

Hens and stags

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Hens and Stags: What Happens in Barca stays in Barca

Introduction

Celebrations of soon to be married men and women's 'last night of freedom' are a cultural tradition signifying a 'rite of passage' in contemporary society. Traditionally more local and low-key, they have become quite elaborate events, often taking place over a weekend, and increasingly involving travel to overseas destinations, creating tourism that encapsulates both positives and negatives. Colloquially referred to as 'stag' or 'hen' 'dos', they are typified by excessive consumption of alcohol, participation in night-time economies and engagement in behaviours that contravene commonly-accepted social norms (Thurnell-Read 2012).

Although characterised as deviant and transgressive (Briggs and Ellis, 2017), such behaviours are valorised by the participants. One popular approach employed by participants to justify their behaviours and reduce or eliminate their guilt is the use of neutralization techniques.

Neutralization techniques are a mechanism by which individuals can reduce the anticipatory or actual cognitive dissonance they might experience when behaving in a way that contradicts their underlying values. The basic thesis is that neutralization techniques enable individuals to violate laws and norms that they ordinarily believe in and adhere to, thus helping them to protect their self-esteem and reduce self-blame (Kaptein and van Helvoort, 2019). The original theory of neutralisation included five techniques: denial of responsibility (when the delinquent defines himself as lacking responsibility for his actions), the denial of injury (the belief that deviant acts do not cause any real harm), the denial of the victim (when the delinquent believes his acts are not morally wrong in light of the existing circumstances), and the condemnation of the condemners (when the delinquent shifts attention from the violent act itself to its motivations) (Sykes and Matza, 1957). More recent categorisations suggest that neutralization techniques can be broadly classify as either: denial of the behaviour as being deviant or denial of responsibility (Kaptein and van Helvoort, 2019).

Forms of deviance or transgressive behaviours can be seen in other tourism sectors (Uriely et al., 2011), from heritage, ecotourism, and rural communities to sex tourism. We propose that this theory offers a way to explore such contradictions, and present data on hen and stag tourism as a way of illustrating its use in exploring apparent contradictions. Our insights are based on a considerable amount of ethnographic fieldwork. Following appropriate ethical approval, the lead author attended fourteen Stag and Hen parties in a variety of contexts from Amsterdam to Barcelona, Budapest to London, having gained access access to participants via commercial party organizers. Data was gathered over a nine-month period via observation of events (pre-, during-, and post-event) and via in-depth interviews with planners, participants, hosts, and service personnel (from bar managers and activity organisers to sex workers and drug dealers). Whenever possible, audio-recording of interviews occurred (detailed notes were taken in the three cases where recording was not permitted), which was conducted concurrently with an analysis.

Our approach incorporated iterative inductive analysis of transcripts, detailed notes and planning, event, and post-party discussions throughout data collection. As our research design was exploratory in nature our design followed closely techniques of constant comparison and the guidelines specified for methods of naturalistic inquiry (see Lincoln and Guba, 1985). These guides constitute a rigorous basis for dimension and theme delineation while comparing and explicating significant events (see Gioia *et al.*, 2013). We coded the data into themes and categories using the open, axial, and selective coding recommendations of Strauss and Corbin (1998), so our approach

was iterative until an adequate understanding of emergent issues and relationships was generated.

Participants Neutralisation Techniques

Two key contributions emerge from the data gathered. First is that that Stag and Hen attendees employ a wide range of techniques and mechanisms to alleviate their guilt both before and after events. Second, two previously undocumented techniques of neutralization were found. These two contributions merit further explication.

First, as expected, we found evidence of the extensive use of neutralisation techniques post-Stag/Hen events. However, we also found that both during the planning phase and immediately prior to attending Stag or Hen parties, attendees *pre-justified* potential deviant behaviour. First, attendees claimed that their intended behaviour was not supposed to cause harm (the denial of negative intent). Thus, prior to attending (often via Stag/Hen event social media groups – e.g. WhatsApp, Facebook) attendees commonly expressed views such as:

It's a stagggggg! We not aiming to cause trouble. We're not setting out to cause offence. No deliberate harm intended. [Stag Attendee, 32, Male]

Nobody's supposed to get hurt – this isn't a bank robbery! We're just going to partaayyyy! Nobody's out to cause mischief – well, not too much, anyway! [Hen Attendee, 24, Female]

These were supported by event organisers and such norms of ‘fun’ but no intention to harm were reinforced using some variation of the phrase ‘What happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas.’ In this way, rules for acceptable event behaviour were established and pre-rationalised before attendance. Secondly, those organizing the event (often the Best Man, Chief Bridesmaid), would pre-rationalise their behaviour using a variant of the metaphor of the ledger (Klockars, 1974). Intended misbehaviour was pre-justified by arguing that past good behaviour balanced or counter-balanced intended indiscretions. Commonly the ledger was for both past and future good behaviour and centred on intoxicant consumption and relationship fidelity. Illustratively:

I've not touched another woman since I met Tracy – not even looked. But on Stag? Well, that my last night isn't it? [Stag, 26, Male]

I've been so good – I've lost fourteen pounds – not one drink I've had. After the Hen, I'll be straight back to it too – I've still got seven pounds to go. But a Hen's got to drink. It's got to be a serious party!! [Hen, 37, Female]

In this regard, the finding of pre- (rather than post-) behaviour rationalisation extends the original conception of Sykes and Matza (1957) but is entirely consistent with the observations of Maruna and Copes (2005) and supports earlier arguments by Daunt and Harris (2011), who suggest that, on occasions, consumers pre-rationalise intended consumptive misbehaviour.

The second contribution that emerges from the study is the identification of two new, previously undocumented, mechanisms of neutralisation; the ‘defence of tradition’ and the ‘rite of passage’. The **defence of tradition** centres on the alleviation of potential guilt for misbehaviour through the defence of actions on the grounds of established traditional norms. For example:

It's traditional, isn't it? Hen nights have been going on for centuries and bloody right too! Hen's have fun, laugh with their mates, and all by themselves – no bloody men – apart from the traditional stripper. [Hen, 23, Female]

The bases for such traditions were often cited as either 'family traditions' (that's what my brother/Dad/Uncle did) or more vaguely as what is 'merely conventional' (that's what everybody does). Post event discussions revealed that the source of what is 'merely conventional' was almost exclusively film or television shows depicting Stag or Hen events (ranging from the Bachelor Party to the Hangover trilogy).

When I said [during the Stag night] 'everyone does', look at the Hangover – errrrr, The Stag, err the Tom Hanks ones - Bachelor Night? That's proof – everyone knows what goes on at a Stag! [Best man, 25, Male]

As such, participants used the defence of tradition not only to justify their behaviours but to excuse themselves for any responsibility for actions that they would, under conventional circumstances, consider aberrant.

The **rite of passage** neutralising of misbehaviour was particularly evident during overseas events. This type of neutralisation focuses on negating potential guilt via claims that Hen or Stag event conventions entitle participants to break standard norms. Distance from the Hen/Stag's home country appears to establish a detached sense of separation for attendees that aids in justifying their participation is a semi-formal rite or ritual, despite it breaking conventional norms.

We're out here {Budapest}, never been here before for anything other than John's Stag – we're away from everything and everybody – this is planet Stag! Buda-stagggggg! [[Stag, 27, Male]

Moreover, for key participants, such as Stags, Hens, Best Men, and Chief Bridesmaids, the party was often described in liminal terms, a 'crossing over' space, wherein participants were between the discrete stages of bachelorhood and marriage. For example:

It's kinda weird. I'm not single anymore but I'm not shackled either. No ring on this finger baby – not yet anyways! I'm a Hen in limbo and I'm going enjoy it! [Hen, 34, Female]

In this regard, the physical and psychological separation of (particularly overseas) Stag/Hen events contributed to a sense of life-stage liminality that participants collectively articulated in terms of it being a 'duty' to pass through this stage, which absolved them of guilt for any norm-breaking behaviour.

Concluding Remarks

Interestingly, the two techniques most commonly employed by participants were not post-event neutralizations of behaviours (although informants occasionally alluded to these) but rather the most commonly cited mechanisms were *pre-event* neutralisations through setting event norms, or *during* event techniques for neutralising guilt. In this regard, both the rite of passage and the defence of tradition were explicitly voiced during events to neutralise what would otherwise be viewed as norm-breaking by collectively communicating 'Stag/Hen norms'. Collectively, these serve as denials of behaviour as being deviant (Kaptein and van

Helvoort, 2019). In this case, the construction of the argument is simple. These behaviours would normally be unacceptable, but within the spatial confines of a stag or hen party they are rendered acceptable. Furthermore, denial of responsibility techniques were also employed – Stag/Hen events are important experience with their own norms, ‘out of space and out of time’ from normal life. This liminality creates an ambiguity around right and wrong, allowing competing ‘norms’ to be introduced.

The Hen/Stag context creates expectations such that deviance is almost inevitable, where behaviours normally understood as transgressive are re-evaluated based on alternative norms. These behaviours become acceptable and even valorised in order to appropriately acknowledge the soon-to-be bride or groom’s ‘last night of freedom’. Destination management authorities and tourism and hospitality businesses are also implicated in the construction and reconstruction of alternative norms, offering participants opportunities “to experience hedonically what may only be glimpsed voyeuristically at home” (McCabe, 2002:69). Our data offers insight into how conflicts are resolved between what participants should do and what they actually do, and allows us to appreciate the importance of denial of deviance (Kaptein and van Helvoort, 2019) as a neutralisation technique. Transgressive behaviours are an important tourism research context and neutralisation theory offers an interesting and novel way to explore the good and the bad of tourism.

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