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UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF HAZING: A GENDER APPROACH

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ABSTRACT

The initiation rituals that freshmen are subjected to in universities have been characterized quite differently, although the most frequent view is that it is a rough experience for those coming to higher education for the first time. Gender has emerged as a differentiating variable of how students experience this practice. In this study, our interest is to find out the perceptions of university students over the events that take place during the entry to higher education through a comparative gender analysis. The sample included 247 students of both genders. Data were collected by means of the scale 'Evaluation of Bullying Situations in Higher Education Hazing', which consists of 15 items and three factors: 'positive relationship with hazing', 'negative relationship with hazing' and 'social dimension'. Findings indicate that, in the overall scale, there are significant differences between genders, with boys expressing a stronger agreement with the practice. In the analysis by dimension, this fact is reinforced, since in the 'positive relationship with hazing', boys exhibit significantly higher results than girls. In the distribution of variables in the two-dimensional space (CatPCA), we witness that, despite agreeing with hazing practices, boys display a very heterogeneous behavior, while girls more homogeneously disagree with them.

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INTRODUCTION

The transition from secondary education to higher education connects two relatively distinct periods in a student's career, since it requires the departure from one cycle of general studies and the integration into a new context more linked to the establishment of career goals. This transition is experienced by youngsters with happiness for having achieved a coveted goal, but also with anxiety for starting a new phase in their lives in a context that they still do not know and control. Some aspects associated with the entry to higher education can facilitate this transition and the students' adaptation to the challenges of the new academic environment. In particular, relationships appear with some frequency in the literature on this topic (Abrantes, 2005; Agante, 2009; Leary and DeRosier, 2012), with peers playing a prominent role in relaying a welcoming message and in accepting the new element into the academic culture.

It is within this understanding that hazing, which is traditionally called *praxe* in Portugal, is sometimes presented by veteran students (Vieira, 2013) as a means of socialising, so newcomers and veterans can interact with the aim of getting to know each other, establishing new friendships and guiding freshmen in academic activities (Schmalzer, 2013). Although we can recognise that, in many cases, there is a positive intention associated with hazing, the reports of several students subjected to it tend not to validate this favourable and humanitarian view of the events as the most common one. Often the alleged reception events are described as manifestations of power and abuse of veteran students over freshmen (Hoover and Milner, 1998; Mikell, 2014; Nirh, 2014) in which secrecy and silence characterise the dynamics that take place (Allan and Madden, 2008). Feeling some insecurity about their future in the new context and fearing social exclusion from peer groups or other forms of retaliation, newcomers tend to give up their personal identity (Tajfel, 1983; Tajfel and Turner, 1979) and to tolerate these abuses, subjecting themselves to different forms and degrees of violence (Allan and Madden, 2008; Hoover and Milner,

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1998). Gender has emerged in some studies as a differential variable in how higher education students view hazing. For example, in the research of Kumar and Gupta (2012) with university students in India and in the work of Mascarenhas, Matos, Jesus and Galdino (n.d.) with Portuguese and Brazilian students, the authors observed that female participants had a less favourable view of hazing than their male peers. In another study with university students in Brazil, Costa, Dias, Dias, Souza and Canela (2013) found out that girls were more likely than boys ($p > 0.05$) to associate hazing practices to acts of violence. In Marin, Araújo and Neto (2008), who also worked with Brazilian students, we also find the idea that girls (80.6%) suffer more embarrassment with this practice when compared to their male counterparts (63%). Furthermore, we should mention that some studies argue that the rites of passage to higher education easily become repeated humiliation and coercion situations (Klerk, 2013; Nuwer, 2001), which must be prevented in a society that upholds equal opportunities and gender equity. Despite all the elements suggesting that hazing is experienced differently depending on the gender, we cannot fail to mention that research has also identified that male and female students are victimised in similar fashion, particularly in what regards the physical violence inflicted by peers (Bjorklund, Hakkanen-Nyholm, Huttunen and Kunttu, 2010). Considering this scenario, the current study, focusing on gender, compares the perceptions of boys and girls over the relationship they establish with hazing and aims to contribute to the understanding of these initiation rituals in Portuguese higher education institutions.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

For this study we used a (non-probabilistic) quota sampling process, using the variables sex and training area for setting the quotas. 247 Portuguese higher education students (63.2% female and 36.8% male) took part, and they were distributed according to their age (categorised in two classes: 20 years old or younger and over 20), year of the degree (1st, 2nd or 3rd) and training area of the degree (categorised in four groups: Natural and Health Sciences –NHS; Humanities – H; Technological Sciences –TC; and Exact and Business Sciences – EBC), as detailed in Table 1. To learn the perceptions of students over hazing, we used the scale 'Evaluation of Bullying Situations in Higher Education Hazing' (SEBSHEH) by Matos, Jesus, Simões and Nave (2010), which provides an overall score and scores for three factors, namely: F1 – 'positive relationship with hazing'; F2 – 'negative relationship with hazing'; and F3 – 'social dimension'. The scale scores towards agreement with hazing in a Likert scale where 1 corresponds to the maximum disagreement and 5 to the maximum agreement. To calculate the score, F2 items must be reversed. Therefore, after the inversion, the higher values for all factors mean a more favourable relationship with hazing. To measure any significant gender differences both at the overall score level and for the factor scores, we applied a Mann-Whitney U Test (nonparametric test for two independent samples). A nonparametric test was applied to the gender variable, as well as to the other variables in Table 1, because they do not follow a normal distribution (Kolmogorov-Smirnov goodness-of-fit test). The choice of nonparametric tests depends on the number of categories of the independent variables. Therefore, to investigate the behaviour of the age variable (encoded into

two categories), we applied a Mann-Whitney U Test, while in the case of the variables training area and year of the degree (with more than two categories) we applied a Kruskal-Wallis test (nonparametric test for k independent samples). We have equally used a Categorical Principal Components Analysis (CatPCA) with principal variable normalisation, which aims to understand the correlation structure of the variables being studied. We aimed to find out the distribution of all variables in a two-dimensional space and to observe the gender variable in relation to all others.

FINDINGS

The findings from a comparative perspective can be found in Table 2. There are significant differences between students when it comes to the overall scale and the factor 'positive relationship with hazing', with boys exhibiting a greater pleasure to take part in initiation rituals proposed by veterans. There are no statistically significant differences between boys and girls in the factors 'positive relationship with hazing' and 'social dimension'. These latter findings do not allow us to say that gender is consistently a differentiating variable in the relationship with hazing in the group under study. Within each gender, we tried to understand whether the variables age, training area and year of the degree exhibit a different behaviour in what regards the perceptions over the relationship with hazing. The findings for the female and male students are displayed in Table 3. As previously mentioned, the ages of respondents were categorised into two classes: 20 years old or younger and over 20. Girls that are 20 years old or younger feature higher mean ranks when compared to their peers over 20, but the differences are not statistically significant considering the overall score of the scale ($U = 1898.00$; $p = 0.112 > \alpha = 0.05$) and also of the factors (F1: $U = 1915$; $p = 0.083 > \alpha = 0.05$; F2: $U = 2178.5$; $p = 0.707 > \alpha = 0.05$ and F3: $U = 2200.5$; $p = 0.124 > \alpha = 0.05$). Younger boys are equally the ones that score the highest, but the differences between the two age groups are statistically significant in terms of the overall scale results ($U = 512.5$; $p = 0.004 < \alpha = 0.05$) and of the factors 'positive relationship with hazing' and 'negative relationship with hazing' (F1: $U = 519.5$; $p = 0.0011 < \alpha = 0.05$; F2: $U = 604$; $p = 0.046 < \alpha = 0.05$). There are no significant differences for the 'social dimension' (F3: $U = 838.5$; $p = 0.377 > \alpha = 0.05$). Therefore, we assume that for female students age is not a differentiating variable in the relationship with hazing, but the same cannot be said for male students.

For the training area, we once again considered the four aforementioned groups: Natural and Health Sciences, Humanities, Technological Sciences, and Exact and Business Sciences. In the case of female students, there are significant differences in the overall scale results ($\chi^2 = 8.435$; $p = 0.038 < \alpha = 0.05$), with girls from Natural and Health Sciences scoring higher (76.83) and those from Humanities featuring a lower score (57.62). If we look into each factor, there are only significant differences in the 'negative relationship with hazing' ($\chi^2 = 8.685$; $p = 0.034 < \alpha = 0.05$), where female students from Exact and Business Sciences display higher mean ranks (81.21), indicating a position of greater agreement with hazing, and those from Humanities the lowest average values (60.76). In the case of males, the training area does not appear as a differential variable when we consider the overall scale

($\chi^2=5.543$; $p=0.136 > \alpha=0.05$) and each factor (F1: $\chi^2= 6.107$; $p=0.107 > \alpha=0.05$; F2: $\chi^2=2.845$; $p=0.416 > \alpha=0.05$; F3: $\chi^2=3.677$; $p=0.299 > \alpha=0.05$). Male students from Natural and Health Sciences are those with higher mean ranks (50.67), while those from Humanities showcase the lowest values (33.19).

Finally, regarding the year of degree (replace all)year of the degree (1st, 2nd or 3rd), in the case of female students, the findings demonstrate significant differences in the overall scale score ($\chi^2=6.459$; $p=0.04 < \alpha=0.05$), with 1st year students displaying higher mean ranks (72.64) and 2nd year ones the lowest values (52.59).

Table 1. Distribution of students according to age, year of the degree and training area (percentage)

	Age		Year of the degree			Training Area			
	≤ 20 years old	> 20 years old	1 st	2 nd	3 rd	NHS	H	TC	EBC
Male	42.9	57.1	56.5	24.1	17.6	24.2	24.2	8.8	42.9
Female	55.8	44.2	23.9	44.8	31.3	17.3	46.2	3.2	33.3

Table 2. Mean ranks in the overall scale and in the SEBSHEH factors, by gender, and significance of the differences observed

	Mean ranks		Mann-Whitney U Test Significance of differences
	Male	Female	
Overall Scale	120.57	102.69	U=4683.50 (p=0.042) Significant
Factors			
1 - Positive relationship with hazing	126.88	98.35	U=4060 (p=0.001) Significant
2 - Negative relationship with hazing	114.26	105.81	U= 5140 (p=0.30) Not significant
3 -Social dimension	119.64	114.58	U=6060 (p=0.554) Not significant

Table 3. Differences in male and female subsamples in the overall scale and by factors, depending on the age, training area and year of the degree

Students' variables	Overall scale	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
		Positive relationship	Negative relationship	Social dimension
Female subsample				
Age group	No	No	No	No
Training area	Significant differences	No	Significant differences	No
Year of the degree	Significant differences	Significant differences	No	Significant differences
Male subsample				
Age group	Significant differences	Significant differences	Significant differences	No
Training area	No	No	No	No
Year of the degree	No	No	No	No

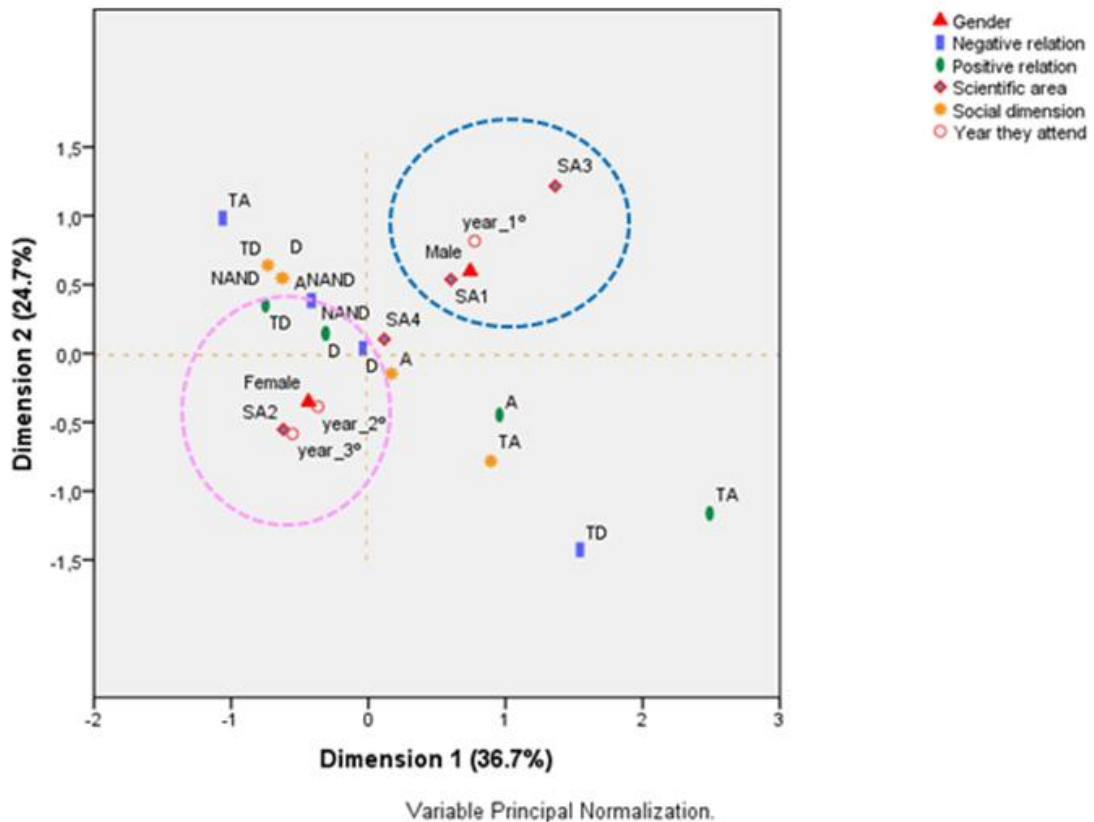


Figure 1. Perceptual map defined by the two main dimensions that were retained

An analysis by factor indicates that there are significant differences in the 'positive relationship with hazing' ($\chi^2=8.065$; $p=0.018 < \alpha=0.05$) and in the 'social dimension' ($\chi^2=18.129$; $p=0.000 < \alpha=0.05$), with girls attending the 1st year showcasing higher mean ranks. This means that the year of the degree is a differential variable in the relationship with hazing, considering the overall score and the factors 'positive relationship with hazing' and 'social dimension'. Focusing on male students, the findings point to the absence of significant differences in the overall results of the scale when we consider the different years of the degree ($\chi^2=0.146$; $p=0.930 > \alpha=0.05$). There are equally no significant differences in the factors that depend on the year (F1 $\chi^2=1.222$; $p=0.543 > \alpha=0.05$; F2 $\chi^2=0.061$; $p=0.970 > \alpha=0.05$; and F3 $\chi^2=1.488$; $p=0.475 > \alpha=0.05$). However, 1st-year students exhibit the highest mean ranks (39.73) while the lowest ones belong to 3rd-year students (37.17). In short, comparing female and male students, we observe differences in the perceptions of the rituals that mark the entry into higher education, with boys expressing more sympathy for these rituals. Within each gender subgroup, if we use the overall scale scores as reference, the age variable does not differentiate the relationship of girls with hazing but it does so for boys, with the youngest students expressing the greatest ease with these rituals.

The training area variable appears as a differentiator among girls, with students from the Natural and Health Sciences indicating a closer proximity to hazing and those from Humanities a greater distance; for boys, the training area does not seem to influence the way how they relate to hazing. Regarding the variable year of the degree, it plays a differentiating role among girls with 1st year ones expressing a better relationship with this practice, but it appears to be a neutral element for boys. In order to summarise the data collected and to observe the distribution of all variables in a two-dimensional space, we have employed a CatPCA using the eigenvalue greater than 1 rule, as the criterion for retaining components. The information regarding the association between the variables was summed up in two dimensions that explain 61.4% of the total variance of the original variables. According to the loadings of each variable in each dimension and to the quantifications of the categories in the first two dimensions, we can name the first dimension as 'opinion on the relationship with hazing' and the second one as 'student's features'. The perceptual map (Figure 1) shows us the positioning of the categories of the variables in the space defined by the two main dimensions that were retained, 'opinion on the relationship with hazing' and 'student's features', allowing for an easier visualisation of the associations between these variables. In dimension 1, which explains 36.7% of the total variance, the gender variable is not the most prominent. This dimension opposes the group of students that expresses complete disagreement and disagreement with the three factors that define the SEBSHEH to those who declare to agree and to agree totally with the three factors of this scale. In dimension 2, which explains 24.7% of the total variance, the gender variable stands out the most. This dimension opposes mostly female students from the area of Humanities (SA2), who are in the 2nd and 3rd years, to mostly male students who tend to be enrolled in degrees in the areas of Technological Sciences (SA3) and Natural and Health Sciences (SA1) and who are in the 1st year. The categories that

express students' opinions on the factor 'social dimension' are those with a smaller dispersion on the perceptual map. In short, Figure 1 illustrates that girls, specifically Humanities female students in the 2nd and 3rd years, concentrate their positions mainly in opposition to hazing. Boys, despite generally expressing greater agreement with this practice when compared to girls, exhibit a quite diverse behaviour when it comes to their relationship with hazing.

DISCUSSION

In this paper, the gender-based comparison of the perceptions of higher education students over the relationship they establish with hazing found out that boys live better with the stimuli and challenges of veteran students when they enter the new academic environment. This is not surprising considering that similar conclusions have been reached by other studies that carried out a comparison between male and female students (Costa *et al.*, 2013; Kumar & Gupta, 2012; Marin *et al.*, 2008; Mascarenhas *et al.*, n.d.). Based on this evidence, we can put forward two interpretative possibilities: (i) the less positive relationship of girls with hazing makes their adaptation to higher education more demanding from a personal point of view, since they experience this transition with less positive connections and affection; (ii) the less positive relationship of girls with hazing stems from some distance they keep with these rituals, as they involve mostly males or as they include certain practices that can be labelled as macho and sexist. It will be interesting to clarify in subsequent studies if any of these possible interpretations is valid; it will also be interesting to analyse these possible interpretations alongside the respondents' academic performance, using the latter as an indicator of a successful adaptation. These aspects may be relevant for the institution to decide on which welcoming activities to prepare, particularly for girls.

Focusing our attention on each subgroup, for girls, we observe that the age variable is not distinctive, although the year of the degree is. These apparently contradictory data could mean that the cut-off point for age is not strong enough. We should note that the youngest students claim to have a better relationship with hazing along with those from the 1st year, although in the case of age, the differences are not statistically significant. We agree with the interpretation put forward by other studies to explain the greater support of the younger students of the degree (1st year), suggesting that such support can be associated with the expectation of getting to know a greater number of new colleagues more rapidly and, therefore, of building new relationships more easily (Vieira, 2013) or of, at least, avoiding exclusion (Miranda, Oliveira, Barreto, Ferriani, Santos and Neto, 2012). This idea can also be applied to the male subgroup, since younger boys are those who declare to have a better relationship with these rituals. Keeping our focus on the gender subgroups, if we consider the training area, we should keep in mind that this variable only achieved statistical significance for girls, with those studying in the area of Natural and Health Sciences pulling away from the ones attending degrees in the area of Humanities. This variable was not a differentiator for boys; nevertheless, students from Natural and Health Sciences also tend to get higher scores and those from Humanities lower ones. A possible interpretation

could be that the field of Humanities, having the human being as an object of study and, therefore, treating primarily the understanding of the human condition and its action in culture and society, discusses matters that are more connected to human rights, communication, social equity and justice, topics that cross all activities associated with hazing. The fact that data points to a better relationship of boys with hazing, when compared to girls, may result from the fact that men's social networks are preferably arranged in pyramidal fashion (favouring a better relationship with the simulation of rigid hierarchical relationships, typical of some activities of hazing), while women's social networks preferably take the shape of concentric circles with members avoiding the periphery of the circle (we should note that a lower participation in hazing could lead to the exclusion from the group) (Gilligan, 1982). In summary, the findings of this study do not deviate from others that have taken place in Portugal and in other countries. From now on, it may be important to develop new methodologies to approach this phenomenon in order to seek elements that allow us to have a deeper understanding of the reasons why students join, subordinate themselves to or repudiate hazing.

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