

## Welcome to the Brotherhood: The Perception of Initiation and Hazing Rituals in the Fire Service

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### Abstract

*Positive initiation traditions can serve as building blocks to camaraderie, trust, and teamwork in the fire service. Yet, in recent years increased attention has been focused on negative trends in the fire service, namely hazing rituals. This is a growing concern as traditionally accepted initiations may result in trauma and sexual assault. Investigation frequently reveals these rituals have persisted over time, serving to test compliance and adherence to prevailing social hierarchies. This paper provides a qualitative look into these rituals from the perspective of firefighter recruits who identified that: 1) there is appositive nature of initiations that supports unit cohesion, acceptance, and group identity, 2) hazing is expected and seen as a test of mettle in the probationary year, and 3) hazing is expected to end once the probationary year concludes. These perceptions are congruent with previous research into hazing which have focused on separation, luminal inversion, and reintegration.*

**Keywords:** Hazing, Initiations, Fire Service, Probationary Year

### Introduction

Positive initiation traditions can serve as building blocks to camaraderie, trust, and teamwork in the fire service. While there are positive initiation traditions in the fire service that serve essential purposes of acculturation and social cohesion, recent media focus has pointed to instances that do not function as positive on boarding practices but appear to be destructive behaviors aimed at targeting certain individuals. The pervasiveness of these behaviors is presently unknown as targets of these behaviors frequently choose to remain silent in order to prove their loyalty. At the heart of this research are the questions: what constitutes positive and negative practices of initiation in probationary status and what are the expectations of firefighter recruits as they begin a career in a new firehouse?

### Workplace Hazing

Federal workplace laws do not prohibit simple cases of teasing, offhand comments, or isolated incidents that are not serious. Most states have some sort of hazing laws (Hazing prevention, 2019; Stop Hazing, 2019) but there are presently no federal laws regarding hazing practices; rather, they typically fall under federal workplace harassment or discrimination statutes (e.g., Title VII of the Civil Rights Act, 1964; USEEOC, 1989); many are considered misdemeanors. While hazing has existed for centuries, there are no universally acknowledged definitions and its meaning may vary as to the perception and intent of the action. For example, the way an individual perceives the act of *performing* hazing may differ greatly from the *perception* of the individual to whom the hazing happens. Some may only consider physical tests as hazing, while others may consider emotional abuse and sexual acts as hazing (Kirby & Wintrup, 2002; Diamond, Callahan, Chain, & Solomon, 2016). Hazing has been described broadly as an activity, situation, or action that an individual must tolerate in order to become part of a group. It encompasses any situation or activity created intentionally and expected of someone joining a group that serves to humiliate, degrade, abuse, or endanger, regardless of a person's willingness to participate (Hoover & Pollard, 1999; Diamond, et al., 2016).

Social scientists theorize hazing persists because it generates group solidarity, expresses dominance, and allows for the selection of committed group members (Cimino, 2011; Cimino, 2013). However, researchers have found that hazing activities can also prove divisive to a group or team, and have been associated with failure and lower levels of unity among the ranks (Van Raalte, Cornelius, Linder & Brewer, 2007; Cimino, 2018). Research on hazing dates back to landmark psychological studies carried out in the 1950s. Most notably, Aronson and Mills (1959) formulated and defended the severity-attraction hypothesis (SAH) which maintains that severe initiation practices induce a feeling of cognitive dissonance; if the individual experiencing harassment and humiliation does not become excessively critical and distance themselves from the group, they tend to over-estimate group-attractiveness. In contrast, Schachter (1959) argued that rather than the severity of initiation practices, the *anticipation* of joining a particular organization, regardless of any adverse entrance criteria, is sufficient to generate a strong sense of group-identification. These two papers provide the theoretical frameworks which have underpinned the recent research on hazing.

Among the more recent and compelling assessments of the severity-affliction hypothesis, Lodewijckx and colleagues suggest that the original SAH formulated by Aronson and Mills may be problematic (Lodewijckx, van Zomeren & Syroit, 1997; Lodewijckx & Syroit, 2001; Lodewijckx, van Zomeren & Syroit, 2005). By controlling for mild and severe conditions, Lodewijckx, et al. (2005) found that group attraction was just as strong in the former (mild) as the latter (severe) condition. As a result, it cannot be concluded that severity of initiation practices invariably engenders a more pronounced sense of group attraction. These studies, in short, establish that severity is a sufficient, but not necessary, condition of hazing in particular, and group formation in general. More recently Van Raalte, et al. (2007) also points out that the differences in the conditions in which Aronson and Mill's experiment was carried out, and hazing in actual circumstances, are significant enough to compromise the study. Specifically, it fails to account for the power asymmetry between senior members and recruits wherein membership was contingent upon initiation tasks, as opposed to being imposed after joining a group where group membership was not valued nor highly rewarded in the controlled setting (Van Raalte, et al., 2007: 496).

Largely due to media exposure (Crow & MacIntosh, 2009:448; Van Raalte, et al., 2007:492-493) the extent of hazing has become more transparent. Consequently, research on hazing has been expanding as well. This includes research attempting to uncover the prevalence, perceptions, and dynamics surrounding hazing. High schools, universities, military groups, churches, sports teams, and other various organized groups have served as empirical sites for these studies (Crow & MacIntosh, 2009). While the conclusions are partially restricted to each respective organization (Crow & MacIntosh, 2009:435), it appears there are universal factors which characterize hazing. Despite its negative emotional and physical consequences (Finkel, 2002), there is general agreement that hazing facilitates group cohesion (Kowalski & Waldron, 2010; Winslow, 1999), especially in organizations that require rigorous labor or close teamwork. In these contexts, hazing signifies to potential group members that recruits are willing to be obedient, loyal, and trustworthy. For example, in the Canadian Airborne Regiment studied by Winslow (1999), hazing ensures squad leaders that recruits can be relied upon in volatile and dangerous situations. In addition to this instrumental element, hazing maintains group unity as a mechanism which demarcates a clear in and out group. From the vantage point of the recruit, enduring unpleasant initiation rites creates a sense of belonging (Campo et al., 2015). Thus, despite its severity, frequency, or scope, hazing is understood as a group-binding mechanism.

Furthermore, available data supports the ubiquity of hazing throughout these organizations. For instance, a comprehensive national survey of American universities found that 68% of male and 63% of female NCAA athletes were *involved* in one or more incidents of hazing (Hoover, 1999). Another study found that 79% of NCAA athletes were *victims* of hazing, and among high school students, 36% experienced at least one act that constituted as hazing (Allen & Madden, 2012). Some studies have been able to identify the socio-demographic composition of perpetrators and victims of hazing (Campo et al., 2005; Drout & Corosoro, 2003; Hoover & Pollard, 2000). For example, in universities where a great deal of research has been concentrated, hazing is more prevalent among Greek, rather than non-Greek members, and among male students (Drout & Corosoro, 2003; Hoover & Pollard, 2000). Additionally, these indicators likely obscure, and underestimate, the rate at which hazing occurs due to the cryptic nature of hazing and the involvement and tolerance by authority figures (Winslow 1999; Kowalski & Waldron 2010). Contrary from being disengaged, Kowalski and Waldron (2010) found coaches to be tolerant or actively involved in hazing. By eliminating formal recourse due to the involvement of an authority figure, recruits are severely constrained in their ability to contest violent or inappropriate initiation rituals. Another significant consideration which impedes quantitative evaluations of hazing is the vague understanding of hazing among recruits, administrators, and organization members (Crow & MacIntosh, 2009; Hoover & Pollard, 2000; Hamilton, La Chapelle & O'Sullivan, 2016). An ambiguous and heterogeneous understanding promotes hazing; if recruits or future members of an organization do not interpret themselves as undergoing humiliating or degrading practices, they are likely to endure the initiation process and subsequently participate in hazing as a member.

Victims do not perceive themselves as such even if they were coerced into a dangerous or illegal activity (Crow & Macintosh, 2009; Hoover & Pollard, 2000). Additionally, victims of hazing are inclined to dismiss institutional or juridical definitions of hazing (Allen & Madden, 2012). Unsurprisingly, this has also helped organizations and individuals responsible for violent initiations avoid legal troubles by playing on this ambiguity. For example, in a recent lawsuit against a New Jersey Fire Department, a firefighter was injured when a bang snap exploded as he sat down on a firehouse toilet (Varone, 2019). He received a second-degree burn on his scrotum a contusion of his left testicle, and was off work for two weeks. He not only lost his civil suit for worker's compensation, but no one was held liable since these actions were classified as "horseplay or skylarking" and thus permissible under New Jersey jurisdiction (WCA. N.J.S.A. 34:15-7.1). In other words, The New Jersey Fire department was not penalized nor was the coworker found guilty on the grounds that these actions were usual forms of comradery in the workplace and therefore no intentional wrong was committed (Johns, 2019).

In light of this ambiguity, there have been a number of attempts to provide an analytic definition of hazing. According to Finkel (2002), hazing consists of "committing acts against an individual or forcing an individual into committing an act that creates a risk for harm in order for the individual to be initiated into or affiliated with an organization." Similar to Finkel, most academic definitions of hazing emphasize the physical and mental harm incurred by hazing (Campo, et al., 2005; Waldron, 2008; Hamilton, et. al., 2016). Allan and Madden add the qualification that hazing is a continuous process and occurs where there is a power asymmetry between two members of an interpersonal relationship (2012:83). While hazing may be continuous, a more causally rich understanding can be arrived at by identifying the phase and context in which it occurs. Indeed, there are some detailed theoretical frameworks which delineate various stages of hazing (Winslow, 1999; Lodewijkx & Syroit, 2001). In the study of the Canadian Airborne Regiment (CAR), three stages of hazing were identified: separation, liminal inversion, and reintegration. In the separation stage, junior ranks isolate recruits from the rest of the team and leadership. The next stage, liminal inversion, is a transitory period where recruits are not officially accepted into the organization and are subject to humiliating and degrading acts. In the case of the CAR, the author emphasizes the hyper-masculine nature of these acts (Winslow, 1999:445). Lastly, there is reintegration where the recruits are formally recognized as new members of the organization. Relying on anthropologist Van Gennep's schema, Lodewijkx and Syroit (2001:92) illustrate how hazing among two Dutch student organizations follows an almost identical trajectory: separation, transition, and incorporation. Students are isolated in a campsite for a week where they are assigned a new name and expected to do taxing work. Subsequently, students are brought back to the city where they participate in events that familiarize them with the customs, values, and norms of the organization. The incorporation stage consists of a formal inauguration led by senior members of the group. While CAR's and Van Gennep's formulations are quite similar, they contain salient differences. For the CAR, senior members were not present during hazing. For the Dutch student organizations on the other hand, there were senior members present. The separation stage for the CAR was confined to a physically isolated space; in the case of the Dutch student organization, physical isolation and hazing were coterminous. Thus, the timing and intensity of hazing is specific to each organization. Nevertheless, identifying stages of hazing substantially clarifies how it functions as a socializing mechanism.

### **Hazing in the Fire Service**

Hazing rituals have come under scrutiny in the fire service. From the time firefighters enter into service, they are trained in the Duty, Pride, Honor, and Traditions of the fire service. Duty refers to the expectation to perform work as part of a team, as challenging as it may be. Firefighters are taught the history of the fire service and to have pride in choosing a noble profession (Greenberg, 1998; Ditzel, 1976). They are groomed to the long established beliefs, legends, and customs of the traditions of the fire service, many of which come from chivalrous and military environments where competition, brotherhood, and shared identity lend to cooperation and respect (Cooper, 1995; Yarnal, et al., 2004). Where these ideals represent best practices and serve to instill appreciation, Duty-Pride-Honor-Tradition represent the esprit-de-corps of the fire service. Common teasing and pranks are well known social aspects of the culture of the fire service and frequently take place throughout a firefighter's career. Rough and boisterous activities, frequently referred to as *horseplay*, are also experienced as mutual bonding behaviors among firefighters (McCarl, 1985). After graduating from formal training academy where they are taught basic skills, firefighters fulfill a probationary year to learn the culture and techniques associated with the company and officers where they are stationed. As part of their probationary year, firefighters (also referred to as probies, boots, or rookies) will take on menial and important tasks, as well as take their place in the lower tier of the ranks. As part of initiation into the ranks, firefighters may be expected to put up with increased provocations and endure embarrassment as a way to test their resolve and earn their place. Often times, this involves such activities as responsibility for cleaning the bathrooms, kitchen and floor duty, last to sit for a meal but first to leave the table to clean, etc.

One does not need to look far beyond recent news headlines concerning firefighter initiations to find negative examples of the pervasive nature of hazing and assault associated with the fire service which has ranged from immobilization on backboards, to genital striping, to forced sodomy. Investigation frequently reveals certain hazing rituals have persisted over time, serving to test compliance to adherence to the firehouse hierarchy. Many firefighters will endure these tests and remain silent to prove their loyalty. Here we summarize a few examples. Retired firefighters from El Paso, Texas, recently came forward with information about hazing rituals they endured over their years of service, which despite strict new policy, continue to be carried out in present day (Crowder, 2018). One ritual involves spray painting a firefighter's genitals and then hoisting him up and parading him around the station. Additionally, "cocooning," the practice of wrapping a firefighter tightly in duct tape, on a backboard or exercise bench and subjecting the immobilized firefighter to obscene or cruel treatment, such as water boarding, has been practiced for years. One of the victims called it, "A warning, and a rejection," while another referred to it as a rite of passage indicating the practices were not meant to be malicious, "They told us about that in academy" (Crowder, 2018). In another case, a grand jury in Texas indicted eight people on charges of sexual assault and evidence-tampering in a case where a volunteer fire department recruit was sodomized with a broom handle and a sausage. While six people were directly involved with the incident, the Fire Chief and Assistant Fire Chief were indicted for instructing the victim and perpetrators not to discuss the incident with authorities (Rajwani, 2015). In fact, when informed of the incident, the Assistant Chief allegedly said, "This is some funny sh\*\*." He and the Chief met with the accused firefighters and the trainee in an effort to stop the incident from becoming public (Young, 2015). In another example, a firefighter in upstate New York suffered broken teeth, numerous facial fractures along with scrapes to other parts of his body, and developed memory problems due to a concussion as a result of falling face first into the concrete after being rendered immobile when duct taped to a backboard and leaned up against the building upside down. The Battalion Chief from the department was part of the group consisting of five firefighters who strapped him to the backboard. The Fire Chief when asked for comment referred to it as, "innocent horseplay" (LaMothe, 2006). Due to newsworthy legal cases like these, there has been increased concern expressed in the fire service to understand the prevalence, severity, and possible damage of these behaviors. As a first step in our multi-year research into workplace bullying in the fire service, our research team conducted focus group studies of recruits in various parts of the country to understand their perceptions of initiation into the culture of firefighting, their understanding of hazing in the fire service, and the extent to which they feel hazing is a problem.

### **Method**

We used an interpretive paradigm (Willis, Jost & Nilakanta, 2007) to capture the perception and experiences of firefighter recruits. This qualitative focus allowed us to gather in-depth information regarding their core beliefs about firehouse culture, while allowing multiple perspectives to emerge from the different individuals in the different groups we studied. By receiving multiple perspectives (Morehouse, 2011) we were able to gain a more comprehensive understanding of what the recruits expect from their probationary year.

### **Participants**

One hundred sixty-two firefighter recruits voluntarily participated in 1-hour focus groups at their respective fire training academies. The recruits ranged in age from 18 to 45 years old, with a mean age of 28 (SD = 5.55). Ninety-one percent of the participants identified as male. Participants had from <1-24 years of experience (Mode = <1 year, SD = 3.87; recruits with more experience were new to the department and required to go through the training academy). All participants were assured confidentiality and provided written informed consent. All focus group interview items and procedures were approved through both Federal Emergency Management Agency and National Development Research Institute Institutional Review Boards, with reciprocal University of Illinois protocols.

### **Procedure**

Recruit focus groups were held at six locations across the US representing a mix of regions (e.g., East, Midwest, and West), department type (career or volunteer), and department location (metropolitan or suburban/rural). Fifty three percent of the recruits in each focus group had been together for at least six weeks of training, with 47% of the recruits having been together for sixteen weeks. Researchers and firefighter practitioners developed an interview guide to assure topic consistency between each focus group, as well as to capture the main themes related to bullying and hazing in the fire service. The script reflected open ended questions about workplace climate, general perceptions of bullying and hazing, and expectations for the first year as a probie. Interviewers balanced both positive and negative items for discussion. Recruits in the focus groups were introduced to the topic matter and were asked to begin the discussion with examples of positive fire service traditions. Each focus group was audio recorded and the recordings transcribed by a professional service.

## Results

The focus of this analysis is on the firefighter recruits' feedback regarding their perceptions of initiations and hazing in the fire service. The transcripts were sorted using qualitative discourse analysis for references to traditional values and hazing. As coding progressed, we adopted a grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; Corbin & Strauss, 2008) to best represent the social interactions, and differing explanations used by firefighters in the focus groups. Major consistent themes throughout the coding referred to agreement among the recruits in the following areas:

- There is a perceived positive nature of tough initiations wherein they support unit cohesion, acceptance, and group identity. The term hazing can have positive or negative connotations with regard to initiations. Some particularly inappropriate behaviors are considered by recruits to constitute bullying, harassment, and assault.
- Recruits expect "hazing" and see it as a test of mettle. They expect to be set apart and treated differently from the rest of the firehouse crew during their probationary year.
- Recruits expect hazing to end once they clear their probationary year.

Identified themes were consistent across the differing focus groups, therefore generalizable across fire departments. As we discovered consistent themes in the coding, we began to recognize the feedback from the recruits fit into the distinct stages concerning hazing rites of passage in their probationary year: separation, liminal inversion, and reintegration (Winslow, 1999). With this new evolved coding scheme in mind, we proceeded to recode the comments into the three distinct thematic areas.

### Separation/ Onboarding

**Food.** Participants were asked to describe traditions associated with joining a firehouse. Each focus group resoundingly discussed bringing some sort of pastry or dessert the first day on the job. Each group noted that the new rookie had to bring something special that was obtained with a suitable effort – Dunkin Donuts, for instance, was unequivocally rejected. This seemingly trivial gesture is essential for leaving a good impression, displaying attention to detail, and demonstrating an affinity with their co-workers. As one recruit said, "It's a peace offering." Recruits discussed that numerous traditions involved food:

- "You owe ice cream for hitting the curb. If you hit it again, you add on sprinkles..."
- "You get caught on the news, you're ice cream, if it's actual Channel 13 news, you owe the shift steak dinner. Stuff like that."
- "Every additional curve was a topping. I remember one day I had sparklers, waffle cones. What I didn't know was that the lieutenant was taking me on routes. Oh, yeah, we need to go over here. Go ahead and make a right. Yeah, that's a curve. Yeah, just go through this way. ...He's like, 'How many is that?' Four. 'All right. Another topping.'"

**Chores and no privileges:** According to recruits, traditions are far more than an expectation to provide pastries and steak dinners. Recruits noted that the behavior expected of them during the probationary year is to listen, move with a purpose, and demonstrate attention to detail and a dedicated work ethic. They expected to be singled out from the rest of the station and given arduous duties to prove themselves. The mantra of "Last guy to sit, last guy to sleep" was encountered often. In particular, recruits noted that they would not be instantly integrated into the station, would be singled out as the probie to do most of the grunt work, and that they must accept the duties they are given without objection:

- "Instant willingness and obedience to orders. Doing what you're told when you're told to."
- "Not being able to be at the table. Not just the last person, but like, 'All you guys eat out there.' Even that, you're a new guy.... Just 'cause you wear that number doesn't mean you're part of that group. You haven't proved anything."
- "Doin' most the chores. Because you gotta earn their respect. You're the new guy. You gotta show them that you're gonna do the dirty work as long as you need to."
- "If you're the new person, there's not going to be 15 of us, but all of us are going to be getting harassed. It's not even harassment. All of us are gonna be treated like rookies."
- "You're the first one to get up and unload the dishwasher. Doing things like that that are expected of you as a newbie because that's the tradition. That's what other people did."
- "You gotta earn your place at the house. You're the bottom feeder."
- "I think in the outside world—yeah, it would be defined as hazing. But in the firehouse it's not."
- "They shouldn't disrupt your life. It shouldn't be one of those things where it's like, if you're gonna clean the firehouse, you're doing it with good intent. If they come back and throw dirt on the floor and you're doin' it all day, that's just disrupting from what you need to get done."

- “We are starting to make that transformation from rough and tough all the time into we're a little more aware of what's going on in our minds, in our hearts.... Along with that awareness comes the expectation that we treat each other with respect. Maybe not so much there's respect as a fireman yet because you've been on for a freaking week, but respect as a human being. You're still human. You're still here putting in the work. I'm going to give you crap, give you a hard time, but not too much. I think it's just an expectation that we all reciprocate.”

### **Liminal Inversion**

**Pranking the probie.** Recruits shared accounts of pranks they had experienced in a prior station, or accounts of the types of behaviors they'd heard about in relation to the first year on the job. Recruits frequently noted that in addition to having water dumped on them, there were other activities that could escalate over time such as: firecrackers tossed into the bathroom stall, flour or ice tossed onto a person taking a shower, or food in their boots. Recruits emphatically discussed the subjective nature of pranking and the ambiguity surrounding hazing.

- “You're, for sure, gonna get screwed with, like gettin' water poured on you and just practical jokes.”
- “If you come in your room and your ceiling fan's off, make sure you check it before you turn it on because they'll put, like, baby powder and stuff up there. Or while you're sleeping, they'll come and take a little squirt bottle and—just little stuff like that.”

Recruits discussed that freezing gear was a common occurrence as well:

- “They shouldn't mess with his gear.” “Yeah, but it'll teach them to properly put it away next time.”
- “They could do something like whereas you come in, and they done took all your turnout gear. You done found a boot up in the rafters. Somebody done took all your gear and soaked it down or something like that. That's hazing, but when you start going into realms of you start messing with people's religious beliefs—Personal characteristics of a person. People's sexuality, things like that, that's harassment. It depends on the intentions.”
- “Playing jokes to where—If you doing something—if I know what you doing is something to help me learn or help me do better, that's different than if you just doing something to mess with me or make it worse, you know what I mean?”

**Expectation of hazing.** When asked if they expect to be hazed on the job, most recruits responded affirmatively. When queried about their response to the question, most discussed hazing in a positive manner, and even had issue with the depiction of the word “hazing.” Others, who suggested that hazing was not tolerated in their organization usually contradicted this sentiment by expressing a critical attitude towards behaviors which violated group norms, and an implicit understanding of the ambiguity in the referential term hazing. In all cases, recruits felt there were boundaries associated with what is deemed acceptable and that hazing should serve a functional purpose. Responses to this area include:

- “I hope I'm hazed.”
- “Not fitting in is a scary thought.”
- “Right. I feel like you need to earn your position at that station.”
- “I hope so because in the fire service, that's the mistake, (because) people equate that with harassment. It can be, but those that have been in that setting know and understand that that means they trust you enough. They like you. It's messed up.”
- “There are probably things inside the fire service that we view as...well, that's just how we're going to get treated. Somebody maybe from outside the fire service will be, like, that's not right. That wouldn't go on in any other workplace, but inside the fire service, we're just, like, well, that's how the probie is treated, so that's the way it goes.”
- “It's like—but not then, until we go through it. That's only with the Fire Department. Certain jobs you don't have to get hazed to become part of that organization.”
- “I wanna be hazed. When I went to a new crew or whatever, and they were constantly dogging on me, it's okay. This is a good thing. You know you're on the right track, and you're liked and you don't start having negative perspectives on people.”
- “That's why I think it's important to have that expectation for new people coming in is because if someone's testing the waters with you to see where you're at, and you perceive it as negatively and get quiet or get offended, then they're gonna be like, ‘Okay, I can't joke with this person.’ Then you're putting yourself in a bad position. You're missing out on the camaraderie.”
- “I feel like we joke around about it a lot or at least at my old volunteer department, we would joke around a lot during that time, but it was kind of like this understanding. It was like we know. We kind of police ourselves and we know if we're going too far. We know if someone else is going too far and stuff like that. We're able to talk to each other so it doesn't escalate or get to that point. I feel like we're good at checking each other about those kind of things.”

**Test of mettle.** When asked if they thought hazing happened in the firehouse, the recruits generally agreed that it happens in the probationary year; the year in which they will demonstrate their ability to endure complications to learn their place in the firehouse, thus the year they develop trust and understanding among the crew. Along with this concept, recruits also note: “You could call your year of probation harassment.” And “You go through this so they [firehouse crew] will give you their knowledge.” Representative comments include:

- “They’re gonna push you to see how much you can take before you break. It’s all about how you’re gonna handle the stress of the situation (because) everything’s gonna be stressful.”
- “If we can’t handle the pressure of we missed a toothpick, whoop-dee-do. We can’t handle that, there’s no way we can handle the real stuff. It’s a test in a way as well.”
- “I think you have to have thick skin, too. You’ve gotta be able to—you’ve gotta take it. Because the lieutenants are saying—they’re gonna get honest about stuff. They’re gonna tell us, ‘There’s a parking lot’ if we give up. You’ve gotta have that thick skin to—you can get through it and stuff. Just take it.”
- “They just like to see how far you can go. How much you can take? How much is too much (because) it’s different for everybody.”
- “They’re also trying to see what you’re made of because they’re, like, ‘Oh, this is a new guy. This is the guy that’s possibly going to have to pull me out of a[expletive deleted] situation.’”
- “Going off of what he said, it’s like the—these are all my classmates. I got comfortable with every single one of them. We’re going into a burning building where any kind of situation that could kill us. To that extent, I would wanna make sure that you’re 100 percent comfortable with them.”
- “It kind of builds you up to that stress level so you’re calm and collected whenever you’re in that stressful situation, as opposed to breaking down. It builds you up in that perspective. Prepares you.”

#### **Hazing Gone Too Far: Humiliating or Degrading Acts**

Asked if they knew about hazing gone awry or situations that could be considered behaviorally out of bounds, several recruits shared stories of situations that occurred in another firehouse, others did not have any examples. When given examples (e.g., El Paso painting), some recruits thought it funny, while others were critical and viewed the incident as sexual assault. The recruits discussed they believed the instances, such as that in El Paso, meant firefighters in the station had too much time on their hands due to a lack of calls, “[There is] less time to prove mettle in fire these days. [You] have to prove it otherwise.” Comments regarding humiliating acts include:

- “The more disgusting, the more funny, the more trust.”
- “There’s a line of hazing where now it’s the intent, it’s humiliation, it’s degradation. Again, that’s gonna be in the eye of the beholder. Then there’s that line where hazing is a tradition. Is it fun or is it harassment? Is it bullying?”
- “It’s kind of messed up, but if they include you in non-traditional [forms of hazing], it means they like you enough.”
- “Guys do some weird stuff, stuff both parties may think is funny, but you would not want it in the public eye. Technically, you can call it sexual assault, but it’s hilarious.”
- “I think that means they finally trust you. They trust you enough to do something that’s obviously against the sitting HR policy (because) they trust that you’re gonna be okay with that, so that’s a test. Weird. Almost illegal.”
- “Something with malicious intent. Something outside of just building cohesion and comradery. Something outside of that. Somebody has some sort of specific agenda against you, and they’re doin’ it on purpose. Not so much just to get you involved in the brotherhood, the group, see what you can take but something outside the box, I guess.”
- “[You] can’t have one person’s actions speak for the whole fire service as a whole.”
- “It just goes back to the guys do weird stuff, and I’ve worked at a previous department where I saw some things that I was like, ‘This is 110% not cool. Not okay.’ I didn’t feel uncomfortable, like I needed something to be done ‘cause both parties thought it was hilarious. [Laughter] If the public found out about that that’s [another thing].”
- “Most people know that they’re not gonna cross that line because they wanna keep their job, and they normally hire folks with a good moral compass, as far as crossing that line with somebody. The humor and the joking and the hazing and the initiation and all that.”
- “You’re there a day, two, three days unsupervised. That could all of a sudden spiral to where—yeah, I’m pretty sure that’s technically sexual assault, but it’s hilarious. That’s hilarious. [Laughter] I can’t wait to write home about that one.”

#### **Reintegration/It Will End/Integration into the Ranks**

A number of responses suggest firefighters understand they are not officially accepted into the ranks until the probationary year has ended. They discussed experiencing hazing and provocations at work with the knowledge that once they get through their rookie year, they will be integrated and inaugurated into the ranks of firefighter with newfound social privilege. Representative comments include:

- “You have to. We all went through this, and it’s your turn when you’re coming up through.”
- “You can also go to the person who’s not takin’ it well, who’s not takin’ it in a fun manner and just be like, ‘Man, this is just gonna be a couple months....’”
- “Normally, if I was at home, I would not want to put up with that, especially being on probation, I don’t care. As long as I get through my first year, I’ll take whatever you think you want to throw at me.”
- “You know what? As soon as that year is done, retaliation tenfold. As soon as probation...keep notes the whole time.”
- “If they wanna do whatever, it’s like, okay, suck it up, and then, in 25 years, you can do it to somebody else.”
- “The great thing about being a rookie, you only got to do it once. Then you get 24 years of [expletive deleted] with other people, so take your lumps.”
- “Just to build that cohesion. I feel like they do it—if you can take that kind of hazing, that kind of jokes—I was in the military for a number of years, and we used to do that to each other. Eventually, you’re at that point where you can do it back to each other. If you’re one of those guys who can be part of the team, part of the brotherhood, it’s just one of those things.”
- “That’s part of earned trust and respect, that perception. I’ve haven’t heard too many stories of hazing fraternity style or something like that. No, I think it’s just more of, ‘We all did this. You’re gonna do it, and someday, somebody will do it for you.’ It’s part of the community. It’s not something to pick on you.”

The firefighter recruits also discussed that if the pressure from the station culture were to feel overwhelming, they felt they had options to move on.

### **Discussion**

One of the notable contributions of the literature on hazing is the development of periodization schemas, or attempts at organizing the process of hazing into different stages based on particular function. We rely on the formulation developed by Wilson (1999) because it emphasizes physical isolation of rookies. Probationary firefighters, similar to new members of the CAR, are stripped of their distinctive identity or “levelled” (Winslow, 1999: 443). Subsequently, initiates undergo the liminal inversion phase. In this period, initiates are not completely new to the organization, but are not yet identified as members of the team. It is this transitory period where probies are subjected to humbling and many times undignified behaviors. It is interesting to note that complicated and often contradictory behaviors are practiced. Afterward, probies are reintegrated and recognized as new members of the group. The first two stages are crucial to understanding hazing in the fire service in particular, and social groups in general. While Winslow suggests that these rites of passage are initiation rites and not hazing since the behavior it is not continuous, this fails to acknowledge the ambiguity in the definition of hazing (Winslow, 1999:440). For instance, if the distinctive criterion for hazing was continuity, there would be no analytic difference between an initiation that includes light teasing on the one hand and water boarding on the other. Simply because the latter action was not continued does not *necessarily mean* that it did not constitute hazing. On the contrary, the first two stages prepare the ground for hazing. In this transitory period, recruits are acknowledged as inevitable new members; nonetheless, they have not completed the full rites of passage to be officially recognized as such. The conjunction of spatial isolation and an ambiguous identity generate the vulnerable situation which enables initiators to haze probies. In the first stage, probationary firefighters are continually reminded they are a rookie, boot, or probie and that they must perform duties that are distinguished as separate from the rest of the crew’s duties. What must be added, however, is the ambiguity in interpretations of hazing. Specifically, firefighting recruits said that there was a threshold, or there were certain activities, which were harassment and not pranking. Later in the focus groups, when they were revealed as a victim of some of these acts, they did not necessarily classify them as hazing. This contradiction in perceptions and reality hinges on an unclear and vague conception of hazing. It is precisely this ambiguity which manifests itself in the second stage and allows recruits to rationalize or minimize negative consequences. In these first two periods, recruits undergo initiation which may prompt physical or mental interference. While these stages explain hazing on a general social level, it does not explain why individuals continue to endure hazing despite the inimical effects it may bring about. Indeed, recruits acknowledged that there were certain acts which crossed the line from initiation to harassment. Despite this, they bear witness to such acts of hazing as a demonstration of grit, and therefore allow it to persist. This suggests that the ambiguous understanding of hazing is crucial to its reproduction, enabling recruits to endure and subsequently perform it. Correlatively, this enables leadership to examine various inimical practices and deem them as pranks in the workplace. The third trend, or the understanding by recruits that hazing will end after their probationary year, is a pivotal reason why recruits will endure hazing. This does not suggest that hazing does not occur after initiation. Rather, it suggests that hazing takes on a more prominent role when initiating new members into the organization.



When hazing continues beyond the probationary year, hazing functions as a mechanism to reinforce and preserve the idiosyncratic values and norms of the specific group or firehouse.

### Conclusion

In sum, insight from the recruits in our study suggests that the probationary year serves to acculturate new firefighters into the way work is performed, demonstrate their humility, test their resolve, and earn their place among the ranks. Through enduring rigorous standards and exhibiting a willingness to learn, probies feel they prove their worth to the seasoned firehouse crew to achieve a mutual trust among the ranks, aspects of the job that are essential in times of emergency response. Initiations have long served to demonstrate that probies are considered to have become privileged members of an inside group and they provide a ceremonial demarcation of crossing over into the next stage of work and identity; that of firefighter. On boarding behaviors involve not only peers, but leadership as well. Recruits discussed that they would generally bear hazing and get through it, expecting that singling out behaviors should come to an end once their probationary year is over. Our qualitative evaluation reveals a general consensus among present-day recruits we have interviewed who believe initiations represent positive traditions, but agree there can be confusion when it comes to recognizing what behaviors constitute becoming part of the crew and what behaviors constitute workplace hostility. In the end, they believe it's based on the personal boundaries of the probationary firefighter and that these boundaries, once expressed, will be honored. It is evident though that hazing is seen as a rite of passage that signals inclusion and a chance to earn a place in the firehouse.

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