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“Are We Really Not Going to Talk about the Black Girl?”: The Intergroup Racial Attitudes of Senior, White, Sorority Women

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Despite the positive effects of cross-racial interactions for students, predominantly White sororities remain segregated. Utilizing focus group methods, this study investigates the racial attitudes of White sorority women to understand the influence of sororities on racial attitudes. Findings revealed that participants in this study minimized race, thought about diversity within context, and perceived barriers to cross-racial interactions. These findings have important implications for campus professionals who work with sorority women.

With the changing racial composition of college campuses, scholars and (Chang, Astin, & Kim, 2004), practitioners have continued to make efforts to understand more about how race and racism influence student experiences and shape institutional environments (Harper, 2012). Differing views have emerged regarding the outcomes of a racially diverse student body. Some believe structural racial diversity leads to cross-racial interactions that have “positive effects on students’ intellectual, social, and civic development” (Chang, Astin, & Kim, 2004, p. 529). Others point out that even with a diverse student body, “students from different ethnic groups remain relatively segregated and isolated” (Sidanius, Laar, Levin, & Sinclair, 2004, p. 96). This line of reasoning goes on to conclude that the intended positive interracial interactions on college campuses do not occur or keep pace with the increase in the number of Students of Color on campuses (Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin, 2002; Milem, 1998). However, among students who do interact across race, there are many encouraging outcomes, including increased retention, satisfaction with college, and improved intellectual and social self-concept (Astin, 1993; Chang, 1996; Gurin et al., 2002; Hurtado, 2001). Research also points out that racially diverse living (Chang et al., 2004; Hurtado, 2005)

and peer group influences provide essential conditions for student cross-racial interaction and racial understanding (Antonio, 2001). Despite some differences, these studies explicitly or implicitly operationalize aspects of student subcultures as a key contributing factor to racial dynamics on college campuses.

Within the realm of subcultures on residential colleges and universities, fraternities and sororities serve as prominent examples of the opportunities and challenges that college subcultures present for students (Pascarella, Edison, Nora, Hagedorn, & Terenzini, 1996; Pike, 2003). Research has shown that these organizations are more likely to influence the behavior of their members, given that attitudes and interests are similar, membership is highly valued, and isolation from people not within the group typically occurs (Kuh, 1990). Media attention in recent years has shed light on racial tensions that exist in the recruitment practices (Crain & Ford, 2013; Grasgreen, 2013), party themes (Jaschik, 2013a; Jaschik, 2013b; Jaschik, 2013c; Lederman, 2014), and social activities (Jaschik, 2014) of fraternities and sororities across the nation, drawing attention to the racial homogeneity and lack of racial understanding within these student organizations. Empirical research corroborates these anecdotal examples. Sidanius et al. (2004) quantitative study of fraternity and sorority in-group and intergroup racial attitudes revealed a host of undesirable discriminatory attitudes associated with sorority and fraternity membership, including increased opposition to affirmative action and interracial marriage as well as more tolerance for symbolic racism, all of which reinforce intergroup bias.

While much of the research at the intersection of college students, race, and racism considers specific settings on college campuses (Museus & Jayakumar, 2012), these studies do not always address the racist nuances or subtleties of the assumptions and attitudes students possess about the racial dynamics in which they operate. This is a missed opportunity for researchers and practitioners concerned with fostering positive campus racial climates at institutions that are racially diverse and have active fraternity and sorority communities. Building on Bronfenbrenner's work (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1989, 1993), Renn and Arnold's (2003) ecological theory research explains that the racial divisiveness in fraternities and sororities potentially stems from the multi-tiered developmental processes that take place as students interact with each other and with the micro-systems around them. Put another way, students shape the culture they are a part of just as much as the culture shapes them. This argument highlights the importance of considering students' meaning making and the culture they are operating in to better understand the racial dynamics at play on a given campus. Accordingly, learning more about how White sorority members make meaning of their race within the context of their sorority experiences could illuminate ways in which racial attitudes are formed and impact climates for diversity. White women make up a sizeable demographic on many college campuses, comprising 29.4% of students in higher education (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2015). However, they receive little specific attention about their racialized and gendered experiences. Thus, this study sought to investigate the racial attitudes of senior, White Panhellenic sorority members living in chapter houses.¹ The motivation for this study was to clarify how the campus and chapter cultures coalesce to influence the racial attitudes of the organization's members and vice versa. This study is important given high-profile racist incidents some sorority organizations have endured or perpetrated (Crain & Ford, 2013;

¹ In the remainder of the article we will refer to this group as senior, White, sorority women/members.

Grasgreen, 2013; Jaschik, 2014; Jaschik, 2013a; Jaschik, 2013b; Jaschik, 2013c; Lederman, 2014) and calls for renewed approaches to research on racial diversity that simultaneously investigate the interaction between student characteristics and their context (Clarke & Antonio, 2012). The questions that guided this study are: (a) What are the intergroup racial attitudes of senior, White Panhellenic Council (PHC) women, and (b) in what ways does their particular chapter culture affect intergroup racial attitudes?

LITERATURE REVIEW: RESEARCH ON RACE, WHITE WOMEN, AND HIGHER EDUCATION

Much of the literature on college students' racial attitudes has focused on students' perceptions of race relations on campus (Ancis, Sedlacek, & Mohr, 2000), outcomes associated with cross-racial interaction (Chang et al., 2004), and students' perception of institutional commitment to fostering an inclusive campus (Rankin & Reason, 2005). As previous research has demonstrated, students' racial attitudes are problematic and need to be altered towards a more equitable and socially just perception of racialized others (Cabrera, 2014; Kordesh, Spanierman, & Neville, 2013). However, this has a potentially dangerous emphasis: It focuses on the outcomes or symptoms of White students' negative racial perceptions and takes for granted how these racial attitudes are created and reified. Attention must also be directed to how different campus subcultures potentially contribute to and affirm the harmful racial attitudes that White students possess. In order to consider the role subcultures play in shaping racial attitudes, it is important to determine how racial attitudes structure the experiences of White people in general as well as any intersectional considerations concerning White women specifically.

Racial Attitude Formation and the Intersection of Whiteness

Theories of racial attitude development often seek to explain the formation or properties of White racial attitudes and the subsequent transmission of power and privilege in socialized racial dynamics (Leonardo, 2002). The critical theory of Whiteness (CTW) is one such explanatory framework that focuses on racial attitudes and helps illuminate how Whiteness is structured in and shapes the United States. David Owens (2007) posited that a CTW explains the "socio-historical phenomenon that situates persons racialized as White in a social location that provides a particular and limited perspective on the world" (p. 205). Owens outlined seven properties of CTW that illustrate how Whiteness operates on a macro-level. Of particular interest to our study, Owens contended that Whiteness is an invisible property to Whites but is highly visible to People of Color, and Whiteness is continually redefined in order to maintain racial advantages and inequities. These properties pervade all of society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012) and are especially noticeable at predominantly White institutions that have highly visible and active predominantly White fraternity and sorority chapters (Ray & Rosow, 2012).

White Women and Race

One critique of higher education studies is that they often do not consider the multiple dimensions of identity (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007; Jones & McEwen, 2000). Given this study's

specific focus on White sorority women, Frankenberg's (1993) research is useful in helping us consider the dynamic interaction between race and gender. Furthermore, we will build on Robbins's (2012) synthesis of the literature on White women and racial identity development to ground this study in previous research. Frankenberg (1993) rooted her study in an explicitly socialist feminist ethos that sought to center race and gender while making race the unit of analysis. In doing so, she considered how gender informed the way the women in her study sought to make sense of their understanding of race and the mechanisms or "repertoires" they tapped to explain their understanding. As Collins (1995) noted, one of Frankenberg's (1993) major contributions was her assertion that White women identify with one of three overlapping paradigms of race. The essentialist paradigm focuses on "biological inequality;" the color-blind paradigm, or what Frankenberg (1993) termed "color and power evasive," focuses on similarities between races; and finally the "race cognizance" paradigm, which is the idea that inequality exists and is due to social structures and not biological differences (Frankenberg, 1993, pp. 14–15). Frankenberg (1993) concluded that most of the women in her study operated from the first two paradigms.

Gaps in Higher Education's Understanding of Race and Racism

CTW underscores how Whiteness is continually redefined in an effort to protect the advantages afforded to White people by virtue of their physical characteristics (Owen, 2007), whereas Frankenberg's (1993) work highlights the fact that White women's racial attitudes are developed in a continuous fashion. Taken together, these literatures demonstrate why racial attitudes are continuously formed and how that process is carried out. However, these literatures should be understood in light of two cautions pertaining to the present study. First, these bodies of research do not consider higher education as a specific location of their studies. Prior research has shown that predominantly White institutions are often racially hostile environments because of how the aforementioned properties of Whiteness are engendered and left undisrupted (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). Given this reality, frameworks are needed that situate racial dynamics in higher education institutions as a specific location of concern. Second, the specific subcultures that White women frequently operate in are also not fully captured by the previous overarching research. However, higher education scholars have consistently found that the specific cultures that students operate in are important to consider because environments have a large influence on the development of students (Renn & Arnold, 2003). An understanding of these cautions presents an important gap in the higher education literature on race because these cautions convey how little is known about the intersection of race and gender in specific campus cultures. In light of this, we turn to our theoretical framework to provide insight on effective approaches in considering both the racial attitudes and subcultures in which students may operate.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

We borrowed from three different bodies of literature to create a framework for considering the racial attitudes of senior, White, sorority women. The multicontextual model of diverse learning environments (Hurtado, Alvarez, Guillermo-Wann, Cuellar, & Arellano, 2012), properties of colorblind racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2009), and social identity theory applied to intergroup attitudes

(Sidanius et al., 2004) provide a rich conceptual foundation that situates our study in the higher education context and allows for critique of our participants' ways of meaning-making around race and racism. The multicontextual model of diverse learning environments (MMDLE) (Hurtado et al., 2012) framework enables practitioners, policymakers, and scholars to categorize practices and policies on college campuses concerning race and other social identities into five dimensions: historical legacy of inclusion/exclusion, compositional diversity, psychological dimensions, behavioral dimensions, and organizational/structural dimensions. These dimensions are moderated by the overarching policy, community, socio-historical, and institutional contexts. The behavioral dimension of campus climate, which is of most interest to this study, consists of: "(a) actual reports of general social interaction, (b) interaction between and among individuals from different racial/ethnic backgrounds, and (c) the nature of intergroup relations on campus" (Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, & Allen, 1999, p. 291). Also of note in the model is that a student's identity is placed at the intersection of the curricular and cocurricular processes on a campus. Our study, which examines sorority culture, is positioned as a component of the cocurricular process because of the student subculture's role in "advancing the education of students, affecting student development, and creating a positive climate on campus" (Hurtado et al., 2012, p. 81).

Although the MMDLE framework has advanced to be more inclusive of students' different social identities, the primary focus of this inquiry is on race and racism. Some scholars have suggested that many of the epistemologies typically used in educational research, including the constructivist lens chosen for this study, suffer from epistemological racism, or the notion that epistemologies arise out of the social history and culture of the [White] race [and] that these epistemologies logically reflect and reinforce that social history and that racial group (while excluding the epistemologies of other races/cultures), and that this has negative results for people of color in general. (Scheurich & Young, 1997, p. 8)

Given our interest in race and racism, we also utilized a sociological frame known as colorblind racism to analyze the data (Bonilla-Silva, 2009). This framework is helpful in revealing the ways in which "dominant racial groups express racial prejudice ... without appearing racist" (Berry & Bonilla-Silva, 2008, p. 217). This framework is a useful analytical tool that alerts the researcher to the various ways participants may augment or adapt their language, actions, or sense-making to appear less racist while still perpetuating racist systems of oppression.

Finally, studying campus climate related to White students can be challenging as the investigation calls for the illumination of racial beliefs and assumptions that are often unconscious or thought about infrequently. Social identity theory (SIT) helps scholars better understand the privileging of in-groups and the discrimination against those in out-groups (Tajfel, 1986). The central hypothesis of SIT is that in-group identification is causally related to intergroup bias (Kelly, 1993). This theory argues that to enhance self-conception by virtue of group affiliation, people will create or accept negative perceptions of people who do not share their group affiliation. Hence, the theory has been used to understand in-group and out-group dynamics spanning race, class, national origin, and even team sport allegiances (for a critical overview of the theory's application, see Hornsey, 2008).

Relatedly, Sidanius et al. (2004) applied SIT to the college context by conducting a quantitative study of racial/ethnic student organizations and predominantly White fraternities and sororities, testing to see how the affiliation of members in a racially homogenous group affected

their in-group and intergroup attitudes. Sidanius and colleagues (2004) created four conceptual clusters that were utilized to measure the in-group and intergroup racial attitudes of students: racial policy attitudes, social identity attitudes, ethnic prejudice, and perceived group conflict. Similar to our first phase in this research project that focused on senior, White fraternity men (Morgan, Zimmerman, Terrell, & Marcotte, 2015), we adapted Sidanius et al. (2004) clusters as concepts in the interview protocol. Hence, this study builds on the first phase of this project and the work of Sidanius et al. (2004) by using qualitative interviews to uncover the subtle nuances in racial attitudes of senior, White, sorority women. These frameworks underscore the importance of campus subcultures, such as sororities, in the development of students and provides guidance on illuminating the racial attitudes of participants while remaining sensitive to the potentially racist meaning-making of participants and researchers.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Constructivism assumes that both researchers and participants construct multiple realities that produce useful data (Bryant & Charmaz, 2007). Accordingly, the research team was interested in the coconstructed realities of intergroup racial attitudes created by the participants and then interpreted by the research team. Focus groups were selected for their usefulness in identifying areas of agreement and disagreement within a group (Carey & Smith, 1994; Reed & Payton, 1997; Sim, 1998). Furthermore, they allow participants to challenge each other and seek clarification on contentious issues potentially revealing the sources of complex behaviors and motivations (Morgan & Krueger, 1993).

Participants

We used purposeful (Patton, 2005) and criterion sampling (Creswell, 2013) to recruit women from Panhellenic Council (PHC) organizations to participate in the focus groups. The research site was located at a large, public, research university in the Midwest. Research suggests that members living in chapter facilities possess attitudes that are more racially hostile than those that do not live in chapter facilities (Hughey, 2007; Morris, 1991). Thus, the sampling criteria for the study focused on PHC organizations that have large chapter houses at the research site with living accommodations for over 75 people. The organizations also had to be established at the institution prior to 1950 to ensure that the groups had a substantial amount of time to develop a pervasive and unique chapter culture (De Los Reyes & Rich, 2003). Additional criteria stipulated that focus group participants had to self-identify as seniors (fourth year or above), White, and women. These criteria were used based on research that suggests that senior sorority members are significantly affected by the fraternity/sorority experience on a range of outcomes including openness to diversity (Pike, 2003; Zhao & Kuh, 2004). In combination, these criteria presented the opportunity to glean information-rich data about their intergroup racial attitudes (Patton, 2005). To recruit organizations and participants, a member of the research team contacted the presidents of all the PHC organizations that met the sampling criteria via e-mail and asked them to participate in the study. There were only two organizations that did not meet the sampling criteria. After the research team gained consent, they worked with presidents to recruit members to participate in the focus

groups. Two focus groups were conducted with a total of 12 participants across the study; one focus group had five participants, while the other had seven.

Data Collection

Data were collected during hour-long focus groups utilizing a semi-structured interview protocol (Fontana & Frey, 1994). The focus groups were held at the participants' chapter houses to foster a sense of comfort so that participants would feel more open to speaking candidly about their sorority experience. To create the interview protocol, the research team used the conceptual clusters from the Sidanius et al. (2004) study, noted in the theoretical framework, as guides to formulate interview questions that would facilitate discussion about how the essence of each cluster functions in their sorority experience and in the larger chapter culture. For example, racial policy attitude questions included asking participants to talk about the degree to which their sorority values talk about racial diversity. Questions about social identity attitudes asked participants in the focus group how they knew if members were the right fit for their organization. Focus groups were digitally recorded and members of the research team transcribed each session verbatim.

Data Analysis

Coded transcripts were compared and similar codes were collapsed into parent codes. Parent codes were defined and arranged into overarching themes that were illustrative of the participants' experiences and racial attitudes (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2013). Data were analyzed through the colorblind framework. This allowed members of the research team to challenge the participants' voices and our interpretation of their voices in order to be mindful of the way that racism is potentially enacted in chapter cultures and subsequently influences their racial attitudes. For example, if a participant said "I don't see race" in partial response to a question, we sought to analyze how this colorblind view may indeed be a perpetuation of racism in their social context. Without the use of this framework, the research team could be inclined to hear "I don't see race" as a benevolent finding. Transcripts were independently coded and analyzed for consensus and disagreement among the participants regarding the intersection of their chapter experiences, intergroup racial attitudes, and how these experiences and attitudes were influenced.

Positionality

It is critical for researchers to interrogate their research positionality in order to "bring to researchers' awareness and consciousness known (seen), unknown (unseen), and unanticipated (unforeseen) issues, perspectives, epistemologies, and positions" (Milner, 2007, p. 395). To help manage this process, the team members engaged in ongoing conversations, wrote research memos, and maintained currency with up-to-date literature on race and racism to facilitate the process of making the unseen and unforeseen more visible during the research process. Further, the research team examined their own identities as they related to the study. Our research team is made up of one woman and two men from different backgrounds and social identities, including fraternity and sorority membership,

race, and student affairs interests and experiences. The combination of these characteristics gave us a unique collective lens because we were a part of the broader campus culture but had differing levels of familiarity with the properties of Whiteness and the norms of the sorority subculture. For example, one of the team members is affiliated with a Panhellenic sorority and identifies as a White woman. The second researcher is affiliated with a National Pan-Hellenic Fraternity and identifies as a Black man, and the third researcher is not affiliated with a Greek-letter organization and identifies as a White man. This “insider/outsider” dynamic among the team members presented many opportunities to reflect on the ways our positionalities informed various stages of the research project. For instance, having a team member who was not familiar with fraternity and sorority culture led to many discussions of tradition and culture that may have been taken for granted if all team members had experiences in a fraternity or sorority.

Trustworthiness

To facilitate trustworthiness and credibility, the team members individually coded each transcript and then compared codes throughout the analysis. This process also advanced consistency and triangulated the data analysis because we did not solely rely on one person’s interpretation of the data (Tracy, 2010). The team shared findings with an outside researcher familiar with the context of the study as a form of peer debriefing. Participants were provided a summary of the themes and invited to provide feedback as a form of member-checking (Creswell, 2013). The research team engaged in an on-going dialogue during data analyses to challenge each other’s biases and assumptions that might have stemmed from the researchers’ positionalities (Barry, Britten, Barber, Bradley, & Stevenson, 1999).

LIMITATIONS

The findings from this study must be understood and interpreted within the context of certain limitations. First, this research was conducted at a single site—a large, public, predominantly White, research institution in the Midwest. A significant number of the students at the institution are involved in Greek life. We further restricted our sample by including only White, Panhellenic sororities with women who resided in chapter houses. Our findings and implications should be understood through that context. The findings are also based on focus group interviews with women from two chapters. Therefore, individuals hoping to use this research should bear those things in mind when thinking about transferability of the findings to other contexts or groups of students.

FINDINGS

Presented in this section are four themes that illuminate nuanced insights into how senior, White, sorority women make meaning of how the chapter and institutional culture inform their interracial group attitudes. These include: (a) the minimization of race, (b) diversity

within context, (c) perceived barriers to cross-racial interaction, and (d) contrasting racial attitudes.

Minimization of Race

Minimization of race occurred when participants used identities other than race to focus broadly on diversity in an effort to draw the attention away from the lack of racial diversity and toward other forms of diversity. One strategy used was to focus on other social identities in which there was more variation within their chapters. For example, one participant commented, "Yeah, and I think that ... there are diverse religions between houses and what not. I think it's ... weirdly sort of how the system pans out." Additionally, other participants thought about diversity as being involved in different activities, "Our chapter does value [diversity] a lot I would say. I would say our members are very diverse. There's people that are involved in 'you name it' someone is doing it."

Participants also focused on a very generalized notion of diversity stating that their chapter diversity comes by virtue of everyone possessing diverse and unique characteristics, "I think as a sorority we think of diversity as different, every person here is different." Another participant put it a different way when she said, "Yeah, but, even within being diverse with your interests and who you are as a person, it's a big deal." For the women, diversity was defined less by social identities and categories and expanded to encompass a much larger array of experiences and characteristics.

Another way participants minimized race was by focusing on the ways in which they felt discriminated against because they were in a sorority. One participant exemplified this when she noted, "even the campus in general I think looks down on all of Greek Life. They don't know that we study and are in other organizations unless they knew us personally." Instead of focusing on racial differences between White women and Students of Color, the women focused on ways in which they too experienced discrimination because of others' perceptions of their membership in a Greek organization.

Finally, some participants equated their minimization of race to a sense of altruism or being a good person because they did not see race when they looked at an individual. One participant stated that "We don't want to judge someone based on the color of their skin. I want them to be in this chapter because they're goofy, they're ambitious, they're great and if they're African American then awesome." Another participant saw seeing someone for their race as a form of reverse discrimination when she stated that "I feel like [paying attention to someone's race during recruitment] would be placing them at a higher value than other people is kind of like, what you're not supposed to do, everyone is supposed to be equal, so reverse discrimination." Minimization of race is a strategy employed by the sorority women in their efforts to not focus on the lack of racial diversity in their context. The strategy also persists as a racial attitude that pervades how they see themselves and others.

Diversity within Context

Another theme that emerged was the contextual way in which sorority women thought about racial diversity. The participants often stated that while they may have appeared racially homogenous, they were more racially diverse than several of the observed environments within

their context. Some of the women pointed to the lack of racial diversity at their institution: “I also think it’s a little bit like the ratios. Here at [institution omitted] there’s not a lot of diversity so the chances of you being friends with someone is lower to begin with.” Others used the lack of racial diversity within their state context as a reason that they do not have a large pool of diverse people with whom to interact: “Yeah, I mean ... [this] state is pretty conservative but as a university we are very liberal so ... I don’t know how that plays into things.” Additionally, another individual commented that “I want to talk to my uncle about this because he’s actually a Trustee and he’s been over to the house and he’s like, ‘I don’t understand why you don’t have more multicultural girls.’ Just because there’s not the numbers.” Others stated that other Panhellenic chapters were not diverse, but their chapter was: “I would say that we have some racial diversity. I think in the Greek system as a whole there’s not a lot of racial diversity. I think that’s something that I’ve seen changed throughout my time in the chapter.” Whether it was other chapters, the institution, or the state as a whole, for the women, there was some other comparison point to which they were more diverse. There seemed to be a sense among the women that they were doing better than others at diversity, and therefore did not need to focus on it as much as others.

While the women acknowledged that there was a lack of racial diversity within their context and attributed their lack of cross-racial interactions to that lack of racial diversity, they also seemed to hold fast to an idealized hope that society was changing, and the lack of racial diversity and cross-racial interaction may soon be an issue of the past. When speaking about multicultural groups interacting with predominantly White groups, one participant stated,

I think that’s changing, but with any sort of change it takes awhile just because it’s always been done a certain way so it always has to be done a certain way. But like we said, we’re [experiencing] a sea-change.

Others commented that the idea of racial integration would be welcomed and appreciated: “I think it would be a really neat thing because I think [interaction between predominantly White groups and multicultural groups] needs to be more integrated.” Diversity within context highlights how relative the understanding of race is for the sorority women in the study. By focusing on a broader meaning of diversity, the women worked to shift attention away from their racial sense-making towards understanding diversity in a way where they could include themselves and their current chapter demographics.

Perceived Barriers to Cross-Racial Interactions

The focus groups participants also shared that there were obstacles that served as barriers to cross-racial interactions on campus. One barrier that participants identified was what they perceived as significant, but non-racial, differences between the multicultural organizations and their own. In the words of one participant,

I have a couple friends who are in a sorority within Multicultural Life and it’s a lot different. Their process of recruitment and their standards that they’re held to are way different than ours. So I don’t know if that could necessarily come into ours ... I know that at least one of my friends doesn’t see what we do as legitimate.

The different methods for recruitment and member education served as a stark distinction between their organizations and multicultural organizations that created a perceived barrier for the White women.

Participants also perceived differences in organizational pride and tradition between the predominantly White and predominantly Black councils. For instance, one member noted,

They place a lot more emphasis on ritual and I think almost everyone that I know who would be in a multicultural sorority really has a lot of pride in the organization that they are in. Panhellenic people still have pride but it's not as prevalent as it would be for the people that I know in multicultural sororities.

As one participant shared, the lack of communication between their community-wide governing boards created an information stop-gap, "a lack of communication between the two organizations that kind of separates diversity."

Another perceived barrier was the social structure of having parties together, as one participant shared,

I personally don't know anybody in any multicultural sororities or fraternities. We haven't had [social events] and I feel like at least it's easiest for me to make friends with people that we [socialize] with because I see them all the time.

Differences in chapter size also served as a barrier that participants spoke of: "[One NPHC fraternity] invited us to come to their formal and because there's a lot less of them I think that's also an issue. They don't allow as many and stuff like that. It's a lot smaller."

Participants provided a few examples of when they did interact with other multicultural² groups at the institution. One participant commented, "I just met a couple new members at our philanthropy who came from one of the multicultural sororities and I think that we're going to try to do some activities with them this semester." As the participants spoke about these interactions in conjunction with their perceived barriers, it became apparent that the onus for cross-racial interactions, such as inviting the women to formals as stated previously or taking the initiative to come to a philanthropy event, was placed on the multicultural groups. However, none of the White participants spoke about going to multicultural philanthropy or educational events. While the women expressed interest in interaction across race, the responsibility for initiating that interaction was placed on the multicultural groups.

Contrasting Racial Attitudes

The previous themes present exemplars of attitudes held by the sorority women that allow aspects of Whiteness and privilege to operate in their chapter culture in a largely undisrupted way. However, it became evident that at least some of the women in the focus groups were becoming more aware of and sometimes more empathetic to the experience of Students of Color at their institution. In particular, we illuminate the interplay of how the participants came to understand more about racial dynamics within their context.

² We have chosen to use "multicultural" as an all-encompassing word to represent Greek letter organizations that represent various racial/ethnic backgrounds (e.g. Black, Asian American, Indian American, Latinx).

Some participants discussed how they were aware that they lacked an understanding of different racial groups. One participant remarked, “I just don’t know that much about [multicultural sororities and fraternities], which is kind of embarrassing for someone who’s been in a sorority every year and someone who’s on Panhel.” This lack of understanding spurred another participant to take advantage of opportunities that the campus offered to learn more about and interact with different racial and ethnic groups. She described why she chose to visit the Latino culture center saying, “I’m a Spanish major and a Portuguese minor, so I’m really interested in Latino culture anyways but it’s not weird [to visit the culture center] because I speak the language so I feel more connected [there].” It is interesting to note here that the woman felt comfortable going to the Latino cultural center because of her ability to speak Spanish. Her ability to feel like she can share in aspects of culture with groups that are different from her created a sense of comfort, which was not necessarily present when the women thought about interacting with multicultural groups.

Another contrasting finding came from one of the participants about how she made meaning of her experience as a woman in the computer science field.

And I think that would be fantastic, go to a fair where multicultural fraternities and sororities are maybe having a booth and have our sorority to be there and reach out to these women and let them know that we are interested ... I think that we are so disjointed from other demographics that maybe effort to reach out to these girls and maybe invite them over for a day beforehand to meet us and get introduced to something that neither of us have much contact with.

This is another example of one of the participants being caught up in the process of wanting to affirm allegiance to aspects of the hegemonic culture but also starting to question if interactions could be different. In this way, we see participants developing complexity in the way they think about race.

DISCUSSION

The findings illustrate that intergroup racial experiences of senior, White, sorority women are highly varied, continuously negotiated, and complicit in the systemic marginalization of Students of Color. These findings are not entirely novel and align with previous research on White people’s racial identity development (Helms, 1990, 1995). Furthermore, consistent with Sidanius et al. (2004) and SIT (Tajfel, 1986), we found that, to an extent, involvement in the sorority functioned as “ethnic clubs” for the participants, meaning that participants’ experiences largely went along with and contributed to White racial norms and attitudes. Considering our theoretical framework, what makes this study’s findings relevant to higher education scholars and practitioners is the added nuance into how White women make sense of how the culture and climate they operate in shapes their racial attitudes and resulting behaviors (Hurtado et al., 2012).

Our findings suggest that the culture of the sorority and the larger institutional climate may exert pressure on the women to minimize the salience of their race and how salient race is for others (Abes et al., 2007). This appears to be an effort to not conform to racialized stereotypes about White people relative to the prevailing dimensions of climate. Participants expressed that they do not often think about race or racial issues as the quotes about minimization of race show. It seems as though race is either not salient at all or they work to minimize their own racial

salience in order to fit into the predominant norms of their sorority subculture. To think and act in ways that bring up issues of their race and racial dynamics within their subculture and on campus might alienate them from their peers who are less inclined to think about race or think about race differently. This dynamic of minimizing race muddies the conclusion from Sidanius et al. (2004) that membership in fraternities and sororities tended to have “broad effects” on the racial identity development of White students, most notably leading to increases in “their opposition to an ethnically diverse campus, their belief that ethnic organizations promote separatism, their opposition to interracial marriage and dating, their symbolic racism, and their sense of ethnic victimization” (p. 107). However, considering the central tenant of SIT, with minimization of race in mind, it becomes unclear whether the participants’ shifts in racial attitudes stem from a lack of racial salience or a racial salience that is predicated on racial conflict.

Our findings also show that participants sought to minimize the importance of race for their minoritized peers. This is consistent with Bonilla-Silva’s (2002) assertion that “colorblind racism persists because American norms forbid the open expression of racially-based feelings, views, and positions, when Whites discuss issues that make them feel uncomfortable” (p. 59). The participants framed these efforts when interacting with Students of Color in altruistic terms. Minimizing race for Students of Color allowed participants to find commonality in experience and served as a way to help affirm their positions as non-racists.

Additionally, the culture of the sorority experienced by participants fostered a unique interplay between how the psychological and behavioral dimensions work together to produce aspects of Whiteness and group identity (Tajfel, 1986). The racial demographics of our research site and the interplay between the psycho-behavioral dimensions of the chapter culture mediated the Whiteness and group identity for the participants in our study in a nuanced way that has not been previously identified in work based on the MMDLE (Hurtado et al., 2012). Psychological efforts to not want to confirm stereotypes that participants were either racist or overly concerned about race presented an interesting paradox whereby they worked to avoid perceiving themselves as racists. This in turn led to them behaving in ways that could be perceived as racially hostile (e.g., by dismissing the importance of race for minoritized students). This paradox is important to consider because it presents an underexplored rationale for why White women make investments in minimizing race within campus contexts.

As the quotes about the salience of other forms of diversity make clear, the women prided themselves on their chapter diversity. Given the quantitative nature of the Sidanius et al. (2004) constructs, it is no surprise that a nuanced understanding of diversity might have been overlooked. This finding is in part an example of how colorblind racism operates in that it seeks to dismiss or ignore race as a relevant concept (Bonilla-Silva, 2009). However, our participants did not totally dismiss the importance of having “diversity” in a particular context. In fact, they celebrated how their sorority culture could be viewed as an example of how diversity (e.g. different majors, hometowns, co-curricular involvement) looks and operates. By centering diversity in context, participants were able to identify themselves with what they perceived as a larger institutional value of diversity. While they were not able to pick out race and racism as a discourse that they should be concerned with, they could effectively identify the concept of diversity as important, despite not being able to clearly explain why diversity is a value.

In contrast, recent research has explicated how White male college students make meaning of racial discourses claiming to be the victims of racial antagonism on a campus (Cabrera, 2012,

2014). Our participants did not appear to view themselves as victims of negative racial intergroup dynamics. They did identify as victims of sorority stereotypes but centered their victimization on aspects of their identity that were not racially salient. Thus, they could effectively be recognized for embodying diversity, broadly defined, just not racial diversity. This indicates that efforts to raise awareness about racial diversity either by the institution or their national organization might influence the sense-making of the women. However, it seems that the messaging is colorblind or race-neutral in nature and not concerned with pushing the women to consider their intergroup racial perceptions. For instance, the National Panhellenic Conference (NPC) standards document, which serve as a statement of minimum expectations for the 26 member sororities, states that chapters should, “participate in at least one program that promotes a climate of diversity and inclusion” (National Panhellenic Conference, n.d.). There is no further guidance on how diversity should be operationalized, and it could very easily be interpreted to mean “diversity within context” rather than racial diversity or other forms of diversity related to social identities and systems of oppression.

Finally, participants expressed their belief that racial dynamics on their campus were changing, something that Sidanius et al. (2004) did not attend to in their study. Given their experiences, the women believed that the racial dynamics on campus are changing, relative to their understanding of the past, or else cross-racial interactions among predominantly White groups and multicultural groups would not be occurring. This concept conflicts with the previous discussion points because there seems to be a tacit acknowledgement from participants that there may have been previous racial tension and that intergroup interaction on the basis of race is something that is positive and desirable. This nuance is best showcased by the disconfirming finding of the participant who used her experience of being a woman in computer science to express empathy with the experience of racially minoritized students and ideas for how her chapter could work to address the racial dynamics that exist on campus. Previous literature has noted that unlike White men, White women might be more inclined to be sensitive to the experience of racially minoritized students because of their experiences with patriarchy and sexism (Frankenberg, 1993; Robbins, 2012). Our findings corroborate these previous studies and add that despite pervasive problematic racial sense making in their sorority culture, there is still space for these racial attitudes to be challenged and disrupted.

IMPLICATIONS

Drawing on the central themes derived from the data collected in the focus group sessions with White sorority women and consistent with our theoretical framework, suggestions can be made to address intergroup racial attitudes that hinder more positive and profound relationships and attitudes across race. The four implications that follow could aid student affairs professionals, particularly those working closely with staff and student leaders in sorority and fraternity life, in their attempts to address some of the hindrances found in the study.

(Re)Define Diversity in Sorority and Fraternity Life

We observed at various points during the focus groups that a variety of definitions regarding diversity were held by sorority members in the same chapter. These variances in what constitutes

diversity stalled the complexity and depth of the focus group conversation because it was necessary to continually redefine diversity as a social construct tied to one's identity and manifestations of power and privilege in society. Therefore, student affairs professionals could seize this opportunity to define or redefine what constitutes diversity in their sorority and fraternity life division on their respective campuses. Assessments regarding diversity policy or mission statements could yield useful information for practitioners regarding the efficacy or even existence of such statements. (Re)defining diversity at the campus and national headquarter levels could help to alter the misperception and avoidance of diversity in the chapter house. This suggestion also addresses the CTW concern of Whiteness persisting as an invisible property by foregrounding racial diversity as a concept that chapter members must grapple with in conversations about diversity (Owen, 2007).

Integrate NPHC, MCGC, and PHA

More could be done to raise the level of awareness, both in sorority and fraternity life and on college campuses generally, regarding the presence and purpose of the National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC) and Multicultural Greek Council (MCGC) sororities and fraternities. The NPHC is an umbrella organization bringing together the nine historically Black fraternities and sororities. MCGC is the umbrella coalition for the multicultural Greek letter organizations. Many of the participants were unsure or completely unaware of NPHC and MCGC organizations' policies and practices nationally and at other institutions. They did not know whether other institutions had Greek life councils and chapters that were separated by race, how separate councils met distinctive needs of organizations at other institutions, or whether NPHC or MCGC groups lived in chapter housing.

Subsequently, student affairs professionals who work in sorority and fraternity life should assess their environments, both physically and socially constructed, for injustices in representation, lack of interaction amongst all fraternities and sororities, access to resources, and administrative policy. The lack of knowledge and understanding of multicultural Greek life on the part of predominantly White sorority members suggests not only a gap in communication but also perhaps that these groups have seats at different tables that create policies and programs for their respective communities. However, since predominantly White tables come with power and privilege, it is important for all of the groups to have a seat at the same table. One promising place to ask about equity across race in sorority and fraternity life are the NPHC and MCGC sororities and fraternities themselves. Holding interviews and focus groups with students who belong to NPHC and MCGC sororities and fraternities could yield promising, realistic, and actionable solutions for creating a campus that has a greater understanding of and appreciation for NPHC and MCGC organizations.

Utilize Existing Trainings and Courses to Unpack Whiteness

Because of their role in providing social support, comforting guidance, and logistical information to potential new chapter members, sorority recruitment counselors often undergo training programs that equip women with these skills. While some of the participants had completed recruitment counselor training themselves (for the institution of focus here, an eight-week, credit-bearing course), one clear finding noted earlier was the apparent lack of knowledge and

palpable discomfort in discussing potential Chapter Members of Color. A challenge is thusly made to student affairs professionals to include or increase time devoted to unpacking Whiteness, its unearned advantages (McIntosh, 1989), and the ways it manifests itself in the recruitment process and elsewhere. The notion and implicit meanings of “fit” could be deconstructed and scrutinized in a safe and nurturing learning environment. This recommendation also helps to respond to the CWT concern of the ways in which Whiteness is continuously redefined to maintain its advantages and could help chapters remain aware of these dynamics on a proactive rather than reactive basis (Owen, 2007).

Chapter efforts to emphasize colorblindness as a strategy to address race in sorority and fraternity life could be challenged through existing training. Educational sessions could progress and be extended to address nuanced racialized concepts uncovered in this study, including racial stereotyping and cultural appropriation. Finally, campus-specific issues related to racial diversity could provide additional contexts through which the level of awareness, skills, and attitudes in addressing race might be improved.

Promote Diversity through Intersecting Experiences

Offices or individuals tasked with fostering inclusive institutions should think through strategies that take up how sexism could be employed as a gateway to illuminating systems of privilege and oppression at work nationally, their historical foundations, and their current effect within higher education. Unlike most White fraternity men, sorority women could be challenged to reflect on their minoritized experiences, the irrational reasons provided to explain away their experience, and the hurtful messages that were received as a result of their experience. They could question the messages promoted in contemporary culture regarding what it means to be a woman and could name what people and groups have the control to distribute and reinforce these messages.

The commonality of marginalization observed and felt by both women and Individuals of Color could move White sorority women closer to the “race cognizance” paradigm described earlier, which posits that inequality is due to social structures as opposed to biological differences (Frankenberg, 1993). This is an important conceptualization of race because it allows women to uncover the nexus between race and gender, which are both socially constructed identities harnessed to produce hegemonic privileges in society for White men (Hooks, 1986). However, professionals should be careful not to allow sorority members to overgeneralize or equalize experiences related to racism and gender when employing this technique. While relatable experiences can be an effective mechanism for illustrating the lived experiences of others, careful attention must be paid to ensure that members understand that experiences of marginalization across and within identities are not universal. We point readers to Nash (2008) for important intersectionality considerations.

CONCLUSION

As noted previously, sororities can be highly influential in shaping campus culture. Though widely studied, the subculture of sorority life has received less attention for its effect on the intergroup racial attitudes of college students. Meanwhile, the stratification—both structurally

and ideologically—of sorority life has yielded incidents of racial intolerance that have caught national media attention (Svrluga, 2015). More importantly, Students of Color continue to face racially hostile campus environments while White students continue to reify this culture (Sidanius et al., 2004). The results of this study illuminated the existence of intergroup racial attitudes amongst senior, White, sorority members within chapters that present race-related challenges and opportunities that affect the campus culture and climate. Greater engagement across race in the campus sorority life organizational system could allow organizations to harness their campus culture influence and support positive change with regards to racial attitudes. While there is historic separatism built into the foundations of Greek life, increased attention on the degree to which traditionally unconnected groups collaborate and the qualities of those interactions could provide a path forward for campuses looking to ensure that sorority life exists as an attribute to positive campus racial environments.

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