

Hazing and Harassment

Introduction

Hazing behaviours are often labelled as "harassing" by recipients who are unable to stop them or cope with them. Those who can cope with them, however, frequently find themselves attracting followers. The interpretation put on hazing behaviour differs depending on the recipient's understanding of its meaning. Hazing behaviours serve two purposes: firstly, to see whether a person will accept the behavioural norms and authority relations within the group; secondly, to screen for people who will stand up for themselves when challenged or threatened (Nuwer, 2004).

Hazing, therefore, can have diametrically opposite meanings, depending on the intentions of the hazer. If a person is seeking someone who will be submissive, they will be looking for a response that indicates acceptance of their will (or point of view). But if they are looking for someone to lead, they may issue a challenge and look for a reaction, particularly one that indicates a capacity for independent balanced judgement. The recipient, of course, will not know in advance which response will win them favour hence the ambiguity and angry reactions that can result from cross-purposes. Someone expecting submissive behaviour but receiving an independent judgement may themselves feel challenged and become angry or defensive. Someone expecting independent judgement but seeing submission may feel contempt or disappointment. When expectations and reactions match, however, attraction is the result (in one, but not necessarily both, directions).

This is why the current construction and understanding of hazing is so problematic (Farrell, 1994). Hazing is a common behaviour for both men and women. While men's hazing is frequently labelled 'harassment', women's hazing is usually not recognised at all, especially by women. Only a small group of men interested in gendered behaviour are even aware that women haze and harass as much as men. It is, however, reconstructed so that the derogatory term is applied to men who cannot resist a woman's demands. He, and not she, is labelled 'pussy-whipped' (Vitalio, 2005).

It is worth stressing that hazing behaviour is as common within same-sex groups as cross-sex groups. Girls have traditionally relied on verbal hazing to resolve their disputes in the playground (particularly in their teens) and continue this into adulthood. Recent trends in crime statistics, however, suggest that girls are becoming increasingly physical in their behaviour. Boys, particularly those used to sporting environments, continue to resolve such battles through a mixture of verbal and physical confrontation (Roy, 1960; Cairns and Cairns, 1994; Goleman, 1998).

The issue, therefore, appears to be one of consent and meaning, not just actual behaviour (Ackroyd and Thompson, 1999). A new group member may see advantages in perpetuating the appearance of subordination as a strategy for gaining acceptance and influence within a group. The critical moment is when the submissive behaviour stops. If his or her peers accept the change then this indicates acceptance as a group member. But if hazing behaviour continues when the member does not consent, the social dynamic is oppressive (and the member has not yet been fully accepted).

The Power of Passivity

At the other extreme, deliberate passivity (i.e. intentionally waiting for others to take initiatives) can be a powerful strategy for selecting and developing a person willing to accept responsibility for leadership. Both men and women can engage in this type of behaviour, but passivity is more often directed towards men to induce them to take a leading role in difficult, awkward or dangerous situations. It is particularly common when conflicts or threats to a mixed gender group occur. It does not, however, necessarily indicate that the person who ends up assuming a leadership role has assumed a position of power (over their own life).

Last year, I listened to a researcher talking about their experiences studying nurses who broke bad news to bereaved relatives. What emerged was that male nurses, even though in a minority, usually broke this bad news. They internalised this as a sign of inherent leadership skills and rationalised that relatives would probably prefer to hear bad news from a man. What emerged from the interviews with female nurses, however, was that they did not like giving bad news and routinely looked for a male nurse to do it for them. Who is the leader and who the follower? In the short term in traditional (and gender-based) power terms the woman is exercising power. Not only is she delegating a task but also exercising most control over her own life. In the longer term, however, the situation can change due to an accumulation of bottom-up leadership processes. Let me explain how this happens.

Repeated exposure to more difficult, challenging or dangerous tasks teaches interpersonal and learning skills: it prepares a person for career advancement. Such subtle processes, therefore, can result in emergent bottom-up leadership whereby the person who gets used to more challenging work develops skills that others do not acquire.

We once had discussions about this in one of the companies in which I served as a director. At an annual review, the men and women broke into gender groups to discuss how sexism against women affected the workplace. There was a highly unusual outcome in the men's group and I reconstruct the dialogue below (you'll have to allow me a bit of licence here!):

Brian: *It pisses me off when people ring up and ask for the manager and expect it to be a man. It is demeaning to the women.*

Henry: *Yeah I agree, but it means that we [the men] have to deal with the more difficult calls all the time. That pisses me off too.*

Rory: *Yes, the women are much better at empowering themselves. They say 'no' much more than we do!*

Julian: *That's right. If there is a problem with a client, it is usually you [points to Rory] or me who ends up having to deal with it. While they are empowering themselves by saying 'no' we are landed with all the shit.*

Henry: *But maybe you get landed with this because people expect it of you.*

Rory: *I think what Julian is saying is that it is not just men who expect to speak to a man as manager, it is also an assumption amongst women, and also implicit in the way things work inside the company.*

Brian: *You mean that they want the men to do the harder jobs and deal with the most difficult customers?*

Rory: *Not necessarily. I mean that they want the option to pass something on if they feel they can't deal with it. They get to choose, but we don't. I'm not sure who is being discriminated against more the women (for being ignored) or the men (for getting landed with the most difficult problems).*

The moral of this story, perhaps, is that men need to learn the value of saying 'no' as well. Moreover, we need to ask why men are more reluctant to say 'no', or why they like to say 'yes'. Is there a fear of being seen as weak? Is there a sexual dynamic inducing men behave in particular ways in the company of women? Have they already learnt that they will be disciplined (by both women and other men) if they say 'no' to a woman?

Emotion is important here. What the men believed (but may not have actually been true) was that the more threatening the call, the more likely it would be passed (or escalated) to a man. While we recognised the disrespect shown to our female colleagues, we also began to see the disrespect implicit in callers (male and female) feeling they could vent their anger more freely at a man than a woman. As our discussion developed, we got a sense that we had less choice over whether to accept it. We were expected to handle the anger of others. If we did not, others got angry at us.

It was about 5 years later that one man (Mike) identified three men as de facto leaders. This situation arose even when women constituted 50% of the directors and all had one vote in management meetings. "Followers", in this case mostly women, had become agents inducing leadership behaviours through various rewards (loyalty, flattery, money and sexual attention) or repeated insistence that someone else deal with their most difficult problems.

Such behaviours encourage leaders to keep leading, to keep accepting responsibility when things go wrong. In turn, these de facto leaders improve their skills at dealing with complex situations but also got resentful and frustrated at feeling used by others. Herein lies the cause of authoritarian confrontations (a battle of wills) between 'leaders' and 'followers' who both seek to reassign responsibilities given to them by "the other".

Definitional Problems with Harassment

It is for these combined reasons, that 'harassment' is a difficult concept to pin down. Taking initiatives becomes habitual behaviour of those working (or living) amongst others who prefer to avoid responsibility. What appears as harassment to a new group member might simply be habitual or "normal" behaviour that has been induced by followers. It is perverse if we start to blame the leader for behaviour that has been induced by followers. As a result, there is much to be gained from exploring how one person's "harassment" can be another person's "helpfulness".

Men claim they do not take women seriously as potential leaders if they resist subordination, or place a higher value on their own well-being than the group they intend to serve (Farrell, 1994). The main criticism is that women show themselves to be less willing to sacrifice themselves, put themselves in danger or take risks - qualities that men accept as an integral part of leadership. The main criticism of men by women, however, is that such behaviour is "masculine", misogynist and rooted in a desire for domination and control (Hearn and Parkin, 1987). Clearly there needs to be a lively debate here because the "male" argument is that the ability to cope with "harassing" behaviour shows a person's capacity and willingness to serve others (i.e. cope with the demands of leadership), while the "female" argument is that "harassing" behaviour is a desire to dominate others. Which of these views is correct?

By constructing "hazing" as "harassment", the process by which people have traditionally come to build high trust relationships (to prepare for collective working in dangerous situations) has become obscured and misunderstood. Hazing behaviour, while disliked, is not so much masculine as a set of behaviours associated with preparation for dangerous and risky occupations. If a person is able to survive it, the result is a particularly high level of trust in that person. It is for this reason that hazing is most prevalent in occupations like the police, fire fighting, the armed forces, executive teams and politics. The question, however, remains why hazing also occurs in other environments? In student fraternities, for example, there is no need for it and yet it occurs. Is it a deeply ingrained anachronism, or does it continue to serve its original purpose?

"Harassment" might be any of the following: an act of violation to gain control through fear; behaviour that is over-friendly ("showing the ropes" too eagerly); a genuine interest to establish a lasting and equitable relationship (by trying to establish the other person's capacity for handling conflict). Accusations of harassment may be made to reduce the amount of unwanted attention, to avoid responsibility for previous actions, or a strategy to control and isolate 'weak' individuals.

In most cases, these are purposeful power plays. The most robust interpretation is that social hierarchies develop through a social process whereby people seek out and ally themselves with those who can be induced to accept risks and responsibilities. Through this process, wealth and responsibility are exchanged for followership. Ironically, social organisation is driven by the many socialising the few who appear able to generate wealth and handle conflicts. And what if they stop generating wealth or refuse to handle conflicts? Typically, they are discarded by their followers who then search for a new leader.

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