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## **SORORITY MEMBERS' PERSPECTIVES OF CHAPTER RACIAL INTEGRATION**

**Jennifer T. Edwards, Ed.D.**

*The survival of social fraternal organizations may depend on whether or not members understand the importance of increasing the racial/ethnic diversity of their membership (Boschini & Thompson, 1998). Higher education institutions can emphasize the importance of diversity through university culture, vision, and support systems. A qualitative study was conducted to identify and compare the perceptions of members of historically Black and White sororities regarding racial diversity within their chapters. The purpose of this study was to explore the level of openness towards racial integration among members of both historically Black and White sororities. Findings suggest members of sororities may not support the recruitment of racially diverse members.*

Colleges and universities have a responsibility to address the needs of a diverse student body (Seurkamp, 2007). In this regard, one area neglected by administrators at many colleges and universities is the social fraternity/sorority system. The survival of social fraternities and sororities depends on whether or not these organizations understand and embrace the importance of diversity (Boschini & Thompson, 1998). Higher education institutions can provide a foundation for change in these organizations through the university culture, vision, and support systems.

A paucity of research exists regarding social sororities and their acceptance of members of other races and/or ethnicities. The lack of research addressing this topic and the need for further synthesis of the literature were significant rationale for conducting the study.

The purpose of the study was to explore the level of openness towards racial and ethnic integration among members of historically Black or White sororities. The social fraternity/sorority system may experience a decline in membership or may appear to be unprogressive if members do not accept people of other races or ethnicities in their organizations (Chang, 1999).

This study was formulated from the hypothesis that women from historically Black or White sororities who participate in multicultural training and events are more open to having a diverse membership in their organizations. To address this question, participants were chosen from a list of sorority members who participated in at least one multicultural activity on campus. Results suggest although sorority women may support diversity-centered recruitment on an individual basis, the general membership of their organizations may not support this type of recruitment.

### **Background**

The United States population is rapidly becoming more diverse. In 2004, racial minorities represented 33% of the population (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2004). In 2004, Hispanic Americans were the fastest growing minority group with 14% of the ethnic population, while African Americans represented 12% of the population, Asian Americans represented 4% of the population, and American Indians/Alaska Natives represented 1% of the population. Overall, the

number of racial minorities is projected to increase to 39% of the U.S. population by the year 2020 (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2004).

The higher education environment is reflective of the growing diversity of society. By 2020, students from ethnically underrepresented populations will comprise 46% of U.S. college students (Seurkamp, 2007). Many colleges and universities acknowledge the existence of their increasingly diverse student body. However, some higher education institutions fail to either discuss issues of diversity or to develop a holistic approach focused on the academic and social needs of all undergraduate students (Anderson, 2007).

A common goal among institutions of higher education in the U.S. is to continually provide a campus environment that is welcoming of diversity and multiculturalism. There is an increasing emphasis on the importance of creating diversity-centered campus environments (American Council on Education, 1988; Boschini & Thompson, 1998; Rendón and Hope, 1996; Smith, 1989). These diversity-centered campus environments would include student organizations, such as sororities and fraternities. However, research suggests that sorority and fraternity members are not tolerant of diversity or multiculturalism in their organizations or on their campuses (Pascarella, Edison, Nora, Hagedorn, & Terenzini, 1996).

### **Theoretical Framework**

A Critical Race Theory (CRT) framework was used in conducting a review of the literature and participant interviews. Matsuda (1991) defines CRT as “a jurisprudence that accounts for the role of racism in American law and that works toward the elimination of racism as part of a larger goal of eliminating all forms of subordination” (p. 1331).

CRT stems from the legal field, but the theory is also used to analyze inequalities in the educational setting (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Soloranzo and Yosso (2001, p. 472-473) note CRT has five themes that create the foundational perspectives, research methods, and pedagogy in education. The first theme is the centrality of race and racism and their intersectionality with other forms of subordination. The second and third themes are the challenge to dominant ideology and the commitment to social justice. The fourth and fifth themes are the transdisciplinary perspective and the centrality of experiential knowledge.

CRT in education focuses on analyzing race and racism in education by placing both categories in a historical and contemporary context (Soloranzo & Yosso, 2001). The centrality of experiential knowledge is critical to understanding, teaching, and analyzing racial subordination in education (Soloranzo & Yosso). Experiential knowledge can be discovered through the use of narratives to understand people’s experiences, the exploration of organizational structures, and the examination of the practices and policies that perpetuate ethnic inequalities (Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, & Thomas, 1995; Daniel, 2007; Ladson-Billings, 2000; Solorzano & Villalpando, 1998).

Racial and ethnic integration of social sororities was examined through interviews. Specifically, the demographic structures of the participants’ chapters were examined using interview questions that focused on the members’ perceptions of ethnic and racial integration in their

organizations. Exploring the demographics of the sororities in this study was essential, as geography plays a role in the racial and ethnic diversity of historically Black and White sororities. Past studies indicate there may be race-based distinctions (i.e., sororities in the South may be less diverse than sororities in the North) between sororities and fraternities in the Northern and Southern U.S. (Johnson, 2001; Muir, 1991; Robbins, 2004).

### **Review of the Literature**

Social fraternities and sororities were founded to provide numerous benefits for their members. These benefits included maintaining an environment to share ideas, building lasting friendships, and providing support from a continuous set of student peers in a world that is separate from living with parents (Sirhal, 2000). Ironically, these benefits were not originally targeted towards all students.

#### ***Racially Based Organizations and Critical Race Theory***

Historically, neither Black nor White social sororities and fraternities have always accepted members of a different race into their organizations at the same rate as colleges and universities (Sindanius, Levin, van Laar, & Sears, 2008). Overall, sororities and fraternities have remained segregated in terms of race and ethnicity (Sindanius et al, 2008; Sirhal, 2000). Segregation in these organizations may be further explained through CRT. According to CRT, race and racism exist at the basic level of U.S. history and society (Crenshaw, 1990; Taylor, 1999; Valdes et al., 2002). Taylor also indicated that race and racism are embedded in the structures and policies that guide the everyday practices of higher education institutions. If U.S. higher education institutions use historically racially biased structures and policies, some historically White fraternities and sororities may be perceived as racist due to their lengthy history on these campuses. However, it was this perception that led to the creation of other racially based fraternities and sororities (historically Black, Latino/Latina, Asian, and Native American fraternities and sororities).

#### ***Benefits of Diverse Student Organizations***

Undergraduate students who participate in diverse interactions with their peers experience significant changes in their values, beliefs, and actions (Pascarella et al., 1996; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). During students' first three years of college, peer interactions outside of the college classroom have positive impacts on their cognitive development. Negative impacts on college students' cognitive development arise when higher education environments shield students from diversity-related experiences (Pascarella, et al., 1996). Therefore, as more students from underrepresented populations enroll in historically White, Black, or Hispanic higher education institutions, the need for colleges and universities to acknowledge and embrace diversity increases.

Research indicates undergraduate students who participate in diverse interactions experience various benefits (Antonio, 2001; Chang, 1996; Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin, 2002; Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pederson, & Allen, 1999; Pascarella et al., 1996; Hu & Kuh, 2003; Whitt, Edison, Pascarella, Terenzini, & Nora, 2001). Academic benefits stem from diverse interactions and result in increases in critical thinking (Pascarella et al., 2001), problem-solving capacities, and valuing of diverse perspectives (Gurin et al., 2002). White students who choose to interact with students from different backgrounds tend to experience positive outcomes (Chang, 1999;

Gurin, 1999; Hurtado et al., 1999; Orfield & Kurlaender, 2001). These positive outcomes range from important cognitive and learning outcomes to satisfaction and openness to others. White students who participate in ethnically or racially homogeneous experiences (e.g., participation in fraternal organizations) and who have limited interactions with students from different backgrounds experience a negative impact on educational outcomes (Smith & Schonfeld, 2000). In addition, students who are members of fraternal organizations (historically Black or White) experience an increase in feelings of victimization (Sindanius et al., 2008). Undergraduate students who participate in ethnically or racially homogeneous fraternal organizations are less likely to become involved in experiences that encourage social and political change (Chang, 1999; Sindanius et al., 2008).

### **Summary**

The higher education environment is becoming more diverse. An increase in the number of students from underrepresented populations may result in recruitment problems for ethnically or racially homogeneous fraternal organizations. Using CRT, this study explores six sorority members' perceptions of ethnic and racial diversity within their organizations.

### **Research Questions**

The research questions that guided this study were:

1. What are sorority members' (of both historically Black and White sororities) perceptions of inclusive, diversity-centered recruitment of potential new members?
2. What is the difference between historically Black and historically White sorority members' views of current and future racial diversity within their organizations?

### **Methodology**

For the purposes of this study, a qualitative research design was used to identify and to compare the perceptions of women in historically Black and White sororities regarding racial diversity within their sororities. Using an ethnographic interview approach, the researcher worked to understand how other people saw their experiences, learning from people rather than merely studying people (Spradley, 1979). The sorority women who participated in this study were advised of this approach, which helped to enhance the meaning of the data gathered during the research. The researcher is an alumna member of a historically White sorority. During data collection, efforts were made to minimize potential bias, including physical changes to the interview space and a reminder to the participants that the researcher was not serving in her sorority advisor role during the interview.

### ***Site***

At the time of the study, participants attended a mid-sized, public institution in the southern U.S. with an enrollment of slightly more than 15,000 students. For the 2005-2006 academic year, slightly over 13.3% of the students were African American, slightly over .5% were American Indian, slightly over 10% were Hispanic American, 1.06% were Asian/Pacific Islander, and slightly over 1.33% were international students. Approximately 30.4% of the students that attended this mid-sized institution received Federal Pell Grant funds, and the student-related

expenditures/full-time equivalent was \$5,089 per student. This University was classified as a Carnegie Master's Large institution and also had 22 academic programs ranging from architecture and related services to security and protective services (Educational Trust, 2007).

From 2003–2006, most of the potential new members who expressed interest in joining sororities were White. On average each year, out of a pool of 115 interested women there were eight to ten Hispanic Americans, one Asian American, and one African American participant(s) in fall formal or spring informal recruitment. Recruitment methods included individual sororities recruiting women at organization fairs during freshmen orientation, separate National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC) and National Panhellenic Conference (NPC) council Web sites featuring general information about recruitment, and the availability of NPC literature pertaining to fall recruitment through the student activities office.

Through these recruitment methods, most of the NPC sororities successfully recruited at least one Hispanic American woman annually. According to the University administration, four of the five NPC sororities had never had an African American member. The sorority that had an African American member was the newest sorority on campus and extended bids to almost all of the minority women who participated in recruitment.

Most NPHC sororities recruited members who were not freshmen. These sororities recruited members by hosting community service events and information sessions during the academic year. A majority of the NPHC sororities did not have a racially diverse membership. However, one of the four sororities had a White member in the past.

### ***Participants***

The six participants for this study were selected to provide different experiences from their respective sororities. The size of the historically White and historically Black sororities at this institution ranged from 50-60 members and 14-24 members respectively. Overall, slightly over 300 undergraduate women were involved in sororities at this institution during the 2005-2006 academic year.

Participants were selected according to the following criteria: membership in a historically Black or White sorority, race (Black or White), enrollment during the spring 2005 semester, and exposure to at least one multicultural training session or event. This last criterion was important to addressing the central hypothesis that women exposed to such activities would be more perceptive of chapter culture and members' openness to a racially diverse organization.

In terms of ethnicity, four participants identified themselves as Black (one participant also identified herself as Nigerian), two participants identified themselves as White (one participant also identified herself as Hungarian). Four of the participants were seniors, one was a junior, and one was classified as a freshman. There were an equal number of historically Black and historically White sororities represented. Slightly over 80% of the participants were first-generation college students, and half of the participants earned a multicultural certification through the multicultural office on campus.

### ***Interview Questions***

The participant interviews were digitally recorded in a face-to-face session. The instrument was piloted with a doctoral student. This study utilized a series of eight questions designed to answer the research questions:

1. What is your affiliation and when did you become a part of the organization?
2. Why did you decide to become a member of your sorority?
3. Is your organization predominately White, Black, Hispanic, or is it multi-racial? If your organization is not, why do you think your organization primarily consists of one predominate race?
4. Why would people of a different ethnicity or race be attracted to your organization?
5. Do you think that your inter/national organization embraces (actively promotes) a diverse membership and diversity-based (multicultural) recruitment? Why or why not?
6. Do you think that your alumnae would embrace (actively promote) a diverse membership and diversity-based (multicultural) recruitment? Why or why not?
7. Would you like to have members of a different ethnicity or race in your organization? Why or why not?
8. Did you ever consider joining an organization where the majority of the members are a different race than you are?

The first two questions were utilized to gather background information and to discover if the participants were good candidates for the study. Questions three and four addressed the background of the social sororities of which the participants were members and the sororities' level of diversity. The fifth and sixth questions examined whether or not the participants thought that their organizations actively promoted recruitment of racially diverse members. The final two questions addressed the issues of diversity and multiculturalism on a personal level for the participants.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Prior to data collection, the study was approved by the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs at the institution where all research was conducted. Participants were chosen from the multicultural center's event participation list and were compared to sorority rosters. All participants volunteered without expectation of favor. In addition, every participant signed a consent form, which authorized their participation and utilization of data gathered for the purposes of the study.

Data were gathered from the research subjects through two formal interviews (initial and follow-up interview) with each participant. The interviews for this study were conducted in the Office of Multicultural and International Student Services (Office of M.I.S.S.) and lasted an average of 30 minutes each (one hour per participant). Once the interviews were complete, data were transcribed. Researcher triangulation was utilized to analyze the data and to create common themes. The participants' responses were preserved on an external drive for six months after completion of the study and were then destroyed.

## Results

The following categories emerged from the participants' responses: reasons for joining a sorority, sorority's current level of diversity, diversity-based recruitment strategies, and the future of racial integration within the sorority.

### *Reasons for Joining a Sorority*

All interviewees had different reasons for joining their particular sorority. Alicia, Elizabeth, Samantha, and Katie (pseudonyms) joined their sorority because of its morals and values. Some of the morals and values that emerged in most of the interviews were friendship, learning, leadership, academics, community service, and Christianity.

Other participants joined their sororities for other reasons. One woman joined her sorority for the benefits of becoming an alumna. Megan, a Black (Nigerian) member of a historically White sorority, talked about building her résumé and networking with her sorority sisters. She replied, "I wanted the scholarship opportunities and all that [*sic*]. And [*sic*]... it is nice to have someone who is always there." Another participant, Natalie, stated that she joined her sorority because her freshman orientation leader convinced her to go through sorority recruitment and eventually became her big sister in the organization. She also commented, "They were considered the most prestigious [at] the time." Samantha explained that she joined because "I like the sisterhood and that is my attraction to any sorority."

### *Sorority's Current Level of Diversity*

Participants were asked about the predominate race of their organization and why the organization consisted of a predominate race. Megan seemed proud to be one of the few Black members in her sorority. When asked about the predominate race of her sorority, she stated, "It is predominately White. It would take a very long time [for women of different races] to join my sorority." Megan was proud to be the second Black member in her sorority and realized that this is not a common occurrence in historically White sororities on her campus. Megan's sorority was one of the newest NPC sororities on campus and had the highest level of diversity. This level of diversity may be explained by CRT, which contends that race and racism are embedded in the structures and policies of higher education institutions and organizations (Taylor, 1999).

Natalie stated, "They [the past members] were definitely not choosing people [who had] an open mind. The people they were choosing [to become new members] were from their own [racial] group." Alicia stated, "[My sorority is] predominately White. It was founded in [year] and they did not accept anyone else. I think that they [women in her sorority] are going to stick with what women before them have done in our chapter." Alicia also produced the results of a survey that the national organization of her sorority conducted with the members in her chapter. One of the survey questions was, "Would you be willing to sit at the lunch table with a member of a different race?" Over 50% of the members stated that they would not be willing to do so. The results affected her deeply, and she asked me to conduct a diversity session with her chapter later that semester.

When the women from predominately Black sororities were interviewed, they offered similar answers. Samantha stated, "We are predominately African American, but [the racial makeup of

the sorority] is posted on the Web site. We are a historically African American organization that uplifts African American women. There have been people [who] were not African American women that were in our organization.” Katie, who is a member of the same chapter as Samantha, offered “Our sorority is predominately Black, well our chapter is Black.”

### ***Diversity-Based Recruitment Strategies***

Participants from both historically White and Black sororities believed their organizations employed one or more diversity-based recruitment strategies, though no technique specifically focused on recruiting diverse individuals. Megan, a Black (Nigerian) member in a historically White sorority, added that she was a member of her sorority’s hip-hop dance skit for fall formal recruitment. Natalie stated, “I know that specific alumnae [in charge of formal recruitment] embrace multicultural recruitment.” Another participant, Samantha, stated that her [historically Black] sorority reaches beyond the boundaries of the United States [international chapters]. “I strongly believe that because the organization [seeks to create chapters outside of the United States], the organization will become more diverse. One of our principles is international awareness.”

Other participants commented on the publications that the inter/national organizations disperse to members and to potential new members. Natalie felt that the publications from her organization were centered on only one culture, “I get [my] sorority’s newsletter and it seems [homogeneous].” Alicia commented about the large picture of [a prominent, minority, government official] at her sorority’s headquarters. Members of the historically Black sororities also focused on their sorority’s national publications. Elizabeth explained, “The [name of publication] is geared towards African Americans, Cubans, Haitians, Hispanics, and Caucasians as well as other ethnicities.” Samantha stated that the national magazine of her organization “shows people that [name of organization] is not just about uplifting African Americans. It is about uplifting everyone.”

### ***Future Racial Integration***

While the members of the historically White sororities believed their organizations utilized diversity-based recruitment techniques, study participants did not feel their organization was open to having a diverse membership. Natalie concluded:

I think that my organization can racially integrate, and I think that they will, but I don’t think that they will do so from their own efforts. I hope that the organization won’t stick so much to their homogeneous group.

Natalie’s sorority was one of the NPC sororities that did not have any Asian American or Black members.

Alicia also commented, “Diversity always brings other viewpoints and may bring new ideas. Maybe an asset like a new project [i.e., diversity programming].” When asked if she thinks that the women in her sorority would think the same way that she does, she stated. “People have to want to change and [the women in my sorority] are not going to want to.”

Megan offered some insight on the experiences that she had during recruitment. “I sat down with [my sorority sisters] and they [did not focus on my race or ask me questions about my reason to join a White sorority]. They didn’t look at my skin color.” She also offered, “They accepted me

for who I am and they [acted genuine towards me]. They don't put a face on just to get you to join." When she was asked about whether or not other sororities would be open to diverse recruitment in the future, she stated, "[To join the other historically White sororities], an African American girl would have to be absolutely gorgeous or a supermodel."

Participants from the historically Black sororities believed their organizations were open to diverse membership and that it would enhance their organizations. Elizabeth commented that diversity may enhance her organization by enabling her sorority members to become more open-minded. Katie also felt that diversity would benefit her organization, stating, "You never know what others could bring to your organization."

### **Discussion**

When using the CRT in an educational context, the researcher must analyze race and racism by placing both categories in a historical and contemporary context (Soloranzo & Yosso, 2001). The literature review provided the historical context and the participants' interviews/narratives provided a glimpse into the contemporary context. CRT also requires the usage of experiential knowledge, which is critical to understanding, teaching, and analyzing racial subordination in education (Soloranzo & Yosso). In this study, experiential knowledge was attained through an analysis of the participants' interviews/narratives.

The literature review and the interviews suggest race and racism may be two barriers that interested women encounter when choosing to join a homogenous sorority. Ethnically or racially homogenous sororities (both Black and White) may experience challenges to their dominant ideology when a woman who is not a member of the homogenous group expresses interest in their organization. Social justice may not be achieved when interested women encounter racism when expressing interest in a racially or ethnically homogeneous organization.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this study was to explore the level of openness towards racial integration among historically Black and historically White sorority members. Four themes emerged from the research participants' responses to eight interview questions: reasons for joining a sorority, sorority's current level of diversity, diversity-based recruitment strategies, and the future of racial integration within the sorority. The two stated research questions are addressed below.

#### ***Research Question One***

Nearly all participants were open to having racially diverse members in their organization, but this belief may have been influenced by their participation campus multicultural training and events. Although most of the members of historically Black sororities commented that they would be open to having diverse membership, most of the women from historically White sororities believed that members in their organizations may not support recruitment of racially diverse members.

### ***Research Question Two***

All participants indicated that their sorority chapter was either racially or ethnically homogeneous. Overall, all of the participants in the study indicated that they were open to having members of different races and ethnicities in their organization. These responses may be influenced by the fact that three out of the six women in the study gained a multicultural certification and made an effort to learn about different cultures. Two of the women from the historically White sororities indicated that the rest of the women in their sorority may not be open towards diverse recruitment, while none of the historically Black sororities shared this opinion.

### **Implications**

As a result of the increasing level of diversity within the higher education environment, diversity-centered recruitment is essential for the survival of social fraternities and sororities. The inter/national officers of historically Black and historically White sororities should consider dispersing a survey to their undergraduate chapters based on diversity-centered recruitment. Such a survey may help organizations determine their undergraduate members' openness towards having a more diverse membership. College and university sorority advisors should speak with the organizations they advise about the importance of diversity-centered recruitment. Recruitment chairs from historically Black and White chapters should explore hosting training sessions that are focused on the changing demographics of the college environment and how these changes may impact fraternity and sorority life as a whole. Finally, inter/national staff and campus advisors should encourage members from social sororities to take advantage of diversity-based campus activities and events. The sorority members' involvement may result in an appreciation or interest in other races, ethnicities, or cultures.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

This study focused on the perceptions and experiences of three members of historically White sororities and three members of historically Black sororities regarding their level of openness towards racial integration in their organizations. This study was limited to the experiences of these six undergraduate women and employed a qualitative research design. Due to the limited nature of this study, further research should attempt to use a quantitative research design, increase the population size, examine two or more higher education institutions, and/or focus on the experiences of members from both historically Black and historically White fraternities.

Additionally, studies on the impact of diversity training in fraternity and sorority life may provide further insight into the level of openness that individual members have towards diversity-centered recruitment. In this study, members from historically White sororities indicated that while individual members may embrace diversity-centered recruitment, the entire chapter may not have the same level of openness. Another beneficial study would focus on sorority members who are open to diversity-centered recruitment and whether these members voice their opinions of diversity or choose to keep silent during recruitment meetings.

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