequently determines what is acceptable (and in some cases necessary), unacceptable, and even human. This inquiry into humanity is not limited to that which is considered human physically, but also culturally and psychologically.

The way in which this work adds to the body of philosophical, theoretical, and practical knowledge is that it seeks to help us understand a process among a group of men that may at times seem sociopathic and barbaric. My feelings about the endurance or demise of the pledge process notwithstanding, before policy can be influenced, a clear epistemological understanding of the true forces at work must be reached. Some may be disappointed that I do not have answers to all the questions posed in this work. Admittedly, no sure-fire solutions to the problem of BGF violence are offered in these pages. The ritual of hazing may be too deep-seated to be halted—short of eradicating the organizations. This work offers a study that seeks to draw a distinct line between fact and the fantastic and get at the root of the phenomenon by being very clear about *why* this violence takes place.

No doubt something is amiss here, but it is probably not some intrinsic evil bred purely of fraternal interaction or some “natural” violence found in black men. The need for perceived power, respect, and acceptance is most likely the culprit. The quest for these social goods—born of psychosocial anxieties—plays itself out in fraternities, but would (and does) manifest itself elsewhere if (and when) the fraternal vehicle is not present or accessible. BGF policies change, but behavior among many members and initiates remains constant because of one simple fact—the fraternities do not produce potential initiates, society does. National BGF organizations continue in the struggle to identify and solve their problems from the wrong perspectives—practical (organizational hierarchies, dues structures, individual chapter and national chapter power relations, and so forth) and individuo-psychological (levels of active participation, personal approaches to the organizations bred by particular pledge processes, and so forth) rather than examining the more telling relationship between sociopolitical systems and black male organizational and

personal interactions and identities. As a corrective, this study takes a new approach to an old problem that has plagued BGFs for most of their existence.

My research here suggests that oppression is societal in that it is a reality that has been historically integrated into every day American life through political, economic, and social means. This everydayness has, over time, desensitized us to the very real dehumanization that American structures have fostered where their African-descended citizens are concerned, and BGFs are not immune to the effects of this progression. We must, therefore, trace out the true links between the production and cultivation of the inhumane and its effect on black male identity and action—inside as well as outside of fraternities. The reasons for the failure of fraternal policy are multivariate, with the various causes reinforcing one another. Most of these causes are usually (if not always) societal—not individual—and it is there that we must search to change present fraternal realities into generative forces in modern black life.