

# BAD APPLES OR BAD BARRELS? MORAL DISENGAGEMENT, SOCIAL INFLUENCE, AND THE PERPETUATION OF HAZING IN THE COLLEGE FRATERNITY

GENTRY MCCREARY, PH.D., DYAD STRATEGIES, LLC, NATHANIEL BRAY, PH.D., THE UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA, AND STEPHEN THOMA, PH.D., THE UNIVERSITY OF ALABAMA

*Previous research on moral disengagement has suggested studying moral disengagement considering internal mechanisms and environmental variables that operate at stimulus, social, structural and contextual levels to influence individual and group behaviors. Zimbardo (2007) specifically suggested college fraternities as a specific environment in which these relationships could be better understood. This article proposes and tests a hypothetical path model involving moral judgment, moral disengagement and attitudes about violence within two separate contexts – fraternity hazing and adolescent bullying. The findings indicate that moral disengagement has a unique impact on the perception of violence based on group membership (fraternity vs. non-fraternity) and that campus climate and cultural norms predict the relationship between moral disengagement and tolerance of hazing in fraternities.*

Moral actions are the product of the often complex interplay of affective, cognitive and social influences (Bandura, 2002). Research in the area of morality has focused heavily on the affective and cognitive functions of the moral decision-making process, with less attention devoted to the social, contextual, and environmental factors that impact moral action. Research suggests that contextual and environmental factors exert influence within each of Rest, Bebeau, and Volker's (1986) four components of morality. For example, in the fourth component, moral action, it is suggested that a number of environmental barriers may exist to prevent someone who has made a pro-social moral decision from actually following through on that decision, yet these relationships remain unclear. While moral behavior has been studied through a variety of lenses (Bandura, Barbaranelli, Caprara, & Pastorelli, 1996; Hymel, Rocke-Henderson, & Bonanno, 2005; South & Wood, 2006), research has yet to fully disentangle the interplay of social influence, morality, and behavior. The research presented in this article attempts to address that void in the literature by investigating the influence of peer-group membership and environmental climate on the interactions between moral judgment, moral disengagement, and pro-social bystander behavior through an examination of fraternity

hazing on college campuses.

Bandura (2002) put forward moral disengagement as a framework to help us better understand the disconnect between moral character and the perpetration of inhumane action. He argued that moral agency involves affective self-regulatory personal standards that are linked to self-sanctions. One makes moral decisions in order to avoid the self-condemnation that comes along with violating one's moral standards. These moral standards, however, do not operate as fixed internal regulators of conduct (Bandura, 1990). The self-regulatory mechanisms that govern human behavior do not operate unless activated. Much like a light switch than can be turned on and off, there exists a series of psychological maneuvers by which one can selectively disengage the self-sanctioning process from the perpetration of inhumane conduct (Bandura, 2002). Bandura (1990) has suggested eight separate mechanisms by which this act of selective disengagement can occur: moral justification, euphemistic labeling, advantageous comparison, displacement of responsibility, diffusion of responsibility, disregard/distortion of consequences, dehumanization, and attribution of blame.

Collectively, Bandura's (1990) eight mechanisms provide a useful framework for understanding violent, abhorrent, and anti-social be-

havior. Moral disengagement has been employed as a lens through which to view a number of violent behaviors, specifically bullying and physical violence. Bandura et al. (1996) found that students prone to moral disengagement tend to be more irascible, ruminate about perceived grievances, exhibit low feelings of guilt or need for reparation, and engage in higher levels of interpersonal aggression and delinquent behavior. Their study also found that moral disengagement is negatively correlated with pro-social orientation and peer popularity. As noted earlier, the strongest predictors of injurious behaviors in their study were moral justification and dehumanization of the victim (Bandura et al., 1996). A number of other studies have also confirmed Bandura et al.'s (1996) finding of moral disengagement being strongly correlated with bullying and aggressive behavior among adolescents (e.g., Gini, 2006; Hymel, Rocke-Henderson, & Bonnano, 2005; Menesini et al., 2003).

Several studies examining moral disengagement have specifically suggested future research that controls social setting and context in a way that will allow for the investigation of the manner in which social setting interacts with moral disengagement to induce inhumane behavior. Detert, Trevino, and Sweitzer (2008) specifically suggested that future research should investigate the possibility that contextual factors such as climate, culture, and environment have independent and interactive influences on moral disengagement. Paciello, Fida, Tramontano, Lupinetti, and Caprara (2008) suggested studying moral disengagement considering internal mechanisms and environmental variables that operate at stimulus, social, structural, and contextual levels to influence individual and group behaviors. Through an examination of fraternity hazing, the current study investigates whether moral disengagement leading to tolerance for violent behavior is influenced by contextual and environmental factors and the moderating effect of moral judgment.

As noted by Zimbardo (2007), the social norms and situational pressures of a novel setting

can elicit intense and often pathological reactions from the individuals who find themselves in that novel setting. As in his Stanford Prison Experiment, the current study “disentangled person from place, disposition from situation, ‘good apples’ from ‘bad barrels’” (Zimbardo, 2007, p. 206) by evaluating the differences in bystander response time in a context-specific fraternity hazing scenario and a more general bullying scenario. This study adds to the body of knowledge regarding moral development by examining how the context of the fraternity culture, a culture with strongly established social norms (DeSantis, 2007), impacts the interplay of moral judgment and moral disengagement in an integrated moral model. Zimbardo (2007) specifically suggested college fraternities as a group worthy of further study in attempting to understand these relationships.

## Literature Review

Current research on moral action breaks the process of moral decision-making into four separate and distinct parts: (a) the ability to interpret a situation as a moral problem; (b) the ability to make a moral judgment, discerning right and wrong; (c) the ability to choose a moral path over competing interests; and (d) the ability and wherewithal to follow through on the moral decision (Rest et al., 1986). The first component, moral sensitivity, has strong linkages to bystander behavior in that when subjects are unclear about what is happening in a moral dilemma, then they are less likely to intervene in a pro-social manner. Research also indicates that social situations can arouse strong feelings before any cognitive processes take place, suggesting that dehumanization and de-individuation in moral disengagement theory may affect moral sensitivity. That is, notions about an individual's worth or attractiveness may cause us to feel a strong dislike or feel empathy for someone before we cognitively assess the moral dilemma in a situation (Zajonc, 1980). The second component, moral judgment, involves an individual making a judgment about

a moral dilemma, determining which course of action is morally right, thus labeling a particular course of action as what a person ought to do in a given situation. The third component, moral motivation, requires that a person give priority to the moral values above other personal values such that a decision is made to do what one believes is morally right. Lastly, the component of moral action, suggests that an individual must have the perseverance, strength and skill necessary to implement the decision to behave morally and to overcome obstacles that would prohibit the moral behavior (Rest et al., 1986). These four dimensions, which Rest et al. (1986) described as The Four Component Model, represent a synthesis of the processes that direct moral action. The second component, moral judgment—the measure of how a person discerns right from wrong in choosing a course of action in a moral dilemma—is the primary lens, using a Kohlbergian tradition, through which fraternity hazing will be viewed in this study. In particular, this study will investigate the extent to which high levels of personal interest moral judgment fail to buffer moral disengagement and allow for the perpetration of hazing within the context of the college fraternity.

### **Fraternity Hazing**

Hazing is a problem impacting adolescents and young adults on many high school and college campuses (Allan & Madden, 2008). Hazing is particularly problematic in colleges and universities across the United States. Between 1838 and 1969, 35 deaths occurred on college campuses as a result of hazing or alcohol abuse. In the next thirty years, that number climbed to over 210 (Nuwer, 1999) and has continued to grow. Hollman (2002) reported that more hazing-related deaths occurred between 1990 and 2002 than all previous college and university campus deaths of that nature on record. High profile hazing deaths have resulted in the criminal conviction of college students, the indictment of college administrators, and millions of dollars in punitive and

compensatory damages awarded to the families of hazing victims (Rutledge, 1998). While hazing exists on college campuses in a variety of organizational types, it is most commonly associated with social fraternities (Allan & Madden, 2008; Nuwer, 2010).

Cimino (2011) discussed three sociological factors that are often cited to justify or rationalize the hazing of newcomers in groups: solidarity, loyalty, and social dominance. Cimino argued that each of these can be boiled down to one fundamental factor, that hazing is designed to prevent newcomers from immediately exploiting the benefits of group membership. He further demonstrated that as the perceived benefits of group membership increase, so does the perception of the appropriate level of hazing severity (Cimino, 2011). This last finding is of particular importance to the present study as it will examine student responses to hazing happening along a continuum of escalating severity.

Despite a long history of injury, death, and litigation, hazing within fraternities remains both a widespread and commonly accepted practice on most college campuses. Allan and Madden (2008) found that 55% of students participating in clubs, organizations, and sports teams experienced hazing. The most widely reported forms of hazing include forced alcohol consumption, humiliation, isolation, sleep-deprivation, and forced sex acts (Allan & Madden, 2008; Campo, Poulos, & Sipple, 2005). Allan and Madden (2008) also found that 69% of all students were aware of hazing practices on their campus, and that one in four students had personally witnessed hazing activities. The Allan and Madden (2008) study also debunked the myth that all or most hazing takes place behind closed doors. They found that coaches or advisors were present in 25% of the hazing cases reported, and that hazing occurring on campus often took place in a public setting.

Fraternity hazing is a valuable context through which to examine the interactions of moral disengagement and social setting for a several reasons. First, the fraternity setting is novel and unique

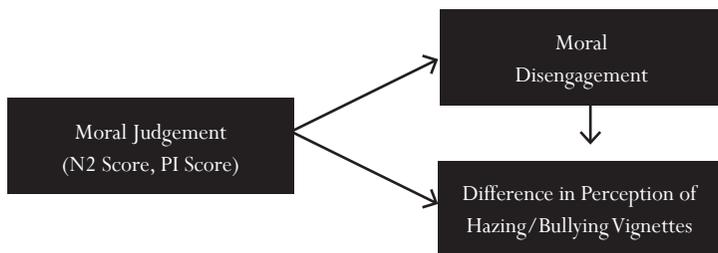
for both the perpetrator and the victim. The perpetrator has likely never been in a position of absolute power over the life of another, and the victim is unaware of the norms of the group and is often a willing participant in order to achieve social status within the group (DeSantis, 2007). As suggested by Zimbardo (2007), the novelty of this situation is not unlike the experience of the prisoners and guards in his simulated prison and is one that is likely to elicit moral disengagement. Secondly, the behavior of fraternities can be examined in multiple contexts. Each organization has its own unique cultural norms, and exists as part of a larger campus community with its own norms regarding hazing of new members—allowing for multiple levels of examination. Finally, the very nature of hazing lends itself neatly to many of the mechanisms of moral disengagement. The presence of a larger group of members opens the door for diffusion of responsibility and the bystander effect (Zimbardo, 2007). The fact that many students perceive the

positive benefits of hazing more than the negative consequences (Allan & Madden, 2008) suggests the presence of moral justification. That hazing takes place within a larger community involving many different organizations allows for advantageous comparison between groups and over a time continuum. Certainly, then, fraternity hazing should prove useful as a lens through which to examine the unique interactions of moral disengagement, social context, and behavior.

In understanding the relationship between social influence, moral disengagement, and violent behavior, the researcher hypothesized a causal model (Figure 1) in which moral disengagement predicts the difference in how fraternity members view violent behavior within the context of fraternity hazing and within the context of adolescent bullying. The model further hypothesizes that moral judgment will mediate the relationship between moral disengagement and attitudes about violent behavior.

**Figure 1**

*Proposed Path Model of Moral Judgment, Moral Disengagement, and Difference in Intervention Response Time.*



## Method

### Participants

The study was administered to male undergraduate students at four large, public, research universities in the southeast United States. The size of the institutions ranged from 17,000 to 30,000. All four are classified as either Carnegie Research Universities (high research activity) or as Carnegie Doctoral/Research Universities. These institutions were selected because of simi-

lar institutional demographics and the presence of large, traditional, and thriving fraternity communities with on-campus communal housing. The percentage of undergraduate students that are members of fraternities or sororities on the four campuses ranged from 14 to 28%.

At each of the four institutions, a random sample of 1,200 students, stratified to include 600 undergraduate fraternity members and 600 non-members, were selected to participate in the study. Expecting a low response rate due

to the length of the survey, this represented an oversampling of the population. A total of 200 students submitted fully completed surveys that were useable in the study, a response rate of 4.2%. Participants ranged in age from 19 to 23. The sample included four freshmen, 26 sophomores, 65 juniors and 105 seniors. The sample was 87.5% Caucasian ( $n = 175$ ), 6.5% African American ( $n = 13$ ) with less than 5% identifying as either American Indian/Native American, Latino/Hispanic, or other, and 1% unreported, reflecting the overall demographic breakdown of the institutions and fraternity communities studied. The sample included 37.5% fraternity members ( $n = 75$ ) and 62.5% ( $n = 125$ ) non-members. Participants were contacted via email to solicit their participation in the study and completed the survey online using the Survey-monkey software.

## **Measures**

### *Moral Disengagement*

The Moral Disengagement Scale is a 32-item survey developed by Bandura et al. (1996) and measures the degree to which individuals fail to self-censure their actions and engage in transgressive behavior. The scale assesses proneness to moral disengagement as demonstrated in different forms of detrimental conduct in a variety of contexts (Bandura et al., 1996). The items in the scale are designed to measure individuals' readiness to resort to moral justification, euphemistic labeling, advantageous comparison, displacement of responsibility, diffusion of responsibility, disregard or distortion of consequences, dehumanization of victims, and attribution of blame. Respondents are presented with statements involving justifications for a variety of acts and rate the degree to which they agree or disagree with the statements on a 5-point Likert-type scale.

### *Moral Judgment*

In measuring the construct of moral judgment, this study employed the Defining Issues Test-2 (DIT-2). The DIT was derived from

Kohlberg's theory of moral judgment development, but instead of Kohlberg's production-oriented interview, the DIT presents a recognition task in which participants read a moral dilemma and then choose between a set of statements selecting the ones that best justify a course of moral action (Rest, Thoma, & Edwards, 1997). The DIT-2 was developed in response to criticism that the stories in the moral dilemmas from the original DIT were becoming outdated. The DIT-2 contains five moral dilemmas with streamlined instructions and more validity tests that attempt to purge fewer responses. In addition to the traditional P-Score, it also reports an N2 score, which measures the degree to which participants can distinguish between stage 4 and stage 5 and 6 items. The PI (personal interest) score measures the frequency with which individuals use personal interest, or selfish, pre-conventional reasoning, in making moral judgments. The MN (maintaining norms) score measures the individual's frequency of using social norms and societal rules as a means by which to make moral judgments. Finally, the DIT-2 was designed to include developmental phase indicators that would differentiate between consolidated and transitional levels of development (Thoma, 2006). The DIT-2 has been used extensively to measure moral judgment, and the internal reliability of the instrument is consistently above .80 (Rest et al., 1999). The researchers used the N2 score as the primary measure of moral judgment in testing the proposed moral model, and the PI score as a secondary measure of moral judgment.

### *Hazing and Bullying Vignettes*

Although technically separate instruments, the two vignettes used in this study were designed to complement and interact with one another and, therefore, are discussed together in this section. The use of vignettes in social science research is well established, having been used in psychological research as early as 1951 (Hughes & Huby, 2002). Researchers have suggested that the rise in popularity of vignette research stems from the increased awareness of the limitations

of self-reported behaviors, particularly in studies of attitudes, perceptions, beliefs, and norms (Gould, 1996). Vignettes tend to be effective research tools because they are able to selectively simulate elements of the research topics being studied (Gould, 1996) and they often more closely approximate real-life decision making (Alexander & Becker, 1978). As noted by Alexander and Becker (1978), most people are not particularly insightful regarding the factors that enter into their own judgment and thought processes. Vignette research is valuable in detecting subtleties and nuances that, oftentimes, measures of self-reported attitudes or behaviors are unable to detect (Sumrall & West, 1998).

The vignettes used in the present research were developed through a multi-step process. As this research was designed to understand responses to escalating forms of hazing, having an understanding of how students viewed different forms of hazing was critical. A study by Ellsworth (2006) was particularly helpful in this regard. Based on how students defined hazing in Ellsworth's study, the author was able to develop an escalating scale of behaviors. Next, the author piloted this scale of escalating behaviors with a group of 12 students. When asked to place the items in order from least severe to most severe, 11 of the 12 placed them in the order in which they are presented in the vignettes. Next, the stories of the vignettes were constructed, and then a focus group with fraternity members was conducted to ensure that the vignettes were realistic. Lastly, the vignettes were piloted with both fraternity and non-fraternity members to ensure a normal distribution of responses and an adequate amount of variance. For a more detailed description of the development of the two vignettes, see McCreary (2012).

The developed vignettes depict two scenarios: fraternity hazing and adolescent bullying, with the person taking the survey in the position of a third-party bystander. The behaviors in the two vignettes are similar and escalate along an identical trajectory. The only difference in the vi-

gnettes are the context and environment in that one takes place in a fraternity house involving fraternity members, and the other takes place in a public park involving a group of boys playing football.

#### *Research Questions*

Specifically, this study attempted to answer the following:

RQ1 – Does the context of violent behavior influence fraternity members' perceptions of that behavior? Specifically, do fraternity members view violence in the context of fraternity hazing differently than they view similar violence in the context of adolescent bullying?

RQ2 – Do fraternity members' attitudes fit the hypothesized model? Specifically, do moral judgment and moral disengagement predict the difference with which fraternity members will view a fraternity hazing vignette and an adolescent bullying vignette?

RQ3 – Does the macro-level social context influence the relationship between the variables? Specifically, are the paths between the observed variables different on campuses with a pro-hazing culture when compared to campuses with a culture that is less supportive of hazing?

## **Results**

Fraternity members were higher on levels of Moral Disengagement (MD), had lower N2 scores, and higher Personal Interest (PI) scores. Fraternity members were less likely to intervene in a hazing scenario when compared to an adolescent bullying scenario. Interestingly, non-members were also less likely to intervene in the hazing scenario. Fraternity members were slower than non-members to intervene in either scenario. Tables 1 and 2 contain a summary of these results.

Pearson's test for correlations was used to determine the relationships between the variables in the fraternity sample ( $n = 75$ ) and the non-fraternity sample ( $n = 125$ ) (see Tables 3

**Table 1***Independent t-test of Fraternity and Non-Fraternity Males*

Groups	Both		Fraternity		Non-Fraternity		t-Test			
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	df	t	p	d
MD	64.92	15.18	67.97	14.14	63.09	15.55	198	2.22	.014	.32
N2 Score	32.56	14.82	29.73	13.61	34.25	15.30	198	-2.10	.019	-.31
PI Score	29.01	12.07	30.21	11.24	28.29	12.54	198	1.09	.139	.17
HazelInt	2.55	1.13	2.76	1.37	2.42	.94	198	2.06	.02	.30
BullyInt	2.32	.94	2.55	.92	2.19	.93	198	2.62	.005	.39
IntDiff	.63	2.22	.63	2.60	.63	1.97	198	-.016	.494	0

Note: N = 200, n (fraternity) = 75, n (non-fraternity) = 125

**Table 2***Independent Samples t-test of Fraternity and Non-fraternity Members on the Hazing and Bullying Vignettes*

Group	Hazing Vignette		Bullying Vignette		t-Test		
	M	SD	M	SD	df	t	p
Fraternity	4.32	2.76	3.69	1.82	74	.040	2.089
Non-Fraternity	3.65	1.83	3.02	1.69	124	.000	3.587

and 4). For the fraternity sample, there was a significant correlation between moral disengagement and PI score ( $r = .246, p < .05$ ), indicating that higher levels of moral disengagement correlated with an increased tendency to use personal interest considerations in making moral judgments. Additionally, moral disengagement positively correlated with differences in intervention response time ( $r = .238, p < .05$ ) between the two vignettes. Higher levels of moral disengagement for fraternity members were related to larger differences between their intervention time in the hazing and bullying scenarios. These relationships were not significant for the overall sample or the non-fraternity sample. For the non-fraternity sample, intervention in the bullying scenario was positively correlated with moral disengagement ( $r = .438, p < .01$ ) indicating that higher levels of moral disengagement were related to later interventions in the bullying scenario for non-fraternity members. The relationship between these variables was not statistically

significant among fraternity members.

#### *Path Analysis*

The researchers tested the path model hypothesizing the direct effects of moral judgment and moral disengagement on hazing attitude (specifically, the difference in intervention response time between the hazing vignette and the bullying vignette), as well as the indirect effects of moral judgment on hazing attitude, as mediated through moral disengagement. In all, three different models were tested using the PI (personal interest) score from the DIT-2 as a measure of moral judgment and are listed in Table 4. Although MN (maintaining norms) was the prevailing schema among the sample, previous research (Carroll, 2009) has found that higher PI scores, particularly among college students, create a scenario in which moral judgment fails to buffer moral disengagement. Similarly, in the present study, PI scores were more highly correlated with moral disengagement than the standard N2

score. Fraternity members using personal interest as a basis for moral decision making are more likely to support actions that benefit them, either directly or indirectly through benefiting their organization. Thus, PI scores were used in the path analysis to demonstrate the unique interaction of

personal interest, moral disengagement, and tolerance for hazing behavior.

In the model using Personal Interest (PI) as the moral judgment variable, two of the three path coefficients are in the direction of the hypothesized model for the overall sample and for

**Table 3**

*Correlations between Moral Judgment, Moral Disengagement, and Bystander Intervention Responses for Fraternity Members*

	1	2	3	4	5
	<i>n</i> = 75				
PI Score (Moral Judgement)					
N2 Score (Moral Judgement)	-.466**				
MD Score (Moral Disengagement)	.246*	-.063			
HazelInt (Hazing Intervention)	-.124	.052	.309**		
BullyInt (Bullying Intervention)	-.196	.078	.119	-.164	
IntDiff (Difference in Intervention)	.034	.034	.238*	-.279*	-.241

Note: \*\* Correlation is significant at the .01 level (two-tailed); \* Correlation is significant at the .05 level (two-tailed)

**Table 4**

*Correlations between Moral Judgment, Moral Disengagement, and Bystander Intervention Responses for Non-Fraternity Members*

	1	2	3	4	5
	<i>n</i> = 125				
PI Score (Moral Judgement)					
N2 Score (Moral Judgement)	-.696**				
MD Score (Moral Disengagement)	-.006	.052			
HazelInt (Hazing Intervention)	-.096	.095	.296**		
BullyInt (Bullying Intervention)	-.059	.014	.437**	-.222*	
IntDiff (Difference in Intervention)	-.030	.066	-.108	-.038	-.493**

Note: \*\* Correlation is significant at the .01 level (two-tailed); \* Correlation is significant at the .05 level (two-tailed)

fraternity members. As shown in Table 5, for the fraternity sample, the parameter estimates (B) for the path between moral judgment (as measured by the PI score) and moral disengagement is positive, indicating that moral judgment has

a direct effect on moral disengagement. In the fraternity sample, this path is particularly strong (B = .25,  $p < .05$ ). The parameter estimate for the path between moral disengagement and intervention difference for fraternity members is

also positive and significant for fraternity members ( $B = .24, p < .05$ ), indicating that moral disengagement has a strong direct effect on the difference with which fraternity members viewed the hazing and bullying scenarios. For the non-fraternity sample, the direction of each of the paths as measured by the parameter estimates do not support the hypothesized model. The negative path between moral disengagement

and intervention difference indicates that moral disengagement influenced non-members' intervention in the bullying scenario to a greater extent than their intervention in the hazing scenario. That is, the path analysis indicates that moral disengagement influenced bystander behavior in the bullying scenario for non-members, but influenced bystander behavior in the hazing scenario for fraternity members.

**Table 5**  
*Path Model 1*

Effects	PI → MD		MD → INTDIFF		PI → INTDIFF		PI → MD → INTDIFF		Total Effects
Formula	1		2		3		(1x2)**		(1x2)+3
	B	error	B	error	B	error	B	B	
Both	.087	(.07)	.036	(.07)	-.006	(.07)	.003	.002	
Frat	.25*	(.11)	.24*	(.12)	-.03	(.12)	.06	.034	
Non-Frat	-.006	(.09)	-.11	(.09)	-.03	(.09)	-.0006	-.030	

Note: \*Indicates a Significant Path; \*\*Indicates the indirect effect of Personal Interest on Intervention Difference

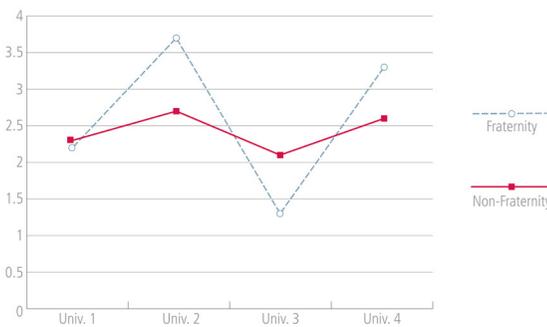
### Macro-level Differences

Four different institutions were examined in this study. In examining the data, it can be determined that two of the institutions had a “pro-hazing” fraternity culture, in which fraternity members were significantly more supportive of hazing than non-members, as measured by their response to the fraternity hazing vignette. The remaining two schools could be described

as having a “hazing-neutral” fraternity culture, in which fraternity members’ views of hazing were similar to that of non-members, as measured by the fraternity hazing vignette. These two groups are best demonstrated in Figure 2, in which the fraternity culture at Universities 1 and 3 can be described as “hazing-neutral” and the fraternity culture at Universities 2 and 4 can be described as “pro-hazing.”

**Figure 2**

*Line Graph of Two-way ANOVA Showing Mean Hazing Intervention Response between Fraternity Membership Status and Institution*



## Limitations

To determine the differences among the paths for fraternity members in “pro-hazing” campuses compared to fraternity members at “hazing-neutral” campuses, the institutional grouping variables were recoded to combine University 1 with University 3, and to combine University 2 with University 4. Then, the file was split in SPSS along the lines of the newly recoded University groupings and fraternity membership. Using correlation analysis, the researchers discovered different relationships among the variables between the fraternity members on “pro-hazing” campuses and those on “hazing neutral” campuses, as demonstrated in Tables 6 and 7 and the path model showing relationships between the PI, MD, and Hazing Intervention (HAZE) variables in Table 8. Overall, the relationships between all of the variables were significantly stronger on pro-hazing campuses than on hazing neutral campuses.

There are a number of limitations to this study. The low response rate limits the ability to generalize the results to the overall population. Despite the low response rates, moderate effect sizes were still observed. Due to the length of time required to complete the surveys (participants took between 45 and 60 minutes to complete the entire survey), future studies of this nature should provide incentives to participants in an effort to increase the response rate. The sample was primarily white and upper-middle class. Future studies should specifically target fraternities from the National Pan-Hellenic Council, National Association of Latino Fraternal Organizations, and other culturally-based organizations to determine if the relationships among the variables in this study are also evident among those groups. The institutions in this study were

**Table 6**

*Correlation Matrix for Fraternity Members on Pro-Hazing Campuses*

	<u>1</u> n = 39	<u>2</u> n = 39	<u>3</u> n = 39	<u>4</u> n = 39
PI Score (Moral Judgement)	1			
MD Score (Moral Disengagement)	.417**	1		
HazeInt (Hazing Intervention)	.195	.412**	1	
BullyInt (Bullying Intervention)	.046	.281	.393*	1

Note: \*\* Correlation is significant at the .01 level (two-tailed) \* Correlation is significant at the .05 level (two-tailed)

**Table 7**

*Correlation Matrix for Fraternity Members on Hazing-Neutral Campuses*

	<u>1</u> n = 39	<u>2</u> n = 39	<u>3</u> n = 39	<u>4</u> n = 39
PI Score (Moral Judgement)	1			
MD Score (Moral Disengagement)	.080	1		
HazeInt (Hazing Intervention)	-.242	.231	1	
BullyInt (Bullying Intervention)	-.307	.013	.287	1

Note: \*\* Correlation is significant at the .01 level (two-tailed) \* Correlation is significant at the .05 level (two-tailed)

**Table 8**  
*Path Model 2*

Effects	PI → MD		MD → HAZE		PI → HAZE		PI → MD → HAZE	Total Effects
Formula	1		2		3		(1x2)**	(1x2)+3
	B	error	B	error	B	error	B	B
ProHaze	.41*	(.16)	.41*	(.15)	.20	(.16)	.168	.368
HazeNeut	.080	(.17)	.23	(.17)	.26	(.16)	.018	.278

Note: \*Indicates a Significant Path; \*\*Indicates the indirect effect of Personal Interest on Hazing Intervention

all large, public institutions in the Southeastern United States, further limiting the generalizability of these findings to various institutional types and other geographical regions.

### Discussion

The findings of the present study lend considerable support to the proposed link between context and social influence, moral disengagement, and violent, anti-social behavior. Individually, fraternity members are less likely to intervene in a context-specific hazing scenario than in a more general bullying scenario, and the difference by which they view those two scenarios is predicted by moral disengagement. At the community level, the relationships between personal interest morality, moral disengagement, and hazing attitude is twice as strong in an environment that tends to be supportive of hazing when compared to an environment in which hazing is viewed less favorably. Collectively, these findings suggest that contextual factors such as climate, culture, and campus environment have independent and interactive influences on moral disengagement.

Given that a vast majority of the fraternity members in this study showed the highest responses in the Maintaining Norms score on the DIT-2, it stands to reason that institutional culture regarding hazing is particularly important in determining how fraternity members view and respond to hazing. As noted by Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau, and Thoma (1999), individuals in the Maintaining Norms schema define moral-

ity through adherence to the established social order. They further suggested a duty orientation, in which an individual in the Maintaining Norms schema clings to a perceived “chain of command.” Decisions are made not out of respect for authority, but out of respect for the established social system (Rest et al., 1999). In an environment where anti-social behavior is part of the accepted system, individuals in the Maintaining Norms schema are likely to be quite beholden to that system and have little inclination to behave in a way that runs contrary to the widely held views within that system. Thus, it seems reasonable that in an environment laden with individuals in the Maintaining Norms schema (like a college fraternity, for example) is one that is particularly ripe for moral disengagement leading to anti-social behavior. Fraternity members also measured higher on PI scores, which significantly influenced the relationship between moral disengagement and responses to the two vignettes. Much of the hazing reported on college campuses, particularly within fraternities, could be described as benefiting the individual perpetrating the hazing or the organization providing the context for the hazing (Allan & Madden, 2008). It would appear that higher PI scores make it easier for fraternity members to disengage from their moral selves and support more severe forms of hazing.

In the fraternity sample, there was a significant relationship between moral judgment, as measured by the PI score, and moral disengagement ( $r = .246, p < .05$ ). This relationship was not present in the non-fraternity sample or in

the overall sample. This finding is consistent with those of Carroll (2009), who found a significant relationship between moral judgment and rape-supportive attitudes among fraternity members, but no significant relationship among those variables for non-members. There was also a positive correlation ( $r = .238, p < .05$ ) between moral disengagement and the difference in intervention response time between the two vignettes. Again, this relationship was not present in the non-fraternity sample or in the overall sample. In fact, there is a weak negative correlation between moral disengagement and intervention difference within the non-fraternity sample. This finding is of particular interest, as it suggests that the novel setting of the college fraternity has a unique influence on the relationship between moral judgment, moral disengagement, and attitudes about violent behavior only within a particular context. In the fraternity setting, a novel setting with unique cultural norms (DeSantis, 2007), moral judgment and moral disengagement significantly influenced the difference in how fraternity members responded to bullying and hazing scenarios.

There were also differences between the fraternity members and non-members. While in the fraternity sample there was a significant correlation between moral disengagement and intervention in the hazing scenario ( $r = .303, p < .01$ ), the relationship was weak and not significant for non-members. Conversely, the relationship between moral disengagement and intervention in the adolescent bullying scenario was significantly correlated ( $r = .438, p < .01$ ) for non-members. This relationship was weak and not significant in the fraternity sample. Based on group membership, moral disengagement had a unique interaction with the two bystander behavior variables in that it influenced hazing intervention in the fraternity sample, and it influenced bullying intervention in the non-fraternity sample. This finding provides additional evidence that environment and context have individual and interactive influences on

moral disengagement, and that those influences impact individual and group behavior. This finding confirms those of Carroll (2009), who noted significant relationships between moral disengagement and rape-supportive attitudes among fraternity members, but not among non-members. The present study goes beyond Carroll's findings, however, in evaluating how the grouping variable (fraternity vs. non-fraternity) interacts with moral disengagement in a setting that is context-specific (fraternity hazing) and one that is not (adolescent bullying). Carroll (2009) suggested in her findings that there may be factors in the fraternity environment that increase the likelihood of moral disengagement. While this may be true, the present study, particularly the finding of a significant relationship between moral disengagement and bystander response in the bullying scenario for the non-fraternity sample, indicates that moral disengagement influences behavior in different ways among different groups, depending on the context and the particular behavior in question.

These findings also have practical implications for educators, particularly those concerned with the prevention of hazing on college campuses. These findings would indicate that hazing behavior, at least within a campus fraternity community, is a vicious cycle that becomes more severe over time. Students, using personal interest/maintaining norms judgments, engage in hazing behavior. Slowly, this behavior permeates campus cultural norms, triggering more disengagement and more severe forms of hazing. From a prevention standpoint, educational initiatives must be aimed at addressing lower levels of moral judgment, particularly Personal Interest, in a way that will block the moral disengagement that allows this cycle to continue. Programs should also directly confront the mechanisms of moral disengagement which allow for hazing behaviors to persist. Multiple studies have suggested that students who join fraternities during their freshman year lag in terms of their moral development in relation to their non-affiliated peers

(Pike, 2006). The findings of this study suggests that deferred or delayed recruitment (not allowing students to join fraternities until later in their collegiate careers) may indeed be a means by which to stop the cycle of hazing and prevent hazing by bringing students into these organizations at higher levels of moral development. More research on this is needed.

If, as the findings of this study suggest, moral disengagement is triggered by cultural and social influences regardless of moral judgment, the implications for both scholars and practitioners of violence prevention are profound. To borrow the “bad apples/bad barrel” analogy used by Zimbardo (2007) in analyzing the behavior of the guards in his simulated prison, the findings of this study suggest that the barrel provides a more reliable prediction of anti-social behavior than the apple, particularly when the behavior in question is taking place within a specific context with unique and salient cultural norms. Future research should consider the influence of context and environment when investigating the relationships between moral agency and behavior. In particular, research should investigate campus cultural norms and perceptions that lead to “pro-hazing” or “hazing-neutral” cultures as described in this study. Practitioners of violence prevention should also take note, as these findings suggest that adjusting cultural norms within a particular group or community may be of paramount importance in efforts to reduce violence. There is much to be gained in better understanding how particular contextual factors interact with moral disengagement to produce violent, inhumane behavior.

## References

- Alexander, C., & Becker, H.J. (1978). The use of vignettes in survey research. *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 42(1), 93-104.
- Allan, E., & Madden, M. (2008). *Hazing in view: College students at risk*. Initial findings from the National Study of Student Hazing. Retrieved from <http://www.hazingstudy.org>.
- Bandura, A. (1990). Selective activation and disengagement of moral control. *Journal of Social Issues*, 46, 27-46.
- Bandura, A. (2002). Selective moral disengagement in the exercise of moral agency. *Journal of Moral Education*, 31(2), 101-119.
- Bandura, A., Barbaranelli, C., Caprara, C., & Pastorellie, C. (1996). Mechanisms of moral disengagement in exercise of moral agency. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 71(2), 364-374.
- Bandura, A., Underwood, B., & Fromson, M. (1975). Disinhibition of aggression through diffusion of responsibility and dehumanization of victims. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 9, 253-269.
- Campo, S., Poulos, G., & Sipple, J. (2005). Prevalence and profiling: Hazing among college students and points of intervention. *American Journal of Health Behavior*, 29, 137-149.
- Carroll, A. (2009). *Impact of moral judgment and moral disengagement on rape-supportive attitudes in college males*. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Alabama).
- Cimino, A. (2011). The evolution of hazing: Motivational mechanisms and the abuse of newcomers. *Journal of Cognition and Culture*, 11, 241-267.
- DeSantis, A. (2007). *Inside Greek U: Fraternities, sororities, and the pursuit of pleasure, power and prestige*. Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky.
- Detert, J., Trevino, L., & Sweitzer, V. (2008). Moral disengagement in ethical decision making: A study of antecedents and outcomes. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 93(2) 374-391.
- Gini, G. (2006). Social cognition and moral cognition in bullying: what's wrong? *Aggressive Behavior*, 32, 528-539.
- Gould, D. (1996). Using vignettes to collect data for nursing research studies: How valid are the findings? *Journal of Clinical Nursing*, 5, 207-212.
- Hymel, S., Rocke-Henderson, N., & Bonanno, R. (2005). Moral disengagement: A framework for understanding bullying among adolescents. [Special Issue]. *Journal of Social Sciences*, (8), 1-11.
- Hughes, R., & Huby, M. (2002). The application of vignettes in social and nursing research. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 37(4), 382-386.
- McCreary, G.R. (2012). *The Impact of Moral Judgment and Moral Disengagement on Hazing Attitudes and Bystander Behavior in College Males*. (Unpublished doctoral dissertation, The University of Alabama).
- Menesini, E., Sanchez, V., Fonzi, A., Ortega, R., Costabile, A., & Lo Feudo, G. (2003). Moral emotions and bullying: A cross-national comparison of differences between bullies, victims and outsiders. *Aggressive Behavior*, 29, 515-530.
- Nuwer, H. (1999). *Wrongs of passage: Fraternities, sororities, hazing and binge drinking*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University.
- Nuwer, H. (2010). *Unofficial clearinghouse for hazing and related risks in the news*. Retrieved April 20, 2010 from <http://www.hazing.hanknuwer.com>.
- Paciello, M., Fida, R., Tramontano, C., Lupinetti, C., & Caprara, G.V. (2008). Stability and change of moral disengagement and its impact on aggression and violence in late adolescence. *Child Development*, 79(5), 1288-1309.
- Rest, J. (1986). Constructing the defining issues test. In Rest, J. (Eds.), *Moral Development: Advances in Research and Theory*, 75-105, Boston: Praeger Publishers.

- Rest, J., Bebeau, M., & Volker, J. (1986). An overview of the psychology of morality. In J. Rest (Eds.), *Moral Development: Advances in Research and Theory* (pp. 1-39). Boston, MA: Praeger.
- Rest, J., Thoma, S., & Edwards, L. (1997). Designing and validating a measure of moral judgment: Stage preference and stage consistency approaches. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 89*(1) 5-28.
- Rest, J., Narvaez, D., Bebeau, M., & Thoma, S. (1999). A neo-Kohlbergian approach: The DIT and schema theory. *Educational Psychology Review, 11*(4), 291-324.
- South, C., & Wood, J. (2006). Bullying in prisons: Perceived social status, prisonization and moral disengagement. *Aggressive Behavior, 32*(5), 490-501.
- Sumrall, W., & West, L. (1998). Using a vignette technique to compare various groups' beliefs about the future. *The Journal of Environmental Education, 29*(4), 45-51.
- Thoma, S. (2006). Research using the Defining Issues Test. In M. Killen & J. G. Smetana (Eds.), *Handbook of Moral Psychology*. New York, NY: Psychology Press.
- Zajonc, R.B. (1980). Feeling and thinking: Preferences need no inferences. *American Psychologist, 35*(2), 151-175.
- Zimbardo, P. (2007). *The Lucifer effect: understanding how good people turn evil*. New York, NY: Random House.

### Author Biographies

**Dr. Gentry McCreary** is the CEO and Managing Partner of Dyad Strategies, LLC and is an affiliated consultant with the National Center for Higher Education Risk Management. He is a member of Alpha Gamma Rho fraternity.

**Dr. Nathaniel J. Bray** is an Associate Professor of Higher Education Administration, and a Fellow at the Education Policy Center, at the University of Alabama.

**Dr. Stephen Thoma** is a University Professor in the Educational Psychology program at the University of Alabama and is the Executive Director of the Center for the Study of Ethical Development. He specializes in personality and social development with a focus on social/moral development in adolescence and youth.