

Race and the Greek System in the 21st Century: Centering the Voices of Asian American Women

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Analyzing interviews with 18 Asian American female undergraduates, this study seeks to understand how participants viewed the sorority system at a predominantly White institution in the Southeastern United States. Drawing from critical race theory, I argue that the ways in which women perceived and experienced both acceptance and marginalization in the Greek system testify to the complexity and subtlety of racial politics on campus. While women generally perceived sororities as open access, they also reported instances in which race mattered, such as the presence of status hierarchies within the sorority system and the underrepresentation of women of color in sororities.

This study examines both the presence and absence of Asian Americans in a sorority system at a predominantly White institution in the Southeastern United States. Using critical race theory to analyze interviews with eighteen Asian American college women, half of

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whom belonged to sororities and half who did not, the study asks the following questions: How do Asian American women both inside and outside Greek life view sororities? Are sororities a site where race still matters? How do Asian American women recognize the role of race or downplay its significance in their perceptions of sororities?

Research on this topic is needed for several reasons. Asian Americans are an often invisible group in higher education and society (Osajima, 1995). By probing the experiences of a group that is often thought to fall somewhere in between Blacks and Whites on the line of social privilege (Takagi, 1992), I wish to explain how Asian American experiences confound simplistic explanations of complete racial exclusion or integration, particularly on college campuses. Because of their tenuous status as a minority group that is somewhat more accepted into mainstream American society (Chew, 1994) and often “caught in the middle” of American racial politics (Inkelas, 2003), highlighting Asian American encounters with race can testify to the subtlety and complexity of the continuing significance of race on campus (Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Omi & Winant, 1994). The participation of Asian Americans in Greek letter groups could signal assimilation or acceptability within society, while their absence could also point to exclusion or barriers these students continue to face within higher education. As these women’s stories testify, their experiences blur the lines between outright exclusion or inclusion.

Furthermore, this study hopes to provide information on role of race in Greek life in the 21st century that may be helpful to Greek advisors and others in understanding how students of color, particularly Asian Americans, both inside and outside the Greek community may perceive the system. Greek life, which is composed of sororities and fraternities on college campuses, has a troubled past with the issue of race (Lee, 1955). Blatantly racist acts such as students donning black-face or throwing a racialized theme party easily grab media attention (Association of College Unions International, 2006), but we know less about the day-to-day encounters that shape student perceptions of the role of race in the Greek system. As a group caught in the middle of racial politics, both absorbed and excluded by majority culture, Asian Americans are a prime group to examine how subtle racial dynamics manifest themselves on the postsegregation era campus. Unlike previous work that has examined Asian Americans participating in Greek

organizations (Chan, 1999; Chen, 1998), this study includes the perspectives of women who are not a part of the Greek system, albeit limited in number. Their voices provide valuable alternative insight in understanding why some students choose not to join Greek life. Thus, following Boschini and Thompson's (1998) advice that Greek organizations should seek to understand the impact of diversity on campus, Greek life can benefit from a better understanding of campus racial dynamics, as well as how sororities and fraternities influence the climate for diversity.

Background

Asian Americans in Higher Education

The Asian American population in higher education has grown substantially in recent times. Between 1991 and 2001, Asian American college enrollment increased 54% (Harvey & Anderson, 2005). Asian American students currently make up roughly 6.4% of the overall U.S. college population (The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2007), while Asian Americans make up approximately 4.5% of the total U.S. population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2004). However, with this growth comes a notion that because Asian Americans are generally well represented in the academy, they do not have special needs or face discrimination (Chang, Park, Lin, Poon, & Nakanishi, 2007). Cho (1996) and Chew (1994) point to the deceptiveness of numerical parity for Asian Americans, the misconception that Asian Americans are overwhelmingly overrepresented throughout higher education even while certain Asian American ethnic subgroups are extremely underrepresented in higher education (Chang et al., 2007). The dominant stereotype of the model minority, which contends that all Asian Americans are educationally successful (Suzuki, 2002), overshadows the heterogeneity within the Asian American population. Furthermore, Asian American students may be underserved in the student affairs arena because they are thought not to need services or have special needs (Kodama, McEwen, Liang, & Lee, 2002).

Asian American students also occupy an uncertain racial position in higher education. In her discussion of the anti-Asian quotas at elite institutions during the 1980s, Takagi (1992) explains how the polarization of race in America and hence in higher education affects Asian

Americans: “[R]acial politics in higher education are determined and shaped by black experiences, on one hand, and White experiences, on the other. Asians are perceived to be either like Whites or not like Whites; or alternatively, like blacks or not like blacks” (p. 11). To use her term, Asian Americans become the “wild card,” defined in relation to Blacks or Whites but rarely independently. In a world used to classifying races by general “haves” (Whites) and “have nots” (Blacks, Latinos, and Native Americans), Asian Americans complicate simplistic explanations for racial difference in the context of the United States’ rapidly changing demographics.

This study presents a setting in which Asian American students are truly a racial “wild card.” As will be discussed in more detail, the women in my study saw their circumstances as differing from Black women on campus, who they generally felt were unambiguously excluded or unwelcome in a majority White sorority system. However, they still expressed feelings of racial otherness that distinguished their experiences from White women.

Greek Systems and Race

The Greek system has had a contentious history with race. Most groups officially banned non-White students, including Asian Americans, from joining during the first half of the twentieth century (Lee, 1955). During the 1950s, formal exclusionary policies against students of color in fraternities were challenged on campuses. Lee (1955) noted that almost all formal exclusion statutes had been dropped from sororities by the mid-1950s, although he also observed that they remained as racially homogeneous and guilty of “Aryanism” as ever (p.ix). During the era of formal exclusion, Jewish students went on to found their own groups, and in 1906 the first Black fraternity was founded (Ross, 2002; Sanua, 2003). The National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC) was formed as an oversight body for Black Greek groups, distinct from bodies that govern historically White fraternities and sororities (Kimbrough, 2003). In more recent years, Latino/a and Asian American Greek organizations have also emerged as alternatives on campus to historically White Panhellenic groups (Chen, 1998; Kimbrough, 2003). Even when the number of students of color at predominantly White institutions grew, Greek life remained

and continues to remain racially divided on many campuses, especially in the region with the highest rates of Greek participation, the U.S. South (Chang & DeAngelo, 2002).

Several studies point to the racially homogeneous nature of Greek systems in the United States. In a study examining intergroup attitudes of undergraduates at a large U.S. West Coast institution, Sidanius, Van Laar, Levin, and Sinclair (2004) found that White students were “significantly and substantially” overrepresented in Greek groups, noting that “sororities and fraternities tend to serve as ethnic enclaves for White students” (p. 100). Other research highlights the influence of an institution’s racial composition on the decision to join a Greek organization. In a quantitative study examining predictors of participation in Greek life for White students, Chang and DeAngelo (2002) found that White students participated less frequently in Greek life at more racially diverse institutions. Of those who participated in Greek life on the most diverse campuses, 82% of those surveyed indicated at the beginning of their first year of college that they were likely to join a sorority or fraternity, showing a preinclination to Greek life. They stated that students who did not have a preinclination to Greek life were more likely to join on less diverse campuses, and they concluded that Greek systems remain a majority White activity at both racially diverse and homogeneous institutions. Their study points to the role of previous exposure to the Greek system, as well as the role of the campus’ racial demography, in influencing student decisions to join a Greek organization.

Schmitz and Forbes’ (1994) ethnographic inquiry into Greek life at a large public institution in the Southeastern United States is a telling account of how race operates in a racially polarized Greek system. Interviewing primarily White women, the authors detailed how sorority members denied the presence of segregation or suggested that Black students were responsible for maintaining a divided system. Participants presented the (overwhelmingly White) Panhellenic system as open access. However, participants also reported that Black women interested in joining Panhellenic groups were subtly steered towards the Black NPHC system. In some cases, exclusion was explicit: “I can guarantee you that my sorority would never take another colored girl” (p. 106).

While Schmitz and Forbes' study focused solely on the dynamic between Black and White students, Chen (1998) looked at Asian American sorority women in predominantly White, Asian American, and Black sororities at a large public institution on the U.S. West Coast. As was the case for Schmitz and Forbes, race was still relevant throughout the Greek system, whether the women were acknowledging or denying its presence (Chen, 1998). She found that race played a significant role in the group that was most adamant about its irrelevance: middle-class, traditionally White (Panhellenic) sororities. Asian American women in these groups actively recognized and refuted their minority status in various ways, such as befriending other Asian American women or constructing non-Asian identities. They generally embraced a colorblind rhetoric towards race "which fosters Anglo conformity and limits discussion of power difference" (p. 138).

Theoretical Framework

Some scholars (McEwen, Roper, Bryant, & Langa, 1990; Villalpando, 2003) note how traditional student development frameworks inadequately explain the experiences of students of color because they are based on the experiences of majority White populations. Student development theory has benefited from the inclusion of theories on racial and ethnic identity development (Cross, 1995; Wijeyesinghe & Jackson, 2001) that provide useful tools for better understanding how students of color develop as individuals and in relation to a social group identity during college. However, research on the college experiences of students of color also needs to address how campus race relations exist in a broader societal context in which the significance of race is challenged (Wilson, 1980) and society is thought to be colorblind (Bonilla-Silva, 2003).

This study uses critical race theory (CRT) as a tool to frame findings, challenging the idea that race is irrelevant to who joins sororities but also documenting how race is often downplayed in explanations for why certain groups are racially homogeneous. CRT provides a lens to better understand the role of race in contemporary Greek organizations. Campus leaders can benefit from this lens, which seeks to make visible some of the more micro, but important, ways in which race continues to affect social interactions and campus dynamics. Several

key tenants of CRT (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001) are useful in framing this study: the rejection of a colorblind society, the role of narrative or counter-stories, and the rise of covert racism.

CRT rejects the traditional liberal, race-neutral embracement of a colorblind ideology (Gotanda, 1991). A colorblind ideology views racism as a thing of the past or something that has been deeply mitigated by the passage of civil rights legislation (Bonilla-Silva, 2003). In a colorblind society, the significance of race is refuted, and often interpreted an accusation of racism. Thus, people are hesitant to discuss race, instead offering well-intended axioms such as “I don’t see color, I see humanity” or “I don’t think of you as being Black, I see you as a person.” In the study, I will discuss how many women used colorblind rhetoric in describing the sorority system, even when they noted instances in which race mattered, such as the demography of sororities and feelings of racial otherness. In other cases respondents expressed that race was irrelevant to the sorority system. However, CRT argues that in a colorblind America, most people do not readily recognize the significance of race. Thus, from a CRT perspective, comments that may downplay the relevance of race may actually be used as evidence that race is highly relevant to the situation at hand.

Secondly, CRT embraces the role of narrative to give voice to people of color and counter majoritarian narratives. With the exception of one study (Chen, 1998), Asian American women are essentially absent from the literature on sororities. A colorblind narrative offered by a postcivil rights discourse would argue that since sororities dropped formal exclusion policies decades ago, such groups are open and bias free. Within this narrative, Asian Americans are cast as model minorities that do not face discrimination (Rhoads, Lee, & Yamada, 2002; Suzuki, 2002), capable of completely assimilating into sororities and campus life. Thus, the presence of Asian American women in sororities could be viewed as proof that the Greek system is open to everyone and free of racial barriers. I challenge this argument by interpreting these women’s viewpoints as evidence of the continued racialization of Asian Americans in higher education.

However, just because race may matter in the Greek system does not mean that Asian American women are systematically blackballed during rush or recipients of racial slurs. Race can be significant in subtle

and covert ways. Thus, another tenant of CRT recognizes that while explicit acts of discrimination still occur, racism has largely gone “underground” and less often takes the form of obvious, rampant acts of racial bias. For example, Solórzano (2000) defines seemingly minute, but significant slights towards people of color as microaggressions. Microaggressions can be verbal or nonverbal, intentional or unintentional. Regardless, they privilege Whites and disadvantage people of color by creating strain and a sense of racial otherness. Omi and Winant (1994) emphasize that race relations can also occur on a micro scale and are lived out through people’s everyday experiences and the meanings that they attach to them. Sororities, a fixture of campus life at many institutions, are a site in which race and racial meanings may be experienced and interpreted by students.

Methodology

This study used a basic or generic qualitative approach, as it sought to “discover and understand a phenomenon, a process, or the perspectives and worldviews of the people of the world involved” (Merriam, 1998, p. 11). The particular phenomenon being examined is Asian American women’s participation or lack of participation in sororities, and how they address the role of race in their experiences. The study was also influenced by the methodological approach of phenomenology, which seeks to tap into the essence or underlying meaning of participants’ lived experiences (Creswell, 2003; van Manen, 2002). Phenomenology also recognizes that meaning is subjective, both the meaning that the participant conveys to the researcher and the meaning-making processes that the researcher equips in interpreting the narrative of the participant.

Site

The site for this study is Southern University (SU, pseudonym), a highly selective, private university in the Southeastern United States. At the time of the study, SU had an undergraduate population of approximately 6,000 students. While SU drew students from across the country, approximately 47% of the entire student body came from the Southeast. Greek life was a prominent fixture on campus. As of spring 2003, 53% of undergraduate women belonged to sororities and

31% of undergraduate men were in fraternities. In the 2003–04 school year, 15 fraternities composed the Interfraternity Council. Of these fraternities, 14 were historically White organizations and one was a Latino/multicultural fraternity, recognized on campus in 2001. The NPHC at SU was made up of six historically Black sororities and fraternities, the first of which came to SU in 1971. Lastly, the Panhellenic Council consisted of 11 sororities, including one Latina sorority.

The issue of racial/ethnic diversity of sororities and fraternities was a somewhat controversial topic at SU. Greek life as a whole was a strong force on campus, but the organizations with the largest memberships and longest presence on campus were all predominantly White. As SU sought to establish its reputation as a national university, drawing students from all over the United States, the Panhellenic Greek system was at times viewed as detrimental to such efforts when seen as a bastion of White, American Southern culture. Greek communities in general are traditionally majority White, and SU is a majority White institution. At SU, women of color, with the exception of Latinas, were sharply underrepresented in sororities. A similar trend was observed in Chen's (1998) study, and she suggested that the more proportionate representation of Latinas may have to do with their "ability to pass as Whites more readily than Asian and African American women" (p. 52).

Table 1 shows the racial/ethnic make-up of the sorority system at SU (including members of both NPHC and Panhellenic sororities) as of fall 2003.

While Asian American women were highly underrepresented in Panhellenic sororities (none were in NPHC sororities); they constituted a relatively visible minority presence in contrast to Black women. Out of the 19 Black women in sororities, only 3 were members of Panhellenic sororities, while there were 23 Asian American women in Panhellenic sororities at SU. The high number of "unknowns" may be students who did not mark their race during the admission process. Previous research has found that typically, nonrespondents tend to be White (Smith, Moreno, Clayton-Pedersen, Parker, & Teraguchi, 2005). If true of the population at SU, it is possible that sororities at SU were over 90% White.

Table 1
Racial Breakdown of SU Sorority Women

Racial/Ethnic Background	Number in Sorority	Percent in Sorority	Percent of SU Campus
Asian American	23	2	6
Latina	48	4	4
Black	19	1	5
Other Minorities	15	1	1
White	1,162	88	82
Unknown	48	4	2

Sample

The sample consisted of 18 SU students: 9 seniors, 3 juniors, 5 sophomores, and 1 graduate student who had been a member of a SU sorority as an undergraduate. First-year students were not recruited because they did not join sororities until the second semester at SU. Participants ranged in age from 19–23 years old. Nine of the women belonged to sororities and nine did not. While the voices of nonsorority women are referenced in the text, the voices of sorority women ended up being more frequently cited in the final write-up, which should be noted when reading the results. The sample consisted of two women of Japanese descent, six of Chinese descent, five of Indian descent, one of Pakistani descent, three of Korean descent, and one of Filipino descent. One woman was multiracial (Korean/White) and five were not born in the United States, although none of the women in the sample were international students. Participants were initially recruited through an e-mail that was sent to the entire Asian American female population based on a list provided by the SU Registrar’s Office. The entire non-Greek sample was recruited through this means. While several of the Greek participants did respond to the recruitment e-mail, I secured the majority through snowball sampling, asking participants to refer other potential participants (Babbie, 2004). All Greek women approached agreed to participate.

Methods

The study relied on face-to-face, semistructured interviews (Merriam, 1998) with eighteen participants and took place during November and December of 2003. Interview length ranged from 45 minutes to 1-1/2 hours; all were tape recorded with the participants' consent. Participants, Greek organizations, and the institution were all assigned pseudonyms in order to preserve confidentiality. One section of the interview, about sorority selection, was only asked to Greek participants. The interview questions were divided into two sections, one that primarily revolved around questions pertaining to the Greek system: why or why not the participant decided to join, the participant's attitudes towards the Greek system, and the participant's perceptions of diversity in the Greek system. The other portion of the interview included questions pertaining to Asian American identity.

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and hand-coded for major themes and patterns. Codes were first developed in regards to elements of the theoretical framework of CRT, but other emergent themes and patterns were identified as they related to the study's findings. Qualitative research does not claim to be generalizable or present objective knowledge (Freeman, deMarrais, Preissle, Roulston, & St. Pierre, 2007). However, member checks (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) were used as a means to strengthen validity and trustworthiness. Participants were invited to examine the manuscript and had the opportunity to confirm or challenge the interpretation of their remarks.

The role of the researcher and the experiences that he or she brings to the study are important factors in understanding how the study was designed, implemented, and analyzed (Maxwell, 2005). As an Asian American female, I shared some commonality with the participants and felt that it helped in establishing rapport. Like Schmitz and Forbes (1994), as an advocate of diversity, I came to this study "troubled by the racial divisions apparent in the sorority system" (p. 103). However, I had previously collaborated with Greek groups on diversity programming and felt they had the potential to be open to critical dialogue and change.

Limitations

As Freeman et al. (2007) state in regards to qualitative research, “the goal is not to generalize, to predict, and control but rather to describe what people do and say within local contexts” (p. 29). It should be noted that while this study has implications for other campuses, it seeks to delve deeply into the experiences of 18 Asian American women at SU from a specific time period and thus cannot and should not be seen as representative of all Asian American women or women of color. However, the study adds texture and depth to quantitative studies examining race and Greek life (Chang & DeAngelo, 2002; Sidanius et al., 2004), while showing how race and Greek life goes beyond Black and White (Schmitz & Forbes, 1994). Also, in this manuscript I do not address the intersectionality of race and gender for these women and how these complex dynamics played into women’s perceptions of who could or could not belong in the Greek system. I regrettably had to omit this analysis in order to narrow the focus of this study to the examination of race, but I expect to address it in future research.

Findings and Analysis

In this section I will first present and discuss viewpoints on access to sororities and participants’ explanations for why the system is not racially diverse. Although the sorority women in my study referred to circumstances in which race mattered in sorority life, such as feelings of racial otherness and a hierarchy in which women of color tended to be in less prestigious houses, they generally maintained that race was basically irrelevant to the system. Rush is the process by which women meet and join sororities.¹ A frequent response was to portray rush as an equal opportunity system. As Katherine, a senior in a sorority, told me: “I think anyone can go through.” Sorority women and some nonsorori-

1. At SU, women go through rounds in which they visit houses and interact with sorority women. Throughout the week they are invited back to houses or are cut from them. The entire process culminates in “Pref Night,” when women rank the sororities that they are still considering; and “Bid Day,” when they are offered an invitation to join.

ty women used individualistic and societal perspectives as largely race-neutral explanations for why the system remained homogeneous.

Individualistic Explanations for Homogeneity: Comfort, Fit, and Choice

Interestingly, some of the same women who were critical in their assessment of the uneven distribution of women of color in houses still defended rush as an open system. Gina, a sophomore in a sorority, concluded: "I feel like it's very open. It doesn't really matter what ethnic background you are. I think a lot of it just has to do with how comfortable you are." Her statement shifted the focus to comfort level instead of race. She did not see race playing a role in determining comfort level, and she reported that she felt comfortable during most of her rush process. References to comfort level put the responsibility on the individual woman who has to be comfortable in order to rush. Schmitz and Forbes (1994) also found that White participants used comfort as an explanation for why Black women would not fit into a Panhellenic sorority.

Another explanation for why sororities were not more diverse was to cast participating in rush as an individual choice. Jenny, a senior who was not in a sorority, displayed this belief when asked why Black women rush less often than White and Asian American women, as well as whether certain sororities were more accepting to women of color:

So I'm sure everyone has their own personal reasons . . . I think it's more of an individual decision. What I've heard and what I kind of perceive is that different sororities rush a certain type of girl because these are the types of girls that would fit together better. I guess if you want to look at it on a surface level then yes, there are those sororities who seem to be more welcoming to different races, but it's just that if your personality fits in with those girls, then yes, I guess they would be more accepting towards you . . . It'll be the sororities who pick you, but I don't think they're discriminatory. I think they look out for the best interests of their organization and seeing if you're the type of person who would fit well with the current members.

Jenny acknowledged that there are sororities that may seem more welcoming to different races, but explained such patterns as issues of “fit” that were more of a matter of personality and not race. The process was portrayed as natural and race-neutral. Once again, the onus is on the individual and her personal reasons for rushing.

Casting rush as an individualized process challenges notions of rush as a structured and institutionalized transaction of insider knowledge and privilege (Boyd, 1999). If rush is a meritocracy, everyone should be judged fairly and true personalities will shine through, allowing sororities to make a bias-free decision. However, personality is a highly subjective trait and, regardless, a woman can be barred from joining a sorority with the dissent of one member or other highly subjective judgment calls. Maybe she just does not “fit” with the current members, as Jenny suggests. So why might sororities looking for new members who fit with current members result in groups that are racially homogeneous? The concept of homophily describes how people seek to affiliate with those who share similar backgrounds (Kim, 2006; Marsden, 1987). Humans desire a sense of belonging, and an easy way to foster such community is to create groups with strong in-group bonds where participants share similar traits. Race can be a quick proxy for similarity and familiarity, but in a politically correct world, it is not socially acceptable to suggest that sororities consider race to recruit or exclude. Thus, notions such as fit and comfort level become more viable explanations for why women of color are not rushing Panhellenic sororities at the same rates as their White counterparts.

A last individual explanation for the homogeneity of the Greek system is the notion that the fault largely lies with the women of color themselves who choose not to rush. Anjali, a senior in a sorority who was also active in multicultural organizations, gave this explanation:

I think a lot of the time the Greek system gets judged on diversity that's unfair. The fact is that the Greek system does choose its members, but members also decide to be Greek. I wish that people would look at the demographics of who rushes. Because if you looked at the demographics of who actually goes through the process of rush, the demographics of the house would make more sense. If Asian people don't

rush, then chapters can't take Asian people because they never go through the process. And I think that's something—that's probably my biggest pet peeve about people judging the system about discrimination because people always go "oh well, I don't think they'll take me." "Well, did you go through rush?" "Well, no." Well if you didn't go through rush you didn't give any house the chance to accept you or reject you, you know? *If it is that way, it's because minorities have made it that way.* [emphasis added]

Anjali is correct: If Asian American women do not rush, they cannot be chosen. However, she disregarded fears that women of color may have about being rejected from the system and ultimately portrayed the issue as a matter of individual choice. The perceived outcome is that minorities have allowed the system to remain homogeneous by choosing not to participate, and the Greek system cannot be blamed. Later on she acknowledged that women had told her that they did not rush because of feeling self-conscious of their race, but she disregarded that explanation as a legitimate motivation for not rushing. The system worked for her as an individual, so why should it not work for others? As a result, she discounted race-related reasons that students gave her for not rushing and maintained that students of color ought to overcome insecurities and rush.

Not all women saw race as irrelevant to the rush and selection process. As Karen, a senior not in a sorority, articulated:

It's not discriminatory. If I wanted to, I can apply. I feel like anyone who wants to can ask for an application or rush, but in terms of when members are selected, I feel that [diversity] doesn't happen . . . the way sororities and fraternities are perceived on campus, it just deters people, deters minorities from even applying.

While Karen agreed with other interviewees that technically anyone could participate in rush, she distinguished between being allowed to participate and being asked to join a sorority, a more selective step of the process. Furthermore, she noted that perceptions of Greek life may deter students of color from joining the rush process in the first place.

Institutional Perspectives: SU and the South are Not Diverse Enough

Besides race-neutral explanations that cast participation in sororities as ultimately an individual choice, participants also used larger societal or institutional perspectives to explain why sororities were racially homogeneous. Unlike some of the individual choice perspectives, which did not see race or racism playing a role in sorority composition, these perspectives acknowledged that race was an issue, but to the point where changing a sorority's demographic makeup was beyond the control of individuals in the sorority. Like individualist perspectives, using an institutional framework can also absolve the larger sorority of responsibility for diversifying because of social dynamics beyond the scope of the sorority's control.

Both sorority and nonsorority members made a point to state that sororities lacked diversity because SU lacked diversity. This result was described as "inevitable" by one participant and "probably has more to do with the fact that this school is not the mecca of diverse populations" by another. Mina, a senior member of a sorority, expressed the attitude that Greek life was actually fairly diverse, considering the makeup of SU:

I would say [Greek life] is diverse for the fact that when you look at SU's campus, it's not very diverse to begin with. So when I look at it proportionately, it seems like it's diverse enough. Like I wouldn't expect a lot of Black and Asian people in fraternities and sororities because there's not a lot here to begin with.

Mina was accurate in her assessment of SU's lack of diversity. However, even when considering the small number of students of color at SU, Black and Asian American students were still strongly underrepresented in Panhellenic sororities (see Table 1). Seeing the low number of students of color in these groups as an inevitable, even expected, outcome of the school's low diversity suggests that the system is at minimum "diverse enough." Participants seemed to believe that the Greek system could not be expected to change if the school did not change.

Jing, a junior not in a sorority, also acknowledged a direct link between campus diversity and diversification of the Greek system: "I

believe that if there were more minorities here at SU, there would also be more minority Greek representation.” Her assessment may be accurate. An increase in the number of students of color could lead to an increase in minority participation in the Greek system. However, White students tend to be overrepresented in Greek life regardless of the demography of the overall student body (Chang & DeAngelo, 2002). Racial homogeneity in Greek organizations persists even on highly diverse campuses. At the large public institution where Chen (1998) conducted her study, White women made up 33.2% of the female undergraduate population but 72.7% of Panhellenic sorority members. Asian American women made up 38.7% of the female population, but only 9.1% of the sorority system. Thus, the impact of further campus diversification on Greek life is uncertain.

Other women recognized racial stratification within Greek organizations and viewed it as unfortunate, but an understandable outcome of a system largely out of the control of individuals. Mina, who commented earlier on Greek life at SU being relatively diverse for a non-diverse campus, elaborated:

I said my sorority is pretty diverse and there are a couple others. But I don't know if I could say that other houses are not diverse because they don't want that diversity, just because of the way that the recruitment process works. They have a tradition of being not diverse, a tradition of taking girls from this area—you go where your friends go, so when a lot of people from that area come to this school, they want to go where all the girls from that area went. So for them, you can only take a certain number of girls, a quota for recruitment, and when you're filling them with all the girls from um, Texas (laughs), it's hard to see who else is out there because they've already made their selection.

In Mina's presentation, the recruitment or rush process creates a self-perpetuating cycle in which women pick their friends or other women from a similar background. Implicit is a previously mentioned notion of fit, which may be interpreted as a term used to describe how certain types of women just happen to mesh better together because of supposedly race-neutral, yet highly subjective traits such as personality. Mina also referred to seemingly race-neutral characteristics such as

high school and region that are used to funnel groups of women into different sororities. As it stands, most U.S. high schools are racially homogeneous (Orfield & Gordon, 2001). “The South” or even more specifically, Texas, was often used as a descriptor for certain types of elite sororities, but when asked, participants said that women of color from Southern U.S. or Texas did not belong to these sororities. Thus “fit” may fall along not only geographic boundaries, but also racial lines as regional terms become codes for Whiteness.

Participants often noted that they rarely, if ever, encountered explicit acts of racism in Greek life. I did not see evidence that the cycle of homogeneity was the result of any intentional ill will or racism on behalf of sorority members. As Mina said, sororities do not intend to reject diversity, but “because of the way the recruitment process works,” the end result is oftentimes racial homogeneity, particularly in elite, high-status sororities (Chen, 1998). Instead, the cycle of homogeneity persists because groups generally do not intentionally act to counter the natural flow of self-segregation or homophily (Kim, 2006). In turn, the institution, greater societal demographics, or even racial minorities themselves are blamed for creating a situation that is beyond anyone’s power to change.

A critical race perspective would suggest that the only way to counter institutionalized and historical racial homogeneity is to make race “matter,” that is, reject the narrative of colorblindness in order to create a more just society (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Part of understanding the continuing significance of race in American life is to recognize the subtle, unintentional, and even implicit ways (Kang, 2005) racial bias works to privilege certain populations and subordinate others. However, challenges to recognizing these nuances include tendencies to immediately associate race consciousness with racial bias and to limit racial significance to the presence of explicit racism or past discrimination.

Recognizing Race: Reverse Discrimination and Race-Conscious Policies

In this section, I will present and discuss ways in which participants addressed existing and possible race consciousness in the Greek system, first in ethnic Greek groups and secondly in efforts to diversify

the system. This first quotation, from Payal, a sophomore sorority member, describes ethnic Greek groups as discriminatory. At SU, these groups consist of historically Black and Latino/a organizations:

And although it started out as a White system, there's also other ethnic systems. The fact is anyone can go into this system, but it almost seems like the ethnic sororities and fraternities are more discriminatory of others because anyone could theoretically do the Greek system.

Notably, she grouped still-existing “other ethnic systems” with the previous discriminatory practices of the nonethnic system. She argued that anyone can now enter this formerly White, but now race-neutral, “theoretically” open system, in contrast to the race-specific organizations. In naming these ethnic Greek groups as discriminatory, her comments parallel attacks (Connerly, 2000) on programs geared towards racial minorities as being exclusionary. In this case, recognizing the relevance of race through the existence of sororities and fraternities that cater to underrepresented minority groups is equated with racial bias and discrimination.

Christi, a sophomore sorority member, acknowledged that the Greek system lacked racial diversity, but she was at odds about how to remedy the system without reverting to what she perceived as reverse discrimination. Her specific comparison of any sort of race consciousness to affirmative action as a practice unfair to Asian Americans speaks volumes about how many Americans currently view the role of race:

I wish more people of color would join [fraternities and sororities] and I think there is a considerable number, but not as many as it should be. But I mean, it leads back to the entire affirmative action debate thing. I'm just like it wouldn't be right for them to accept someone just because they're of a different race. To bypass someone who maybe (pause) I do think that diversity is really a good thing but it's also difficult with my own perception of law school, like it's a lot easier for African Americans to get in than me because I'm not really considered—Asians don't get any scholarships and they're not considered a minority really when they judge us for entrance. So I do wish it was more diverse sometimes so there could be more of a variety.

By linking her desire for more diversity with a sudden wary reference to affirmative action as something that makes it “a lot easier” for Blacks to get into law school, Christi lumped an unusual pair of policies together. Diversifying a sorority received the same negative associations as her perceptions of affirmative action. To encourage diversity would entail not only being conscious of race, but letting people of color into sororities just because of their race at the expense of other (White) women who would be “bypassed”—a manifestation of social affirmative action at its worst. According to Christi, doing so would not be right.

Several nonsorority women proposed ways that sororities could address the race issue, such as Monica, a sophomore not in a sorority, who proposed “a diversity initiative . . . to appeal to minority students to rush,” but most of these women were wary of tokenizing women of color or singling them out for special treatment.

When Race Matters: Who Joins, How Do They Join, and What Do They Join?

In this section I will discuss how participants articulated ways that race can function in sorority recruitment through implicit exclusion. Several women in the study proposed that the more diverse sororities at MSU tended to be the lower status sororities. Indeed, similar to Chen’s findings (1998), the three sororities identified as being the most elite had no Black or Asian American women at the time of the study. Payal, a sophomore in a sorority, was one of the only women that I interviewed who rejected the idea that women of color were concentrated in certain houses. She challenged questions I asked her about diversity and race:

I’ve never been ostracized because I am ethnically diverse, especially in my house. It’d be prevalent if they were discriminatory, if a large percentage of Asian people fell through, like didn’t get a bid from a house, but at most—one. Of all the people who fell through, and there were like thirty to forty, I did not hear of one that was Asian. And so that would be a direct indicator, but the fact that everyone was placed, I don’t necessarily see how it’s discriminatory . . .

I think it definitely started out that way because it is an old system, [during] segregation . . . it isn't discriminatory, it is accepting, the way people view it is totally different from how it is.

Payal drew a definitive line between rampant historical discrimination in the Greek system, a thing of the past, and the present, racially accepting Greek system. She hypothesized that if many of the women who "fell through," a term for not receiving bids from any house, were Asian American that it would be evidence of discrimination. Only explicit acts were framed as discrimination, such as if women of color or she herself were ostracized from sororities. In the same way, critical race theorists identify how Americans tend to see racism as a thing of the past and only present in overt acts of racial malice (Bell, 2004; Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

Interestingly, while there was not a high number of Asian American women among women who "fell through," I observed a more subtle phenomena. Within the sorority sample, five of the nine women had joined their sororities through nontraditional means. Nontraditional pathways were anything that fell outside of the traditional rush calendar, such as joining as sophomores, falling through and then joining, or dropping out of rush but later accepting a bid. One exceptional case was Christi, who joined as a sophomore. She entered SU cynical of Greek life and did not think of rushing a sorority. However at the start of her sophomore year, she struck up a conversation with a complete stranger at the bookstore, and this student invited her to participate in sophomore fall rush. At SU, fall rush is much more informal than freshman spring rush; participants informed me that it was only conducted by houses seeking to meet their yearly membership quotas.

Christi's experience, and the experiences of the other four women who joined through nontraditional means, cannot be called representative. Still, considering that there were only 23 Asian American women in sororities at the time and over half of the sorority sample reported joining through nontraditional means, the trend possibly affirms previous research (Chen, 1998) on a more subtle way that race operates in sororities: how status hierarchies between houses influence the openness of certain sororities to women of color.

Less elite houses may be more willing to recruit women through untraditional means because they seek to meet enrollment quotas. On top were sororities that were known for being the most selective; they had the fewest women of color, if any. Within the more diverse sororities, two or three sororities stood out as being lower status sororities. Several minutes after citing Zeta Sigma (pseudonym) as a diverse sorority, Katherine, a senior in a sorority, stated:

It's gonna be really bad, a lot of my friends are Zeta Sigmas, but really really weird girls who fall out—fall through the system two or three times, always end up at ZS because they just take everyone. Some of them are really really weird. Some of my friends are in [ZS] and they don't like the idea that they're taking everyone they can but it's like they have to or they won't have enough members.

Zeta Sigma was the newest Panhellenic, historically White sorority at SU. As it accepted even the “weird girls” to maintain quota, women of color were lumped in with White women who were seen as less desirable, thus indicating that women of color themselves possibly may carry even less prestige. Sophia, a senior Zeta Sigma, commented:

[W]e have a lot of hurdles to overcome because the Greek system here is so established. . . . We're one of the youngest ones and we've got so much to compete with. So we just welcomed everyone, and we're always diverse because I feel like we do give a lot more bids to minority women than the other houses. So like we just perpetuate that.

Because Sophia's sorority could welcome everyone, they were more likely to take women who may get rejected from more selective houses. Sophia went on to state that the cycle that produced more diversity in Zeta Sigma was “not intentional;” it happened because “we just welcomed everyone.” Interestingly, in the previous quotation, Katherine, from a different sorority, referred to Zeta Sigma in less optimistic tones: a group that will “just take anyone,” suggesting a sense of desperateness.

Not all of the houses that I observed that had higher numbers of women of color struggled to make quota. However, the fact remained that Black and Asian American women were virtually absent from the

three most popular, elite houses. Nonsorority women also observed the relationship between higher diversity and lower status. Uzma, who was not a member of a sorority, clarified frankly:

And if you look at it, the quote/unquote high class, elite ones, I don't think there is one single minority in any of them. And the ones that do have them, I think are in the bottom of the pit.

The last "them," of course, referred to women of color. She did not hesitate to name the correlation between higher numbers of women of color and lower social status.

Even though these commentaries on the racialized social hierarchy within sororities are expressed in clearly racial terms, many of these same women stated almost contradictory attitudes on the significance of race in the Greek system, arguing that the system was still open access and nondiscriminatory. Like Payal and much of the American public that embraces a more colorblind rhetoric, they only acknowledged the presence of race in describing more explicit discrimination (Bell, 2004; Bonilla-Silva, 2003; Brown, Carnoy, Currie, Duster, Oppenheimer, Schultz, & Wellman, 2003). It is important to note that very few sorority participants actually reported feeling like they had been overtly discriminated against or marginalized during the rush process. Instead of blatant discrimination, the role of race was much more covert, such as racial microaggressions (Solórzano, 2000), subtle comments that reminded Asian American women of racial otherness. In some cases, derogatory comments that Asian American sorority members overheard about other racial/ethnic groups made them wonder about how they were perceived as racial minorities. Maya, a member of a sorority, recounted:

One of my girlfriends was talking about this guy who was really good looking and he happened to be African American and this girl was like 'Really? Oh that'd be awful if I brought him back to my family.' It just made me think twice about what she's thinking about me if she's saying that about him.

Nonsorority women often expressed that they were hesitant to rush not because they thought that there was rampant discrimination throughout the system or that they would be turned away at the door

of a house, but because of more covert messaging in regards to race. Participants noted that students of color often associated Panhellenic with White culture. Besides this association, some women may have simply not wanted to deal with being the only (or one of few) people of color in their sorority. This explanation was often used to explain why Black women would not want to join sororities, but several respondents stated that it was also an issue for Asian Americans. Anna, a sophomore not in a sorority, observed:

Also I think a lot of my friends who were minorities were really turned off by the fact that it was all White. Just didn't want to [join] because they didn't want to be the only brown face.

Marissa, a senior in a sorority, noted how women can feel marginalized without overt exclusion:

I mean, you can send a message without saying anything if you have a whole four hundred people in a sorority, the majority are White, that obviously can be a little intimidating unintentionally for someone of color.

As Marissa said, messages about who belongs or does not belong in a group can be sent without a hostile word, action, or negative intention. Even in the absence of obvious bias, some women picked up on implicitly drawn lines on campus that marked racial boundaries and spaces.

Conclusions and Implications for Practice

Racial barriers towards Asian Americans have evolved significantly since the time of official discriminatory clauses against people of color; nonetheless, Greek letter organizations are still a site in which race and racial identity continue to matter. As the narratives of this study indicate, race continues to shape Asian American women's access to sororities in subtle, yet significant ways. From the inverse relationship between prestige and the number of people of color in a sorority to implicit messages that sororities can be unwelcome spaces for minorities, both the significant presence *and* absence of Asian American women in sororities at SU testify to ways in which race shapes how Asian American women view sororities. The trend of not recognizing the relevance of race unless explicit racial animus was present also

reflects general American attitudes towards race as a thing of the past or something that society has managed to transcend (Bell, 2004; Brown et al., 2003).

This study does not seek to offer smoking gun evidence of the Greek system as a continuing perpetrator of racial exclusion on college campuses. Still, the subtleties and complexities of how race functions in higher education and society at large are equally deserving of attention, but may be easily overlooked in student affairs. Further utilization of CRT in higher education literature can help campus communities become more sensitive to the more understated, yet key ways that race continues to influence intergroup dynamics, student interactions, and campus policies.

How can campus professionals work to ensure that Greek groups are not counterproductive to campus racial dynamics? Some universities have responded by eliminating Greek organizations altogether; and while this may be an appropriate solution for some campuses, the rise of ethnic-specific Greek organizations (Kimbrough, 2003) suggests that there is still something in Greek life, for instance the close camaraderie and opportunities for leadership, which can appeal to students of all races. Given the relationship between Greek organizations and alumni relations (Harrison, Mitchell, & Peterson, 1995), it appears that Greek life, while certainly changing, is not going to be eliminated en masse anytime soon. How can the system evolve in an age of increasing diversity? Who is responsible for initiating change?

Participant perspectives that tended to see diversifying as beyond the power of the Greek system presented a self-perpetuating cycle of homogeneity. Breaking this cycle will inevitably take intentionality that may be difficult to undertake without running in the other extreme direction of making students of color feel like token minorities. Possible partial solutions may include a demystifying rush for students without previous exposure to the Greek system and dialogues or collaborations between Greek groups and ethnic student organizations. Some of the study participants successfully straddled the worlds of sororities and the Asian American campus organizations. Anjali served as an officer in both groups and told me of a time when her (White) sorority sisters outnumbered the South Asian American students in the audience at a hate crimes forum that she had organized.

Instances of Greeks showing support to campus diversity efforts may be rare, but they can be fostered if the participants are willing and committed to change.

Part of the solution is also being able to diagnose the problem. Casting racial significance in a binary between colorblindness and explicit discrimination does a disservice to how we understand race. Instead, we need to learn to navigate the murkier waters of the more subtle ways race manifests itself, and how these circumstances shape student experiences. Hopefully, by better understanding how race continues to permeate our society in less obvious yet significant ways, we can have a conversation about how race influences interactions, perceptions, and beliefs on campus. Until we completely recognize its presence and dynamic manifestations, we are ill-equipped to hope of moving beyond a racialized society.

Institutions, led by student affairs practitioners, need to take a critical look to how Greek life affects the campus racial climate. Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pederson, and Allen (1998) argue that the campus racial climate is influenced by a variety of interdependent components, and diversity is more than just the percent of students of color on campus. They urge campuses to also look at how the historical legacy of the institution, intergroup relations, and psychological perceptions affect the climate for diversity. Greek life can have a major effect on all of these areas. For example, if Greek organizations used to ban students of color from joining during a time in the institution's history, how might that legacy affect the demographic composition of Greek life today? If Greek life causes White students to self-segregate into racially homogeneous environments as previous research suggests (Sidanius et al., 2004), what impact might that have on intergroup relations on campus? These are important questions to ask if institutions are going to be committed to building healthy climates for diversity.

Future research is greatly needed to document both the implicit and explicit ways in which students encounter race, class, and gender in the Greek system. No longer just a Black-and-White issue when it comes to race, students of color around the country are reinventing and challenging not only Greek systems, but also the very concept of what it truly means to be an inclusive campus community with opportunities for all students to flourish.

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