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## WHAT'S NEXT: HISTORICALLY WHITE SORORITY CHAPTER OFFICERS' RESPONSE TO 2020 RACIAL EVENTS

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AND KERI DECAY

*The racial events of the summer of 2020 left many searching for answers regarding racial equity. This critical phenomenological qualitative study examines how chapter officers perceived the summer 2020 racial events that influenced their leadership regarding race and racism in their historically White sorority. The study findings revealed that the racial events catalyzed the chapter officers' self-reflections, navigation of racial organization climate, and leading chapter reflection and education. These findings have important implications for practice and scholarship supporting chapter officers' racial consciousness leadership development.*

*Keywords: National Panhellenic Sororities, Race and Racism, Chapter Officers*

In the summer of 2020, the continued murders of unarmed Black and Brown people and the discrimination against Asian people, coupled with an advancing anti-diversity social-political context, led to national and global protests, demonstrations, and unrest, making systemic and institutionalized racism a public topic across various aspects of society. Within higher education, college students participated in physical and virtual protests against racism and called for universities and student organizations to do the same (Kolodner, 2020; Rim, 2020). Historically White sororities on college campuses were no exception, as students and alumna called for these organizations to confront their racist history and current practices. All 26 historically White sororities within the National Panhellenic Conference (NPC) released statements condemning racism and urging members to reflect and act toward racial equity (Roland & Matthews, 2023). While social media posts by these (inter) national organizations condemned racism in society (Roland & Matthews, 2023), there remains a demand for collegiate sorority chapters, especially chapter officers, to address racist practices in their local organizations.

As racist incidents, such as the use of racial slurs by White sorority members, themed parties representing racial stereotypes, the exclusion of Women of Color from membership, and shared experiences of racism by members, are becoming more public (Beaird et al., 2021; Garcia et al., 2023; Gillon et al., 2019), sorority officers must grapple with their leadership and organizational responses to racism and anti-racism. Due to their positional leadership, these chapter officers influ-

ence chapter culture and values by organizing and executing chapter activities and services (e.g., communications, ritual, membership selection, and finances).

These organizations operate in a predominantly White leadership context that often situates Whiteness as normative and privileges White positionality, emotions, and comfort (Harris et al., 2019), leaving racism unchecked and race as apolitical in these organizations. This article refers to Whiteness as an ideology that maintains White supremacy through social processes, systems, organizational culture, and discourse (Gusa, 2010; Nishi et al., 2016). According to Ray (2019), organizational hierarchies and processes are not race-neutral, as “racial inequality is not merely ‘in’ organizations but ‘of’ them, as racial processes are foundational to organizational formation and continuity” (Ray, 2019, p. 48). Consequently, we engage the term “Whiteness” beyond individuals and people who are racialized as White, but rather how Whiteness functions systemically in NPC organizations. We argue that understanding the perspectives of chapter officers in historically White sororities on how racial events and national racial climate influence their leadership approach can provide insight for supporting these students in creating antiracist environments. Also, insight into chapter officers’ perspectives on racism and leadership highlights how campus and national-level organizational history, structures, programs, and daily operations may hinder and enable the college chapters’ movement toward racial equity consciousness and practices.

Hence, the purpose of this study is to examine how chapter officers perceived the influence of the summer 2020 racial events on their leadership regarding race and racism in their historically White sorority. The following research question guides this study: How did chapter officers perceive the influence of the summer 2020 racial events on their leadership related to racism in historically White sororities? This study defines sorority officers as elected or appointed positions within their collegiate chapter organizations, which may differ across organizations and chapters. The present study is significant because, without the intentional leadership development of chapter officers in historically White sororities around race and racism, these organizations will remain unsafe for students (members and non-members) from racial/ethnic marginalized communities and will remain a social institution that maintains racism on college campuses.

### Literature Review

The literature on race and racism in historically White sororities has focused on membership recruitment (Beaird et al., 2021; Edwards, 2009), racial attitude (Park & Kim, 2013; Matthews et al., 2009), intercultural competence (Park & Kim, 2013), and cross-racial membership (Edwards, 2009; Greyerbiehl & Mitchell, 2014). Historically White sororities have had a contentious history with race and racism. While all historically White sororities eliminated legal racial exclusion statutes, these organizations have remained racially homogeneous through de

facto discrimination (Park, 2012; Torbenson & Parks, 2009). Scholars have interrogated Whiteness related to recruitment, organizational structure, and social activities that result in de facto discrimination practices discouraging cross-racial interactions and membership (Betty et al., 2019; Freeman, 2020; Harris et al., 2019; Hughey, 2010; Park, 2012; Torbenson & Parks, 2009). Using the framework of Whiteness as property, Harris et al. (2019) highlighted how Whiteness in these organizations was maintained through organizations' hegemonic operating processes and constructed environments and cultures. In other words, within these organizations, Whiteness became normalized through practices, traditions, and policies taken for granted as part of the organization's values and function. While there has been an increase in People of Color as members in the NPC, we agree with Harris et al. (2019) that "because HWFS (historically White Fraternities and Sororities) were constructed and are currently maintained through and by exclusion and White supremacy, these legacies cannot be undone just by increasing representational diversity" (p.24).

Organizational, institutional, cultural, and individual forms of racism continue to permeate historically White sororities through history and traditions that are used to justify racial exclusion (Harris et al., 2019; Park, 2012; Salinas et al., 2019). Although there has been an increase of Women of Color in historically White sororities, scholars have noted that these members still experience racism, tokenism, and the expectation of assimilating into Whiteness (Hughey, 2010). These organizations have adopted a color-blind approach, allowing members to ignore covert and overt racial injustices (Beatty et al., 2019). According to Banks and Archibald (2020), White sororities have displayed racist ideologies through member use of racial slurs and theme parties used to represent racial stereotypes or to mock any racial or ethnic group. Many racial incidents have been documented, such as when, in 2013, the historically White sororities at the University of Alabama denied a Black woman membership, or when the Methodist University's Alpha Delta Pi members critiqued four Black football players in 2021.

Following the murder of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, the National Panhellenic Conference and (inter)national sorority headquarters released statements that denounced racism and held awareness events; however, their response has come across as reactive and routine (Roland & Matthews, 2023; Wilkins, 2022). In a study to understand what NPC sororities posted on social media about race and racism, Roland and Matthews (2023) found that social media posts from these organizations centered on Whiteness and called for their predominantly White members to address racism through reflection, listening, and education. As a result, these organizations provided external resources (e.g., readings, videos, etc.) via their websites and conducted leadership programs around diversity, equity, and inclusion for chapter officers. It is important to note that dealing with race and racism in these organizations centered on members who are racialized as White, making Whiteness within policies, processes, and recruitment socially

unmarked. Therefore, chapter officers have been left to navigate the national and local socio-political tensions, COVID-19 transitions, local chapter business, and student peer protests to address racism in their organization.

### **Sororities and Leadership**

Scholars have argued that developing leadership skills is a benefit of joining a sorority (Biddix, 2010; Long & Snowden, 2011; Martin et al., 2012). According to Biddix (2010), “fraternities and sororities are environments in which students who have been leaders already and those who may not have been placed into leadership roles can develop leadership competence” (p. vii). In other words, members can develop leadership skills and behaviors in these organizations through formal (e.g., chapter officers) and informal roles. Researchers have explored the effects of positional leadership (i.e., chapter officers) on leadership development among fraternity and sorority members. For instance, Harms et al. (2006) found that executive officers in fraternities and sororities demonstrated extraversion, agreeableness, conscientiousness, emotional stability, and intellect. Research has grown focused on understanding how sorority and fraternity members develop and enact socially responsible leadership (Dugan, 2008; Hevel et al., 2018; Tyree, 1998). Although these students show socially responsible leadership skills, Hevel et al. (2018) noted that socially responsible leadership development depends on institutional context and the membership makeup. Hevel and colleagues support Barber et al.’s (2015) claim that sororities and fraternity members often demonstrate leadership behaviors that align with their chapter’s explicit and implicit norms. Put differently, sororities and fraternities create a culture that reinforces organizational values and culture, causing individual members to either modify or strengthen their values and actions by the norms of the organizations. While there has been a shift in the literature on sorority and fraternity leadership development around social change, there has been limited scholarship on how these students still develop such leadership around race and racism, given their organizational history.

### **Conceptual Framework**

Using the theory of racialized organization and racial consciousness as a conceptual framework allowed us to analyze how chapter officers perceived the influence of the summer 2020 racial events on their leadership. Victor Ray’s (2019) racialized organization centers on how organizations are nested in a broader institutional structure informed by race, and it offers insightful understandings of how, when, where, and why racism is perpetuated. Ray posited that the theory accounts for how institutional (macro), organizational (meso), and individual attitudes influence racialized organizations. There are four tenets of Racialized Organization: (a) racialized organizations enhance or diminish the agency of racial groups; (b) racialized organizations legitimize the unequal distribution of resources; (c) Whiteness is a credential; and (d) the decoupling of formal rules from organizational practice is often

racialized.

The first tenet, racialized organizations shape agency, refers to individual positions and their ability to influence organizational hierarchy and processes. In White organizations, Whiteness often goes unmarked through racialized exclusion, racial symbolism, explicit and tacit discrimination, and normative practices. The second tenet focuses on how White spaces, White emotions, and the racial hierarchy of an organization influence material resources to support White people's sense of group position. Thus, the third tenet, Whiteness is a credential, refers to providing access to organizational resources, legitimizing work hierarchies, and expanding White agency. The last tenet considers how racialized organizations decouple formal commitments to equity, access, and inclusion from policies and practices that reinforce existing racial hierarchies. We applied the four tenets of the theory of racialized organization to interrogate how, when, where, and why race and racism shaped chapter officers' meaning-making and leadership action.

Grounded in critical consciousness theory (Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994) and critical race theory (Bell, 1970; Harris, 1993), racial consciousness refers to an individual's analytical ability to understand and address racism in society. Being racially conscious involves ongoing self-reflection and exploration to understand how assumptions, privilege, and biases about race shape conscious and subconscious participation in the system of racism (Brookfield, 2017; hooks, 1994). In critical reflection, there must be an interrogation of Whiteness and anti-Blackness that maintains the racialized nature of the world. The experiences of a critical incident related to racism (i.e., the summer 2020 race reckoning) can catalyze self-reflection, which may lead to meaning-making and informed decision-making on seeking continued or additional education on race and racism. A critical incident is a significant event or problematic situation that causes self-reflection that may result in personal change or development (Brookfield, 1997).

In addition, racial consciousness is characterized by individuals developing critical analytical skills to locate the root causes of racism within a social-historical context (Peller, 1990). The development of critical analytical skills to dismantle racism includes "(1) development of a more potent sense of self about the world; (2) construction of more critical comprehension of the social and political forces which comprise one's daily life and world; and (3) cultivation of functional strategies and resources for the attainment of personal or collective socio-political roles" (Serrano-García, 1984, p. 175). In racial consciousness, there must be a commitment to actions that challenge racism and reconstruct an antiracist system. Leadership as a practice can serve as a vehicle for critical action to dismantle racism and create antiracist systems. In this study, we used racial consciousness to understand how the chapter officers perceived the summer of 2020 racial events and their leadership, especially in predominantly White spaces.

## Methodology

We employed a critical phenomenological qualitative methodological approach to understanding how chapter officers perceived the influence of the summer 2020 racial events on their leadership. A phenomenology explores and interprets the ordinary meaning of individuals' experiences with a phenomenon (van Manen, 2014). In studying participants' experiences with critical racial incidents, a phenomenological approach allowed for the interpretation of emotions, perceptions, and beliefs of the phenomenon. Critical phenomenology extends the conventional approach to phenomenology by interrogating structures and social norms for hidden oppressions that may go unnoticed in everyday life. According to Ngo (2022), "phenomenology—when critical—seeks to illuminate this racializing vision and can avail itself of the work of phenomenologists" (p. 4). In other words, this methodological approach allowed insight into how systems operate to maintain ideologies of White supremacy within everyday interactions. We leveraged a critical phenomenological qualitative approach because it inherently attends to uneven power dynamics in understanding shared lived experiences and through the research process.

### **Participant Recruitment and Selection**

Study participants were initially recruited using a purposeful selection process through selection criteria (Maxwell, 2013). The criteria included (a) being a member of an NPC organization and (b) being a chapter officer during the 2019-2020 and/or 2020-2021 academic year. It is important to note that not all participants identified as White, which influences their meaning-making. This study was not exclusive to racial identities, given the history of cross-racial membership and the change in the population of student racial identities on college campuses. After recruiting via social media yielded two participants, we used a snowball sampling technique to recruit potential participants to engage in the study (Maxwell, 2013). Ten sorority officers participated in this study. All members were active collegiate chapter officers in various positions during the study (see Table 1).

Data were collected using two in-depth, semi-structured individual online interviews. Semi-structured interviews using a critical phenomenological approach invited participants to share their lived experiences in their own words (Bevan, 2014). Each participant engaged in two interviews lasting approximately 45-60 minutes. As the primary lead in this research study, author one interviewed all ten participants. The following are examples of the interview questions: (1) What position(s) do (did) you hold (held) as a chapter officer? And why did you run for this position? (2) What is the culture of your chapter, campus, and national sorority regarding race and racism? (3) What was the response of your chapter related to the killing of George Floyd and national unrest on racism? And (4) What lessons are you taking from national unrest on racism, your sorority response, and your experiences as a chapter officer?



**Table 1**

Participant Name (pseudonym)	Chapter Position	Chapter Location	Racial Identity
Anna	Social Chair	Southwest	White
Charlotte	President	Southwest	White
Chloe	Finance Chair	Southwest	White
Izzy	Academic Chair	Southwest	White
Mel	Vice President	Northeast	Asian
Scarlett	Fraternal Relations Chair	Southwest	White
Shauna	Recruitment Chair	Midwest	Black
Taylor	President	Southwest	White
Zoey	Ritual Chair	Southeast	White

All interviews were audio-recorded and then transcribed by a third-party company.

**Analysis and Trustworthiness**

We used a phenomenological data analysis approach, including a deductive theory-driven approach with inductive thematic coding. We started with a deductive approach using racial consciousness leadership development to create a priori codes (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). A priori coding included but was not limited to uneven power dynamics, Whiteness, anti-Blackness, self-awareness, self-reflection, critical analysis, and critical action. Then, we engaged in an inductive analysis of emergent codes through open, axial, and selective coding (Saldaña, 2020). We read and coded all participants’ interview transcripts and researchers’ notes for prominent themes to familiarize ourselves with the data. Through open coding, we identified codes in each interview using multiple and overlapping codes (Saldaña, 2020). Axial coding allowed us to refine each code into more distinct codes across participants’ interviews (Saldaña, 2020). Finally, we used selective coding with our a priori codes to refine the codes and create themes. This analysis process assisted us with condensation and making meaning of the participants’ lived experiences in connection to the literature.

We engaged in the steps Guba and Lincoln (1989) outlined, including peer debriefing, triangulation, and researcher positionality. As a re-



search team consisting of a faculty member and two doctoral students, we held several debriefing sessions to seek clarity and consensus to create themes and make claims. Each research team member kept data analysis memos to note how we made sense of the data throughout the analysis. We used a triangulation technique with the two interviews to better understand the participants' experiences (Miles et al., 2014). The use of this technique was to deepen our understanding of the phenomenon. While traditional phenomenological qualitative approaches suggest researchers engage in bracketing to set aside their bias, a critical approach to phenomenology required us, as researchers, to engage in reflexivity (LeVasseur, 2003). Reflexivity allows researchers to be sensitive to how their cultural, political, social, and lived experiences influence the research process. Reflexivity informed our positionality regarding this study.

### **Researcher Positionalities**

Given the importance of the researcher in qualitative research, we must be conscious of how our positionalities, along with our previous and current experiences, influenced the data collection and interpretation of the data for this study (LeVasseur, 2003). We used reflexivity not to bracket our experiences or knowledge but as an awareness tool throughout the research process.

Author 1: I identify as a Black woman who is an alumna of an NPC sorority. As a college student, I served as a chapter officer in different roles (i.e., ritual chair, personal development) and president of the campus-level Panhellenic Council. My experiences as a member and chapter officer have been shaped by overt and covert racism. Therefore, I came to this study with experiences and assumptions about NPC sororities' race relations and leadership development within these organizations. Also, the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and countless Black and Brown people, coupled with unifying cries for racial justice, left me hopeless and hopeful that racism could be eliminated in society. I came to this study anticipating how such public racial violence can be used for racial consciousness development for NPC sorority members.

Author 2: I identify as a White woman who is an alumna of an NPC sorority. I did not hold leadership roles in my chapter but have since been an advisor for collegiate chapters. As an advisor, I served during the 2020 racial violence incidents and wished NPC sororities would have been less performative and taken consistent action. Being a sorority woman, I value my sisters and the benefits of the NPC sorority community. However, there needs to be more conversation and education around racism at the national and chapter levels.

Author 3: I identify as a Black woman who is an alumna of a historically Black sorority. During my time in an undergraduate chapter, I served in leadership roles within my chapter and in other student activities. I am an on-campus advisor to an NPHC sorority and am a leadership educator. I came to this study hoping that leadership education can

contribute to supporting students in resolving social justice issues in their chapter leadership roles.

### **Limitations**

There are some limitations concerning the findings of this study. First, the data were collected within two months, limiting participants' reflections to a short time period. A more time-extended study that engaged participants throughout an academic semester may have provided a more in-depth understanding of their racial consciousness leadership development. Additionally, we did not observe participants in chapter activities or context. Observations could have added additional perspectives of external influences on their racial consciousness leadership development.

### **Findings**

This study explored historically White sorority officers' perceptions of how the summer 2020 racial events influenced their leadership regarding race and racism. We identified three findings to answer the research questions. These findings are that the participants (a) engaged in self-reflection on race and racism, (b) navigated organizational climate, and (c) led chapter actions.

#### **Self-Reflection on Race and Racism**

All participants shared that the summer 2020 racial events caused them to self-reflect on race and racism related to their racial positional-ity. More specifically, participants grappled with their understanding of racism and how Whiteness affected their awareness of race and racism before the public murder of George Floyd. These events appeared to highlight, especially for White participants, an unawareness and understanding of racism, prompting participants to reflect on their upbringing, racial status, and the makeup of their families and communities. For example, Scarlett said,

*I didn't think there was racism still in the world coming from my high school. I'm from a suburb of Houston. And that's pretty whitewashed. It's awful. It's little bubble and that we just don't have the capacity to learn about other people's experiences and backgrounds. So, I really didn't know what the word microaggression was. I didn't know there was such a thing as the Black Lives Matter movement.*

In the above quote, Scarlett understood how being in a White-only space limited her interactions and awareness about others from other backgrounds. There is a sentiment among some White participants that the lack of exposure to different backgrounds (i.e., Black people) just happened to them. Most participants acknowledged that being in a White "bubble" gave them the "privilege" of being unaware of others outside their White spaces. These acknowledgments were held for the Women of Color in the study whose upbringing and/or current context were in predominantly White spaces.

Participants began their reflections by trying to understand how their lives, upbringings, and geographical space connected and disconnected them from the murders of Black people and protests. While some participants focused on external factors that limited their understanding of race and racism, others sought to make sense of their biases. Taylor recalled,

*So many things this summer were brought to light, biases I never even realized I had. Okay, I need to sit back and recognize, I think these ways sometimes, and there's absolutely no reason. There's no reason these injustices need to be occurring we need to ally with the Black community. . . . But, when people say all lives matter, I don't understand that. Because Black lives are the ones in danger. And I just felt personally that we needed to ally with them.*

Taylor narrated a degree of discovery of her racial bias and expressed empathy for the Black community. When describing how the racial dynamics of 2020 prompted their reflection on race and racism, White participants began to sort through their emotions and cognitive dissonance that caused discomfort. Therefore, many participants sought to educate themselves on issues of race and racism to rid themselves of such discomfort and move towards feeling better. However, many participants' self-reflection centered on their Whiteness and developing empathy for Black and Brown people who experience such violence.

Participants recalled using reading and video provided by their (inter)national organization to guide their education on race and racism. Although education resources provided by (inter)national organizations helped some participants, Shauna and Mel noted that these materials were often "whitewashed" and missed the experiences of Women of Color. Put differently, most education materials targeted helping White members understand race and racism and did not address Whiteness. As a Black sister, Shauna was not afforded space for self-reflection due to the need to facilitate and validate her White sisters' reflections. Shauna, a Black woman, spoke about being significantly impacted by the murder of Breonna Taylor because she could have been Breonna Taylor. While trying to make sense of the racial violence that could easily claim her life, Shauna recalled sorority sisters contacting her to educate them on race and racism. She explained,

*I was getting text messages from sisters who are like, 'are you okay?', 'How do you feel?', and 'What can I do to help you? What can I do to better understand?' And it got to a point where I told them just stop asking me about it, go do your research. I shouldn't have to talk about it to you guys 24/7 for you guys to understand it because you're only getting my point of view. Go get it, do some research, and talk to others. But many people in my sorority haven't been around Black people that much, and I have to tell them I'm*

*not the voice for all Black people.*

Shauna highlighted how racial incidents can become less about the community being murdered and more about White guilt and education. Also, Shauna's statement aligned with many White participants concerned about being offensive, saying the wrong words, and engaging in performative actions. Such an outcome of self-reflection distances the participants from the responsibility of contributing to racism while joining with others for temporary outrage or response. Meanwhile, the Women of Color participants were navigating how they understand their racial identities in spaces/places that may be harmful while expecting to educate their White sisters. In this finding, participants started with self-reflection, which led them to seek ways to address race and racism through their chapters.

### **Organizational Climates**

As the participants grappled with self-reflection on their racial positionalities, they also had to navigate their sorority organizational climates on the local and (inter)national levels to lead a response to the racial events. It is important to note that the participants used their leadership to address race and racism outside the chapter. Charlotte said, "There was a lot of pressure in the summer, and it was really scary." Given the racist histories of NPC sororities, these chapter officers experienced demands from people outside of their organization for a response on how they were addressing race and racism in their organization and society. Meanwhile, Shauna shared that her chapter did not face such demands because they were on a conservative campus where racial incidents often happened without consequences or responses from university administrators. The summer of 2020 events influenced how the officers understood the racial climate of their campus and chapter.

The participants described navigating their (inter)national organization, local campus climate, and chapter culture to put out statements of performative condemnations of racism and start conversations on race and racism related to the sorority. For example, Izzy recalled the response to her organization reposting the (inter)national message around racism,

*We reposted it (national message) and got a lot of hate on there; we got messages like you guys (sorority chapter) aren't doing enough. At that point, we just trying to ally with our national organization. As we were kind of internally figuring out, we don't want to put something out there that seems performative, or we want to create change in our chapter.*

The above quote highlights the tensions that Izzy had to lead through between satisfying external demands to release a statement, national organization alignment, and the desire to make lasting change. Some

participants led a different strategy for releasing their local chapter statement. For instance, Taylor's chapter released an independent response. She offered the following:

*Putting out our message, which was not taken well by our national fraternity. The first slide of it just basically says that, we recognize that there is institutionalized racism in Greek life, and that was something that our national attorney didn't appreciate of like, like you didn't, didn't have to say that, like, what there is, we recognize that it is real, we're not going to ignore that.*

Taylor highlighted the relationship between the local chapter and national organization regarding releasing statements using the sorority name. Participants also alluded to the (inter)national organization policing what, when, and how local chapters released statements and the chapter tension of not getting involved in political matters as a social organization. Most participants spoke about the disconnect with the (inter)national organization on making an explicit statement and actions regarding racism. Shauna shared,

*I'm hoping that headquarters does more. I know that my chapter isn't the only chapter that has problems with racism. There's not any blatant racism that goes on in the chapter. But you can tell when we have a girl in the chapter who's 100% Trumpy.*

Shauna provided insight into the local chapter dynamics related to racism that the (inter)national staff should be aware of and address. Also, Shauna alluded to how the sisters' political party alignment may influence how she navigated conversations about racism and race through her leadership role. Consequently, the participants had to confront local chapter dynamics and tension during this time, especially around the purpose of their organizations as social and apolitical spaces.

Most participants shared that they had to navigate conversations and education with sisters that reinforced that killing Black and Brown people and protesting for justice is not a political issue. Past chapter officers held some of these beliefs, and participants spoke about the changing of some officers' positions for the chapter's activities to focus on race and racism. Anna recalled members being upset about the executive board's lack of action around these events, and "once we had the change from the old executive board to the new executive board, we made sure to implement a lot more inclusivity" activities. Thus, Anna highlighted the chapter officers' role in deciding how the chapter will address race and racism within the organization. Many of the participants found that many of their members lacked self-reflection and awareness around race and racism; thus, they needed to lead education and dialogue on these topics.

### **Led Chapter Reflection**

Participants identified the need to intentionally leverage their chapter officer position to invite sisters to reflect and dialogue around race and racism. Shauna said in her interview that "the officers reflect the chapter," alluding to the responsibility and influence these sisters have in their chapter. The race-related events of the summer of 2020 influenced all the participants to take action to help their sisters understand race and racism in individual lived experiences and society. In other words, the leadership actions taken by the participants were within their chapter. For instance, Charlotte shared about addressing racism in her chapter officer position:

*I think as it relates to my position, first of all, I didn't know exactly what to do in the beginning, just because I am a White blond girl; at the end of the day, I didn't know what my position could be. So, the first thing I did was I called one of the African American girls in our chapter, not out of targeting in any way, but just checking in, I love you so much. How are you? What do you think of what my thought process is right now? Like, how can I support you? And how can we do this? Right? Because I don't think I have the right ideas, you know, and I think through that, it started forming our D&I (diversity and inclusion) committee. We are all processing different things in our chapter right now; let us educate our community internally. And then we could use our platform to educate the external community based on what we figure out.*

The above quote shows how Charlotte's identity and understanding of racism limited or cautioned her actions. Therefore, she reached out to a Black sister to gauge what the chapter should do to educate all members.

Like Charlotte's quote, many participants spoke about their leadership in creating a committee or appointing diversity, equity, and inclusion officers; educating sisters on race and racism; engaging in interpersonal conversations; and external action. Put differently, the participants had to strategically lead the chapter in internal and external action. Some participants enacted policies of zero tolerance for racism in the chapter. Anna offered the following:

*As a leader of my sorority, I don't want to be promoting racism. And I feel we've had issues with that in the past with past exec boards, maybe not necessarily promoting it, but not educating and being allies. And that may be because it wasn't as big of a deal, or it wasn't in the media as it is now. And that maybe we hadn't had a diversity inclusion officer last year. We've been cracking down on this year. I just mean, using inclusive speech and making sure that everyone feels like they're represented in our group.*

Anna discussed how the public racial events are forcing the chapter officers to at least talk about race and racism. Anna also talked about

making sure the organization is not “promoting racism,” and, to do so, the officers are holding members accountable for their words and actions.

While Anna takes a stance for educating members on racism, it is essential to note the shift in focus to inclusive speech or not saying anything offensive. Several of the participants said educating members about race, racism, and inclusive speech will help them recruit and provide a welcoming and comfortable community for Women of Color in these organizations. For example, Zoey said,

*We need to have more People of Color to feel more comfortable. Well, and that type of thing, not just towards one specific group of people or that type of thing. But that's also another thing, I think where it comes from that it's just going through recruitment, in general, the more people more girls we have in our sorority that are People of Color, then the more girls will feel comfortable just in general. I would feel more comfortable.*

Zoey's comment illustrated how the chapter could benefit from a collective education on race and racism related to being a member of the organization. Most participants shared that conversations about race and other social identities were usually had as the chapter prepared for membership recruitment. However, most conversations avoided race and racism and focused on individual identities and experiences. Mel provided the following thoughts:

*I want to have a conversation that's just about race and racism and race. And I mean, again, it's important to include the like, intersectionality of other pieces of people's identities... And it didn't come back to race ever again after it had initially been mentioned. I think the first step is to have an explicit conversation about race.*

Mel alluded to her chapter being uncomfortable with talking solely about race and racism, which derails such conversations and meaningful action to address these issues in the organization. Many participants spoke about fundraisers, guest speakers, and chapter programs during Black History Month to support the local Black businesses. For example, Taylor shared that along with educational conversations with the chapter, they “also with a financial contribution, externally...started planning in the summertime that we would have a Black History Month fundraiser.” Taylor's comment showed how the chapter adjusted its philanthropy focus to include Black organizations. Ultimately, the participants perceived the summer 2020 racial events influencing their leadership approach around race and racism by provoking action through attempted conversations, cross-racial membership recruitment, and philanthropy efforts.

## Discussion

The study's findings suggest that chapter officers perceived that the



summer 2020 racial events influenced their leadership by invoking self-reflection on race and racism to navigate various organizational climates, lead their chapter in public messaging against racism, and facilitate dialogue with sisters for an organizational racial consciousness. Using the theory of racialized organization and racial consciousness as a framework, our findings highlight how Whiteness as an ideology is maintained and influences leadership action about race and racism both at the organizational level and at the individual level. Most of the participants' self-reflection often centered themselves as passive actors in racism, primarily related to their upbringing, racial status, and the makeup of their families and communities, which prevented many of the participants from critiquing systems and the ways they uphold these systems. While all participants engaged in racial consciousness, the White participants often stayed in an awareness stage of how race and racism were displayed in the critical incidents. Such an outcome of self-reflection distances the participants, especially White participants, from the responsibility of contributing to racism while joining with others for temporary outrage or response. While self-reflection created awareness for the participants and a need to respond through their leadership, the lack of interrogating Whiteness beyond empathy for Black and Brown people or beyond sympathy for their and other's racial ignorance, limited their leadership impact in the organization.

Meanwhile, the Asian and Black participants situated themselves in the critical incident, thus moving them beyond racial consciousness awareness to the cultivation of functional strategies and resources for unpacking race and racism. That deeper engagement with racial consciousness may be a result of fear that violence can happen to them, given their race and that their organization is not a safe space. The critical incident of the summer of 2020 race reckoning catalyzed the participants' self-reflection and subsequent decision-making on seeking continued or additional education on race and racism. The participants' engagement in self-reflection around race and racism was complex, given the public demands for their chapter officers to take an organizational stance against the historical and current practice of racism in their organization. While the first finding in this study supports Tyree's (1998) first two tenets of the socially responsible leadership model, the other two findings suggest that chapter officers must move beyond themselves to include their organizations and sisters. However, given the historical and organizational hierarchy at the national (macro) and local level (meso), Whiteness remained unmarked (Ray, 2019).

The second finding aligns with the literature on how historically White sororities have operated under de facto discrimination practices discouraging cross-racial interactions and membership (Freeman, 2020; Harris et al., 2019; Hughey, 2010; Park, 2012; Torbenson & Parks, 2009). The participants described navigating their (inter)national organization, local campus climate, and chapter culture to put out statements against condemning racism and to start conversations on race and racism related to the sorority. Thus, our finding suggests that the

(inter)national and local sorority culture may pressure these chapter officers to minimize racism and maintain an apolitical approach to race relations. This is evident through the (inter)national organization policing what, when, and how local chapters released statements and the chapter tension of not getting involved in political matters as a social organization. Like the study conducted by Roland and Matthews (2023), these tactics centered on Whiteness and White people's emotions and racial hierarchy. This finding also supports the literature that sororities and fraternity members often demonstrate leadership behaviors that align with their chapter's explicit and implicit norms (Barber et al., 2015; Hevel et al., 2018). Thus, many participants actively navigated these organizational norms and outside pressures with the motivation to "do something" in response to the racial events of the summer of 2020. Due to being part of a racialized organization, the participants were limited in their ability to influence organizational hierarchy and processes and in their ability to challenge organizational, institutional, cultural, and individual forms of racism. Consequently, chapter officers' leadership position and role is not only to role model anti-racist practices but also to create processes, policies, and culture within the organization that actively challenge racism.

The culture of the local sororities fostered a leadership approach that guided members in identity reflection and race-related education. Our third finding shows that participants needed to intentionally leverage their position to invite sisters to reflect and dialogue around race and racism. Although reflection and education around race issues are a starting point for race consciousness, these actions alone focused on individual racist behavior and disregarded structural and organizational racism. The participants framed attending to racist behaviors of individuals in the chapter will assist with recruiting and retaining Women of Color in the sorority, which expands the literature on cross-racial membership (Edwards, 2009; Greyerbiehl & Mitchell, 2014). Such a practice of decoupling formal commitments to equity, access, and inclusion from policies and practices that reinforce existing racial hierarchies (e.g., recruitment) maintains a racialized organization and leaves Whiteness unmarked. Without a change in organizational norms, practices, and policies, Women of Color become tokenized and are expected to assimilate (Hughey, 2010). Within the chapter, the participants shared that race and racism conversations were avoided, and the participants feared that future chapter officers would forget the racial events of the summer of 2020. The decentering of race and racism within the chapter business over time recenters Whiteness to avoid the discomfort of the White members and instead focuses on all members' sense of belonging. Scholars noted NPC organizations' history and current issues with race and racism, from exclusionary membership to racist theme parties (Freeman, 2020; Harris et al., 2019; Hughey, 2010 Park, 2012; Torbenson & Parks, 2009); therefore, chapter officers' leadership within historically White sororities must explicitly pay attention to race and racism in society and their organization.

## Implications

Drawing from the study's findings, we provide practice and research implications that could aid campus and (inter)national professionals in supporting NPC chapter officers in leadership development related to race and racism. The first implication is that campus and (inter)national professionals should create a continued space for chapter officers' racial consciousness development that moves them through reflection, analytical skills, and action. Such spaces should include reflective activities and dialogue on Whiteness, racism, and anti-Blackness beyond term definition to include current events, personal experiences, and within their history and current organization. In addition, campus professionals and (inter)national professionals should offer leadership training that assists students in building and facilitating conversations, conflict resolution, program and organizational culture change, and communication on race and racism. These leadership trainings should be an ongoing offering and proactive, not reactive to when a campus or national critical incident occurs. Our findings suggest that the participants needed support in making sense of the racial events and leading their organization around race issues. This implication is not intended for chapter officers to become passive in their development but to create a community that will help them enact transformative leadership in their local chapter.

For future research, we recommend more scholarship on sororities' leadership development related to race and racism and how chapter officers navigate these organizations. Such scholarship will help student affairs and (inter)national professionals with chapter officers for lasting racial equity. Lastly, we recommend that research on leadership approaches to race and racism be used long after the racial event of the summer of 2020 at the local chapter level with new chapter officers. This scholarship will assist in understanding what leadership approach remains in place or is effective within these environments.

## Conclusion

As the summer of 2020 becomes distant public discourse, and the pendulum has swung to anti-diversity equity and inclusion movements, sorority officers remain essential to disrupting racism in their organizations, college campuses, and society. The findings of this study illuminate how racial events and incidents can catalyze demands for change from within the sorority leadership. However, we caution waiting until after a public incident about Black and Brown people's deaths to consider the role of chapter officers in leading toward racial equity in and through these historically White organizations. If racism is not addressed through leadership in these organizations, it will continue to protect and perpetuate Whiteness with performativity, racial inclusion, and justice.

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