



“There’s Black People Here?” The Experiences of Black Alumnae in National Panhellenic Conference (NPC) Sororities

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ABSTRACT

Utilizing Critical Race Theory as the guiding framework, this study portrayed the essence of Black women’s experiences and motivations in joining National Panhellenic Conference (NPC) sororities. The findings illustrated that participants chose to join an NPC sorority for the social aspect and due to a lack of knowledge of culturally based sororities. Additionally, upon reflecting on their experiences, participants shared they may not make the same decision again. Participants’ experiences as Black women in NPC organizations were further characterized by them neglecting their racial identities while in these organizations and regaining them upon graduation. This study discussed implications from the obtained findings and offered suggestions to help create more equitable and inclusive experiences for Black women who join historically white sororities.

Keywords: Black women, Critical Race Theory, sorority

INTRODUCTION

The National Panhellenic Conference (NPC) is the worlds' largest sorority association consisting of 26 national and international women-only sororities. Their members are located on 670 campuses with nearly 370,000 undergraduate members in more than 3,350 college chapters (NPC, n.d.). However, NPC member organizations are not known for being highly diverse or representative of students with marginalized identities. Many of the NPC sororities were founded during a time of slavery or segregation, and many did not accept Black members until the mid-1900s, causing them to be designated as historically white organizations (Ross, 2015). Even though individual chapters would allow Black members to join, National Panhellenic Conference sororities were and still are very much segregated (Ross, 2015).

Previous research has established that, despite being represented by Black and other minority members, many sororities maintain a variety of ethnocentric, exclusionary, and prejudiced practices (Hughey, 2010; Torbenson & Parks, 2009). Through their structures and activities, many organizations, and particularly historically white ones, have been called out for sustaining heterogeneity and discouraging diversity and individual differences (Laird, 2005). Similarly, the experiences of minority students in these organizations, mainly Black women, remain underrepresented in the contemporary literature (Hughey, 2010), especially compared to the existing body of research on Black women experiences in culturally-based sororities (Greyerbiehl & Mitchell, 2014; Jennings, 2017; Mitchell et al., 2017).

At the same time, many students have started to call for abolishing historically white fraternities and sororities due to systemic racism, discrimination, and other issues, or demanding that they address their lack of diversity and history of racism and discrimination (Burke, 2020). In response, many sororities, including NPC sororities, have begun to implement programming and initiatives to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion. Specifically, NPC sororities have expressed commitment to “to creating a more welcoming, inclusive Panhellenic community, including addressing racism and racial injustice in our community” (NPC, n.d. para 1.). However, the outcomes of such initiatives and the experiences of members with marginalized identities have not been sufficiently investigated or documented.

The scarce research in this area suggests that Black students who join historically black fraternities and sororities are more engaged on campus and membership has a positive impact on their racial identity development (Mitchell et al., 2017). However, there is little evidence to

suggest the same for Black women who choose to join National Panhellenic Conference sororities. Further, as most research on Black sorority women is focused on members of historically black sororities, there is a lack of knowledge around the experiences of Black women in NPC sororities. Understanding their experiences is critical as many NPC sororities are implementing new initiatives and programs to create safer and more inclusive spaces for women of color, including Black women. As college and university campuses are engaging in efforts to increase student diversity in campus organizations, they must ensure that such initiatives are effective and grounded in research-proven practices.

Theoretical Framework

This research was theoretically grounded in the Critical Race Theory (CRT) which Delgado and Stefancic (2017) defined as the “collection of activists and scholars engaged in studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power.” (p. 3). The basic tenets of CRT assume that racism persists because it is not acknowledged and that color-blind conceptions of equality lead to continuous discrimination of minority and underrepresented groups. The theory also presumes the unique voice of people of color as they can “communicate to their white counterparts matters that the whites are unlikely to know. Minority status, in other words, brings with it a presumed competence to speak about race and racism.” (p. 11).

Givens (2016) points out that CRT helps explain how Black and White students can co-exist on the same campus yet have entirely different experiences and relationships with the institution. He introduces the concept of *invisible tax* that Black students shoulder when attending predominantly white institutions and seeking campus engagement. The premise of this concept is that Black students feel as though they are not provided with adequate support to engage with the institution, and they are taxed to create their own campus spaces and means of engagement. In conjunction with the invisible tax, CRT shows how Black students are already at a disadvantage before they even come to campus because the institution and its engagement opportunities were created for the dominant culture – whiteness (Givens, 2016).

Regarding fraternity and sorority life, CRT challenges the notion that race does not matter when selecting whom to invite to join their organization. Many sororities claim to be color-blind, which views racism as something historical and not relevant in the present or in their organizations. CRT can help these organizations and their members recognize race and

dismantle the systems and policies in place that continue to oppress people of color in their organizations (Park, 2008).

This theory was critical for the context of this research as it served as a foundation for exploring Black women's experiences within a particular social system – NPC organizations. Due to the competence of people of color to “speak about race and racism” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017), CRT allowed this research to account for this competence of participants and portray their unique experiences as Black members of NPC sororities. Particularly, this study explored and reflected on the role participants' race may have on their overall sorority experience and their motivation to join their organizations. This approach, ultimately, allowed to compare their experiences with those reported in prior research and among different organizational types, mainly culturally-based sororities.

This study sought to overcome the limitations of prior scholarship by portraying the experiences of women in NPC sororities whose identities often go unnoticed and unexplored. Specifically, the purpose of this study was to understand motivations of Black women for joining National Panhellenic Conference sororities as well as their experiences while in these organizations. In doing so, this research sought to educate these organizations, as well as their colleges and universities, on what being an NPC sorority member may look like from the perspectives of these Black women.

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What are the primary motivators for a Black woman to join a National Panhellenic Conference sorority?
2. What is the experience of being a Black alumna of a National Panhellenic Conference sorority?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Following the widespread social justice movements during the summer of 2020, many fraternities and sororities began to examine their past and current practices to create more inclusive organizations. It is essential to understand Black women's experiences in NPC sororities during such a time. As research on the experiences of Black women in NPC organizations is limited, the presented synthesis of the literature discusses contemporary findings related to racism and discrimination in historically white organizations, Black women's sorority experience, their racial identity development, and the theoretical framework guiding this study.

Racism and Discrimination in Historically White Organizations

Most of the social sororities were founded during the 19th and early 20th century, a time when hardly any Black students were attending colleges and universities (Thelin, 2011). Some of the first sororities were established on campuses when societies and their educational institutions benefited from enslaved Black people by utilizing slave labor on college campuses and receiving funds from slave owners (Wilder, 2013). Once Black students were allowed to attend HWCUs, they could still not join the white social sororities. As Black students felt unwelcome and unsafe on these campuses and wanted space for their culture and people, they created their own social sororities beginning in 1906 (Ross, 2015). The racial exclusion within historically white sororities continued throughout the 1900s and is still prevalent today (Ross, 2015).

In more recent years, it has become clear that many sororities are still predominantly white and not as welcoming for students of color. For instance, evidence exists that Latinx students perceive historically white organizations as inclusive and visibly whiter (Garcia, 2019). On the other hand, Black women in historically black sororities at predominantly white colleges and universities felt their sororities provided a space that they could not find elsewhere on campus (Greyerbiehl & Mitchell, 2014). These Black students' experiences are not surprising, considering that the culture on these campuses and in these organizations primarily benefits White students.

Recent studies further suggest that minority students in historically white organizations reported feeling as if they were ignored by the university and the staff who were supposed to advise them (Beatty et al., 2019; Garcia, 2019). An advising practice among some sorority life professionals has been structured as colorblind advising, which disregards race and its effects on a person's life experience. This approach is harmful to students of color in their organizations as the professionals supporting them choose to ignore race and the way it impacts the student's experience (Beatty et al., 2019; Vaccaro, 2017). Overall, previous research has been built on the premises that, in cases of cross-racial membership, non-White students must assimilate to be fully accepted, their voices remain marginalized, and they navigate their experience as organizational insiders but racial outsiders (Hughey, 2010). This research aims to advance this line of inquiry by portraying the experiences of Black women in NPC sororities to examine the extent to which these premises hold true to the present day.

Black Women Sorority Experience

Despite the issues of racism and discrimination, research documents that sorority membership has provided valuable and positive experiences for their members. Overall, membership in sorority organizations has been indicative of higher graduation and persistence rates (Walker et al., 2015). Studies have also shown that sorority membership has positively influenced students' sense of belonging on campus (Long, 2012; Walker et al., 2015), and their intercultural competence (Martin et al., 2015).

Studies have shown that Black women in culturally-based organizations received the same benefits as members of HWSs in regard to a sense of belonging, friendship, and academic success (Greyerbiehl & Mitchell, 2014; Jennings, 2017). Regarding their motivation to join culturally-based organizations instead of HWSs, Black women have indicated that their primary motivator was to form friendships. They also shared that their decisions were mostly influenced by their family and friends (Greyerbiehl & Mitchell, 2014).

Membership in culturally-based organizations has provided Black women space to feel safe and included at their predominantly white college or university. Some Black women in culturally-black sororities have found that their sorority has provided support they had not been able to find elsewhere on campus and increased their sense of self (Jennings, 2017). Further, Black women in historically black sororities were more involved in student organizations and other educational practices, compared to their peers in other historically white organizations (Mitchell et al., 2017). However, there has been very little scholarly discussion regarding how these findings may compare to Black women experiences in historically white organizations and specifically NPC sororities.

Black Woman Racial Identity Development

Despite the limited research on sorority membership's impact on racial identity development, understanding the literature regarding Black women's undergraduate identity development and Black racial identity development is of critical importance for this study. Numerous theories and models have been developed to describe Black racial identity development. While some scholars, such as Cross (1971, 1991) or Sellers (1998), focused on the identity development of Black people, of particular importance to this study are theorists such as Porter (2013), Porter and Dean (2015), and Winkle-Wagner et al. (2019) who inquired specifically into Black women.

Porter (2013) developed a Model of Identity Development in Black Undergraduate Women arguing that conditions and influences they are

exposed to, such as media and role models, ultimately influence their college actions and choices. Such influences further shape students' racial development during their collegial years by causing Black women to reflect on and prioritize one or more of their intersecting identities in their predominantly white environments. Subsequent empirical evidence confirmed the premises of this model by documenting that, during their formative college years, Black women have noted that support systems on campus, their families, and other Black women influenced their racial identity (Porter & Dean, 2015). Still, while Black women can find campus spaces where they develop a sense of belonging, many of them are still disappointed in the lack of diversity on their campus, causing some of them to report a need to conform to the dominant culture of whiteness (Winkle-Wagner et al., 2019).

The central construct in most theories of racial identity development is intersectionality which Crenshaw (1989) defined as the merger of multiple identities that individuals have and a complex nature of how they intersect, creating moments of privilege and oppression. When developed in 1981, the theory sought to explain Black women's experiences with oppression and how their experiences differ from those of White women and Black men. Intersectionality theory is central to this research as Crenshaw emphasized that intersectionality could lead to membership in certain groups to make their minority and underrepresented members vulnerable to potential forms of bias.

Other theories, such as Black feminist thought (BFT) further examined the identity development of Black women through the lenses of intersectionality. BFT, created by Collins (2000), is a theory used to empower and pursue justice for Black women that have been historically oppressed. This theory differs from traditional feminist theories due to its intersectional lens and focus on the experiences of Black women in particular. BFT provides context to the experiences of Black women through four different domains of power: structural, disciplinary, hegemonic, and interpersonal.

Black feminist thought is essential when examining the development of Black undergraduate women. BFT provides an intersectional lens like Porter's (2013) model and Crenshaw's (1981) theory. When used together, these theories further explain how Black undergraduate women have had a plethora of experiences before they arrive on campus and that their experiences while on campus will continue to impact their identity development (Porter et al., 2020). BFT is used to understand Black women's

lives and experiences and provide context for the experiences of the Black women who participated in this study.

RESEARCH METHOD

Given the gap in literature and theory on the experiences of Black women in historically white sororities, this study used a phenomenological qualitative research design to portray the essence of participants' shared experience (Fitzpatrick et al., 2011) and the meaning they ascribe to those experiences (Knaack, 1984). Further, this study was designed as phenomenological research as it sought to investigate what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon (Creswell, 2013), which in this study was being a Black woman in an NPC organization. Specifically, phenomenology aims to describe *what* participants have experienced and *how* they experienced it (Moustakas, 1994).

Participants were recruited by contacting the sorority life offices of various institutions across the country. To maximize the number of potential participants, large institutions with enrollment greater than 10,000 were contacted first. Due to the low response rate, the recruitment was expanded to medium-sized universities as well. An email was sent asking the sorority life professionals to share it with alumnae of their organizations. Additionally, an invitation was posted for the survey on the NASPA Fraternity and Sorority Knowledge Community social media page. The email and social media post included a link to a screening questionnaire for potential participants to complete to help determine their eligibility by asking for the name of the sorority and initiation and graduation years. Then, 14 guiding questions were developed for each interview. The questions were open-ended and sought to discover motivations for joining an organization and participants' overall experiences in the sorority.

Given the scarcity of research on the topic of Black women experiences in historically white sororities, it was not possible to draw ideas from or replicate any qualitative interview guides from prior research. Instead, a set of interview questions was developed to answer the research questions guiding this study. Specifically, to inquire into participants' motivation for joining their respective sororities, we asked a series of questions pertaining to the ways in which they learned about their sorority, the ways in which they had been recruited (formally or informally), and factors that guided them in choosing a particular sorority. To inquire into participants' sorority experiences, a series of questions were developed focusing on their sense of belonging, personal development, and formation of social relationships while in the sorority. Throughout interviews, all

participants were encouraged to share additional thoughts and perspectives about their sorority experience that may not have been captured in our interview questions.

Due to the ongoing pandemic in fall 2021, all interviews were conducted via Zoom and audio recorded. Each participant was interviewed only once with each interview lasting between 45 minutes and one hour. Audio recordings were first transcribed and then coded for themes. Inductive coding was used to identify common themes in the transcripts and to develop codes using the terms, phrases, and narratives participants shared. Then, these codes were categorized into categories of themes. Specifically, Saldana’s (2013) evaluation coding was used to assign judgments about the merit, worth, or significance of a particular phenomenon or participants’ experiences. Evaluation coding allowed to categorize the responses based on the evaluative value participants ascribed to their experiences with the investigated phenomenon.

RESULTS

As illustrated in Table 1, the eight participants in this study represented four sororities and seven colleges/universities. All participants graduated and/or earned alumna status between 2010-2020. To protect their identities, all interviewees were assigned pseudonyms.

Table 1
Participants’ Backgrounds

Participant	Sorority	University Location
Kiara	Delta Phi Epsilon	Northeast USA
Hailey	Alpha Gamma Delta	Southeast USA
Tiana	Alpha Gamma Delta	Western USA
Alyssa	Alpha Omicron Pi	Northeast USA
Thalia	Alpha Gamma Delta	Southeast USA
Amari	Alpha Gamma Delta	Southeast USA
Imani	Alpha Gamma Delta	Southeast USA
Alexis	Phi Mu	Midwest USA

The findings of the interviews revealed the following three themes regarding the experiences of Black alumnae of National Panhellenic Conference sororities: (1) social belonging as motivation to join a sorority, (2) lack of knowledge regarding historically Black and culturally-based sororities, (3) and uncertainty if membership in an NPC sorority was the right choice.

Social Belonging as Motivation to Join a Sorority

A majority of participants joined their sorority through an informal recruitment process and did not have an interest in the formal recruitment period because they did not feel like they belonged in that setting. All eight participants spoke of an initial lack of desire to join a sorority when asked why they chose to join one. Most participants mentioned that they decided to participate in the recruitment process due to persuasion from their friends or other acquaintances on campus. As Hailey mentioned:

I heard about the open bid [process] from one of my freshman group leaders who was an Alpha Gamma Delta. She is the one that kind of invited me over to the house and then that's how I learned about it from there.

In discussing their motivation to join, other participants mentioned being invited either by friends to come to recruitment events or being encouraged by their significant other to participate. Tiana mentioned that she had a lot of friends in Alpha Gamma Delta and during her sophomore year she was invited to participate in informal recruitment for the second time. She decided to participate so that “*they leave me alone.*”

Each participant mentioned that their desire for friendship and social belonging was the primary reason they decided to join their sorority. Most of the participants discussed feeling “*connected*” to members and the values of the sorority. As evidenced in Imani’s quote:

I feel like all the girls that I talked to were down to earth and real. Our conversations were not just like surface level “tell me about yourself”. I felt like we really connected. And the values of the sorority, I felt like I aligned with. I felt like it would be a good experience and that I would make the friends I wanted to make, and also be connected to an organization that has values similar to mine.

Most alumnae shared that the conversations they had with members made them feel a sense of belonging. The informal setting through which most participants met with members (by spending time together at the sorority

house, going to coffee shops or for lunch, etc.) aided in them seeing themselves as a member of the organization.

Participants further noted that what they knew about NPC sororities is what is often depicted in popular media – organizations that are extremely social and one of the best avenues on campus to meet people and have fun. Some interviewees referred to a desire to attend social events and meet new people. Alyssa believed that joining would be “*a free pass to have friends and social plans, since I didn’t have a core group of friends*” at the university. Outside of their own organizations, some members were also connected to the larger sorority community on their campus. For some participants the connection with other organizations was a benefit. For instance, Alexis believed that it was her connection to the larger community that helped her win a Student Government Association position. For others, the feeling of belonging was limited to their own sorority and not the larger community.

As illustrated in the presented excerpts, the motivation of these Black women to join was grounded both in the values represented by the organization’s members and the values of the sorority. Further, participants felt that these values represented their own, thus encouraging them to become members. Among the outside factors, friends and family served as a critical motivator for these Black women to choose a particular organization, as well as any prior contact that these Black women may have made with a sorority and its members. Finally, the participants believed that joining a particular sorority would help them establish social connections with a wider campus community and relied on their sororities to help them be seen and recognized by other campus constituencies. Overall, these Black women felt that being members of their sororities had positive outcomes for their college experience, ranging from sense of belonging, accomplishing social connections, and obtaining positions on campus.

Lack of Knowledge of Historically Black and Culturally-Based Sororities

The second theme that emerged from the interviews with Black alumnae of NPC sororities is that when they decided to join their sorority, most had a lack of knowledge and understanding of historically black and culturally-based sororities. Participants described a lack of education from their campus’ fraternity and sorority life staff and council officers about the existence and purpose of historically black and culturally-based sororities. When most alumnae learned about the joining process for a sorority, they only learned about NPC sororities.

Most interviewees did not learn about culturally-based sororities until after they had joined their NPC organization. As Amari explained: *“I didn’t know that they existed here. I was like ‘there’s Black people here?’ I did not know until my second semester, and I was like ‘Oh, I would have joined you guys.”* This lack of awareness was present among participants who joined through both formal and informal recruitment processes.

Some alumnae also described a lack of desire to join a historically black or culturally-based sorority because the chapters were too small on their campus or did not have the same social capital as NPCs. As Alyssa noted:

Black fraternities and sororities like aren't really respected, they're not big. People are like: ‘What are those letters? I don't even know what that is.’ It's like ‘Oh my God, read a book.’ We are not the only people who exist on this campus, but for a lot of people that I knew, it was like that was just a world that didn't exist to them. So, I knew that was not going to be a route for me... I just did not see a black sorority being a viable option for me.

The recurring theme in the interviews was that alumnae seemed to not understand or acknowledge the history of culturally-based sororities, their significance, or the reasoning behind their smaller size when they were undergraduate students. Once interviewees joined their sororities, their interactions with organizations outside of their council were mainly limited to the Interfraternity Council, which is made up of historically white fraternities and sororities.

For Imani, the decision to join an NPC sorority instead of a culturally-based one was because she felt she was not in touch with her racial identity. As she stated:

At the time, I was not knowledgeable or in touch with my identity. I was like ‘What does it matter? My organization is just as good.’ I think if you interview more people from my chapter that were founding members, they would have similar thoughts about how they never saw an issue or any of the negative sides of being in a white sorority until we got out of it.

Other interviewees mentioned that their initial friend group on campus was mainly White women going through the formal recruitment process. Similarly, participants further mentioned coming into their racial identity only after graduating.

Overall, the narratives of participants were characterized by a reflection on culturally-based organizations as a possible choice they wished they had explored prior to joining a white sorority. The sentiments of these

women echoed that, in choosing where to join, there were only presented with NPC organizations. Therefore, they were left to choose between NPC organizations only, rather than between an NPC and other sororities, such as culturally-based or black organizations. In their decision to join an NPC they felt they assimilated, rather than integrated, by neglecting their racial identity and regaining it only upon graduation.

Uncertainty if Membership in a Historically White Sorority was the Best Choice

When reflecting on their sorority membership experience, most participants stated they would have weighed all their options before choosing to join an NPC organization. As noted previously, the formal and informal recruitment processes at the participants' institutions only highlighted the NPC sorority experience. As undergraduates, some participants believed that NPC sororities were the only option, and many wished they had known that there were historically black and culturally-based sororities on their campus. As Kiara stated:

I wouldn't have joined. I think if I had given myself a year to explore everything, go to information meetings for Divine Nine [historically black fraternities and sororities], I probably would have gone Divine Nine if I'm being honest with myself.

Others agreed that they may have not made the same choice to join an NPC sorority had they waited to see all their options, or if their institution did a better job at educating potential members.

Participants further mentioned that they could see a stark difference between the NPC alumnae experience and the black/culturally-based sorority alumnae experience. Some interviewees said they were envious of the lifetime connection and involvement among National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC) sororities, and that she would have joined an NPHC sorority upon reflection of her experience. Some revealed that their NPC membership was a fulfilling experience while they were in college but were unsure if they would have still made the same choice. As Alyssa noted:

I think, for the time that I was in college, it was beneficial because it did lead me to making friends and making connections. Do I feel like it's had this profound impact on my life? No... I think that I would still be exactly where I am today, with or without it, so I don't know that it would have made a difference.

Three participants were still actively involved as alumnae by serving on national committees or serving as advisors for local chapters near their home. The rest were not involved or did not volunteer their time for their

sorority. For most interviewees, their sorority experience ended when they graduated from their institution or earned alumna status.

In talking about their experiences, some alumnae discussed instances of microaggressions and racism they experienced as sorority members, that now give them pause about their decision to join an NPC sorority. Although their sororities extended them invitations to join, these participants felt as though their sororities could have done a better job at educating members on diversity, equity, and inclusion issues or holding members accountable for being racist. As an illustration, one participant discussed how when her sorority would attend fraternity parties, the music played was explicit. During songs that had the n-word racial slur, some of her sorority sisters and fraternity members would sing the word. She was hesitant to discuss her concerns with her sisters for fear of being attacked or viewed as an “*angry Black woman*”.

As illustrated, the overall sorority experience of these Black women was characterized by sentiments of self-reflection, questioning, doubt, and even regret. Their narratives strongly contrasted their experience in NPC organizations with the experience they could have had in a culturally-based or black sororities. Further, the constructs of racism and microaggressions characterized the reflections of these young women who overall felt that public commitments of their institutions to diversity, inclusion, and social justice were not represented in the actions of their members. They also admitted not voicing their concerns for the fear of not assimilating and giving up their racial identities in order to fit in.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study corroborated some of the prior research on Black women experiences in sorority organizations while offering new insights into the questions that have not yet been investigated. Regarding the first research question and Black women’s decisions to join NPC organizations, participants reported being driven by social motivators, mainly friends and family. This finding is comparable to the general literature exploring the choice of female students to join NPC sororities (Long, 2012; Walker et al., 2015), as well as the research on Black women decisions to join culturally-based organizations (Greyerbiehl & Mitchell, 2014). The significance of this study lies in the finding that these Black women felt that choosing between a particular NPC sorority was the only choice they had. This finding can be connected to the prior research that documented that students at predominantly white institutions can feel as though historically white sororities do not wish to associate with culturally-

based organizations (Garcia, 2019). Specifically, Garcia (2019) documented lack of awareness among students at these institutions of the existence of multicultural organizations as well as a prevalent lack of interaction across councils. Similarly, most participants in this research mentioned that their connection to the larger sorority community was limited to other historically white sororities, with some adding how sorority community-wide events (e.g., Greek Week, Meet the Greeks, et.) were all tailored for historically white sororities. In her research, Garcia (2019) attributed these practices to the lack of information participants received as incoming students about multicultural organizations. She also documented participants' perspectives that multicultural organizations do not receive sufficient resources to adequately promote themselves, as compared to NPC organizations. Comparably, the findings of this study echo these notions as the experiences of most Black women in this research illustrated the practice of their universities to center historically white sororities in their orientation, recruitment, and social events, thus influencing participants to believe that joining these organizations is their only option.

This knowledge confirms and advances the previous research that established that even though sororities welcome Black and other non-White members, they still perpetuate ethnocentric and selective practices (Hughey, 2010; Torbenson & Parks, 2009), which in this case of this study were reflected in their promotional and recruitment activities. By being led to believe that that NPC sororities were their only choice, the experiences of Black women in this study confirmed the premises that structures and practices of many sororities sustain heterogeneity and discourage diversity and individual differences (Laird, 2005).

Regarding the second research question, and participants' experiences as Black women in NPC organizations, the alumnae in this study shared that they neglected their racial identities while in these organizations and only regained them upon graduation. This knowledge is critical for all sororities serving Black students given that for Black women at predominantly white institutions social support systems are vital to their personal and racial identity development (Porter & Dean, 2015). Further, the experiences of Black women in this study were marked by strong sentiments of assimilation, rather than integration, which echoed the existing knowledge that cross-racial sorority membership is characterized by assimilation and marginalization of non-White members, if they are to be fully accepted (Hughey, 2010). Similarly, many of the women in this study disclosed their decisions to not voice their concerns regarding their experiences with racism and microaggressions. Interpreted through the

lenses of the theoretical framework of this study – Critical Race Theory – these narratives confirm the color-blind modus operandi of NPC organizations through their practices that perpetuate the oppression of people of color (Park, 2008)

It is of particular importance to highlight the finding that, in reflecting on their sorority experience, Black women in this study felt that public commitments of their organizations to diversity, equity, and inclusion, were not represented in the actions of their members. These sentiments are consistent with those reported in the literature as Black women have already voiced disappointment with diversity efforts on their campuses and the pressure to conform to the dominant culture of whiteness (Winkle-Wagner et al., 2019). Most importantly, the narratives of Black women in this research were contrary to the public commitment of NPC organizations to creating an inclusive community and addressing racism and racial injustices (NPC, n.d.). Many participants had hoped their sorority would put more intention and action behind these statements. Although most of the interviewees were disappointed in their organization’s response, they were not surprised as their sorority had, in their opinion, failed to support diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts appropriately over the years.

Ultimately, this study represents one of the very few inquiries focused on Black women in NPC organizations, which has been identified as under-investigated area that warrants increased scholarly focus and investigation. Before this research, the experiences of minority students in these organizations, mainly Black women, remained underrepresented in the contemporary literature, especially compared to the existing body of research on Black women experiences in culturally-based sororities (Greyerbiehl & Mitchell, 2014; Jennings, 2017; Mitchell et al., 2017). By portraying the experiences of Black alumna of NPC sororities, this research hopes to improve their experience and the experiences of the Black women who will join in the years to come. This research seeks to aid stakeholders, such as campus advisors, volunteer advisors, and organization’s staff members, in becoming aware and informed of the experiences of Black women in NPC organizations. As many of these sororities are implementing new initiatives and programs to create safer and more inclusive spaces for Black women.

IMPLICATIONS

The results of this study suggest that there needs to be more education on and promotion of culturally-based organizations prior and during formal recruitment processes. Participants spoke of having a lack of

knowledge regarding the culturally-based sororities on their campus, and most now wish they had known all of their options before deciding to join a sorority. To ensure equity for all fraternities and sororities on campuses, the organizations and their staff must examine that the education they provide to potential and active members is inclusive and equitable.

Next, majority of participants stated that even after joining their sororities, their interactions with the larger sorority community were limited to other historically white organizations. Some participants mentioned feeling out of place in such a community. Therefore, college and university staff should explore opportunities to build a stronger sense of community within *entire* sorority life on campus, so that the members of all chapters feel a sense of belonging and feel supported. This goal could be accomplished through a common office-sponsored new member education, educational opportunities for current members, roundtables with leaders from *a variety of* chapters, or informal team-building opportunities for members across *all* chapters.

Third, many participants discussed how their membership experience was limited to their four years of undergraduate education. Some participants are involved on a national level, but most said they do not feel a sense of belonging to their sorority on a national level as Black women. As such, it would be beneficial if organizations developed meaningful opportunities for Black members to connect and support one another. Another avenue to explore for the staff is to develop educational opportunities for undergraduate and alumnae members that increase cultural competency. Finally, sorority staff should explore the policies and practices they have in place that may be limiting the opportunity for Black women and other women of color to join a sorority. They could also develop new policies and practices that would enhance the experience for undergraduate and alumnae members. These practices could address the uncertainty participants had regarding their decision to join.

Additional implications emerge from the finding that sorority experience of participants was shaped by overt racial microaggressions. The racism that Black alumnae experienced calls for not only educating the members of NPC organizations and wider university community on diversity, equity, and inclusion, but for providing safe spaces for Black members to share these experiences and seek support in overcoming them. It is critical for university counseling centers and mental health professionals to not only be aware of the challenges these women encounter while in NPC organizations, but to also actively collaborate with sororities to ensure that all members experiencing racism and microaggressions receive adequate

psychological and mental health support. For this goal to be accomplished, NPC organizations must actively promote counseling centers on their campuses and ensure that all their members have safe spaces to discuss any experiences they are hesitant to share with their organizations.

Overall, all institutions and their organizations must ensure that their public commitments to diversity, equity, and inclusion are not just empty promises, but a set of coordinated and ongoing activities grounded in research-proven practices and developed upon reflecting on the actual experience of their non-White members. In order for this to happen, it is not enough that these organizations only welcome Black members, but they must provide venues for them to voice their concerns, such as those reported in this study. Only by continuously reflecting on their practices and ensuring that they are inclusive and representative of all members, can these organizations ensure that they live up to their public statements and promises.

LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Limitations for this study include the number of participants and the fact that their experiences cannot speak to all other current and alumnae members. This study initially sought to recruit 10-15 active members at colleges and universities in the Northeast United States. Although over two dozen schools were contacted, we were only able to interview one participant who met the criteria. As it was difficult to recruit a substantial sample size from that population, the study expanded to young alumnae across the United States. The population of Black alumnae within NPC sororities is small, so future researchers should anticipate spending a significant amount of time recruiting participants for their studies. Additional limitation of this research is that each participant was interviewed only once using a standardized interview guide. Upon reflecting on the findings of this study, it became obvious that, despite the commonalities in their shared experience, each participant narrative was also quite unique. Thus, it would have been useful if interview guide included additional probing questions or if participants were interviewed twice to allow them to elaborate on the most significant aspects of their experiences.

Future studies should be conducted to further explore the experiences of Black women in NPC sororities. Ideally, future studies should also include quantitative inquiries so that the results can be more generalizable across this population. Further exploration into the Black

experience would hopefully benefit Black women who decide to join NPC organizations in the future.

CONCLUSION

The experiences of Black alumnae in NPC sororities are unique to each woman. The study explored the motivation for each participant to join and their experience as Black members of their organizations. The most notable finding of this study is that Black women found their undergraduate sorority experience to be beneficial at that time, but upon further reflection on their experiences, they may not make the same decision again.

Colleges, universities, and sorority professionals should explore a variety of avenues to create a more diverse, inclusive, and equitable sorority experience, and seek opportunities to increase the cultural competency of their members. Further research into the experiences of Black women should increase awareness and scholarship on this subject. Black members of NPC sororities deserve to have an experience that is enjoyable and beneficial for more than their four years of their undergraduate education.

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