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TRAINING IN VIOLENCE: AN ESSAY ON MILITARY HAZING

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In 1975, Dennis Coates published a short book of poetry inspired by his time at West Point, the U.S. Military Academy. One poem – entitled "Summer Training" – seeks to convey the tough drills and exercises that each cadet has to endure in order to graduate. "When he comes here", the poem starts, "he is a child". This can only change once he has "dreamed his own destruction" and positioned himself "at the edge/of a howling vortex which postpones even the night "(p.6). Through undertaking a series of ordeals, Coates is suggesting, "boys" symbolically die, initiating the process by which warrior men are born.

Whether at West Point (New York), the Marine Corps recruiting deports at Parris Island (South Carolina) or San Diego (California), or any number of boot camps located throughout the U.S., the rigours of military training have been immortalised in numerous memoirs, novels, and movies, perhaps most notoriously in Stanley Kubrick's film "Full Metal Jacket" (1987). They routinely depict not only punishing training regimes but also violent and humiliating practices known as "hazing".

In this talk, I will be exploring some reasons for the durability and symbolic power of hazing practices, or the bullying of soldiers. As we shall see, military hazing is generally justified in three overlapping ways: it meets individual psychological needs, it is crucial in forging powerful group ties, and it is a rite of passage into manhood. Although all three justifications have merit, I will be arguing that these psychological explanations have less force than a fourth justification: institutional dynamics. What is being created through hazing is much more than simply an individual warrior or even a cohesive fighting force. More importantly, the warring institution itself is reproduced through instrumental violence against its own members. The appeal to the "separate culture" of military institutions allows hazing to be justified as a morally relative practice. This is why hazing has proved impossible to dislodge.

Definitions

The concept of hazing is often traced back to ancient Greece, where soldiers were required to demonstrate their strength and loyalty by enduring certain ordeals. However, the verb "to haze" was first used in the fifteenth century where it was used in the navy and army to refer to scolding, upbraiding, frightening, and punishing personnel. In modern times, practices labelled "hazing" do not only take place in the military: fraternities, colleges, oil drilling rigs, and other relatively closed communities are just some of the places where hazing thrives.

There is no uncontested definition of the concept, since the term changes depending on who is speaking. For instance, there is a lively debate about what distinguishes "hazing" from violent and humiliating practices that are said to be necessary aspects of military training.

However defined, a vast array of practices is subsumed under the term "hazing". Indeed, institutional idiosyncrasy is encouraged. Hank Nuwer, the editor of *The Hazing Reader* (2004), observes that hazing can

include everything from "horseplay" to vicious assaults: it includes "a good-natured punch" and "hard boot camp activities" (p.141). Many definitions suggest that, unlike other forms of bullying, hazing has a strong *initiation* component, in addition to causing potential or actual harm to victims. A typical definition claims that hazing involves "any activity expected of someone joining a group (or to maintain full status in a group) that humiliates, degrades, or risks emotional and/or physical harm" (Phillips, 2013; p.1).

What are some of the practices typically subsumed under the rubric of hazing? Military hazing typically involves a range of degrading, revolting, and painful practices. Victims are subjected to sleep deprivation and required to perform extreme exercises. They are forced to eat or drink disgusting food and fluids. Humiliation is routine. Victims are made to feel worthless, forced to wear women's clothes, and ordered to sing silly ditties or play with dolls. Many rituals are sexual, including public masturbation and imitating or performing fellatio. Euphemisms attempt to obscure the cruelty of many hazing activities. In "sweat parties", naked men are confined in steam-filled shower-rooms; during "blanket parties", they are wrapped in blankets and beaten. "Bloody Sunday" or "break out" rituals involve victims running the gauntlet of senior upperclassmen who hit them. "Kissing the Royal Baby" (that is, kissing a superior's stomach that has been thickly plastered with lard) is relatively benign when compared to "greasings" (a naked man is smeared in machinery grease and buggered with a plastic tube). During "blood winging" ceremonies (which occur after paratroopers have completed a certain number of jumps), gold-wing pins are brutally punched into the skin and tissue of troopers' chests. The consequences for victims are not trivial. Hazing is routinely linked to suicide, psychiatric breakdown, and serious injuries. Hazing is a virulent form of abuse and bullying.

Explanations

The formidable status and longevity of hazing practices can only be understood by recognising hazing as a form of bullying – meaningful violence, for perpetrators as well as for many (although by no means all) victims.

Sociological explanations for hazing take two broad forms: the first emphasises the way hazing creates a sense of belonging for individual members while the second takes this a step further, arguing that only by forging a strong, shared identity can the group act cohesively in combat. In both cases, it is taken for granted that pain and distress are necessary in constructing martial masculinities. A slightly broader justification refers not to the function of hazing in engendering an individual's sense of belonging, but for the cohesiveness and combat-effectiveness of the combat-group as a whole. Implicit in this justification is the assumption that warring does not come "naturally" to most men: men must be socialised into the warrior caste.

Crucially, commentators who focus on group dynamics emphasize their belief that painful and humiliating rituals are a necessary rite of passage from boyhood to martial manhood. If masculine traits are to be inculcated, feminine influences have to be excised. A defence of hazing at The Citadel (a military college in South Carolina) claimed that it was aimed at identifying and expelling any cadet who was likely to go "blubbering to his mommy". Indeed, it was "a point of pride… to see who can chase out the most knobs" (Reilly, 1992; n.p.). Degrading recruits by calling them "wet tarts", "powderpuffs", and other "female" insults was also a way of forcing them into adopting a particular kind of masculinity (Hockey, 2003; pp.16-7).

Problems

Functionalist justifications – including those that focus on the inculcation of individual traits, the forging of group dynamics, and rites of passage – are problematic. Crucially, they blur the distinction between military training and hazing. Indeed, they imply that there <u>is</u> no clear distinction.

There are also numerous problems with the adoption of anthropological ideas about "rites of passage". Proponents speak as though hazing is simply a rite of passage that is "culture-free". They draw analogies between hazing in contemporary American militaries with practices in other cultures, assuming a universal set of contexts, norms, and psychological profiles. This enables them to evade awkward questions about the levels of violence involved in military contexts and whether hazing constitutes "bullying".

In addition, the concept of a "rite of passage" evolved from anthropological research into cultures in which young men make a transition to adulthood through undergoing a series of arduous ordeals. The dissimilarities between these ordeals and the ones expected of men in elite military units becomes clear when it is noted that in the former contexts practically all young men are expected to succeed in achieving the status of manhood and there are often subtle ways of ensuring a high success rate. This is very different from what we see in hazing rituals in the military (and, indeed, in fraternities), in which a sizeable proportion *fail*. Indeed, a high failure rate is built in to military hazing. Equality is also wholly illusionary since not everyone who attempts to join the group are hazed equally. Hazers habitually assume that they are superior to their victims, since certain types of people are excluded from the start, irrespective of whether they currently or potentially possess the requisite traits of fitness, courage, and solidarity. The excluded groups change over time, but at various times and places African Americans, Chinese, Jews, and other minorities have been subjected to more violent hazing than, for example, white, middle-class men. The required characteristic for hazing is also masculinity: this became clear during the sexual abuse scandal at Tailhook in September 1991.

Safeguarding an Elite Caste

It is more convincing to argue that hazing is as much about the reproduction of the institution as it is about individual psychology or group dynamics. Indeed, this is why it has proved so difficult to eradicate: it is not so much the individual warrior and his unit that is being reproduced through hazing, but a particular kind of "warrior institution".

The most convincing way to explain why hazing has persisted and why few victims report it (according to one survey, most cadets experienced hazing two or more times per month: Pershing, 2000; p.478) is to understand that hazing practices have become institutionalised.

Furthermore, time and again, members defend hazing as necessary to protect the *institution* as a separate, warrior culture, which helps explain the covert acceptance of such practices. This resigned tone can be heard time and again, as military and civilian observers simply note that abolition has failed. Some senior trainers go much further, gleefully boasting about how rules against inflicting cruel and humiliating practices in training could be circumvented.

The more "elite" the unit, the more loudly hazing was defended. Hazing was seen to safeguard the "warrior" or combat-ready character of elite military units, distinguishing themselves from the technocratic aspects of other branches of the armed forces. With the professionalization of the armed forces and the increasing role played by *civilian* contractors within the forces (in Iraq in 2015 there were as many civilian contractors "in the field" as American troops), elite *combat* units were desperate to ensure that they were not interchangeable with civilians.

The separateness of military culture was being attacked not only by the incursion of "political correctness" and civilian values, such as those opposed to aggressive swearing: it was also threatened by feminism. Sociologists such as Lionel Tiger claimed that the public furore over hazing was due to "feminisation" or the "norms of female behavior" being "increasingly and successfully applied to male behavior". It was a fact, he believed, that women neither enjoy enduring painful ordeals nor did they become "effective contributors" to the "traditional draconian immersion of young men in Marine culture" (1999; p.215).

Prohibiting hazing probably *increased* its appeal. Recruits and members of elite armed units prided themselves on being "set apart" from civilian mores and sensitivities. Painful and humiliating rites were essential to the mystique of joining an exclusive "club". Marines were immensely proud that the Marine Corps "'didn't join you' nor promise a rose garden", Colonel Robert H. Thompson reminded readers of the *Marine Corps Gazette* in 1986. "In fact", he continued, "Marines, as well as much of the American public, have endowed Marine Corps recruit training with almost mystical powers to change young men" (p.53).

This mysticism and "set apartness" were powerful disincentives to complaining about what went on inside the barracks and parade grounds. A shared belief in the importance of pain and humiliation helps explain why recruits aligned themselves with officers in resisting the "softening" of boot camp. For example, in the 1970s

when there were some attempts to eliminate the harsher forms of hazing, some cadets were dismayed. As one psychiatrist working at West Point observed,

new cadets and upperclass men felt that an easier Beast Barracks diminished their own achievement. At the end of every summer, a number of new cadets complained that the ordeal had not been difficult enough. Some of this was, of course, bragging, but these cadets also felt genuinely disappointed, as if they had not been tested as rigorously as their predecessors (U'Ren, 1974; p.62).

He quoted an old army doctor who reiterated the negative response to the reduction of pain and humiliation, on the grounds that cadets arrived at West Point "feeling it would be a test of their manhood". In order to

win membership in the club, they feel they have to be tested; the worth of the experience is directly related to the amount of suffering they have to go through. Many felt that last summer [1973] [sic] wasn't tough enough, that too many pussies got through; and they don't want to hobnob with wimps" (U'ren, 1974; p.62).

Crisis in The 1990s: Regulate Military Abuse

Despite high levels of consent and shared values about the need for pain and humiliating in shaping an elite, warrior caste, in the 1990s the military was subjected to a particularly vocal critique of hazing. This was not unique to the military; hazing scandals in college fraternities were also causing public outcry. State officials finally decided to legislate against the practices. The result can be seen by just one statistic: in 1990, only 25 states had enacted statutes outlawing hazing; within a decade, all states except seven had adopted anti-hazing statutes (Pelletier, 2002; p.377).

In the military context, the need to take seriously the groundswell against hazing was driven by plummeting recruitment. High profile hazing scandals had generated unprecedented and sustained negative press coverage.

If there was to be change, it needed to come from *within* the Corps itself, where officers could ensure that the "separate and different culture" would be preserved. The Commanding Officer of the Weapons Company, 5th Marines, set out the dominant approach. He argued that since hazing was probably necessary, "the point should not be to legislate this need away but to feed it in a positive way". He proposed doing this by "taking rituals out of the background – by institutionalizing, supervising, and sanctioning each one" (Wilcox, 1997; p.37). Self-regulation and monitoring of hazing practices were the solution to the crisis.

On 18 June 1997, General Charles C. Krulak, Commandant of the Marine Corps tackled the problem directly when he issued Order 1700.28. The Order defined hazing as

any conduct whereby one military member, regardless of Service or rank, causes another military member, regardless of Service or rank, to suffer or be exposed to an activity which is cruel, abusive, humiliating, or oppressive.

It listed examples of hazing, which included "physically striking another to inflict pain, piercing another's skin in any manner, verbally berating another, encouraging another to excessively consume alcohol, or encouraging another to engage in illegal, harmful, demeaning or dangerous acts". Importantly, the Order banned verbal haranguing as well as acts that were deemed to be psychologically cruel.

However, the Order also explicitly *legitimated* certain military practices that some opponents of hazing had urged should be banned. According to the Order, hazing did *not* include the following: anything that took place during

mission or operational activities; the requisite training to prepare for such missions or operations; administrative corrective measures; extra military instruction as defined in the reference; command authorized physical training; authorized incentive training permitted at the Marine Corps Recruit Depots; and other similar activities authorized by the chain of command ("Marine Corps Order 1700.28, 1997; p. 2).

In other words, hazing was regulated – rather than forbidden – within the context of Marine Corp culture.

Conclusion

As a form of institutionalised violence – "legitimate bullying" -- hazing continues to the present. This was admitted in a 2014 article entitled "Hazing v. Challenging", written by Ethan Brooks. Brooks said that he had been prompted to write the article after attending "equal opportunity training" earlier that year. The instructor had asked a corporal to stand up and define hazing. When the corporal began to read the official Marine Corps definition, the instructor stopped him and told him to give his own definition. "Hazing", said the corporal, "is tradition". Brooks reported that "The room erupted in murmurs, probably equal parts 'You can't say that' and 'Hear, hear'". Brooks took this as evidence that

Marines aren't buying the Marine Corps' policy on hazing….. Of course, many Marines are happy to see the old ways go, but every year during the equal opportunities class, you can sense what many are thinking…. "We all know this is gay, but hey, it's the new Marine Corps and there's nothing we can do about it".

He argued that hazing "comes from a good place" in the sense that Marines "want to test themselves and find out what they are made of" (p.24). They turned to hazing because they were not being challenged enough. The solution, then, was to make training significantly more difficult: "When young men or women join the Marine Corps, they expect to be pushed to their breaking point. We owe this to them" (p.24). Masculine, militarist nationalism trumped civilian discourses of human rights. This was not simply a Marine Corps problem. As we have seen, within the army, navy, and airforces, as well, hazing was posited as ennobling and redeeming rites that created a special link between corpsmen and women and the elite institution. This was regarded as particularly necessary in units expected to see active military service: hazing was believed to buttress the "warrior" character of the institution, to prevent that culture from being tainted by civilian mores. It needed to be preserved from anything "soft". Although the term "hazing" was increasingly reviled, bullying and other painful and humiliating practices continue to be regarded by corpsmen as important to "maintain that unique characteristic edge" necessary in the creation of effective front-line combatants in war (Hull, 1992; p.84).