

“When everybody participates ‘willingly’ it can’t be wrong. Right?”

Hazing, rookie parties, inductions, welcome rituals... whatever the name/label the problem persists in North American education institutions and sport organizations. The belief that young people must be subjected to and happily endure practices that are humiliating, degrading and sometimes dangerous or deadly (Florida A&M is only one such example) in order to achieve full acceptance in the club, group or team is all too common.

Most of us can see that asking a young person to submit to physical punishment or confinement, common ‘welcoming practices’, is wrong, but what about the ‘fun’ stuff. Behaviours like forcing young women to consume alcohol; serving and obeying the seniors; head shaving and pretending to push young people from great heights are all defended as harmless activities that bring people together. The problem with trying to pick and choose between those activities in which there is an abuse of power that are fun and harmless and those which ‘just go too far’ is that we can never truly know.

What might seem minor to some can be difficult and even traumatizing for others; head shaving seems harmless unless you are from a culture or background where this act carries more significance, serving the seniors is hilarious unless you come from a family where you are treated like this all the time and compelling a young woman to ‘do keg stands’ when she grew up around alcohol abuse takes on a new meaning. The common feature here is the abuse of power by some over others in the name of building spirit, unity and a common objective (like student leadership or club/team membership) and there is no universally safe and fun exercise of this power –over practice. Paradoxically, researchers like Dr. Susan Lipkins have found that these rituals are more likely to thwart the very goals articulated by their proponents. They don’t build trust, they are not conducive to team building and they don’t feel welcoming. One of the effects of hazing, however, is that the ongoing repetition of these rituals year after year results in an escalation of the practice as each new generation of hazers takes their place at the top of the hierarchy. For example ‘funny dressing up’ seven years ago escalates to buttock slapping this year as the basic dynamic of power-over leaves the door open to abuse, individual interpretation and ‘creativity’. In brief, the dressing up ritual that no one challenged begat the shocking incidents exposed this year at Ryerson University. The evolution (devolution) of hazing rituals over time into violent and life threatening rites of passage could have been prevented by prohibiting any practice where some are asked to perform for others in order to be accepted.

The final line of defense from those who will protect hazing rituals or decry that we make too much of them is the argument that: “we’ve been doing this for years and no one ever complained or refused to take part. It is voluntary you know”. This naïve declaration demonstrates a clear lack of understanding for the need to be accepted and to belong as felt by young athletes, club members, recent band members, novice campers, new students, fraternity and sorority members and others seeking to become part of a community or group. The pressure on a young person to go along with whatever is asked of them when they witness their peers taking part, know that ‘this is how it has been done’ for years and understand the consequences for standing out or demurring is tremendous. That, under these circumstances, we never hear a complaint or a refusal is hardly evidence that the practice is safe, respectful or right.

To prevent hazing from hurting young people we need to stop searching for ways to separate the “ok and fun” practices from the ones that go too far and we cannot wait until we hear a complaint from the hazed, because that’s just too late.

For information on alternatives to hazing or assistance with a possible incident of hazing, adults involved with sport, culture and recreation can contact the Canadian Red Cross Support Line at 1-866-773-5777.