“Stick With Yourselves; It’s What’s Normal”: The Intergroup Racial Attitudes of Senior, White, Fraternity Men

Demetri L. Morgan, University of Pennsylvania
Hilary B. Zimmerman, University of California - Los Angeles
Tanner N. Terrell, Indiana University - Bloomington
Beth A. Marcotte, Loyola University Chicago

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“Stick With Yourselves; It’s What’s Normal”: The Intergroup Racial Attitudes of Senior, White, Fraternity Men

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Hilary B. Zimmerman, University of California, Los Angeles
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Abstract

Substantive cross-racial interaction on college campuses has been known to have positive effects on student learning and development (Chang, Astin, & Kim, 2004). However, literature shows that students from different minoritized racial groups often remain separated from majority White groups, such as fraternities, thus prohibiting each group to realize the benefits such interaction could offer (Sidanius, Laar, Levin, & Sinclair, 2004). Utilizing focus group methods, this study investigated the racial attitudes of 20 senior, White, Interfraternity Council men in order to better show how the fraternity culture and experience influence the racial attitudes of members. This study found four themes that help illuminate how racist attitudes are formed and reproduced in these organizations. The implications of this study are useful for student affairs professionals concerned with the ways in which racial dynamics on predominantly White campuses affect the campus climate for diversity and the character development of students.

While mostly White males have attended higher education institutions throughout the history of higher education in the United States (Cohen & Kisker, 2010), the racial demographics of college campuses have changed drastically over the years. Within the past 40 years, enrollment rates among Hispanic, Asian/Pacific Islander, and Black students have increased by 19% (U.S. Department of Education, 2012). Because of these changes, institutions have made efforts to understand more about race and the influence of racial dynamics among college students (for a comprehensive review of the campus climate for diversity literature, see Hurtado, Alvarez, Guillermo-Wann, Cuellar, & Arellano, 2012).

1Demetri L. Morgan (demetrim@gse.upenn.edu) is a doctoral student in the higher education division at the University of Pennsylvania. His research explores the role and responsibility of higher education in a diverse democracy. Hilary B. Zimmerman (hzimmerman@ucla.edu) is a doctoral student in higher education and organizational change at UCLA. Tanner N. Terrell (terrell@indiana.edu) is a doctoral student in higher education and student affairs at Indiana University. Beth A. Marcotte (bmarcotte@luc.edu) is currently a resident director at Loyola University Chicago, where she works primarily with first-year students and two learning communities.
While students possess multiple identities (Abes, Jones, & McEwen, 2007) that shape how they experience higher education, racism and its pernicious influence on campus climates and higher education scholarship continue to be significant challenges for scholars and practitioners to navigate (Harper, 2012; Harper & Hurtado, 2007). In response, higher education scholars have developed various theories to help explain the racial identity development of college students (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010) and to show that students experience college differently because of different racial identities (Reid & Radhakrishnan, 2003). However, there are differing views on the influences of a diverse student body. Some argue that diversity leads to cross-racial interactions that have “positive effects on students intellectual, social, and civic development” (Chang, Astin, & Kim, 2004, p. 529). While others point out that even with a compositionally diverse student body, “students from different ethnic groups remain relatively segregated and isolated” from White students (Sidanius, Laar, Levin, & Sinclair, 2004, p. 96). Given the variance between these views, more research on how experiences in college influence student’s racial attitudes and shape their behaviors is necessary.

While the body of literature on the effects of race on the individual student is growing, the research regarding race dynamics between student organizations is limited. Peer groups serve as a major influence on students’ interactions, specifically in racial understanding (antonio, 2001). One influential peer-group on both the individual student and the institutional culture are fraternities. The media attention over the last year has shed light on the racial tension that exists in recruitment practices (Crain & Ford, 2013; Grasgreen, 2013), party themes (Jaschik, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c; Lederman, 2014), and behavior (Jaschik, 2014) of fraternities across the nation, displaying the negative outcomes associated with racial homogeneity of these organizations. Little research has been done to find out how students make meaning of why racial homogeneity stills exists or how their experience in these organizations influences their attitudes and behaviors around racial dynamics in their chapter and on their campus. This study aims to aid in the understanding of how fraternities contribute to members’ understanding of race through the study of intergroup racial attitudes.

Trends in the Study of Race

In order to investigate the intergroup racial attitudes of fraternity men, it is important to have an understanding of the literature pertaining to the construct of race on a college campus. Prior research from the 1950s to the 1980s focused largely on hostile environments, lack of access for Students of Color, and the role of segregation practices and policies in influencing the higher education landscape (Braddock, 1985; Hurtado, 1992). In the 1990s, a narrative emerged on college campuses that access to higher education was slowly improving for underrepresented students (Altbach, 1991; Harvey, 2001). However, the intended positive cross-racial interactions inside and outside the classroom did not occur or keep pace with the increase in the number of Students of Color on college campuses (Milem, 1998).

The need to understand the lack of positive cross-racial interactions in conjunction with affirmative action court cases (Fisher v. University of Texas, 2013; Grutter v. Bollinger, 2003), spurred a growing body of literature regarding the educational benefits of both a racially diverse student body and cross-racial interactions among students (Hurtado et al., 2012; Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, & Allen, 1999; Milem, Chang, & antonio, 2005). Researchers found that there are many positive benefits of cross-racial interactions for individual students, including increased student retention, satisfaction with college, and improved civic, intellectual, and social self-concept (Astin, 1993; Chang, 1996; Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin, 2002; Hurtado, 2001). Additionally, researchers also found that certain conditions promote cross-
racial interactions. The most essential conditions have centered on racially diverse living and work arrangements (Chang et al., 2004; Hurtado, 2005), enrollment in courses with racially diverse content (Nelson Laird, 2005; Nelson Laird & Niskodé-Dossett, 2010), and structured opportunities to engage in interactional diversity (Hu & Kuh, 2003).

One way that researchers have extended the work on the conditions that promote positive cross-racial interaction is by studying White students’ attitudes towards racial diversity (Gurin, Nagda, & Lopez, 2004; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). This line of inquiry is important because many studies have noted that White students perceive the racial climate to be very different and often more positive than their Peers of Color (Ancis, Sedlacek, & Mohr, 2000). There are undoubtedly multiple factors that contribute to this perception. One of the prevailing explanations for this reality is that racially diverse environments cause White students’ race not to be as salient of an identity since “Whiteness” is normative (Ancis et al., 2000; Phinney, Ferguson, & Tate, 1997; Rankin & Reason, 2005). Another explanation for the differing perceptions of the racial climate for different groups of students is that the campus culture in which different student populations operate is having an important effect (Museus & Jayakumar, 2012).

Very few studies have sought to make White students the center of their inquiry on race and racism without doing a comparison to Students of Color. There are three reasons the authors very intentionally focus this study on senior, White, fraternity men who are a part of longstanding organizations that have chapter houses on a campus. First, research shows that members who live in chapter facilities of Interfraternity Council (IFC) organizations have been found to be more racially hostile than those who do not live in chapter facilities (Hughey, 2007; Morris, 1991). Secondly, the focus on longstanding organizations, or chapters that have been on a campus since 1950, assures that the groups have had a substantial amount of time to develop a pervasive and unique chapter culture (De Los Reyes & Rich, 2003). Finally, the concern with senior (fourth year or above), White males stems from research that suggests that senior fraternity members are significantly affected by the fraternity experience on a range of social and academic outcomes and, of most interest to this study, openness to diversity (Pike, 2003; Zhao & Kuh, 2004). In combination, the research points to why senior, White fraternity men might have negative racial attitudes. However, these bodies of literature do not center on how the participants actually make sense of their attitudes and how their attitudes are informed by the culture that they regularly experience. Thus, the authors turn their focus to the intersection of race and campus culture.

**Theoretical Framework: The Intersection of Social Identity Theory, Campus Culture, and Colorblind Racism**

Studying campus culture related to White students can be especially challenging because the investigation calls for the illumination of racial beliefs and assumptions about one’s own race (i.e., in-groups) and other races (i.e., out-groups), which are often unconscious or thought about infrequently. Intergroup bias is operationally defined here as the “systematic tendency to evaluate one’s own membership group (the in-group) or its members more favorably than a non-membership group (the out-group) or its members” (Hewstone, Rubin, & Willis, 2002, p. 576). As Engberg (2004) noted, intergroup bias, or to put another way, the racial attitudes one possesses, stems from one’s prejudices, stereotypes, affective reactions, and discriminatory acts. Consequently, (a) social identity theory, (b) the influence of campus culture on college students, and (c) colorblind racism are integrated to form the theoretical framework that guided the authors’ approach to the design and analysis of this study. The remaining portions of this section will overview...
relevant aspects of each concept and then conclude with an explanation of how the integrated framework informed our research questions and study execution.

Social Identity Theory (SIT) has often been employed as a theoretical tool to help scholars better understand the privileging of in-groups and the discrimination against those in out-groups (Tajfel, 1986). SIT states that in-group identification is causally related to intergroup bias (Kelly, 1993). A study by Sidanius et al. (2004) applied SIT to the college context by performing a comparison study between minority racial or ethnic student organizations and predominately White fraternities and sororities, testing to see how the affiliation of members in a racially homogenous group affected their in-group and intergroup attitudes. Interestingly, Sidanius and colleagues (2004) found that fraternities and sororities have similar positive effects on their White members’ in-group attitudes while stalling the White racial identity development of its members.

Consequently, the authors list a host of potentially undesirable outcomes associated with fraternal membership for the students in their sample population, including increased opposition to affirmative action and interracial marriage as well as more tolerance for symbolic racism, which all reinforce intergroup bias (Sidanius et al., 2004). However, the study does not address the nuances and subtleties of the assumptions and attitudes fraternity and sorority members have about the intersection between race and their fraternal experience and the resulting effect of those dynamics on the chapter and campus culture. Understanding these nuances should be of utmost importance to student affairs professionals and scholars concerned with understanding and improving the campus culture around students’ race relations.

In this sense, culture in this article “reflects the assumptions, beliefs, and values inhabitants construct to interpret and understand the meaning of events and actions” (Strange & Banning, 2001, p. 100). At large institutions, a group subculture is more likely to influence the behavior of its members when (a) attitudes and interests are similar, (b) membership is highly valued by its members, and (c) isolation occurs in regards to interaction with people not within the group (Kuh, 1990). Therefore, examining the student culture of fraternities at the subcultural level, or more specifically within each fraternity, should provide insight into the intergroup and in-group attitudes of individuals within the fraternity.

Given the centrality of race in this study, the authors seek to avoid Harper’s (2012) critique that, “most higher education scholars rely on everything but racism in their attempts to explain, theorize about, and discuss findings that emerge in their race-related studies” (p. 23). Some scholars suggest that many of the epistemologies typically used in educational research, including constructivism, suffer from epistemological racism that contributes to the avoidance of racism in scholarly work (see Scheurich & Young, 1997, for a review of the literature). Thus, a sociological perspective known as colorblind racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2009) framework is helpful in revealing the ways in which “dominant racial groups express racial prejudice… without appearing racist” (Berry & Bonilla-Silva, 2008, p. 217). It was important to utilize this complimentary framework because of the authors’ epistemological agreement in Bonilla-Silva’s (2002) assertion that,

the normative climate of what can be said in public changed dramatically from the Jim Crow to the post-civil rights era, [thus] the language of color blindness is slippery, apparently contradictory, and often subtle.

(p. 42)

In summation, social identity theory and the research on campus subculture help the authors remain sensitive to the ways racial attitudes are formed and how a particular campus culture influences that process. Coupled with the idea of colorblind racism, the authors are empowered to remain sensitive to the ways in which racial hegemony is being manifested and reified in the chapter and campus culture.
However, it still remains to be seen how the fraternity men make meaning of their own racial attitudes and experiences on campus when race and racial dynamics are foregrounded. Thus, the present study seeks to answer the following research questions: (a) What are the intergroup racial attitudes of senior, White, Interfraternity Council (IFC) men and (b) in what ways does their particular chapter culture affect their intergroup racial attitudes?

**Research Design**

In this study, researchers employed a constructivist epistemology (Lincoln & Guba, 2013; Schwandt, 1994) and focus group methods (Kitzinger, 1994) because the study aimed to illuminate the intergroup racial attitudes of IFC fraternity men and how their environment affected those attitudes. Bryant and Charmaz (2007) asserted that constructivism assumes that both researchers and participants construct multiple realities that produce useful data. Accordingly, the research team was interested in the co-constructed reality of the intergroup racial attitudes created by the participants and then interpreted by the research team. Focus group methodology was selected as the authors’ methodological approach because it is particularly useful for identifying areas of agreement and disagreement within a group (Carey & Smith, 1994; Reed & Payton, 1997; Sim, 1998). Furthermore, focus groups are helpful in revealing the sources of complex behaviors and motivations because the group setting allows participants to challenge each other and seek clarification on contentious issues (Morgan & Krueger, 1993).

**Research Site & Participants**

Researchers used purposeful (Patton, 2005) and criterion sampling (Creswell, 2007) to recruit organizations to participate in the focus groups. The research site was located at a large, public, predominantly White research university in the Midwest. The research site has a history of tense race relations among students, faculty, and staff. Numerous initiatives have been implemented on the campus over the years to help improve the campus climate for diversity broadly and to respond to overt acts of racism specifically.

A member of the research team contacted the presidents of all the IFC organizations that met the sampling criteria at the research site. As previously mentioned, potential participants had to identify as White, male, and fourth-year student or above. After the research team gained consent from the presidents, they worked with presidents to recruit members to participate in the focus groups. Two members of the research team conducted each focus group. There were about 110 eligible participants across the four organizations that fit the study’s criteria. Each focus group had five to seven participants totaling 20 participants. The participants represented a wide array of majors, but most were in either the college of business or the college of arts and sciences. In addition, the participants’ hometowns were mostly from the mid-west region of the United States, and most of participants were involved in student organizations outside of their fraternities. While the participants’ chapters had individuals who racially identified as non-White, the overall membership of each of the chapters was predominantly White.

**Data Collection**

Researchers collected data during four one-hour focus groups. The authors chose to conduct focus groups and not individual interviews because of their simultaneous interest in individual meaning-making and group meaning-making with regards to intergroup racial attitudes. The focus groups were held at the
participants’ fraternity houses in order to foster a sense of comfort so that the participants might feel more open to speaking candidly about their fraternity experience. A semi-structured interview protocol (Fontana & Frey, 2005) was used during each session. To create the interview protocol, the research team used the conceptual clusters from the Sidanius et al. (2004) study as guides to formulate interview questions that would facilitate discussion about how the essence of each cluster functions in their fraternal experience and in the larger chapter culture. Follow-up questions were asked to better understand the overall culture of the fraternity chapter concerning aspects of race, racism, and cross-racial interactions. Focus groups were digitally recorded, and members of the research team transcribed each session verbatim.

**Data Analysis**

Team members independently coded each transcript and looked for areas of consensus and disagreement among the participants regarding the intersection of their fraternal experiences and racial attitudes, with special attention paid to how these experiences and attitudes were influenced. Next, the authors compared coded transcripts and collapsed similar codes into groups of codes. They then discussed and defined each group code and arranged the group codes into overarching themes that were illustrative of the participants’ experiences and racial attitudes (Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2013).

The initial codes, group codes, and emergent themes were analyzed through the colorblind framework (Bonilla-Silva, 2009) to disrupt and challenge the participants’ voices and the researchers’ interpretation of their voices in order to be mindful of the way that racism is potentially enacted in their chapter culture and subsequently influenced their racial attitudes. An example of the application of this framework is how the research team combed through the transcripts and examined the data for evidence of racist attitudes or beliefs in the participants’ responses versus benignly taking the participants’ responses without questioning whether the response had colorblind racist undertones. If the authors believed that colorblind racism may be operating in the response, they noted it in their initial coding and brought it up as a point of discussion with the research team as they moved through the data analysis process.

**Trustworthiness**

Techniques used to assure trustworthiness included individually coded transcripts by multiple researchers and code comparison throughout analysis to confirm consistency and triangulate data (Denzin, 1978). The authors shared their findings with an outside researcher familiar with the literature and the research site as a form of peer debriefing, and participants were provided a summary of the themes as a form of member-checking (Creswell, 2007, 2009; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Miles et al., 2013). During the data analyses, the authors readily challenged each other’s biases and assumptions that might have stemmed from their positionalities, which included a mix of gender, fraternity and sorority affiliation, and race among the research team (Barry, Britten, Barber, Bradley, & Stevenson, 1999).

**Findings and Discussion**

Four themes emerged from the authors’ data analysis, including minimization of race, out-group perception, traditions and history, and relative diversity. These categories were selected to help capture the complex ways the participants made sense of their racial attitudes and how their experiences in the culture of their chapter and the larger campus informed their racial attitudes. Each category is presented below with
direct quotes from the focus group participants. To remain true to the constructivist approach they took to
this study, the authors integrated a discussion of their theoretical framework into each subsection rather
than disentangling the findings from their interpretation (Mills, Bonner, & Francis, 2006).

**Minimization of Race**

One of the more prevalent findings was that participants’ attitudes were shaped by their belief that race did
not or should not have an influential presence in their life or the lives of People of Color on campus. Minimization of race explains how White people dismiss race as a viable or central influence in the lives of People of Color. The participants were not open to interrogating how their chapter dealt with the racial dynamics present in their lives or how those dynamics were embedded within their particular chapter culture. While this finding is in agreement with the current literature about the low salience of race for White people (Helms, 1997) or colorblind racism (Bonilla-Silva, Forman, Lewis, & Embrick, 2003), particularly interesting within this study was how the fraternity men made sense of race being perceived as a small piece in their lives and minimized within their collective chapter culture. Scholars suggest that these efforts allow White people to acknowledge that discrimination exists but then affords them the opportunity to explain it away through either “outright denial or minimization strategies” (Bonilla-Silva, 2009, p. 29).

Participants in this study minimized race in three distinct ways: by focusing on other identities, highlighting altruistic outcomes, and shifting racial outcomes.

**Focusing on other identities.** The focus on other identities was most prevalent when participants were talking about their recruitment practices. Participants, especially during recruitment, indicated that they tried to view the different aspects of any potential candidate as quantifiable “stats” that indicated fit within the organization or added value. In response to a question about their recruitment approach and if their chapter should take steps to specifically recruit People of Color, one participant responded by saying:

I don’t think it would change our recruitment process. We’re looking for the same people regardless of the color of their skin. It’s all about the stats they have and the conversations that we have with them.

Another focus group participant addressed this idea when he said:

[We want] guys who also bring something to the house. If you’re going to rush someone, you want them to make the house better than where it is right now. So… someone who will be able to take leadership positions on campus, get good grades here, and, I don’t know, all of that…. I don’t think any of those qualities have anything to do with race so we’re not looking….

This example also highlights an important epistemological approach to race. Race was not accorded any value by the chapters in the same way that “standing for something” would, despite participants’ inability to explain what standing for something meant in concrete terms. Nonetheless, the focus on other stats became justifiable enough to dismiss race from consideration.

**Highlighting altruistic outcomes.** Participants also explained that they saw their minimization of race as an altruistic outcome. They denied the centrality of race by supporting the idea that centering race for the purposes of recruitment would (as one participant put it) run the risk of marginalizing the accomplishment of that person getting in the house because people could potentially see that as “that person only joined because we have that policy of having a certain amount of a certain race.” Another participant responded in more frank terms, saying:
If people don’t look at him [candidate for recruitment] as being an awesome guy, they don’t look at him as an established student or an accomplished athlete or whatever he maybe. To say ok well, here is our diversity, great. I’m not going to see him as anything other than that.

Thus, the men agreed and expressed what could be interpreted as an altruistic incentive to deny race as a factor since it would be in the best interest of any potential Members of Color.

**Shifting racial outcomes.** The third way in which participants minimized race occurred when the men explained away racial outcomes as the result of race being central for others but not for them. When asked whether or not ethnic-based organizations promote separatism on campus, one participant stated:

There’s just something unwelcoming about identifying yourself as a race-based organization, because I know [culturally based fraternity] has Caucasian members. I wouldn’t feel comfortable being a member of [culturally based fraternity]. There are certain guys that could do it, I personally wouldn’t. I’ve got an African American guy in my pledge class. He feels no less welcome than I do in this house because there’s no identification based on race, so I think that the fact that there is that race-based identification and pride in historically Black organizations, how could it not support some kind of separatism?

In slight contrast, another participant said:

I think we’re all guilty of [separatism], I think the university is as guilty of it, I think any club, any organization just by the nature of bringing some people together by default you push other people away and you at least withdraw a little but from other people too.

Instead of seeing race as an important way for Students of Color to group themselves, the importance of race is minimized and seen merely as a characteristic to separate individuals instead of an important way to support students and their salient identities. Because race then acted as nothing more than a sorting mechanism and the Students of Color were given access to groups based on their racial identities, the participants could feel as though it was not their fault or that they were victims of the structure around them.

Sidanius et al. (2004), noted:

Membership in Greek groups increased the degree of members’ ethnic and/or racial identity, which in turn increased the White students’ opposition to affirmative action, ethnic group activism… and sense that they were being victimized by virtue of their ethnic group membership. (p. 107)

The findings from our study both support and oppose Sidanius and colleagues’ (2004) conclusions. While the fraternity men did indeed oppose affirmative action, ethnic group activism, and other racially infused chapter conditions aligning with the findings from the Sidanius et al. (2004), the minimization-of-race theme suggests participants opposed these dynamics in an effort to reduce the centrality of race rather than attribute it to potentially racially hostile attitudes.

**Out-Group Perception**

Another theme observed during the study was the tendency of the participants to indicate that they perceive Student Groups of Color in generalized, communally negotiated constructs. This phenomenon, described as out-group perception, allows White fraternity men to create one-dimensional views of Students of Color that inform their overall racial attitudes. Other researchers (Harper, 2009a) have previously described
similar trends where White individuals misperceive Students of Color as having similar thoughts, values, and ideas. The out-group perception theme can be broken down into three different ways in which participants expressed that they thought in an essentializing manner about Students of Color and culturally based groups. First, participants indicated that they felt that culturally based groups are more unified, cohesive, and harmonious from chapter to chapter. They are more inclined to reach out and collaborate with sororities than their White counterparts, and there are significant but elusive differences in the values that unite culturally based groups versus their White counterparts.

Many participants commented on the unity, cohesion, and harmony of culturally based groups. Participants commented that “[culturally-based fraternities and sororities] feel themselves part of the national community,” that Fraternity and Sororities of Color have “less rivalries,” more of a “tight knit group,” and that “those people take a lot more pride once they get out of school in saying this my house, these are my letters, I’m going to wear this to death.” Participants also spoke of culturally based fraternity and sorority members as having a common soul that contained a similar set of values, beliefs, and expectations to be upheld by all members.

Second, participants reported that they perceived culturally based fraternities as much more engaged in the process of philanthropy, specifically noting their willingness to reach out to White and culturally based sororities: “when (culturally based fraternities) do their philanthropies, the first people they contact is (predominantly White sororities) because their philanthropies are a big deal, too.” Numerous participants noted that both predominantly White sororities and culturally based fraternities were much more successful at planning and executing effective philanthropic events together. At many points throughout the focus group interviews, some of the participants downplayed their own philanthropic endeavors and spoke of the perception that most philanthropic events undertaken by culturally based fraternities were more successful, in part, because of their collaboration with predominantly White sororities.

Third, there was also an indication of a common perception among participants that there exists a fundamental difference in the values between predominantly White and culturally based fraternities: “The values are very different between [predominantly White] chapters to [culturally based] chapters. They have different priorities and they operate very differently, the way they run their activities.” When asked about his overall perception of culturally based groups, one student stated, “I don’t think anyone has anything against those kinds of chapters, but…there is a huge gap between those kinds of houses and the more standard, traditional Greeks.”

Attitudes related to the out-group perceptions support the Ethnic Prejudice cluster that focuses on how the positive or negative experiences participants have with different ethnic groups shape their beliefs and their ideas pertaining to the more nuanced aspects of racism (Sidanius et al., 2004). The generalized, one-dimensional view of all culturally based organizations that was observed throughout the study could be used to explain a relationship between the attitudes observed and the Ethnic Prejudice cluster (Sidanius et al., 2004).

**Traditions and History**

Another theme that emerged from the data was that of an allegiance among participants to traditions and history. Traditions and history can be defined as the things that the participants viewed as part of their long lasting legacy that contribute to the patterns of behavior that manifest in their current fraternal experience. Participants enacted this theme in three different ways throughout the data. They discussed previous history of action, socialization, and relationships.
Participants indicated a previous history of action when describing behaviors or actions that had been around before their experience with the fraternity. Often times, previous history of action was used as the justification for something that the participants could not explain or trace back to a specific origin. One participant stated, “It’s just been that way since some of our dads were in the house and how we were brought up.” Previous history of action also alludes to or indicates a pre-established normative standard of behavior for the in-group: “We just go by the normal actions, how people taught us to do things.” Finally, members also referenced systemic behaviors and the lack of a need to change those behaviors that have been around in previous history:

My dad was a (fraternity name omitted) here 20 to 30 years ago and I can talk to him about some nights we have. So I can talk to him about the whole pledgeship process, about events, formals that have been the same forever. So why change a system that’s been working?

The second subcategory within previous history is socialization. Participants commented on strong allegiance to local chapter customs and traditions that had been passed down: “I can say I have very little to even no allegiance to (my national organization). I don’t at all really, but what’s important to me is this chapter and the values this chapter brings.” Additionally, participants commented on their pride about being members of fraternities at the institution. One participant said, “I know who I am on the inside and that I’m proud of my organization.” Finally, participants exhibited forms of socialization when commenting on recruitment practices. One student said, “You can tell right away who fits in and who doesn’t.” The idea that there is a particular “fit” for members within the chapter is learned as new members are brought in to the chapter structure and taught how to recruit men for membership.

The final sub-category within history and tradition is the identification of relationships rooted in tradition as a point for collaboration or a lack thereof. As one participant put it, “At least within [predominantly White chapters] types of events, everything is relationship based.” Participants commented on the lack of collaboration between culturally based fraternities and their own predominantly White fraternity, citing that their organizations had no history of a relationship with one another. One participant said, “If you don’t have a relationship with that organization already then the chances of you being able to put something together is pretty slim.”

These themes align with the Sidanius et al. (2004) clusters of Racial Policy Attitudes and Social Identity Attitudes. Participants in the study attributed their actions and beliefs to the socialization and previous historical action of their fraternity experience. Social identity attitudes focus on why and to what extent individuals felt a sense of belonging to their group. Participants attributed their historical relationships with other groups as well as legacy to their attitudes about social identity.

**Relative Diversity**

Relative diversity is another theme found throughout this study, which is the participants’ constant effort to be included in diversity while simultaneously describing the overall fraternity and sorority community as less diverse. Participants continually sought to highlight characteristics other than race that they deemed diverse. These characteristics included members’ hometown, majors, interests, and passions. When recruiting potential new members, the fraternities look for men who have multiple characteristics. One student said that fraternities seek “someone that can demonstrate that they do care about academics, that they do care about being social, and a well-rounded person in a lot of areas.” Furthermore, another member said:
While we all have somewhat similar goals, values, [and are] well-balanced men, we have different personalities. And if you go around and meet all of us, we have very different types of personalities, so its diversity of types of people.

The group reported that they perceive fraternity members as being diverse through areas and characteristics that have no connection to race but fulfill their efforts and need to be diverse.

More notable are the participants’ descriptions of being diverse, while also recognizing that the fraternity and sorority community is not diverse. As one student said, “I also think just in general, the Greek system itself attracts a pretty non-diverse group of people.” This connection can also be described using Bronfenbrenner’s (1993) theory that students have specific attributes that shape their reactions toward the immediate environment. Specifically, persons’ “directive beliefs explain how individuals view their agency in relation to their environments” (Renn & Arnold, 2003, p. 269). The participants reported that they believe they understand the fraternity and sorority environment and act under the assumption that having similar characteristics within a non-diverse community yields diversity within their chapter.

Participants also compared themselves to other predominantly White chapters in order to make diversity relative. Reflecting on the chapter’s diversity, one student said:

We are pretty racially diverse. We have a guy from Brazil, a guy from Mexico, India, Pakistan, Korea, and China. So, it’s more diverse than most chapters. It’s not as obviously diverse as the student body, but compared to the Greek system it’s more diverse.

The men made diversity relative by comparing their own make-up to other predominantly White chapters. There is a need to place diversity on external conditions other than race, such as characteristics of members and comparisons with other groups.

Relative diversity fits within the Sidanius et al. (2004) cluster of Ethnic Prejudice because of the members’ indication of high intergroup bias toward having common characteristics. As one student said, “There are so many other factors that are important that are more important than race.” The need to relate to each other and effort to be included in diversity trumps their opinions of other races, resulting in prejudice conceptions. Comparing these efforts to other predominately White groups on campus eliminates any realm of ethnic influence in attitudes of these men.

Implications

Based on the findings derived from the data collected in focus groups sessions with senior White fraternity men, some organizational and programmatic proposals can be made that could begin to address aspects of chapter culture that reinforce the observed racial attitudes held by these young men that hinder more positive, meaningful relationships across race. Recall that the participants minimized the role of race as an influencer of campus culture while redirecting the conversation toward other aspects of chapter diversity, that they overgeneralized the group attitudes of culturally based fraternities and sororities while perceiving that there were vast values differences between their chapter and those same organizations, and that deep traditions in fraternity and sorority life stood in the way of any disruption to the observed phenomena above. The following three implications are offered to aid fraternity/sorority professionals in their attempts to address some of the preceding inter-group attitudes that hinder meaningful relationships across race.
Promote Diversity Through Interest-Convergence

First described by Critical Race Theory forefather and Harvard Law Professor Derrick Bell, interest-convergence explains that many civil rights advances for people of color emerge only when they coincide with the self-interest of White elitists (Bell, 1980). Bell (1980) used the example of the 1954 Brown v. Board of Education ruling to illustrate the interest-convergence phenomenon, explaining that the United States and its White government officials needed to improve Third World countries’ image of the United States and to model the idealized notion of American freedom during the Cold War. While unpleasant in definition, interest-convergence could be used for good instead of evil in that increased education and collaboration regarding diversity could be incentivized to meet White interests (Harper, 2009b). Campus-based professionals could emphasize the usability that comes from being comfortable working in diverse environments (Bishop, 2012), thus creating a link between increased exposure to racial diversity and career success. Fraternity/sorority professionals might also consider incentivizing active collaboration between predominately White and predominately non-White chapters. Certifications at both the university level and national headquarters level could be instated to encourage predominately White chapters to see increased racial awareness as value-added to the fraternity and sorority experience. Awards and recognition could also be considered for chapters that have integrated diversity awareness programs into their new and existing member education curriculum or for those chapters that see improvements in the number of Students of Color they admit into their fraternity or sorority. Such initiatives that couple increased diversity awareness with personal gain and opportunity could indicate a pathway forward in an effort to minimize ethnic prejudices uncovered in this study. Furthermore, these programs could create pathways for meaningful interpersonal development with regards to social identities—a comparatively altruistic and morally digestible rationalization. Practitioners, in their attempts to initiate similar initiatives on their respective campuses, could look to existing diversity certification program models to uncover program characteristics that are essential to enduring effectiveness, such as longitudinal participation and curricular/co-curricular linkages (Ohio State University Multicultural Center, 2014; Purdue University Diversity Resource Office, 2014; Texas A&M University Department of Student Affairs, 2014).

(Re)define Diversity in Sorority and Fraternity Life

It was observed at various points during the focus groups with White fraternity men that a variety of constructed ideas concerning diversity were possessed by fraternity members in the same chapter. These variances in what composes diversity stalled the complexity and depth of the focus group conversation because it was necessary to redefine diversity. While some students made a case for a variety of majors and different residence hall experiences to be considered as diversity in their fraternity chapter, it had to be reiterated that the focus group questions were related to racial diversity. This attempt to renegotiate the terms of diversity could signal some level of unfamiliarity or discomfort with the notion of diversity as it relates to social identities such as race, gender, sexual orientation, ability, religion, and other identities that are socially constructed and historically underrepresented. Therefore, fraternity/sorority professionals could seize this opportunity to define or redefine what comprises diversity in their fraternity/sorority community on their respective campuses. Assessments regarding diversity policy or mission statements could yield useful information for fraternity/sorority professionals regarding the effectiveness or even existence of such statements. (Re)defining diversity at the campus and national headquarters level could help to alter the misperception of and avoidance of diversity in the chapter house.
Affirm the Campus Presence of NPHC and MCGC Fraternities and Sororities

The overall underdeveloped understanding of NPHC and MCGC fraternities and sororities on behalf of the IFC men who participated in this study was pronounced. The participants of the study overgeneralized many aspects of NPHC and MCGC fraternities and sororities and were uncertain regarding several basic attributes of these organizations on the campus. These findings led the research team to consider that more could be done to raise the level of awareness, both in the fraternity/sorority community and around campus, regarding the presence and importance of NPHC and MCGC fraternities and sororities. Campus professionals should assess their environments, both physical and socially constructed, for inequalities in representation, access to resources, and governing policy. Ensuring that NPHC and MCGC fraternities and sororities have a seat at the table in the fraternity/sorority community and how that takes shape on campus will look different from university to university, but one promising place to ask about equity across race in the fraternity/sorority community are the NPHC and MCGC fraternities and sororities themselves. Hosting interviews and focus groups with students who belong to these fraternities and sororities could reveal racially informed issues and frustrations for these organizations that might have been previously invisible to well-intended campus professionals working in fraternity and sorority life. Armed with the important student perspectives gained from these discussions, campus professionals could better develop realistic, customized, and promising solutions for creating a campus that has a greater understanding of and appreciation for NPHC and MCGC fraternities and sororities.

Limitations

The findings of this study must be understood in light of certain limitations. As with any research, human interpretation by our research team of findings adds certain bias, even with the effort to limit this as described in the methods section. Another important consideration is that this research was conducted at one large, predominately White research institution. The findings are based on a fraternity and sorority community that makes up around 20% of the student body along with most IFC and Panhellenic groups having chapter houses. The research used site sample restrictions that included only fraternities with large chapter houses, who were established prior to 1950, and whose membership numbers exceeding 100. The study also had a participant sample size of only four focus groups, which limits generalizability of these findings to other fraternities. Lastly, the authors’ intention is not to suggest that all fraternities are the same. There is significant and important heterogeneity among fraternities that is informed by regional variations, histories, and a host of other factors. Bearing these concerns in mind, the authors contend that the study’s implications are potentially transferable to other contexts if student affairs professionals intentionally take into account campus racial demographics, size and structure of fraternity/sorority community, and campus climate around race.

Conclusion

Though widely studied for numerous purposes and intentions, the culture of fraternity and sorority life has received less consideration for its effects on racial attitudes of college students. Findings in this study make it clear that these environments are spaces where unchallenged notions regarding race can exist and grow. The authors encourage student affairs professionals that have these organizations on their campus to do their due diligence to help disrupt and reform some of the negative racial attitudes that the fraternity culture
produces. This will eventually lead to campuses that are more inclusive and the realization of all the benefits that having a diverse student body could yield.

References


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