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Stepping Across the Divide: Exploring How Culturally Based Fraternities and Sororities Influence African-Born Members' Navigation of U.S. Higher Education, Race, and Racism

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STEPPING ACROSS THE DIVIDE: EXPLORING HOW CULTURALLY BASED FRATERNITIES AND SORORITIES INFLUENCE AFRICAN-BORN MEMBERS' NAVIGATION OF U.S. HIGHER EDUCATION, RACE, AND RACISM

Jakia Marie, Ph.D., Nuri Thompson

In this study, we explored African-born students' lived experiences in culturally based fraternities and sororities in the United States (U.S.), particularly the reasons they joined their organizations and the ways their articulated involvement influenced their college experiences and awareness of race and racism. Using a descriptive phenomenological research design, ten participants reflected on their lived experiences. Four emergent themes—Why I Joined, Cultural Acceptance, My College Experience, and Learning Race and Racism— describe the essence of the participants' experiences. We close with recommendations for practice and future research.

Keywords: African-born college students, culturally based fraternities and sororities, race and racism, U.S. higher education

While research acknowledges the struggles African Americans face as racial minorities in predominantly white spaces (Chapman & Bhopal, 2019; Jones, 2018; Laouénan, 2017), African Americans are not the only demographic designated as racially Black in the United States (U.S.), and therefore, are not the only group to experience racism and anti-Black sentiments. International students of Color continue to have an increasingly visible presence on U.S. college campuses (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2019). In particular, there is a growing number of African immigrants, with an increase of 52% in sub-Saharan African immigrants between 2010-2018 (Echeverria-Estrada & Batalova, 2020). Considering the increase in African-born college students in the U.S., their academic and social experiences are worth exploring to document and improve their collegiate experiences, particularly concerning outcomes associated with their engagement in student organizations.

Research has documented that Black immigrants and native Black Americans[1] do not always agree (Waters, 2009; Waters et al., 2014). Special attention has been paid to African-born U.S. residents and their relationships with multigenerational African Americans (e.g., see Iheduru, 2012; Jackson & Cothran, 2003). This tension is colloquially known as "the divide" and has become a leading narrative in discussions about intra-racial and inter-ethnic interactions. One cannot deny

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1   Black American, multigenerational African American, and African American will be used interchangeably.

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that strained relationships exist among some people, but it cannot be the singular, dominant narrative. African-born U.S. residents and other marginalized groups have built communities and supported one another in various ways (e.g., community groups and local cultural celebrations). One avenue for this support has been through fraternity and sorority involvement.

Student organizations dedicated to creating a space for students of Color have helped shield them from racism and other forms of discrimination on college campuses (Garcia & Duran, 2021; Harper & Quaye, 2007). Greek letter organizations (GLOs) have historically been a place for students to foster friendships and build social networks. GLOs, particularly those founded by people of Color, also have a history of fighting against racism and for social justice (Garcia & Duran, 2021; Muñoz & Guardia, 2009; Ross, 2000). Considering the positive impact fraternity and sorority involvement has historically had on Black students' college experiences, focusing on this aspect of college life provides a unique position to explore and analyze the experiences of African-born students.

The purpose of the present study was to understand the ways involvement in fraternities and sororities influenced African-born students' college experiences and perceptions of race and racism in the U.S. We paid particular attention to their experiences within Black Greek letter organizations (BGLOs) and Greek letter organizations with multicultural memberships. We also focused on students who pursued their undergraduate degree in the U.S. since fraternities and sororities in the U.S. have a culture and aspect that is unique to U.S. colleges and universities.

Our study was guided by three research questions that centered on the experiences and perspectives of the participants. The questions were: 1) What are the reasons African-born college students choose to join U.S.-based fraternities and sororities? 2) How do African-born college students and graduates make sense of their participation in U.S. fraternities and sororities? 3) What influence does involvement in U.S. fraternities and sororities have on African-born college students' and graduates' views on race and racism?

Literature Review

Literature specifically related to African-born college students in the U.S. remains limited; this is especially true when investigating their experiences engaged in extracurricular activities, such as student government involvement or joining a fraternity or sorority. Since African Americans and other students of Color navigate their world as racialized beings in the U.S., their experiences can shed some insight into the racialized experiences of Black immigrants. The following sections highlight college experiences of African students and fraternity and sorority experiences for African American and other students of Color.

African-born College Students in the U.S.

The Institute of International Education (2019) noted that 40,000 Sub-Saharan African international students comprised roughly 2.1% of the overall international student population in the U.S. As Sub-Saharan African students who are racially categorized as Black pursue higher education in the U.S., they bring unique experiences compared to other international students and African American students. African international students' experiences cannot be consolidated with the experiences of African American students because the types of discrimination are not wholly parallel (Lee & Opio, 2011). Further, it is a disservice to lump all international students' experiences together. For example, in a study exploring international students learning about race and racism in the U.S., Mitchell and colleagues (2017) found that African-born international students' experiences differed from other international students in that they experienced anti-Black racism while learning about race and racism in a U.S. context. Ultimately, African-born students in the U.S. experience racism, but it is layered with cultural biases (Lee & Opio, 2011; George Mwangi et al., 2019). The racism and cultural differences lead to unique adjustments for African-born students in the U.S.

Some scholars have found that African international students' cultural adjustment processes in the U.S. are filled with anti-Black and anti-African discrimination (Constantine et al., 2005; George Mwanga et al., 2019). They experience marginalization due to race, nationality, age, and foreign status. In addition, their new racial statuses cause cognitive dissonance since they are not as familiar with U.S. racial constructs (George Mwanga et al., 2019). However, as they learn about race and racism, African-born students have described experiences of racism from white Americans, while others described discrimination from other international students and Black Americans (Constantine et al., 2005). They have also reported experiencing stereotypes, unwelcoming attitudes, and discrimination in extracurricular engagement experiences (Lee & Opio, 2011). Still, some African-born students have noted they were treated well by white Americans because white Americans saw them as different than African Americans and did not want to be seen as racist (Manguvo, 2013). Given these diverse experiences, as African-born students navigate the U.S., they have varying racial and cultural identity saliences that shift based on space and time (Awokoya, 2012).

Participation in fraternities and sororities is one way students can build relationships with other students and across the community. This is especially true for fraternities and sororities founded specifically to support students of Color. Therefore, we will explore the impact of Black and multicultural Greek letter organizations.

Black and Multicultural U.S. Fraternity and Sorority Life

As more African American students pursued higher education in the 20th century, they faced racism on college campuses. To counter the

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racism that led to lower retention rates of African Americans, a group of Black students at Cornell University formed a study and support club specially for African American students (Ross, 2000). This group, in 1906, led to the founding of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc., the first intercollegiate Black Greek letter organization (Kimbrough, 2003). However, overt racism, isolation, and feeling secluded were not the only experiences influencing the surge in Black Greek letter organizations on college campuses. At Historically Black Colleges and Universities, paternalism and patriarchy were issues students rebelled against, leading to the founding of five of the first eight Black collegiate Greek letter organizations at Howard University including: Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority Inc., Delta Sigma Theta Sorority Inc., Omega Psi Phi Fraternity Inc., Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity Inc., and Zeta Phi Beta Sorority Inc. (Kimbrough, 2003).

Greek letter fraternal organizations founded by African Americans on U.S. college campuses were created to provide a fraternal experience for Black students while enhancing their college social experience and promoting academic excellence (Ross, 2000). For example, Kimbrough and Hutcheson (1998) found that Black students noted that their involvement in BGLOs helped develop leadership skills. Other outcomes associated with Black students' engagement in BGLOs include academic benefits (Greyerbiehl & Mitchell, 2014; Mitchell, 2015), increased engagement overall (Mitchell et al., 2017), social belonging (Greyerbiehl & Mitchell, 2014; Mitchell, 2013; Sharp, 2020), improved student-faculty relationships (Patton et al., 2011) and increased social capital (McClure, 2006; Mitchell, 2015). While there are numerous benefits to African American engagement in BGLOs, members are often still subjected to racism and other forms of marginalization at predominantly white institutions.

Ray (2013) found that Black fraternity members were treated differently than their white counterparts. In particular, the small population of Black fraternity men on campus heightens their racial marking, leading to more visibility and prejudices. When considering the intersection of race and gender, Greyerbiehl and Mitchell (2014) found that Black women involved in historically Black sororities dealt with intersectionality, or interlocking systems of oppression (e.g., the intersection of racism, sexism, and classism) on campus, and the organizations provided safe spaces to combat their marginalizing experiences. Despite experiences with racism within broader campus communities, African American participation in Greek letter organizations, specifically BGLOs, helps students find environments where they can foster higher levels of racial self-esteem (Greyerbiehl & Mitchell, 2014; Mitchell, 2015).

While BGLOs have offered support for students, particularly African American students within predominantly white institutions, they are not the only Greek letter organizations created to challenge racism and create a sense of belonging for students. Multicultural fraternities and sororities later emerged to create culturally relevant spaces

that combat racism, among other forms of oppression (Garcia & Duran, 2021; Gillon et al., 2019). Gillon and colleagues (2019) noted that racially diverse students—including, but not limited to, African American, Black, Native American, Latine, Asian American, and Pacific Islander—experience racism and other forms of marginalization on their college campuses; the support of their fraternities and sororities helps them learn to navigate and negotiate these oppressive spaces. These positive experiences have led to the emergence of more culturally diverse organizations (Garcia & Duran, 2021).

The literature highlighted shows the benefits of fraternity and sorority participation for domestic students of Color and accentuates the possible parallel experiences of international students of Color participating in the same organizations. More specifically, the experiences of African Americans provide some context for the experiences of African-born students within U.S. higher education, given that both populations deal with anti-Blackness. Further understanding the intersection of immigration, race, and higher education led to us seeking to explore the ways involvement in Black and multicultural Greek letter organizations influence African-born students' college experiences in the U.S. and how they make sense of race and racism because of their fraternity or sorority memberships.

Method

We deployed a descriptive phenomenological research design to capture participants' perspectives related to their lived experiences in their fraternal organizations and how they learned about race and racism. Moustakas (1994) explained that the basis for all knowledge is phenomena. Studies using phenomenology research designs center on the participants' perspectives, the essence of their experiences, and how they make sense of the world (Moustakas, 1994). What comes into one's consciousness is what then becomes one's knowledge and how one learns to navigate the world. So, when considering how involvement in culturally based fraternities and sororities created to serve students of Color influences the college experiences and racial ideologies of African-born college students in the U.S., a new consciousness from said involvement can put individuals on a path they may not have experienced. In addition to centering the participants' lived experiences, our phenomenological approach shaped the development of our research questions, our data collection protocol, and our data analysis as we centered the participants' experiences and the essence of their experiences throughout the study.

Participants

The participants for this study were African-born college students and alumni who were members of traditionally Black, Latino, and multicultural Greek letter organizations. We used purposeful, criterion-based sampling to recruit participants. Purposeful sampling is when

researchers use their judgment to select a specific population to explore research questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). It is an important sampling technique when exploring a specific phenomenon. A criterion-based model was utilized because a criterion approach requires the researcher to list the needed attributes essential to the study and locate those matching it (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The criteria for the study were: (1) an individual who was born on the continent of Africa; (2) a current college student or alum with a bachelor's degree or higher; and (3) a member of a Black, Latine, or multicultural Greek letter organization.

Most participants were recruited via social media. We created a study flyer and shared it on multiple social media sites, including Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook. Some participants reached out based on the advertisement. Others were individually solicited based on social media searches on Instagram using its hashtag feature. Individuals using hashtags such as #AfricanGreekPicnic, #AfricanAlpha, #African-Delta, and others of the like were asked to participate. We also utilized snowball sampling to identify participants, asking participants to refer other participants who met the criteria for the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Using these recruitment methods, ten individuals participated, which included everyone interested in participating in the study and provided us with a sample size within the suggested range of 5 to 25 participants for a phenomenological study (Creswell, 1998). Table 1 provides demographic information for each of the participants.

Table 1

Study Participants' Sociodemographic Information

Name	Country of Birth	Fraternity/Sorority	Crossing Year	Region of Institution
Akwesi	Ghana	Divine Nine Fraternity	2017	South
Ashley	Malawi	Multicultural Sorority	2003	Midwest
Josh	Rwanda	Latino Fraternity	2011	Midwest
Kofi	Ghana	Divine Nine Fraternity	2017	South
Marilyn	Ghana	Divine Nine Sorority	2013	South
Mina	Zimbabwe	Divine Nine Fraternity	2009	South
Mugabe	Zimbabwe	Latino Fraternity	2007	Midwest
Pierre	Ghana	Divine Nine Fraternity	2017	South
Taiwo	Nigeria	Divine Nine Fraternity	2016	Midwest
Toby	Nigeria	Divine Nine Fraternity	2014	South

Data Collection and Analysis

We collected data through a series of one-on-one semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews within phenomenological studies allow researchers to explore the research questions while leaving room for imaginative variation of the participants to detail the phenomenon of interest through follow-up and probing questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). We constructed the questions based on our review of extant literature and to provide participants the opportunity to describe their lived experiences (see Appendix A). In total, we conducted ten interviews, one with each participant. The ten interviews ranged from 25 to 144 minutes in length. For confidentiality reasons, we assigned all participants pseudonyms to protect their identities.

After we conducted the interviews, we transcribed them. We analyzed the data using open and analytical coding. Open coding, or horizontalization in phenomenological studies, is the initial process of analyzing the data, giving equal weight to all data, and taking notes of data by establishing codes. Analytical coding is clustering codes and making meaning of the data, which is how we arrived at the themes for the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), or what Moustakas (1994) calls "thematic portrayals of the experience" (p. 131). We saw evidence of data saturation after going through half of the interviews, meaning no new significant codes emerged across the interviews as we continued to code the transcripts.

Rather than attempting to engage in bracketing, which in earlier phenomenological studies is the suspension of judgment (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), throughout the data collection and analysis processes, we were continuously in reflexive processes. *Reflexivity* is continuous self-reflection and evaluation of one's positionality and acknowledges how one's positionality could influence the research (Berger, 2015). As two American-born racially Black individuals, we understand racialization, but not through the context of immigration. Given our positionalities, when transcribing interviews, we reviewed the codes multiple times individually and together to reduce bias, especially biases that could be attributed to our national origins.

Further, as members of Black and multicultural Greek letter organizations, we have personal knowledge of these organizations and their histories, which give us unique insights into how the participants made sense of their lived experiences. Still, we were always cognizant not to try and understand the experiences of the participants of this study based on our own interactions and assumptions. Our positionalities statements offer further insight into our interests and relationships to the study.

Positionality Statements

Marie: I am a multigenerational African in the U.S., or African American/Black American, individual. My family has been living in the U.S. for over six generations, and much of our history has been purposefully erased through various systems of racism and oppression. I

am a member of Sigma Lambda Gamma National Sorority, Inc., and I use a Pan-African framework in my studies because my interest is, and will always be, to highlight cultural diversity as a means of continuously building and strengthening our communities.

Thompson: As an active member of Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc., I am intimately familiar with the process of learning about and joining GLOs. My professional work focuses specifically on working with immigrant communities and provides insight into some of the barriers faced by youth and adults alike who emigrated to the United States. Being Black American, I bear a unique relationship to the experience of being an American. I am painfully aware of the systems of oppression that have historically and continue to impact Black residents today.

Findings

Four themes emerged from this study. Each theme was derived directly from the research questions and the lived experiences of participants. The themes that emerged were: Why I Joined, Cultural Acceptance, My College Experience, and Learning Race and Racism. The themes highlight the similarities and differences between the participants' experiences—or the essence of the phenomena they experienced—and shed light on the variance of experiences of African-born college students in the U.S.

Why I Joined

Participants were asked to reflect on the personal reasons they were attracted to their respective organizations and eventually became members. Though their reasons for joining were diverse, thematically, their reasons revolved around the connections they felt with their organization and personal networks.

Some participants explained that they felt an affinity to their organizations because of the organizations' histories and what they stood for. For example, Mina was attracted to his fraternity because of the history of African leaders who were also members of the organization. He explained:

> I began to research and read a book called *The Divine Nine* and identified with [my fraternity] because…historically, they have a contingent of well-known Africans that were once [members]. Specifically, [names prominent African members in his organization]. So, we already have the first Zimbabwean to be [a member of my fraternity] in South Carolina…So, through learning from him and seeing, you know, his experience, I decided to pledge [my organization].

Mina felt connected to his organization because of his African heritage and the fraternity's close ties to African leaders. This is similar to Toby's reasoning, as he knew other Africans who were members of his organization, and he was impressed with their presence on campus. He stated:

> When I finally came to the school, I saw a bunch of people who were well dressed and leaders in the school, and then I started asking questions…I loved how they carried themselves and became successful on campus and had internships, and I wanted to transition from being a basketball player to a scholar.

Other participants reflected on having similar experiences, highlighting how the history and membership of the organizations were instrumental in building the participants' awareness of their organizations.

While their connections to the organizations were the reasons they joined, the personal networks they established appeared to be the primary gateway to choosing and ultimately joining their organizations. While still a high school student in Ghana, a group of individuals came to Pierre's school to discuss college in the United States, and a person within that group was a member of his fraternity. Although many of his classmates believed fraternal organizations were occultist groups, he still spoke to some of the men there and made a personal connection with one of the men. He stated:

> He gave me his card, and when I went to apply to [a historically Black college], he wrote me a letter of recommendation to all of my schools, not just [that historically Black college]. Like, he even paid some of my application fees for me. Like, he really went out of his way to do stuff for me.

Since Pierre's institution in the U.S. did not have any fraternities or sororities on campus, he joined a local chapter. Pierre's experience with Black American adults during high school relates to Marilyn's experience.

Marilyn moved to the United States at 12, and the transition was difficult. Not only was she an immigrant, but she was also in the racial minority in her area, which was predominately white. She found a welcoming space in an after-school program organized by her sorority. She explained:

> I was the outsider, and it made me feel left out. I felt isolated, and I wasn't doing really well. It wasn't until I started joining afterschool programs and mentorship programs, specifically [my sorority's mentoring program], that I started getting used to the area and making friends and having people who cared about my wellbeing.

The mentoring program Marilyn joined helped her tremendously with her transition to the U.S.. As a result, she decided to join her sorority, which sponsored the program when she went to college, having already built a network with her sorority's membership. The members' interest in her success brought Marilyn a sense of peace during this whirlwind of a time in her life, and the connections she established helped her select her sorority.

Personal networks established were a significant means for most participants to join their respective organizations, many of whom may not have known about their respective organizations without those

connections. Their experiences highlight the importance of friendships and community outreach programs by fraternity and sorority members for African-born college students, sometimes even before they have set foot on a college campus.

Cultural Acceptance

Understanding African-born members' lived experiences in histori-cally African American and multicultural organizations was salient for this exploration because the participants brought with them cultural differences and overlaps, which varied based on their native countries and cultural backgrounds. As such, we asked about participants' expe-riences with feeling out of place or unaccepted in their organizations, and their experience informed the theme, Cultural Acceptance.

Kofi noted he never felt out of place or unaccepted. He felt welcomed in his organization, and his fraternity brothers were excited to learn about his Ghanaian culture. Pierre offered similar sentiments. He stated:

> I feel like with [my organization], I found a second home from home…with [my organization], as a Ghanaian, everywhere I go, I pride myself with my heritage, and these brothers really accept me for that. I don't know about other frats, but that's something that really pushes me and makes me feel like I can stay here.

Taiwo also felt accepted in his organization and even met other Nigerians in his organization. He said:

> When I started traveling everywhere, no matter where I was from or who I was, it automatically made people closer. I think people really do believe in the brotherhood or sisterhood…Once people saw those letters, they'd start to believe, "Okay, this is somebody I could trust" or "This is somebody with the same standards." It was also good to go to different conferences because I met a lot of Nigerians that were also [in my fraternity]. I thought I was the only Nigerian stupid enough to do this (laughs).

Connecting with other brothers in different cities was a welcomed experience for Taiwo, and he was even more energized to meet other Nigerians in his organization. Sharing their African cultures with their siblings was a positive experience for the participants. Their stories highlight reciprocal relationships with members and that African-born members bring a breadth of knowledge and lived experiences that domestic students can learn from. Still, not every participant felt a sense of belonging after joining their organization. For example, Ashley's experience was filled with a series of events that prevented her from feeling like she belonged. Ashley explained:

> They didn't allow me to be a dean. They like they just always treated me differently. So, when I first crossed, we lost our charter… and in gaining the charter back, we had to pay a fine. The fine was divided among all of the sisters. My line sister happened to be

[studying abroad], and they put her fine with me. So, I had to pay her fine instead of dividing hers among everybody.

Ashley further explained that she experienced racism and cultural discrimination in her organization. As highlighted in the importance of imaginative variation in phenomenological studies, this was a critical narrative, even though Ashley was an outlier among the participants. In particular, she was a member of an organization with a diverse membership and purports to empower all members. While it would be unfair to judge the entire organization based on one person's experience, her lived experience is real. It highlights how the experiences of some African-born members of culturally based fraternities and sororities diverge, although all of them join their organizations seeking support. As expected, their experiences within their organizations influenced their overall college experiences, which is why the next theme is My College Experience.

My College Experience

When reflecting on their undergraduate experience and the role their organization had in their college experiences, the participants' responses varied. However, generally, the participants shared that their college experiences were enhanced by being members of the organization. For example, Mugabe explained how he was active in his fraternity and the African student organization on campus. The African student organization membership was predominately international, first, and second-generation African students. He also explained that, at the time, the organization's leadership was patriarchal and did not have a good relationship with other Black organizations. On the other side, his fraternity is predominantly Latino. Being a part of both organizations helped him learn more about race and ethnicity in the U.S., and these experiences helped encourage him to take classes related to African American history. He then used his course content and experiences in diverse organizations to build community on his campus. He also used his position in different spaces to advocate for African Americans and Africans. He also explained that joining his fraternity provided him with the opportunity to form lifelong friendships.

Just as Mugabe has made long-lasting friendships, Kofi explained that his organizational involvement has exposed him to more community service during his college experience. He said, "Maybe the only thing that influenced [me] is doing a lot more community service… donations and stuff like that which I wasn't doing before, but now we do community service, fundraising, cleanups, talking to kids." Mina explained that being a member of his organization helped him learn transferable skills such as time management, planning events, building community partnerships, teamwork, and communication. Although she said she experienced racism in her organization, Ashley also acknowledged the strong friendships she was able to build despite the discrimination she faced. Along with professional skills, Marilyn reflected on how she made lifelong friends:

It allowed me to do more. Once I gained 12 sisters, my life became a little bit different. I felt like I was responsible for 12 other souls, and they also became my family, but in a different way, you know. Our experiences were totally different from the family that I built with the African student union. It's kind of hard to explain the bonds you build with different people based on the different experiences you have together, and [my organization] was one of those where I was thrust into this society or environment where you have a whole bunch of women all over the world that are a part of this organization, and they can do so many things for you.

Overall, the participants found that their organizations improved their college experiences, connecting them with social networks and service opportunities while providing opportunities to be educated on various topics or build transferable skills. Collectively, being in a culturally based Greek letter organization influenced the undergraduate experiences of the participants, and their narratives give us initial empirical insights into how nuanced the fraternity and sorority life experiences are for African-born members. Their experiences within their organizations also provided them a chance to learn about race and racism in the U.S., which shapes the final theme.

Learning Race and Racism

Race is a social construction that manifests differently in various societies (Coates et al., 2018). Across Africa, race and racism function differently, and much of it directly relates to colonization. As we asked about their experiences learning about race and racism in the U.S., each participant's response was shared by their understanding of race as related to their birth country's global history. Mugabe was asked about his understanding of race and racism before moving to the U.S., and he stated:

I understood a little bit about global Blackness; you know, Zimbabwe is a settler colony. When I keep talking about the slightly better schools[2], that's where some of the remaining white students in Zimbabwe went to…First of all, our independence wasn't declared till 1980…so a lot of these conversations were still at the forefront of people's minds…So, this is not to say it is ubiquitous; it is not like [in the U.S.] because there are a lot more white people, so the dynamics are reversed because most Black people in Zimbabwe who suffer and point to racism don't even encounter white people on a day-to-day basis.

He went on to explain that he found himself believing negative stereotypes about Black people around the world. Being born and raised in a settler colony, even with most of the population being Black, led to Mugabe growing up with some familiarity with race and racism that functions in the U.S. since the U.S. is also a settler colony.

Josh's understanding of race before moving to the U.S. was much different from that of Mugabe because he had not experienced the

2   The participant was narrating his own experience having attended such a school himself.

legacy of settler colonialism. He said:

> I didn't know it existed because everyone around me looked just like me…I didn't even know what the term racism was until I actually came to the U.S., you know. It's hard to understand something or know something if you've never really experienced it, so for me, it was a new concept, and it took me some time to kind of understand it or why somebody wouldn't like me or why somebody would treat me differently just because of my skin color.

Race was not a primary topic of discussion for most of the participants because they were not racialized bodies in their home countries. However, compounded with immigration and nationality, the participants began to experience and grapple with race and cultural racism simultaneously.

To connect it to their fraternity or sorority membership, participants were asked if their organizations influenced their understanding of race and racism in the U.S., and many agreed that they did. Taiwo explained that amongst fraternities on campus, he realized a difference between Black and white organizations. Mugabe explained that he became more informed about the complexities of race in the U.S. after joining his organization. He said:

> I just got informed a little more about [my Latino fraternity brothers] and their plight and just seeing how far more fragmented things are. Because I just thought, like I know racism exists, I thought it was more in communities that were obviously fragmented, like suburbia or the hood.

Again, in his home country, Mugabe learned about race in a global sense, but he gained a deeper understanding of race and racism in the U.S. due to his close contact with other people of Color from his fraternity. Mugabe did explain that he was active in other student organizations, such as the African Student Association, on his campus. However, these organizations served different purposes for him and were not places where he learned as much about race and racism. Pierre also explained how his organization helped him learn about race and racism:

> Before I ended up [joining my organization], I thought I had an understanding of racism and all that, but it became stronger…after I crossed because I had a bigger pull of Black men to associate with, and just traveling more and just fellowshipping with brothers, you get into instances where you move from [an] elite group of Black men to just Black men [in broader settings], and it just turns sour, so fast…it always becomes us versus them.

Pierre noticed how he and his fraternity brothers were perceived by various white groups in public. Around people who are familiar with his organization, they are seen and received as an "elite group of Black men," to use Pierre's words, but this was not the view in a majority white space. He witnessed how he could be respected in one space

and completely looked down upon in another, with racism being at the core of this shifted acknowledgment of value to society.

Marilyn learned about racism from personal experiences, and she was enthusiastic about helping her local community with her sorority sisters. Being a member of her sorority allowed her the opportunity to put passion into action. She explained:

> So just understanding society and the systemic, embedded racism and all of that stuff, I was pretty solid, but after joining [my organization], it just gave me a platform to do more for the community because I learned about all these things in class. We don't talk about solutions very much, so being a [member of my organization] was a way for me to conduct different things that affected Black women directly.

Participants learned from first-hand accounts of discrimination based on personal experiences and from the experiences of other members of their organizations. These members helped them better understand the complexities of systemic racism, lessons they might have never learned or perhaps learned years later.

Discussion

Our study helps bring to light the experiences of people born in Africa in historically Black, Latino, and multicultural fraternities and sororities. Situating this study around fraternity and sorority involvement adds a unique layer to the literature on Greek letter organizations and the experiences of African-born students. The participants highlight that experiences do not have to be mutually exclusive and demonstrate how manifold college experiences are. Moreover, their lived experiences document that African-born students have different experiences and cannot be summed into one category of race *or* foreign-born. Next, we briefly synthesize our findings with extant literature.

When Choosing to Join

Joining a fraternity or sorority proved to be an overall positive experience for most members. They all described gaining lifelong friendships, having opportunities to get involved in community service, and leadership opportunities. This aligns with the work of Patton and colleagues (2011), who found that fraternity and sorority affiliations enhanced student engagement among their African American study population.

Research shows that many immigrants feel more comfortable with other immigrants during their initial transition to a new country (Ette, 2012). This is especially significant considering the negative sentiments against African countries that dominate U.S. media outlets and cultures (Shaw-Taylor, 2007). Ette's (2012) study on Nigerian immigrants documents how many of his participants felt isolated after relocating to the United States. Connecting with other Nigerians in the U.S. helped

them feel a sense of community and social well-being. Since building community with those who share similar cultural backgrounds is an initial response to many immigrants, the number of participants who joined their respective organizations due to friends encouraging them or meeting other people in the organization who were, in some way, culturally similar to them is no surprise and shows that the impact of interpersonal connections should not be underestimated as it relates to helping African immigrants feel a sense of belonging, especially on college campuses.

One participant described discrimination in her sorority but also acknowledged that she made life-long friends with others in her sorority. These narratives show that an organization may be multicultural but still express racism and discrimination, particularly toward ethnic minorities in the group. Hunter and Hughey (2013) found that many organizations that claim to champion multiculturalism or see multiculturalism as a positive aspect did the complete opposite in practice. Their study demonstrated that most organizations in the Multicultural Greek Council they studied evaded "ethnically integrated activities" (p. 527) and highlighted a singular ethnic identity. This was precisely what Ashley experienced, coupled with overt racism and restricted access to leadership opportunities within the sorority.

Cultural Exchanges and College Experiences

Most participants reported acceptance in their organization. Further, participants explained that they not only learned about cultures in the U.S. but could teach and showcase their own cultures, highlighting the strengths culturally based fraternities and sororities provide students and institutions (Garcia & Duran, 2021). Collegiate fraternities and sororities can help cultivate intimate friendships and engage in reciprocal learning exchanges. In the case of most of the participants of this study, teaching their organizational siblings about their African cultures brought them joy. It allowed them space to share, teach, and engage with their own cultures in various ways. As an example, one topic mentioned was the African Greek Picnic, an annual event that celebrates African cultures and Black Greek letter organizations. This event is but one example of how African cultures have become more prominent in U.S.-based fraternities and sororities and how members are using their platforms to teach about Africa and celebrate diverse cultural backgrounds.

When Learning Race and Racism

When asked about learning about race, none of the participants described understanding the complexities of race and racism in the U.S. before relocating. This directly correlates with the work of Fries-Britt and colleagues (2014), who, in a qualitative study interviewing 15 foreign-born students of Color, found that many of their participants did not understand issues of race and, therefore, lacked awareness of racial identities. Additionally, some participants explained having learned negative stereotypes about certain demographics (i.e., Black

Americans/African American, Multigenerational African Americans), which also aligns with the work of scholars such as Jackson (2010). Participants in our study have become more knowledgeable about racism and racial stratification from personal experiences and lessons learned from college courses and other fraternity and sorority members.

One factor to note is that all of the participants in our study resided in the U.S. for at least four (4) years at the time of the interview, with most of them having been U.S. residents for over ten (10) years. The longer foreign-born U.S. residents live in the U.S., the more likely they are to acknowledge, understand, and possibly identify with racial categories (Fries-Britt et al., 2014), but this racial internalization did not overshadow their ethnic background. Aligning with the work of George Mwangi (2016), higher education professionals must challenge the Black/white racial binary and acknowledge the complexities of Blackness and African-born students if they have a genuine desire to create an inclusive space for them.

The participants in our study had similar narratives. They unapologetically expressed their cultural heritage, which was different from the majority of those in their fraternities and sororities. Despite the difference in cultural upbringings, they found common ground with their organization siblings regarding racial identity and some shared lived experiences.

Recommendations for Practice

Considering our findings, we offer three suggestions for practice. First, given that fraternity and sorority involvement has been shown to open an avenue for social inclusion and increased involvement, providing more information about fraternity and sorority life to international students could help provide a space for them and help them connect with the campus community in meaningful ways. This work continues with supporting students who may choose to join these organizations as they will have different needs than domestic students. This means that fraternity and sorority life advisors, national organizations, and other stakeholders must move beyond simply highlighting the "diversity" of an organization to taking a vested interest in the social, emotional, and academic success of their members by listening to their needs, validating their experiences, and making the proper changes and adjustments needed to see their success. Onyenekwu (2017) suggests that student affairs professionals learn from African student groups to provide more culturally relevant services for Black African college students. We agree yet note that this labor cannot only be placed on students. Student affairs professionals should also reach out to faculty and staff with international experiences for readings and insights and show that they are committed to learning and improving the experiences of its diverse members, particularly African-born members of their organizations.

Second, higher education administrators and student affairs prac-

titioners must acknowledge that racial categories are not a sufficient measurement of campus demographics, and any programming solely focused on racial categories will marginalize some students meant to serve. In their study on learning race in a U.S. context, many participants in Fries-Britt and colleagues' (2014) study did not understand race and lacked racial identity saliency. Many participants in our study also acknowledged that racial categories in their home countries were nonexistent. Programs targeting "racial groups" are less likely to be attended by those who have no interest in racial categories or race-based activities. It is imperative that professionals acknowledge that their realities are not the same as others. As it relates to fraternities and sororities, promoting race will not capture a diversified Black population, but highlighting organizations, their community impact, and members' success may be more effective.

Finally, many participants indicated that the primary method they learned about fraternity and sorority involvement was from mentors and peers. Fraternity and sorority life professionals should consider creating intentional partnerships with alumni of Greek letter organizations because their personal and professional experiences have proven valuable to many participants even before they decided to join the organization. This could include various forms of community engagement, from picnics to formal presentations. It might be particularly useful for African-born college students in the U.S. as they navigate race and racism. While we encourage these partnerships, alumni chapters' coordination with international headquarters, undergraduate chapters, and institutions would be critical to ensure vetted, sustained initiatives.

Recommendations for Future Research

While fraternity and sorority involvement has been shown to increase campus involvement, participation in fraternities and sororities also holds the potential to burden students with too many responsibilities, resulting in a strain on time management (Mitchell, 2015). Further research into what contributes to academic success for international students, immigrants, and refugees might help delineate various stressors related to international populations. The present study also sheds light on the gap in the literature related to cultural acceptance in United States-based groups and how African students negotiate various spaces based on the intersecting identities of being Black, African, and a college student. Therefore, we suggest that researchers explore intra-racial interactions among racially Black groups and in spaces traditionally for African Americans, along with research that solely focuses on African students. We also suggest that researchers build upon this study and the work of Hunter and Hughey (2013) to explore organizations with multicultural membership and the experiences of members who are not a part of the dominant ethnic group.

Finally, there is a need for more longitudinal studies about African-born college students in the U.S. As with all people, ideas change over

time. Longitudinal studies exploring the experiences of this particular demographic, their ideologies, and if/how these ideologies shift over time will allow institutions to understand better the services needed to support African-born college students in the U.S thoroughly.

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Appendix A

Semi-structured Interview Protocol*

1. Can you begin by telling me about yourself? Whatever you would like to share.
2. What identities are important to you?
3. How did you decide to study in the U.S.?
4. What was the transition like to the U.S. and the U.S. educational system?
5. Were you involved in any other organizations on campus? What were those organizations?
6. In what ways, if any, did your involvement in those organizations influence your college experience?
7. What were the reasons you decided to join your fraternity/sorority?
8. In what ways, if any, did your involvement in your fraternity/sorority influence your college experience?
9. Were any negative outcomes associated with your fraternity/sorority membership? What were they?
10. Would you recommend your fraternity/sorority to other international or African-born students? Why?
11. What was your understanding of race and racism before moving to the U.S.? In what ways, if any, did that change once you joined your fraternity/sorority?
12. Out of everything we discussed, what are the most important aspects about you joining your fraternity/sorority as a student from the continent of Africa?
13. Out of everything we discussed, what are the most important aspects about joining your fraternity/sorority?

   *The questions were asked in any order and allowed for follow-up questions based on each participant's responses.