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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

### HAZING PRACTICES IN HIGHER EDUCATION: A STUDY WITH PORTUGUESE STUDENTS

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#### ABSTRACT

Hazing practices in higher education institutions are perceived controversially. This study looked at the perception towards hazing practices of students from the University of the Azores in first cycle (n=247). It analyses if their perception was positive, emphasizing the integrative aspects of hazing practices, or if it was negative, inclining to define those practices like being violent and humiliating. The applied questionnaire measures 3 factors to define individual's perception with hazing practices (positive relation with hazing practices, negative relation and the social dimension of the practices). This study used descriptive analyses to observe the level of agreement with hazing practices and non-parametrical statistical test to analyse the relationship between their levels of agreement with hazing practices and socio-demographic variables. Results emphasised balanced proportion of students perceiving positively and negatively those practices and incline to define hazing practices with the same components in both perceptions. It didnot highlight a strong mandatory integrative component in students' perception. Also, results stressed a large part of students disinterested in hazing practices. Additionally factors of hazing practices' perception showed significant relationships with respondent's sex, age and academic degree. Hazing practices in this study did not seem to meet their main objectives of welcoming and integrating freshmen in higher education institutions.

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#### INTRODUCTION

The entry of a student in higher education is a complete new challenge. Student's personal attributes are the foundation to face successfully this challenge. The university should also provide appropriate conditions to support a positive adjustment to this new life. It may share this responsibility with student associations (Sousa *et al.*, 2012). In this perspective, hazing practices as student associations initiative scan work as a way to facilitate the integration of the student and promote the feeling of belonging to the new academic environment (Pimentel *et al.*, 2012; Sousa *et al.*, 2012; Vieira, 2013). Some empirical evidences on the integrative dimension are found in a study of Pimentel *et al.* (2012), in which freshmen said they feel sympathy for the hazing practices, agree with the idea that standard hazing activities are entertaining and occur in a lively atmosphere, and those activities help them to nurture their relationships with colleagues and peers. In a study realized by Costa *et al.* (2013), involving freshmen in Brazilian higher education institutions, they observed that welcoming rituals seems to be attractive, especially among male students. Female students do not seem to adhere with this idea and numerous of them tend to associate hazing practices to a form of violence. On another hand, a comparison between study programs showed that medical students tend to define hazing practices unfavourably than did students in nursing, dentistry,

physical education and biology. The conclusion of Dias and Sá (2013) follow the same path. Their study is conducted on freshmen freshly arrived at the university, 47% of respondents consider that hazing practices favour extension and strengthen social support, especially between peers, and improve the integration in academic institutions. While about a third of respondents indicated fear of hazing practices and consider it as a negative element on the entry in higher education. Hazing practices do not only gather definition's components with positive effects. It also gets, and perhaps more frequently, descriptions pointing out a set of practices of elder members domineering newcomers (Mikell, 2014), establish hierarchies (Dias and Sá, 2013) rule by a set of norms, rights and obligations (Mikell, 2014). More examples based on this perspective are exposed in the study of Knutson *et al.* (2011). It exposes practices including ridiculing newcomers, forcing them to alcohol consumption, submitting them to humiliating activities and other behaviours that may jeopardize students' safety and their lives. Loureiro *et al.* (2009) pointed out activities base on unequal relation of power, inequity and coercion, raising the fear of reprisals and driving freshmen to feel worried, anxious and humiliated, which hence hamper transition and adjustment to higher education environment. According to Akerman *et al.* (2014), "the intimidation, abuse and the power asymmetries between students are not restricted to the period of welcoming freshmen, [...] they are acts that continue throughout the years" and hazing practices turn out to be a way to validate and perform bullying at university with

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impunity. Silva (2013) reported students pointing hazing practices as being humiliating, mandatory and standing on an extended period of time. Goulart (2013) supports this view stating that bullying in higher education can turn away students from their courses. Others authors reported, "the victim often endorses the subordination to not be marginalized from the group" (Miranda *et al.*, 2012). This situation has damaging consequences like "low self-esteem, low income, schooldrop out, stress, anxiety and aggressiveness" (Silva and Morgado, 2011). Some authors observed young individuals legitimize their abusive behaviours during hazing practices by defining it as only sporadic excesses or transgressions of rules driving their habitual practices (Klerk, 2013; Silva, 2013; Vieira, 2013). However, heated positions of this perspective on hazing practices, also claimed that those behaviours cannot be defined as practices with a mere excess from a fun initiation rituals, because over time behaviours persist to be violent and humiliating (Camilo, 2010) withdrawal, loneliness and fear within the university (Akerman *et al.*, 2014). Considering this set of antagonistic perceptions regarding hazing practices, this study tried to understand the way Portuguese students from the University of the Azores perceived hazing practices. This study tried to understand if their approach was positive, emphasizing the reception and the integration of students, or if it was negative, disposing to aggression and malaise. Student associations and the university could use results as an element to regulate hazing practices.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

We gathered opinions of 247 students from the 1<sup>st</sup> Cycle of Studies of the University of the Azores (Ponta Delgada campus) in Portugal, from both sexes, aged between 18 and 43 years (mean = 21.66) in different degrees, courses and departments. A quota-sampling method (non-probability sampling method) was used and was weighted based on demographic variables (gender and department of courses). Data collection was carried out using the "Evaluation Scale of Situations of Bullying in Hazing Practices in Higher Education" of Matos *et al.* (2010), which evaluate situations of bullying in hazing practices at university. It is a self-administrated questionnaire with 15 items using a Likert scale. The extreme positions are 1 "strongly disagree" and 5 "strongly agree" and items 8, 11, 12, 14 and 15 are interpreted reversely. This instrument was applied and validated in Portugal (n = 210), and respects a factorial structure with three factors, with an explained variance of 63.19%, a KMO of 0.905 and a Cronbach's Alpha internal consistency of 0.904. The first factor, called "positive relation with the hazing practices" consists of six items, the second factor, called "negative relation with the hazing practices," has six items, and the third factor, called the "social dimension" has three items. Students' opinions on hazing practices were analysed on the entire weighted sample and considering sociodemographic variables: sex (male, female); age (coded in two groups: 20 years or less and more than 20 years); university department associated to the course of the student (coded into nine categories<sup>1</sup>) and their

degrees (1st year, 2nd year and 3rd year (1<sup>st</sup> cycle of To observe sample's level of agreement or disagreement with hazing practices, descriptive statistics were used. To look at the relationship with sociodemographic variables, we applied the Kolmogorov-Smirnov test to evaluate the normal distribution of the studied variables in the population. Variables were not respecting the normal distribution. In the application of inductive statistics we chose to use nonparametric tests. We used different statistical technics based on the nature of the variables in order to determine whether significant differences between subgroups were found with our dependent variable. Therefore, with the bi-nominal socio-demographic independent variables (gender and age), the U Mann-Whitney test was applied (nonparametric test for the case of two independent samples). In the case of socio demographic nominal variables with more than two categories (department and degrees), we applied the Kruskal-Wallis test (nonparametric test for the case of k independent samples). We used the Spearman correlation coefficient with ordinal variables *i.e.* referring to the "Evaluation of Situations of Bullying in Hazing Practices in Higher Education", also ascertaining the significance of this correlation to the population.

## RESULTS

The analysis of the proportion of agreements or disagreements in the items of the scale "Evaluation of Situations of Bullying in Hazing Practices in Higher Education" reported 37.7% of students disagreed with the idea that hazing practices can work as a form of welcoming, 30.4% agreed with the idea that hazing activities contribute at the integration of freshmen involved in hazing practices, 24.7% did not agree nor disagree and 7.3% did not answer. Thus, students did not demonstrate a strong positive position considering hazing practices as being an integrative or a contempt way to welcome newcomers, while the negative focus tendentially founded more support. In terms of adherence, 35.6% of respondents said they participated to hazing practices. In this group, 38.7% said they did not like the activities practiced, 32.4% said they did, 28.8% expressed indifference to it and 10.3% did not comment this topic. Students mostly expressed satisfaction when they were in their 1<sup>st</sup> degree (41.1%), followed by the 2<sup>nd</sup> degree students (39.2%), both differing from the smaller proportion of satisfied students being in 3<sup>rd</sup> degree (19.7%). For the designation of welcoming rituals as being attractive or aggressive and intimidating, 92.8% of students responded they did not see hazing practices as being violent (this opinion inclines to be more marked among boys, 95.2%, than among girls, 91.4%). To improve the understanding of hazing practices' influence in the academic experience, we conducted the study of the relationship between the factors of "positive relation with the hazing practices," "negative relation with the hazing practices" and "social dimension" with the sociodemographic characteristics of the students. It was observed that the "positive relation with the hazing practices" showed statistical significant differences based on the sex (p = 0.001), the age (p = 0.024), the department (p = 0.002) and the degree (p = 0.040) of the students responding. This went in favour of boys, younger students, students studying within the Biology department (medical school) and the School of Nursing, and students being in their 1<sup>st</sup> degree. In the case of "negative relation with the hazing practices" significant differences were

<sup>1</sup>Departments: Biology, Sciences of Education, Sciences of technology and development, economy and management, geosciences, History, Philosophy and Social Sciences, Languages and Modern literature, Mathematic and School of nursing of Ponta Delgada.

only observed with the department allocated to the student ( $p = 0.020$ ), including departments of Economics and Management, History, Philosophy and Social Science. Finally, the "social dimension" only revealed significant differences with the degree of the student ( $p = 0.017$ ), where students in their 1<sup>st</sup> degree stood out (39.6%), followed by those in their 2<sup>nd</sup> degree (34%) and finally by students in 3<sup>rd</sup> degree (26.4%). Finally, in each of the dimension in which significant differences were observed considering sociodemographic aspects, we tried to see if anything demonstrated major effects. In the case of the items of the factor "positive relation with the hazing practices" (items: 3, 5, 6, 7, 9 and 10) the variable sex was not observed as a distinctive aspect. Difference was significantly observed with groups of age in the case of items 5 ( $p = 0.000$ ) 6 ( $p = 0.09$ ), 7 ( $p = 0.038$ ) 9 ( $p = 0.007$ ) and 10 ( $p = 0.021$ ) in favour of younger students. Students up to 20 years old showed more frequently that they thought hazing activities facilitated their integration into academic life. They expressed feeling esteemed and respected by students who hazed them, and revealed being happy to be hazed and to participate at those activities. Also, some significant differences were observed between departments in the case of items 3 ( $p = 0.041$ ), 5 ( $p = 0.014$ ), 6 ( $p = 0.009$ ), 9 ( $p = 0.017$ ) and between degrees with the items 6 ( $p = 0.027$ ) and 10 ( $p = 0.003$ ). Those two were in favour of the students coming from health fields (medical and nursing). In the case of items measuring the "negative relation with the hazing practices" (items: 8, 11, 12, 13, 14 and 15), significant differences were emphasized based on departments and the item 8 ( $p = 0.003$ ) and 12 ( $p = 0.028$ ), in favour of the School of Nursing and the Department of Modern Languages and Literature. Finally, with items evaluating the "social dimension" (items 1, 2, 4), we observed significant differences between the item 4 ( $p = 0.002$ ) and degrees of students. The highest effect registered is reported from the group of the 3<sup>rd</sup> degree students (92.5%) and the lowest with students in their 2<sup>nd</sup> degree (82.3%). This might suggests students perceive a stronger family support when they arrive and when they leave the university than in-between.

## DISCUSSION

In this investigation, students did not demonstrate a strong position in considering hazing practices as a way to integrate or contempt newcomers. Although negative positions on hazing practices were more frequently reported. This supports the literature highlighting negative aspects of those (e.g. Mikell, 2014). On another hand, hazing practices were not perceived per students as being threatening or violent, which is common with previous observations (e.g. Pimentel *et al.*, 2012). Finally, students from Azores highlighted a better position concerning the hazing practices when studying in healthcare area (mostly medical) than did students in the study of Costa *et al.* (2013). Medical students in their study were more incline to define hazing practices as an intimidating phenomenon. In summary, it may be considered that students from the University of the Azores did not perceive hazing practices as attractive and think those activities were relatively sane. At the same time, they are not incline to join hazing activities and do not consider that hazing activities facilitate their integration in higher education institutions. Thus hazing rituals do not seem to meet their objectives of welcoming and integrating freshmen in higher education institutions.

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