But We Didn't Mean It Like That: A Critical Race Analysis of Campus Responses to Racial Incidents

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Racial incidents on college campuses have occurred in a variety of ways for a number of years, with documentation of these instances dating back to the civil rights era (Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Jackson & Heckman, 2002; Perry, 2002; Schmidt, 2008; Stotzer & Hossellman, 2012). Record of such incidents increased in the 1990s, particularly after the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) mandated that hate crimes concerning race, ethnicity, creed, and sexual orientation be reported (Jackson & Heckman, 2002). However, due to the varying nature of racial incidents, it is difficult to quantify their prevalence from both historical and contemporary standpoints. Furthermore, it is probable to assume that numerous racial incidents on campus do not get reported or documented due to the normalized, pervasive nature of racism and discrimination in education (Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Yosso, 2005).

While several studies (Solorzano et al., 2000; Sue & Constantine, 2007; Sue, Bucceri, Lin, Nadal, & Torino, 2009) have been conducted on various student populations who experience campus racial incidents, few have inquired into the campus response to such events. For the purpose of this study, we define “campus response” as statements released by those allegedly responsible for the racial incident (e.g., student organizations, outside parties) in addition to the campus spokesperson (e.g., Provost, Media Relations Director). Although responses go beyond that of released statements (e.g., punishments for offending organizations, social media discussions), we focus on the aforementioned formal statements from campus constituents for this study. Gaining insight to campus responses is imperative for policy development and implementation, especially as the rate and visibility of racial incidents continues significantly on campuses today.

In our study, we critically analyzed campus responses to racial incidents and offered suggestions for how the campus generally, and student affairs administrators specifically, can more effectively respond to and address such events. In summarizing our research, we first briefly discuss definitions of racial incidents. Next, we outline critical race theory (CRT), the framework we used to analyze and critique campus responses to three separate racial incidents. We then detail how we analyzed our data using themes from the CRT framework. We conclude with recommendations for practice.

What Are Racial Incidents?

Campus racial incidents can include hate crime, ethnoviolence, and microaggressions. Stronger words like hate crime and ethnoviolence are used to describe more overt racial incidents such as inappropriately themed parties and culturally insensitive displays, such as nooses and blackface. According to Perry (2002), “ethnoviolence – often referred to as ‘hate crime’ – is much more than the act of mean-spirited bigots” (p. 3). Ethnoviolence is the result of systemic and socially constructed norms that allow dominant cultures to engage in actions that are exploitative, violent, and intimidating toward marginalized groups (Perry, 2002).

The term “microaggression” is used to describe covert, but pervasive, everyday acts of racism that are largely ignored and not reported (Pierce, 1969; Perez Huber & Solorzano, 2015; Sue, Lin, Torino, Capodilupo, & Rivera, 2009; Yosso, 2005). Institutional microaggressions are “those racially marginalizing actions and inertia of the university evidenced in structures, practices, and discourses that endorse a campus racial climate hostile to People of Color” (Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solorzano, 2009, p. 673). These microaggressions represent the systemically and structurally embedded practices at universities that work to marginalize non-dominant populations. In our paper, we investigated “campus racial incident” that involved inappropriately-themed social gatherings or parties where microaggressions and ethnoviolence were exhibited.

Theoretical Framework

CRT is used to frame this research in an effort to expose the systemic and pervasive nature of racism in higher education and responses to campus racial incidents. CRT has been applied as a lens to analyze and critique racism throughout U.S. educational system (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). For the purposes of this research, we focused on three key tenets of CRT.

First, CRT emphasizes that race and racism are widespread throughout society and deeply embedded in U.S. systems (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Higher education is one such system in which racism is institutionalized and deeply entrenched. The endemic nature of racism normalizes its occurrence, making it hard to recognize, let alone remedy. Second, CRT challenges dominant ideologies, such as colorblindness (the belief that race no longer plays a role in society), and meritocracy. When an act of ethnoviolence occurs, perpetrators of the act may claim that, because they do not see color, they acted out of ignorance, or the act was not racist. Challenging dominant ideology exposes how discourse and initiatives that purport to address and include do the exact opposite in that they serve a majoritarian agenda and (re)create a system that is incapable of making tangible advances toward a healthy campus climate.

Finally, the notion of interest convergence claims that gains in racial equity will be advanced only when it
benefits white people in some manner (Bell, 1980). White leaders, who often occupy the spaces and positions with the most power on campus, will tolerate advances for students, faculty, and/or staff of color as long as the changes are not too drastic and do not cause a major disruption of the status quo (Bell, 2004; Castagno & Lee, 2007; DeCuir & Dixon, 2004). Through a CRT lens, we aimed not only to deconstruct responses to campus racial incidents but also to provide concrete suggestions for constructing responses that address the root problem of systemically implicit racism within these incidents.

Incidents & Methods

Utilizing document analysis and CRT, we examined three racial incidents that occurred between February 2012 and October 2012. The racial incidents examined were selected because they all: 1) ignited debate and media coverage at a campus and national level; 2) occurred within a one-year period of one another, and; 3) were similarly characterized as racial incidents in the form of inappropriately themed parties, which allowed for consistency throughout analysis. A brief summary of each racial incident follows.

First, in the winter of 2012, Delta Delta Delta and Lambda Chi Alpha hosted a “cowboys and Indians” theme party at the University of Denver. Three days later members of the Native Student Alliance (NSA) brought their concerns with the party and ensuing Facebook pictures to the attention of a senior level administrator of color working in the campus multicultural center. In response to NSA’s outcry, the two fraternity/sorority organizations wrote an apology letter that was read in a public campus space little over one month after the racial incident, which were part of our analysis. We also analyzed a letter from University of Denver’s Provost addressing the campus incident.

Next, at University of Texas, Austin (UT Austin) in the fall of 2012, Zeta Tau Alpha and Delta Delta Delta organized a fiesta-themed party during which several students donned Mexican sombreros and ponchos that perpetuated inaccurate stereotypes regarding Latina/o culture. For example, one student wore a shirt with the words “illegal immigrant” written across the front, while another student dressed as a border patrol agent. A fraternity, Alpha Tau Omega, at the same institution planned and promoted a similar gathering before canceling it amid controversy from the initial party hosted by the sororities. Two responses were analyzed for this incident: the apology letters from the sororities and fraternity and the acknowledgment statement from the Associate Director of Campus Diversity and Strategic Initiatives.

Finally, Chi Omega sponsored a party at Penn State from which several pictures were circulated on the Internet via social media outlets. Similarly to the fiesta-themed party at UT Austin, sorority members were dressed in sombreros and painted mustaches on their faces. One held a sign that read “will mow lawn for beer + weed” while another sign read, “I don’t cut grass, I smoke it.” Sources analyzed from this racially themed party include the apology letter from the sorority president and the follow up letter from the university’s Director of Public Information. We also relied upon news articles from each campus’s student newspapers each student.

We employed document analysis to analyze documents from three racially charged incidents occurring in 2012. Document analysis is often utilized as a means of triangulating qualitative research (Yin, 2009). To critically examine and deconstruct how students and administrators responded to campus incidents utilizing the various data sources, we analyzed documents for the ability to portray concrete steps taken by university constituents to address the incident. Questions we asked throughout the analysis process included: 1) Do the documented responses present the racial incident as an opportunity for the campus community?; 2) Do the documented responses deny the possibility of racism influencing the racial incidents?; and 3) Do the documented responses place emphasis on future concrete action to be taken with those students involved with the racial incident?
Results

We found that the written responses from both the offending organizations and campus spokespersons were principally defined by neutral and generalized (and thus noncommittal) stances against racism. We also found that the three CRT tenets discussed above (interest convergence, racism as endemic to society, and the dominant ideology of colorblindness) were prevalent within and throughout all responses.

Interest Convergence

Racial incidents on college campuses are not officially addressed and typically remain undocumented until negative media coverage and disruptive campus protests occur (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). Unfortunately, this was the reality with all three incidents we studied. All three campuses and organizations remained mostly unaware and seemingly unaffected until their images were threatened when pictures of the offending incidents surfaced on social media websites. For instance, the Native Student Alliance (NSA) at University of Denver approached a senior administrator to have the “cowboys and Indians” party publicly acknowledged and concretely addressed after the offensive photos were revealed on Facebook. To address the NSA’s concerns (and to calm the storm of media reports), a campus forum was organized during which a public apology was read by the two fraternity/sorority organizations. Members of the NSA also had the chance to speak at the event.

Analyzing this image-protective response from an interest convergence lens exposes how NSA members were given a voice and a political platform because it served the interests of white students and administrators in an effort to restore the peaceful image of the institution (Morfin, Perez, Parker, Lynn, & Arrona, 2006). While members of the NSA hoped to spread awareness regarding the truth and importance associated with Native American culture and traditions at the campus forum, the only members of the fraternity/sorority community present were the two required to read the apology statements. The lack of participation from the fraternity/sorority community prevented NSA members a full opportunity to advance their goal of increasing awareness. Contrarily, the forum did provide the opportunity for the fraternity/sorority organizations to read their statements in an attempt to show remorse for their actions. This leads us to ask, “Who ultimately benefited from this campus forum?”

In the organizations’ apology letter we see the use of the phrase “our organizations will be using this as an opportunity” (Moya-Smith, 2012). Though the entire phrase is telling, the simple word “opportunity” encompasses the interest convergence implicit in the motives of the apology. Too often offensive acts are proclaimed as remedies to promote “the opportunity to learn” or the “opportunity to advance inclusive practices on a broader campus level.” Left out of these opportunities to learn are the acknowledgments of pain caused to those directly affected by the racial incident, or the opportunities for the impacted groups, such as the NSA, to explain the impact or increase awareness regarding their cultural practices and traditions. The opportunities instead focus on those who committed the racially charged incident, thus negating the negative impact such incidents bring to underrepresented campus populations.

Racism as Endemic

As systemic forms of racism and exclusion become more normalized in society, both are increasingly difficult to recognize and acknowledge (Solorzano et al., 2000). As made clear in the public letter of apology from the groups who hosted the “cowboys and Indians” theme party at DU, the students who sponsored the party were unwilling to frame or admit their actions were racist: “the theme was chosen out of ignorance, not racism” (Moya-Smith, 2012). In the apology letter from the offending student organization at UT Austin, there was a failure to acknowledge the fiesta party with T-shirts reading “illegal immigrant” was an act of disrespect, by stating it was merely a perception: “We understand now what seemed to be an appropriate, celebratory theme could be perceived as mocking and insensitive.” (Maly, 2012). To claim a lack of understanding is a privilege bestowed upon students in the majority who do not have to think about their race, or issues of race in society on a daily basis. From a CRT perspective, this ignorance is equated to the endemic and normalized nature of racism that is deeply embedded in many campus communities, making it difficult to expose and deconstruct racist acts that are standard within the institutional environment.

Further fueling the endemic nature of racism is the nearly unanimous inclusion of a statement clearing
the fraternity/sorority organizations and institution as whole from “condon[ing] racial discrimination of any kind” (Maly, 2012). Clearly, not condoning racism does not mean that subtle racist acts do not occur every day. And while the fraternity/sorority organizations and college campuses are quick to denounce racism, their actions to concretely acknowledge, address, and prevent such incidents occur at a disturbingly slow pace, if at all. The constant, incremental claims of “not condoning racism” and “using this opportunity to better ourselves” used in statements from UT Austin and Penn State (Maly, 2012; Zap, 2012) illustrate how entrenched racism is in the culture of these institutions while at the same time creating a façade by taking small steps to “remedy” the situation. Furthermore, while there is a common declaration of “using this as an opportunity to improve our fraternity and sorority member education programs by increasing awareness and sensitivity of minority groups on campus” (Moya-Smith, 2012), such statements are not paired with concrete steps the organizations will take to increase awareness and sensitivity for underrepresented groups.

Dominant Ideology of Colorblindness

Analyzing the documents through a CRT lens also exposed how the dominant ideology of colorblindness was embedded throughout the discourse of response. Colorblindness, which asserts that there is no race and therefore there can be no racism, is illustrated when the fraternity/sorority organizations at DU declared, “the theme was chosen out of ignorance, not racism” (Moya-Smith, 2012). We continue to see this master narrative in statements from the student organizations at UT Austin: “Tri Delta does not condone cultural insensitivity or racism,” and “Alpha Tau Omega does not condone racial discrimination of any kind” (Maly, 2012). Yet both organizations hosted or planned to host parties rooted in the very cultural insensitivity uniformly denounced in each response. The dominant ideology asserted here is that there is some “other reason” these parties occurred, and that racism has no part of the equation, even though this is clearly not the case.

The hesitancy to acknowledge wrongdoing by focusing on intentions versus impact is evident in the three apology statements from the fraternity/sorority organizations at UT Austin. The statement acknowledged that their actions could be “perceived” as mocking and disrespectful of Mexican and Mexican American culture, as opposed to concretely stating that such actions are in fact degrading. One organization’s statement stated that their participation in the offensive party was a “misunderstanding concerning the organization’s intentions” (Maly, 2012) This represents another demonstration of dominant ideology to emphasize intention versus impact, as doing so allows the organization to claim innocence, rather than responsibility, for the incident. CRT deconstructs this reliance upon intention rather than impact as allegorical to restrictive versus expansive (Crenshaw, 1988) views of equality. The dominant tendency to focus on process allows for superficial (restrictive) acknowledgment of racial inequality that does not result in concrete (expansive) outcomes for people of color in education and employment. In the same vein, reliance upon the fraternity’s intentions does not allow the detrimental impact of the offensive party to be concretely addressed.

Doing this means that more than one campus response to a racial incident is needed, and follow-up statements go the extra mile in terms of showing a long-term commitment to addressing the issue as pervasive, rather than isolated.

Chi Omega at Penn State has the shortest apology statement, simply stating that the fiesta party “does not support the organization’s values or what they aspire to be” (Zap, 2012). Again, we see the shifting of focus from the present to the future. Despite having just hosted a party where members of the organization wore garb mocking Mexican/Mexican American traditions with phrases like “I don’t cut grass, I smoke it,” the members of the sorority would not condone the portrayal of such “inappropriate and untrue stereotypes” in the future. But what about their past actions? How will the members of this organization work to fulfill their aspirations of not contributing to such hurtful and fictional stereotypes of ethnic groups? Such superficial acknowledgment of these acts of ethnoviolence on campus from students, administrators, and broad campus organizational standpoints are consistent with scholars’ (Glenn, 2008; Schmidt, 2008) assertions that responses to racial incidents condone racism in efforts to restore the public image of the institution under fire.
Recommendations

As a result of our study, we offer the following recommendations. First, student affairs and higher education administrators must (continue to) work with student groups and campus spokespersons to go beyond expressing sorrow for offensive behavior conducted in racial incidents. It is crucial that apology statements include an action-oriented nature that firmly states how the campus and specific student groups are working to address the subsequent issues, past, present, and future, from the incident. Incorporating concrete action steps to be taken as a result of unrest from a racial incident must create interventions that reach students from the offending organizations, rather than those who are dealing with the offenses (i.e., “preaching to the choir”). Doing this means that more than one campus response to a racial incident is needed, and follow-up statements go the extra mile in terms of showing a long-term commitment to addressing the issue as pervasive, rather than isolated.

Also integral to a follow-up statement is the ability to provide evidence of a systemic approach to the situation that becomes embedded in the campus organizational structure, such as a protocol for responding to racial incidents developed by an on-going committee. The committee must include a diverse representation of students, student affairs professionals, faculty, and administrators. It is imperative that the committee is not a defense mechanism against claims of racism, but rather a proactive means by which to consistently assess, report, and subsequently act on significant issues related to racial campus climate. Systemic integration and continuous program development will demonstrate the longevity of the commitment to dismantle pervasive racism on campus, rather than the implementation of one short-lived intervention program that is isolated and overly specific to the most recent racially charged event.

Group dialogues regarding race and racism tend to be the first step in addressing the aftermath of a racial incident on campus. However, conversations on racism should not be just that, but rather purposeful dialogues that are cross-racial, sustained, and deconstruct the normality of whiteness (Ortiz & Rhoads, 2000; Parker, 2006). Sustained dialogue is a documented practice originally used to strengthen relations between Americans and Soviets after the cold war, and is practiced at several institutions of higher education today (Parker, 2006). It includes intentional dialogue between groups with a strained history, wherein the strategy is to cooperatively delineate the problems, goals, and outcomes of purposeful dialogue over a significant amount of time (at least one year).

Lastly, assessing the institutional climate for racial interactions and outcomes provides university constituents with an understanding of how students are experiencing the campus atmosphere from a racial perspective. While surveys are a common method of assessment for campus racial climate, it is also effective to gather qualitative data from students of color regarding their campus experiences in various spaces (e.g., residence halls, classroom, cafeteria). Counter-story telling as a methodology stemming from CRT will allow the voices of those marginalized students to be centered, while providing rich data with which to address specific areas of campus racial climate.

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