The Space They Take: Evaluating Historically White Fraternities through Critical Race Theory

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Fraternities and sororities are not often thought of as the starting points for social justice education, especially not historically White fraternities and sororities. In this paper, I outline the missions and values of a select group of historically White fraternities to better understand the foundation from which they are starting their organization. I give an overview of Critical Race Theory (CRT) that gives context for how critical race theory can work in higher education. I conclude with recommendations for reworking historically White fraternities with a CRT lens; recommendations are written for national organizations and students, and then for professional staff working with fraternities and sororities, especially historically White fraternities.

Keywords: fraternity and sorority life, greek life, white fraternity, critical race theory, history

I was not affiliated with a Greek letter organization during college; I was partially attracted to my undergraduate institution for its lack of Greek life or fraternity and sorority life (FSL). I believe that some of my lack of appeal was due to my frustration with heteronormative patriarchy that I saw within FSL groups introduced to me. Though I decided not to attend an institution with FSL, I found myself in proximity to FSL communities through family, friendships, and extracurriculars with people who were FSL-affiliated at institutions other than my own. However, most of these folks were affiliated with historically Black or multicultural organizations, different from my perception of FSL communities.

Through developing relationships with folks affiliated with these organizations, I gained different perspectives into what FSL communities do. Within Black and multicultural chapters, I saw emphases on community and culture. Heteronormative patriarchy still existed within the chapters, but I had not realized in high school was that my prior experience with FSL communities had been very White. Reflecting more, I realized that Whiteness and White supremacy culture were also informants in my understanding of fraternities and sororities (Jones & Okun,

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2001). Additionally, my perception of fraternities' and sororities' purposes has changed. In understanding how systemic oppression shapes society and higher education institutions supporting FSL existence, one can see how historically Black and multicultural organizations formed. Higher education institutions were not built to fulfill educational needs of any Students of Color and White women: they were meant to educate future clergymen (Riley, 2018; "History of the Kappa Alpha Society," n.d.). Social communities that centered these marginalized identities developed as a way of creating space for existence within these institutions (Gillon et al., 2019). The fact that higher education institutions were built to serve White men led me to question why historically White fraternities need to exist.

I would not dedicate an article on this topic if I felt that historically White fraternities should cease to exist altogether. However, I believe that the current form they exist in could be improved. To dismiss the number of students and student engagement that is done via FSL feels ignorant. Second, FSL offers students multiple ways to engage with their community both on and off campus via social events, service, and philanthropy. FSL students' engagement is important for those students as well as the community around them. Third, I believe that the model of intentional community in FSL is important for the development of students engaged with it.

Focusing on White fraternities specifically orients this paper around students that likely have some of the most privilege; primarily White, cisgender men, with stable financial backgrounds participate in these organizations. The purpose of focusing on these privileged groups is to deconstruct ways in which historically White fraternities perpetuate systemic oppression as it specifically relates to race and how they could shift to be justice-oriented. The hope of shifting these organizations toward a justice orientation is rooted in the belief that justice and liberation work should be everyone's work, not just of those who are oppressed.

This paper is aimed toward student affairs professionals that work closely with or advise fraternities and sororities in higher education. There are points in this piece when I refer to a collective "we" and in these moments I am referring to professionals who work with fraternities and sororities. This content is also relevant to staff working at national organization headquarters and students who are a part of fraternities. I provide some historical context for fraternities as they have come to exist and an overview of relevant missions and values documents of a select group of historically White fraternities. Following this analysis I overview Critical Race Theory (CRT) as it is relevant in higher education context, which I then use to inform future recommendations. I conclude this piece with recommendations for student affairs professionals and those within national organizations. This structure aims to show why there is a need to approach historically White fraternities from a critical race theory lens to promote justice within these organizations.

Fraternities, Then & Now

Special interest groups and secret societies have existed in higher education institutions long before the first fraternities (as we understand fraternities to be) entered onto campuses. However, it was not until the 19th century that the modern-day fraternity emerged. The start of these organizations is important to understand how they have evolved over time. As this piece will discuss, tradition can play an integral role in differences between fraternal organizations and can help define how an organization exists. Again, while there are needed improvements for how fraternities operate, their significance in students' lives should not be ignored. After reviewing the history of the development of the modern-day fraternity this piece will present current research on benefits of involvement in historically White fraternities.

History

There is uncertainty on which organization is the true "first" of the modern FSL organizations. The first known Greek letter society was Phi Beta Kappa, a literary society that emerged at the College of William and Mary in 1776 (Gillon et al., 2019). However, this organization is noted as more of an honor society rather than a more socially-focused modern day fraternities (Syrett, 2009). The first fraternity most like modern-day fraternities was Kappa Alpha Society, founded at Union College in 1825 (Syrett, 2009). Kappa Alpha Society also formed as a literary society, as did most fraternities until the U.S. Civil War. "Literary" societies were home to discussion about various texts and debates and grew to house libraries that rivaled the colleges they were based at because of their inclusion of fiction works (Syrett, 2009). Fraternity chapters continued to form at New England schools in the years following Kappa Alpha Society's emergence; chapters were often founded in a similar vein to ones that already exist but with the want to distinguish themselves from the others (Syrett, 2009).

When the first fraternities formed, slavery was still constitutionally legal. Due to this, it makes sense that all of these new fraternities consisted of White men, almost exclusively wealthy White men (Syrett, 2009). As fraternities grew in popularity through the 19th century, affiliated men continued to define what it meant to be a gentleman and what manliness is and was. After the U.S. Civil War, members began referring to unaffiliated men as "barbs," a shortened insult of barbarian inferring that unaffiliated men were deemed less "civilized" (Syrett, 2009). The behavior of distinguishing between civilized and uncivilized was congruent with larger society where White men were claiming themselves civilized in comparison to People of Color, specifically after the freeing of previously enslaved people (Syrett, 2009).

Historically White fraternities and sororities codified their exclusion of Black students and other Students of Color from their organizations in the early 20th century (Gillon et al., 2019). Historically White sororities and fraternities excluded Students of Color from joining, stating in their constitutions that they would only consider White students as new members. The exclusion of Students of Color eventually led to those students chartering their own organizations, many of which are still active today (Gillon et al., 2019).

Fraternal Involvement

While there are many constructed popular culture depictions of fraternity life that centers party culture, higher education scholars can bolster this image by exclusively focusing on party culture (Landis, 1978; Barstool Sports, 2020). Hevel et al., (2015) criticize scholarship for overfocusing on drawbacks of participating in FSL – such as binge drinking, sexual assault prevalence, and party culture – and not focusing on student development that is encouraged. The impact of FSL involvement has been minimally studied, and those studies show mixed results in outcomes across academics, civic engagement, personal growth, and social justice.

Fraternity memberships' influence on academic success varies across students. For fraternity men compared to unaffiliated men, grade differences have varied with few exceptions, showing that after four years, affiliated men had lower grades (Hevel et al., 2015). Both Martin et al., (2015) and Hevel and colleagues (2015) concluded that FSL involvement did not significantly impact students. However, Hevel and colleagues (2015) did suggest that students who are high-performing in grades, involvement, and other activities when they join a fraternal organization that their affiliation bolsters their development with aspects like alumnx networks. Student development with justice, respect, and intercultural understanding differed across studies. One found that students did not benefit and were not disadvantaged in their intercultural development by participating in FSL (Martin et al., 2015). Another found that White students had lower critical thinking skills than their unaffiliated peers after four years, and moral reasoning that was similar (Hevel et al., 2015). Students in Matneyet et al.'s (2016) study did not mention diversity or intercultural competence as an area of growth, however some men did note that they felt a "responsibility for action and assistance in my community."

There was a disconnect between fraternity values and value application outside of the chapter context that was found by Matney and colleagues. (2016). The authors suggest that practitioners and advisors find ways to bridge this connection. Knowing that fraternity members are involved in civic engagement and service as a part of their fraternity values means that they are embodying those values in some way. However, bringing those values outside of the specific context in which they were written requires deeper education. This is consistent with how Kuh

(2008) discusses service learning as necessitating reflection to ensure learning. This suggests that fraternity involvement may have additional benefits that have not yet been measured and that there may be more development that could be achieved with more intentional reflective spaces. The literature does suggest, however, that intercultural competence is an area for improvement for FSL members.

Missions & Values

To continue understanding historically White fraternities' central pillars, I have chosen to analyze the missions and value statements of three of these organizations. These organizations encompass the first "modern" fraternity, the organization with the most members currently, and an organization with one of the highest numbers of active chapters. I chose these three because I felt that the first would provide historical foundation for other following organizations. The others I chose as organizations have a breadth of reach across United States fraternity culture. All three are historically White fraternities. With this context, the missions and values of these organizations would have been written to serve White, cisgender, male, collegians. I chose to analyze the missions of organizations as a tangible guide for how these fraternities are meant to exist in their ideal forms.

Kappa Alpha Society

The Kappa Alpha Society was founded at Union College in 1825 ("History of The Kappa Alpha Society," n.d.; Riley, 2018). This organization was founded as a literary society and a space where members could become "movers and shakers" instead of just clergymen who studied Greek and Latin (Riley, 2018; "History of The Kappa Alpha Society," n.d.). There are only seven chapters of Kappa Alpha that are active in some way today and they are strewn across both US and Canadian campuses ("History of The Kappa Alpha Society," n.d.). While there are still active chapters today, Kappa Alpha Society does not have a publicly available mission statement or values. We are left to assume that their values still follow from the founders' intent to diversify learning that was happening within the context of their classrooms, curate an experience that was closer to student's actual wants, and acknowledge the learning that can occur between peers.

Sigma Alpha Epsilon

Sigma Alpha Epsilon (SAE) is the historically White fraternity with the most members, with over 330,000 total initiated members since its founding in 1856 and over 218,000 living alumnx and current members ("Mission & Vision," 2019; Riley, 2018). SAE's Alpha[1] chapter was founded at the University of Alabama ("Mission & Vision," 2019). SAE's mission highlights four pillars, includ-

[1]An Alpha chapter refers to the founding chapter of a fraternity or sorority.

ing friendship, scholarship, leadership, and service and additionally states that the fraternity grooms "members to become True Gentlemen" to be able to tackle challenges that confront them ("Mission & Vision," 2019). On the same page as their mission and values, SAE includes the definition of a True Gentlemen as written by John Walter Wayland. To be a True Gentlemen, in short, is to be a man who is respectable, practices respect, and in a generally is good. In the full description niceness, respect, and humility are prioritized. Each new member to SAE must recite "The True Gentlemen" pledge (Riley, 2018).

As the largest current historically White fraternal organization in the United States, SAE has a breadth of influence over men involved in fraternities. While SAE highlights the True Gentlemen priorities, the organization has not gone without criticism. Hazing, alcohol misuse, and sexual assault have been prominent in the organization's recent history on college campuses (Riley, 2018). Though this behavior is not unique to SAE, its prominence as the largest historically White organization highlights the prevalence of this kind of behavior. With roots in the South, the inclusion of the "True Gentleman" rhetoric can be assumed to be tied to a culturally Southern understanding. This reinforces the Whiteness of this particular fraternity, especially since it was founded during legal slavery in Alabama.

Tau Kappa Epsilon

Officially founded in 1899, Tau Kappa Epsilon (TKE) established their Alpha chapter at Illinois Wesleyan University ("The History of Tau Kappa Epsilon Fraternity," 2019). TKE existed from 1899-1907 prior to writing their Declaration of Principles as a social group at Illinois Wesleyan ("Declaration of Principles," 2019; "The History of Tau Kappa Epsilon Fraternity," 2019). Written by one of the founding members, the Declaration of Principles still remains intact as it was written in 1907. The Principles are central to the operations of the fraternity and includes thirteen statements ("Declaration of Principles," 2019). In addition to the statements of belief, the Principles warn of the danger of "an attitude of exclusiveness toward non-fraternity men, and a bitter and unfriendly spirit toward other fraternities on campus" (2019). This warning highlights the importance of curating a warm and welcoming community amongst men on campus, even amongst men who have decided not to join fraternities, and discourages competition between fraternities.

A central theme to the rest of the Principles is the understanding that men being in community with one another is as important for their development as their official studies at their institution ("Declaration of Principles," 2019). This friendship amongst men is to include "dignity and respect," similar to how SAE defined their understanding of a gentlemen ("Declaration of Principles," 2019). Throughout the Declaration of Principles an understanding of "manhood" is es-

tablished (2019). Specifically, the last statement in the Principles declares that a man "whose manhood has withstood the test of trying conditions" is the time of man that the fraternity values (2019). This is a call for resiliency for the men that join but teeters close to an understanding of manhood that does not allow for emotion or a show of the hardship of the "trying conditions." The reach of TKE in the US is broad. According to TKE's national website, there are 232 active chapters and colonies today, making it one of the most common fraternities to find on a college campus ("The History of Tau Kappa Epsilon," 2019).

Common Themes

All three of the fraternities mentioned noted growth outside of the classroom as central to their conception. The value and wanting power over some of the learning that occurs during one's college years were evident in the founding of the three organizations ("Declaration of Principles," 2019; "History of The Kappa Alpha Society," n.d.; Riley, 2018). Remembering that these fraternities were created to gain power over faculty during a time when only wealthy White men were attending college is important. The groups forming to create space for themselves in opposition to the faculty were created specifically for White wealthy men to thrive in community with one another.

Keeping in mind that fraternities formed to ensure space from faculty and only to include White wealthy men attending higher education institutions at the time, messages of manhood, gentlemanliness, and brotherhood would have been exclusively relevant to that population ("Declaration of Principles," 2019; "History of The Kappa Alpha Society"; "Mission & Vision," 2019; Syrett, 2009). Given the context of the time when these fraternities were established it is not surprising that their missions and principles would lack a critical understanding of how they might perturb racism, classism, sexism, and other forms of injustice. However, driving documents such as TKE's Declaration of Principles have not been amended since they were originally written (2019). If central documents have not shifted, the ideas written within them are still present within the fraternities today.

The specifics of how manhood, gentleman, and brother are defined vary across the fraternities, but have common themes of respect and humility. Within TKE's description of man in the Declaration of Principles, men are considered equal ("Declaration of Principles," 2019). Again, this was still at a time before higher education institutions were desegregated so the men attending would have been almost exclusively White. SAE's definition of a True Gentlemen includes a notion of respecting others that "does not make the poor man conscious of his poverty, the obscure man of his obscurity, or any man of his inferiority or deformity" ("Mission & Vision," 2019). This definition, while aiming at respect for all men

regardless of their positionality, specifically names that there are inferior men. The understandings of respect and gentlemanliness are central within the missions of these fraternities in a way that is meant to promote a better and more kind world, yet are rooted in elitism of understanding that the fraternities themselves are respectful and that they should show respect to others even though others may not be as deserving as the fraternities are.

Within all of the fraternities and the primary reason why they began in the first place, is an air of exclusivity. Kappa Alpha Society formed because a group of students had a common interest in studying, discussing, and thinking about literature that was not in the common core of their courses ("History of the Kappa Alpha Society," n.d.). The central theme of gentlemanliness and becoming the first fraternity to create a leadership development program is unique to SAE ("About Sigma Alpha Epsilon," 2019). TKE focuses on the detrimental attitude of heightened competition between fraternities and calls for cooperation across and amongst chapters to better prepare men for the world after college ("Declaration of Principles," 2019). Each of these organizations were created to serve specific purposes, the organizations that formed after Kappa Alpha Society were created because the ones that existed did not serve the students' specific needs. Even today, students aim to join specific chapters that meet their interests most closely. So many different fraternal organizations exist because they are exclusive to specific interests. With historically White fraternities, however, this exclusivity was created when only wealthy, White men were attending college, meaning that their exclusivity went beyond what was written in their missions, visions, and principles.

A Foundation of Critical Race Theory

With an understanding of the historically White fraternities' histories, how involvement affects its members, and the driving missions and values, I will overview tenets of CRT. These tenets will serve as points of entry to analyze, critique, and suggest better ways of engaging historically White fraternities in a justice orientation. This overview of CRT is basic and focuses on tenets that are most relevant in a student affairs practitioner context and in the context of college student development. This is not meant to be comprehensive of CRT, however it should provide a basic understanding to enter into a conversation about how fraternities perpetuate systemic racism and Whiteness (Patton et al., 2016).

Racism's Permanence

For some, it may be difficult to understand how racism permeates into systems and practices without the explicit intention to exclude Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) from those systems and practices. Racism is so in-

grained and normal in US culture that it becomes unrecognizable, especially to White people (Harris, & Poon, 2019; Hernández, 2016 ; Patton et al., 2016). CRT writers work to center BIPOC's voices and stories and push back against the status quo racism that exists within U.S. structures. The fraternity system in the U.S. can be considered a system that perpetuates this "unrecognizable" racism, which is why interrogations such as this paper are necessary to unpack how generally accepted structures like fraternities could be shifted toward a more justice-oriented lens. Understanding that racism exists within all structures and systems means that colorblindness, or acting as if race is not ingrained within the systems and that a "neutral" approach is possible, must be replaced with centering race in justice efforts (Harris, & Poon, 2019; Hernández, 2016 ; Patton et al., 2016).

Storytelling & Experiential Wisdom

In recognizing the permanence of racism and rejecting colorblindness, we must center the voices of BIPOC. Centering BIPOC requires a recognition of the cultural wealth that these students bring to higher education institutions and the wealth of knowledge and wisdom existing in the lived experiences of BIPOC students (Hernández, 2016; Yosso, 2005). Recognizing experiential wisdom and lived experience of BIPOC requires an examination of current structures that prevent or do not uplift those voices.

Intersectionality

While CRT centers race as the entry point to create a more just world, and in this case more just university and fraternity systems, we cannot ignore the other identities that a person holds. Intersectionality examines the cross sections of multiple social identities, especially the overlaying of multiple marginalized identities (Johnstone-Guerrero, 2016; Patton et al., 2007; Crenshaw, 1991). Kimberlé Crenshaw originally coined the term intersectionality to discuss the unique oppression that Women of Color, especially Black women, experience in the context of the U.S. (1991). She discusses that Black women are oppressed in specific ways in their Blackness as well as in their gender identity (Crenshaw, 1991). Though intersectionality was originally used to describe the oppression of Black women, the term has been used in a widespread way to talk about all the ways in which social identities influence and crossover. For our purposes, we will move forward with an understanding of intersectionality as a term to describe the crossings and intersections of marginalized identities and to remind ourselves that no one social identity is experienced in isolation of other identities.

Whiteness as Property

In line with understanding that colorblindness when it comes to race ignores the

weight race has in the U.S. and the racist structures within it, we must acknowledge the power that comes with being White and with Whiteness. CRT scholars liken Whiteness to a property right because White people are able to use, enjoy, exclude, see their culture reflected in dominant culture, and remain innocent in matters of race because they did not create racist systems (Harris & Poon, 2019; Patton et al., 2007). This understanding of Whiteness as property can be easily understood through the metaphor of a house that one owns. When someone owns a house, they control what happens within it, the expectations of how others act in the house, what is done in the house, if the house is an open space or a closed space, what the thermostat is set to, and much more.

Likening Whiteness to the metaphor of owning a house, White people have held the capital of controlling the house because Whiteness "built" and has "owned" the house. White culture and ways of being have always been present, accepted, and expected within the house. Therefore, White people see themselves reflected in the house and feel at home because the house was built around their needs (Harris & Poon, 2019). However, White people do not actually own the house. This is generally accepted that White people do not own the house, or that White people should not be in sole control of US culture. While we have accepted that White people should not be in sole control, we have not changed the rules of the house or the expectations. As a result, BIPOC are not celebrated for what they bring to the house and are seen as taking away from how well the house operated beforehand (Yosso, 2005). While we as a society and within higher education, work to change the rules and expectations in the house, we must remain committed to always shifting and changing.

Commitment to Social Justice

To truly stick to CRT, we as practitioners must commit to furthering justice. This means recognizing and accepting the previously discussed tenets of CRT and acting upon them in our work (Harris & Poon, 2019; Patton et al., 2007). Within higher education, this means focusing efforts on our immediate functional areas, challenging White students, and uplifting and empowering BIPOC (Harris & Poon, 2019; Johnstone-Guerrero, 2016; Patton et al., 2007; Yosso, 2005).

Rethinking, Remodeling, & Rewriting Purpose

Knowing that historically White fraternities are historically White because of when the majority of them were founded and how their documents and rituals have been passed down since that time, there likely is a lot that could change if the structure was approached with a CRT lens. Starting from an understanding of CRT that racism is fundamental to how the US has been structured, that BIPOC voices have been stifled and should be uplifted, that we cannot think of race

without considering other compounding factors and identities, that Whiteness acts as property within our structures, and that we must fully commit to working toward justice, I will make recommendations to the themes of historically White fraternity missions and history that has likely not been a concerted effort to reanalyze the fraternity structure through a CRT lens. These recommendations are divided into sections for the fraternities themselves and also advisors to the fraternities that can provide challenge, structure, and focus in the realm of social justice work.

Missions & Values

As we learned in aforementioned sections, there are pieces of missions, principles, and documents that have not been updated since the organizations were founded ("Declaration of Principles," 2019; "Mission & Vision," 2019). Understanding the permanence of racism in all structures, especially those created exclusively by White men, I recommend that fraternities go back and edit their driving documents to include the voices of the current membership. For example, in the TKE Declaration of Principles it states that there are "inferior men" and even though there are they should be treated respectfully (Mission & Vision, 2019). Respect is not wrong but the underlying assumption that there are inferior men cannot be thought of with a colorblind approach. An interrogation of these documents is necessary because language such as the aforementioned is prevalent. During this process it would be prudent to consider specifically uplifting stories of BIPOC members of the organizations as a way to hear and value their lived experiences within the group and to better support these members of the community (Harris & Poon, 2019; Johnstone-Guerrero, 2016; Patton et al., 2007; Yosso, 2005). With a specific commitment to social justice, I also recommend that organizations set a time frame to periodically review their driving documents to ensure that they are still meeting the social justice missions. If organizations added specific values of social justice and recognition of historical harm to their missions, that would also further a justice goal. Individual chapters at various institutions can begin by evaluating and interrogating their practices and specific chapters' perpetuation of racism.

Advising Practice

Staff working with historically White fraternities have the opportunity to provide structure to students who continue to work toward justice. I recommend that advisors integrate social justice education into required workshops and trainings for their campus chapters. Creating consistent reminders about the need for justice work will normalize its existence in chapter happenings. Advisors also have influence over how chapters at their institutions sustain affiliation, meaning that requiring social justice-oriented trainings is plausible. In addition to trainings that

proactively inform FSL members of justice, reflection on what has been learned is also an integral part of assuring that learning carries through (Matney et al., 2016). Advisors should consider structures of reflection on how FSL involvement impacts understandings of justice upon graduation. Professional staff should also work to stay up to date on literature and research as it pertains to justice, especially racial justice, with the FSL and Greek community.

Conclusion

Fraternities' and sororities' influence over their members and student values of their campuses make them invaluable spaces to continue social justice work in higher education. While historically White fraternities have work to do, there is the ability for them to center justice in tangible ways. With efforts from national organizations, students, and campus staff, justice, especially racial justice, can become more of a focus in the next generation of FSL members.

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