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Black student leaders' race-conscious engagement:

Contextualizing racial ideology in the current era of resistance



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The 1950s through the 1970s, an era most known for sit-ins and demonstrations, stands out as a notable time for Black students' role in activism and resistance on college campuses. Because Black students were at the forefront of the civil rights movement (CRM), there appears to be a revered commemoration of engagement regarding that time period (Ellis-Williams, 2007). Individuals who see the CRM through this romanticized lens might perceive today's Black youth

as comparatively silent in the fight for social justice. However, data from the 2015 Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) survey revealed that political and civic engagement across the nation's college student demographics reflects the highest levels in 50 years since the survey's inception (Higher Education Research Institute, 2016). This increasing connection to social movements prompts the need for research that provides a nuanced understanding of the motivating

influences behind students' involvement in challenging injustice in the current sociocultural context.

Critical to the issue of social justice in higher education is the role of student activists, who can be defined as individuals committed to and actively engaged in social change (Ropers-Huilman, Carwile, & Barnett, 2005). Although engagement is seen as in line with the democratic ideals of a university, activists (particularly students of color) who problematize an institution's oppressive practices are often viewed as disruptive to the functioning of university life (Martin, 2014). In this paper, I explored what I deem as race-conscious engagement, in that while some Black students reject the consequences of an activist label, they are nevertheless committed to social change motivated by a salient Black identity. Race-conscious engagement may better explore the emotional negotiations that Black students at PWIs make in challenging the oppressive practices within those spaces.

Rethinking Resistance

Individuals who utilized a traditional lens to study discourse on resistance defined the ideal as necessitated by visible and collective action (Evans & Moore, 2015). However, some individuals employ acts of everyday resistance, in that they engage in resistance on a spectrum of actions (Hollander & Einwohner, 2004) based on the associated risks. Evans and Moore (2015) elaborated strategies to minimize the emotional labor of White spaces: "These thoughtful actions are engaged as strategies to both succeed within these institutions and simultaneously reject the personal reification of racial denigration and stereotyping" (p. 450). By investigating the emotional frameworks that guide students' decision-making and racial consciousness, current scholars can perhaps better understand how students fulfill their efforts to be engaged in resisting racist ideologies.

I explored Black student leaders' racial identity through the multidimensional model of racial identity (MMRI). One dimension of the model in particular, racial ideology, is based on how Black individuals should interact with others in society and

includes four philosophies: assimilationist, humanist, oppressed minority, and nationalist. Although most research on racial identity is conducted through surveys, those instruments fail to capture the complexity of race (Bonilla-Silva & Zuberi, 2008). I instead wanted to utilize reflective dialogue to understand the rationale behind how students form racial consciousness. Six Black student leaders at a PWI provided narratives of their experiences in predominantly White and racially-based organizations. The following insights reflect all of the students' desire to break leadership barriers for Black students on and beyond their campus. I follow this discussion with recommendations for scholars and practitioners on ways to support students in the heterogeneity of their efforts.

Resistance through Integration into White Organizations

Dennis, Bruce, Greg, Ron, Angela, and Amira were juniors and seniors at the time of the study. They provided valuable insight into the emotional cost associated with their racial identity beliefs as examples of everyday resistance in their leadership positions. With Angela as the exception, all students chose to actively seek out leadership positions in mainstream organizations to dispel Black stereotypes and work within a system of privilege and power to challenge the lack of Black representation. Angela illuminated her active involvement solely in Black organizations, defining such resistance to institutional racism as the ability to shelter oneself from the constraints of those spaces. Angela confronted the notion of integration as a conscious resistance through the following rationale:

Why are you not down for Black people? If I don't think your motives are pure ... then I'm upset like why would you even want to be a part of what hates you? If you're not gonna try to go in there and try to change it.

... students chose to actively seek out leadership positions in mainstream organizations to dispel Black stereotypes and work within a system of privilege and power to challenge the lack of Black representation.

Although her viewpoint exemplifies empowerment in challenging racism, it also denotes a perception that made engagement in predominantly White organizations undesirable. The remainder of participants saw their presence in mainstream organizations as a collective gain for the Black student community. Amira described her high leadership rank as the

possibility for collective change, declaring, "My whole rationale is that I want to get on the inside so that I can be the one making those decisions that affect people on the outside." In securing positions normally secured by White students, these Black student leaders asserted that in their excellence they should not be seen as an exception to Black students but as establishing the norm.

Challenging Predominantly White Institutions' Colorblindness as Resistance

Understanding of the low hierarchical value of Black lives caused dissonance in participants' ability to interpret experiences through commonalities with other student groups. Therefore, the race neutrality message on campus was amplified. Race neutrality is encompassed by colorblindness, which Bonilla-Silva (2014) addresses as a tool of White privilege that downplays the relevance of race and stalls racial progress by focusing on surface commonalities rather than systemic social inequalities. Participants rejected a colorblind approach through counternarratives of lived experiences with racism. Dennis explained: "There's a time when you're just hit right in the face with—wow I'm a Black male ... so many preconceptions are made before you even open your mouth." Participants as familiar with the stigma of Black inferiority were cognizant of the racialized consequences of attending a PWI.

Greg described campus racial dynamics as a Venn diagram, in that individuals focus on the outer variance rather than trying to find commonalities between racial groups. Greg's account of the lack of the dominant group's interest in diversity directly relates to the notion of PWIs as historically embodying education as an exclusive entity of prestige and entitlement (Patel, 2015) reserved for Whites. Related to the ideal of PWI attendance as an advantage to White students, participants who chose involvement in mainstream organizations were empowered by viewing the decision as the opportunity to tap into the benefits of such an association. Bruce questioned the limitation Black individuals placed on themselves by being confined solely to Black organizations: "Why put yourself in a position to attend a school where you know you're going to be outnumbered if you don't seek to make an opportunity of it?" In understanding that through their race-conscious engagement they were significantly exposed to White norms, participants

felt empowered with experiential knowledge that would allow them to be more intentional in how they disrupted those spaces. They realized the increased power capacity that could be secured in those spaces to ultimately benefit the collective.

The Value of Black Lives as Expressed Through Media

During data collection, the nationally publicized murder of Trayvon Martin, a Black teenage male, occurred. Participants reflected on how they planned to move forward with the influence of this sociocultural event in their leadership roles, and the Black-White dichotomy of racial attitudes in America further transformed participants' race-conscious engagement. Angela, who was attending a national student activist meeting when she heard the verdict results, illustrated the full extent of the event's emotional trauma:

So whenever it came in not guilty—man that was the worst. We were screaming! It was like you told me my mother had just died. I fell to the ground, it was awful. I was like ya'll need to send me home—I quit—I'm not doing this anymore... I still feel like I haven't had a chance to process what happened. I was sad and would love to get mad about it, but I don't have time. They were like what are we gonna do now? I don't know—I did what I thought I needed to do. I felt all we had to do was get Zimmerman arrested and the rest would be handled. They [America and the justice system] didn't care about us.

For Angela and other participants, the inferiority assigned to Blacks was realized through a nation that broadcasts the murder of Black males but declares the killer not guilty.

Bruce indicated that this tragedy fueled a renewed



Image by Loyola University Chicago



Image by Loyola University Chicago

to work at the [alumni center]. I thought Black parents are gonna come and they'll ask 'Do Black students come here?' Well you see me— your child is in good care.

Ron's narrative signifies a consciousness of the need to assist other Black students in combating the racism that often left them feeling outcast and excluded. Participants viewed the maintenance of separate racial spaces, fueled by the influence of a White conservative worldview that kept Black identity at the bottom of the racial hierarchy, as a hindrance to coalition building.

focus for Black students:

It was a wake-up call. Reminding me that the margin of error is weak ... I've always been willing to fight but now I'm realizing how real it is... That's why me succeeding at all cost in anything that I put my hand to— that's my way of making a statement of fighting back. I'm not going out there saying ... I'm doing A, B, and C but I did it on my own. I had support of a lot of people behind me.

Bruce emphasized that through his leadership he tried to establish a norm of success rather than being seen as an exception to Black male stereotypes. His reflective leadership stood as a tactic of hidden, everyday resistance in that it empowered him to succeed and manage the constant stigmatization he faced in White spaces. The reaffirmed low regard for Black lives inevitably framed interactions through a lens of racial consciousness and made it difficult for participants to embrace the notion that racism experienced by other groups was comparable to the Black struggle. Ron noted his form of resistance to the ideal of Black inferiority was to empower others to overcome exclusionary spaces:

That's kind of the reason I forced myself to do some things. I forced myself to do [university traditions], and forced myself

Need for Heterogeneous Perspectives of Activism and Resistance

Participants indicated that the lack of a clear definition of Afrocentrism caused a further divide among Black students. They recognized that an extremist approach has the effect of disengaging others, and at Unity this meant disengaging White peers as well as other Black students. Several participants referred to Angela and what they considered to be "over the top" activism, with Amira even describing Angela as being "too much" in her Afrocentric persona. Angela acknowledged that her commitment to continual Black consciousness was an unceasing effort:

Angela: It's really hard for people like me to understand who live in Blackness. In my mind wherever I am I'm talking about what it means to be Black. You're gonna understand who I am, is not a question. You have a problem with that, handle it. But that's not even a productive way for everybody to live their life.

Amira further elaborated on the confines of activism that made it an unattractive choice:

It's always nice to know about your roots. But I don't think you should be one com-

While some Black students reject the consequences of an activist label, they are nevertheless committed to social change motivated by a salient Black identity.

pletely different person and then 'I have to embrace Afrocentrism.' And you turn into a completely different person that you don't even want to be. If you're not a Marcus Garvey type person, then don't follow that path. Because you're only gonna be unhappy.

The misconception of activism as contentious and removed from more subtle forms of resistance demonstrated the need for Black leaders to deconstruct resistance as an either-or dichotomy.

With the exception of Angela, all of the participants held a leadership role within mainstream organizations, an action she strongly opposed. Due to her recent interactions with the Dream Defenders, Angela engaged in new critical reflection regarding heterogeneous Black engagement:

Everyone has a role in the movement ... we definitely all have a responsibility— how we choose to act in that responsibility is different. People ask me all the time—who did you like better Malcolm or Martin—I don't like either one of them better because they were both needed. If it would've been just one or the other we would have gotten nowhere.

Within this reflection, Angela challenged preconceived notions of mistrust toward those integrating organizations and created space to consider the variance of Black advocacy. Several students noted the romanticized narrative of the civil rights era. The complexity of a divided Black America caused participants to interrogate the division that negatively affects the Black student community. Greg repeatedly asked the rhetorical question "Where did we go wrong?" Frustrations with the apathy they often witnessed in their peers propelled these students to be consciously engaged in reflection on how to best tackle the constraints of PWI exclusions that remained unchallenged.

Recommendations for Research and Practice

Through the current study I highlight how Black student leaders negotiated their emotions in response to the institutional racism of Unity's White norms and exemplified leadership through a salient Black identity. The discourse this group of race-conscious leaders created empowered participants to verbalize how they negotiated their emotions in response to the institutional racism of White

norms through a salient Black identity. In this section, I offer several recommendations for scholars and practitioners related to their support of students' engagement efforts: 1) studying racial ideology through qualitative discourse rather than survey responses, 2) facilitating greater communication about the emotional taxation of engagement, and 3) designing programs around the heterogeneity of Black engagement and emotional management.

First, PWIs function on a narrative that asserts integration and inclusiveness. Such discourse frames student engagement for students of color as an individual choice and influences perceptions of collective action. For participants within the study, this message caused further misunderstandings of the heterogeneity of Black engagement. Research that stops short of holding PWIs accountable for protected inequities disguised as race neutrality fails to interrogate institutional racism and the harm individuals endure due to what Hamer and Lang (2015) described as structural violence. By creating qualitative discourse through this study, I point out the need for future research that explores the fluidity of racial consciousness within institutional contexts. Further research needs to be conducted that utilizes the voices of Black student leaders who challenge inequitable practices within specific contexts rather than generalized studies across institutions, so that the higher education community can hold the individuals who create policies accountable.

Additionally, student leaders within this study upheld the need for greater dialogue to break down such confined definitions of what Black engagement should look like. Evans and Moore (2015) emphasized that emotional management of racism for people of color includes decisions of how to respond, an understanding of how decisions will be interpreted within a White frame, and the feelings associated with particu-



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lar responses. Black student leaders who continuously face this daunting process face the possibility of racial battle fatigue, a concept illuminated by Smith (2008) to relay the emotional, physiological, and psychological stressors associated with fighting microaggressions in White spaces. Because students might have limited knowledge of the wide range of coping strategies to combat these stressors and the complexity of resistance, higher education professionals can empower students through various dialogue opportunities.

Finally, higher education professionals through their efforts can eliminate perceived judgment of what resistance should look like from the very community and programs designed to support them. Due to the fact that students are not just engaged in overt acts of resistance on campus, the higher education community must also address the evolving role of social media in students' engagement. Bonilla and Rosa (2015) discussed the concept of hashtag ethnography to describe individuals' use of a Twitter hashtag to connect to a common cause of resistance. Because these alternative venues can create an opportunity for students, who may fear the realized consequences of physical activism, to get involved, student affairs professionals must generate greater dialogue about the consequences as well as benefits of social media activism on campus.

Conclusion

Research on Black student engagement must continue to make connections to the framing of education as a White property right, emphasizing the ways that activism is co-opted as an inferior act of emotion and thus perceived as a threat (Evans & Moore, 2015; Patel, 2015). This study created the space for Black student leaders to engage in the disruption of institutional racism as the foundation of the PWI experience. Although the juxtaposition between individualism and collectivism as effective strategies perhaps will always permeate Black student communities in PWI spaces, students in this study indicated that both have meaningful purpose. As we seek to understand the emotional frameworks of Black consciousness students utilize to navigate dominant White norms, we must empower them to utilize heterogeneous tactics to do so. As Black students seek to establish a voice distinct from generations before them, we must loosen the constraints of the past so that their endeavors can reflect the cultural realities at present.

In understanding that through their race-conscious engagement they were significantly exposed to White norms, participants felt empowered with experiential knowledge that would allow them to be more intentional in how they disrupted those spaces.