JCAPS

SAYING THE RIGHT THING, DOING THE WHITE THING: PERPETUATING THE ENLIGHTENMENT NARRATIVE IN WHITE UNDERGRADUATE STUDENT LEADERS

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This phenomenological qualitative study explored the ways undergraduate student leaders engaged in the enlightenment narrative. Eighteen White student leaders from seven higher education institutions were interviewed. Participants engaged in frontstage performances of inclusion by "saying the right thing" to maintain ownership of their leadership positions and differentiate themselves from white peers through a white savior complex. When asked to clarify, they revealed private sentiments of dispossession and fear that some campus equity efforts threatened their leadership positions. This revealed ways in which participants undermined their initial rhetoric of inclusion through "doing the white thing." Implications using Adaptive Leadership theory are provided to suggest how student involvement professionals can challenge White student leaders to confront their own Whiteness and counter forms of white supremacy.

The 1989 Spike Lee film, *Do the Right Thing,* centers on a day in the Black neighborhood of Bedford-Stuyvesant in Brooklyn, NY. The summer temperature rises as a metaphor for increasing racial tensions surrounding Sal's Pizzeria, which is owned by a family of White Italian Americans. Tensions explode when Sal, the owner, destroys Radio Raheem's boombox in a fight about the lack of hanging wall pictures of Black celebrities and heroes. Fighting spills onto the streets. Police arrive and choke Radio Raheem until he falls dead on the ground (Flory, 2006).

The police lift Radio Raheem's lifeless body into a squad car and leave the shocked crowd. They demand answers from Sal, in which he sheepishly responds, "You do what you gotta do." Sal defends the police actions, despite all the praise he received from many in the Black community and his own paternalistic words of love for his customers. The crowd, enraged by his response, burns down his pizza shop. The response by Sal was color-evasive (color-blind) and did not recognize the racialized undertones of Radio Raheem's death (Flory, 2006).

Sal positioned himself as one of the "good Whites" throughout the film (Chrisman, 1990; Cooper, 2010). These color-blind responses and paternalistic attitudes toward other Black Americans by White persons is a parallel drawn by other scholars about this film (Cooper, 2010; Manley, 2010). Similarly, on college campuses, color-blind responses and paternalistic attitudes are also common attitudes of White undergraduate student leaders toward other Students of Color (Foste, 2019).

Undergraduate student leadership is a revered status on college campuses as they receive additional support such as individualized advising, early residence move-in, and connections to leadership development (Sasso & Palladini, 2021). Student leaders also populate other student organizations in which they hold multiple leadership roles and can hold significant social influence across undergraduate campus life (Goedereis & Sasso, 2020). Thus, they are asked to serve as student representatives on university committees or are encouraged to enter the profession of student affairs administration as a higher education professional (Sasso & DeVitis, 2015).

Student leaders build social capital and relationships with student affairs personnel throughout their collegiate careers

(Goedereis & Sasso, 2020; Sasso & DeVitis, 2015). Student leadership curricula are often based on the Social Change Model (Komives & Wagner, 2009) or servant leadership (Greenleaf, 1977). These leadership models have been critiqued as too performative, lacking cultural consciousness, or reinforcing behaviors of Whiteness (Eicher-Catt, 2005; Harper & Kezar, 2021). These approaches to leadership are embedded within programming using white privilege pedagogy which reinforces the notions of there being good White people and bad White people (Sasso et al., 2020). This approach complicates further efforts to challenge the system of white supremacy (DiAngelo, 2011).

White student leaders engage in this *enlightenment narrative* where they position themselves (good) against other uninvolved students (bad) (Foste, 2020). These individualist approaches suggest more performative efforts rather than engaged work to dismantle racial oppression (Lensmire et al., 2013; Levine-Rasky, 2000). Through this title, we suggest that in the enlightenment narrative, White students have been trained to "say the right thing" as student leaders speaking against racism but continue to "do the white thing" in their leadership positions.

This qualitative phenomenological study further explored the enlightenment narrative (Foste 2020a) with a sample of undergraduate white student leaders. The purpose of this study was to identify more specific ways White undergraduate student leaders potentially engaged in the enlightenment narrative. In this article, we intentionally place Whiteness to "reject the grammatical representation of power that capitalization brings to the term 'white'" (Perez Huber, 2010, p. 93). We intentionally capitalize racial identities, including White or Students of Color, to acknowledge the importance of race as a component of student identity (Crenshaw, 1989).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Student Leadership

Student leadership development programs in higher education have grown in the previous two decades (Astin & Astin, 2000; Soria et al., 2018). It has been argued that student leadership development should be the central focus of institutions' leadership initiatives, as students have the greatest potential to lead in the broader society (Astin & Astin, 2000). Leadership development programs in higher education have shown varying outcomes in leadership efficacy among students (Soria et al., 2018)

Student leadership is often socially defined by a formal position and not by the influence of relationships and actions (Kouzes & Posner, 2007). While leadership positions are central to students' understanding of leadership (Astin & Astin, 2000), any student has the potential to be a leader beyond holding a titled role (Komives et al., 2013; Parks, 2005; Werner et al., 2016). Holding a leadership position does not necessarily ensure one will become a good leader (Komives et al., 2013). Still, positional student leaders can "build bridges that connect the various disparate cultures on campus" (Astin & Astin, 2000, p. 18).

The ways in which leadership is understood can vary across students' different campus contexts. The culture of a particular organization can impact how leadership development is executed with the recruitment and shaping of future positional leaders (Komives et al., 2013). Emphasis on leadership development in student affairs helps move students away from seeing their participation in co-curricular activities as only a means to build their résumés (Astin & Astin, 2000). In facilitating leadership development, student affairs professionals can fall into "constraining beliefs" regarding their self-knowledge, commitment, and competence around leadership; this limits student potential (Astin & Astin, 2000, p. 59). This is unfortunate as modeling behavior can greatly impact student leadership development (Kouzes & Posner, 2007).

Student leadership development stresses the need for collaboration across different student organizations to address complex problems (Komives et al., 2013). Students' understanding of other cultural identities became a central point of leadership development (Komives et al., 2013). Current critiques of leadership development programs are increasing and have suggested including a more culturally relevant curriculum in consideration of multiple frames of racial diversity (Harper & Kezar, 2021; Jones et al., 2016).

Whiteness

Several scholars distinguished *Whiteness* from White identity. *White identity* refers to the racial location within the system of Whiteness (Abioye & Sasso, 2023). Leonardo (2009) noted, "whiteness is not a culture but a social concept" (p. 170). Further, Whiteness is a cultural discourse that inoculates privileged behaviors and forms of capital among White undergraduate students (Cabrera, 2018, 2019). As a system, Whiteness lacks intersectionality in that there is an absence of allowing other potential identities that may be marginalized to influence its course; this is an important distinction that Whiteness cannot be oppressed but rather acts only as an oppressor (Cabrera, 2018; Crenshaw, 1989).

Cabrera (2018) distinguished that *Whiteness* is a system of interlocking spheres of oppression. It is historically perpetuated on college campuses by *white supremacy,* which is the larger system of racial oppression that privileges engagement with White students (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Feagin, 2006; Omi & Winant, 2015). Whiteness is often conflated by student affairs professionals as solely an identity construct. This serves White people's inclination to shift Whiteness and racism to an individual identity issue (Harris & Patton, 2018). This creates a binary in their minds of "good and bad," which allows White people to recognize and identify their privileges over those who deny them (Cabrera, 2019). This does not provide an understanding of how their social locations or positionality within the system of Whiteness benefits them (Foste, 2020). These forms of Whiteness enable deflecting conversations and personal accountability for racism in society, known as *white agility* (Cabrera, 2019).

White students also operate with *white immunity,* which describes how they are immune from disparate racial treatment (Cabrera et al., 2017). This idea of white immunity was developed as an evolution of thinking around white privilege (McIntosh, 1988) and considers color-blind racism (Bonilla Silva, 2006) in its ideas. Color-blind racism, also known as color-evasiveness (Annamma et al., 2017), is a structure of racism in which White people claim to not see race and avoid racial topics. With white immunity, White undergraduates minimize racism, frame racist actions as innocuous, underestimate levels of racism and racial tensions, and are socialized in racially homogenous groups in which they experience few racial tensions (Cabrera, 2012; 2014b; 2014c; Chesler et al., 2003; Harper & Hurtado, 2007; Rankin & Reason, 2005; Reason & Evans, 2007). This privileges White students to stagnate in ignorance, termed *racial arrested development* (Cabrera et al., 2016).

White students who see themselves as "good whites" pride themselves as more racially aware than their White counterparts because they have had specific inclusion education or claim to have diverse friendships (Foste, 2020). This *enlightenment narrative* has been perpetuated, whether inadvertently or intentionally, by student affairs professionals who have primarily used white privilege pedagogy developed by McIntosh (1988) to teach about identity and instruct White students about race (Ashlee et al., 2020). White privilege pedagogy attempts to help students to become aware of their individual privileges in a larger system of Whiteness but permits students to believe they are experiencing a transformation (Margolin, 2014). This is insufficient for student socialization and may increase white immunity to continue the proliferation of Whiteness in higher education (Ashlee et al., 2020).

Whiteness in White Student Leaders

White student leaders have been found to consider themselves to be among the "good whites" on campus (Foste, 2019). They did this by maintaining that their institution is welcoming and promotes notions of racial harmony (Foste, 2019). They engaged in racial narcissism to believe they possessed greater racial exposure; an increased understanding of racial knowledge due to their leadership position (Foste, 2020). White student leaders have been found to hold "white knight" dispositions in which they infantilize other Students of Color and hold paternalistic assumptions in wanting to "save" them (Trepagnier, 2006). When White students feel that Students of Color are present in institutions to serve their own learning and social achievement, it becomes a form of *Whiteness as property* (Cabrera, 2011; Gusa, 2010; Harris et al., 2019; Harper & Hurtado, 2007). Centering their development of a positive White racial identity perpetuates Whiteness at the expense of subverting racist structures, particularly because they feel they should not bear the obligation of educating their White peers (Foste, 2020). Any challenges to this hegemony feed sentiments of dispossession in which White students feel they cannot exact their privilege, and instead, they externalize blame because they cannot assume "property of power" (Harris et al., 2019; Sasso, 2019).

Foste (2020a) suggested White student leaders perceived social justice and inclusion as a measurable and achievable endpoint, rather than as a continual process of self-work. Additionally, these leaders often engage in frontstage and backstage performances of racism (Ashlee et al., 2020). The concepts of frontstage and backstage racism refer to how White individuals conduct themselves in front of Persons of Color (Picca & Feagin, 2007). In their desire to avoid the label of racist, they often make claims of awareness to be "woke" (Foste & Jones, 2020). Yet, they continually contradict their own understanding with racially ignorant rhetoric (Foste & Jones, 2020). White student leaders were unable to identify their own racial location within the system of white supremacy and engage in backstage racism (Foste & Jones, 2020).

White student leaders will avoid topics of race or assume post-racial perspectives when Students of Color are present and engage and use racial epithets when they are absent (Picca & Feagin, 2007). White students engage in racial joking as the most common example of backstage racism and do not actively label these behaviors as racist (Cabrera, 2014a; Joyce & Cawthon, 2017). Also, White student leaders can frame themselves as victims of racial diversity in their campus environment in primarily White spaces (Cabrera, 2014b; 2014c). This becomes the excuse for racist logics and ideologies, particularly among White student leaders (Cabrera & Corces-Zimmerman, 2017). Without intervention in backstage environments, there will be continued centering of white racial comfort (Cabrera et al., 2016; Gusa, 2010). This will perpetuate racial arrested development among White student leaders and negatively impact racial campus climate (Cabrera et al., 2016).

METHODS

This was a phenomenological qualitative study that followed the research design of similar previous studies (Cabrera, 2012; 2016; Foste, 2019, 2020; Sasso et al., 2022). We specifically selected descriptive phenomenology because it centers participant experiences and voice, allowing the researchers to understand how these perceptions and experiences related to the phenomenon (Giorgi, 2009). Giorgi (2009) suggested that this approach places emphasis on the words expressed by the participants and not their own interpretations. In this study, the enlightenment narrative (Foste, 2020a) was the phenomenon, with the primary research question: In what ways do White undergraduate student leaders persist the enlightenment narrative on campus to engage in inclusion performativity as unconscious behaviors of Whiteness?

Participants

A snowball sampling method was used to recruit initial participants through social media to construct a homogenous sample of White student leaders (n=18) from seven different institutions(Jones et al., 2014). No gatekeepers were used to reduce sampling bias, and initial participants identified others to ensure authenticity (Jones et al., 2014; Patton, 2015). As a phenomenological study, participants must have experience with the phenomenon of student leadership, but did not need prior experiences with race, class, or other social identities. For the purposes of this study, all participants had to identify as White with active membership in a campus-recognized student organization or engagement program and must be between the ages of 19-23. All participants were given individual pseudonyms to protect confidentiality, but were free to select their own multiple identities (see Table 1). Institutional types are included to demonstrate the snowball sampling, but are not included as a unit of analysis in this study.

Table 1. *Participant Demographic Summary*

Participant	Academic Level	Major	Gender	Leadership Position	Institution
Carl	Freshman	Psychology	Male	Fraternity Vice President	Large State Flagship
Ashleigh	Freshman	Business	Female	Student Government Association President	Liberal Arts
Lacey	Junior	Engineering	Female	Sorority President	Large State Flagship
Bryan	Senior	Business	Male	Resident Assistant	Residential Liberal Arts
Jackson	Sophomore	Social Work	Male	Freshman Orientation Leader	Large State Flagship
Ryder	Senior	Human Services	Non–Binary	Peer Health Educator	Liberal Arts
Chadwick	Freshman	Leadership	Male	Fraternity Council President	Engineering/Technology
Brian	Sophomore	Business	Male	Resident Assistant	Liberal Arts
Hollie	Sophomore	Gender Studies	Female	Freshman Orientation Leader	Engineering/Technology
Amanda	Junior	Sociology	Female	Student Government Association Secretary	Large State Flagship
Emilee	Sophomore	Engineering	Female	Freshman Orientation Leader	Rural Regional Comprehensive
Augustus	Junior	Theater	Non–Binary	Sorority Vice President	Rural Regional Comprehensive
Samantha	Freshman	Music	Female	Resident Assistant	Urban Regional Comprehensive
Brittany	Sophomore	Psychology	Female	Marching Band Leader	Engineering/Technology
Grayson	Senior	Accounting	Male	Intramurals Coordinator	Private Faith–Based
Amie	Junior	Forestry	Female	Service Sorority President	Engineering/Technology
Reagan	Sophomore	Education	Female	Student Government Association Vice President	Private Faith–Based
Camila	Senior	Education	Female	Service Organization President	Urban Regional Comprehensive

Positionality

Foste (2020b) suggested a process of reflexivity when engaging in research examining systems of Whiteness. Therefore, the primary researcher engaged in a process of considering their own positionalities to avoid complicity and avoid cultivating White comfort, as suggested by Foste (2020b). The authors recognize their intersecting identities hold power in the broader society, and it is our responsibility to use them in the advocacy of social justice. The researchers are male-identified and cisgender across different intersectional identities, which include Latino and White. As systems of oppression constantly reinforce dehumanizing patterns of behavior (Leonardo, 2009), we acknowledge our respective positionalities limit our perspectives and require us to continually examine and reconstruct new ways of being that promote healing and liberation.

Data Collection

Data collection methods used included 60 to 120-minute interviews using a semi-structured interview guide and a demographic questionnaire completed by participants (available upon request). The interview guide was developed by the primary researcher and validated by subject-matter experts. Questions asked participants about their experiences with involvement, campus inclusion, and Students of Color. Interviews continued until a point of saturation (Jones et al., 2014). All participants were interviewed on campus in predetermined safe spaces that included on-campus housing or the student union. All interview transcripts were professionally transcribed to prepare for data analysis.

Data Analysis

Using descriptive phenomenology, data was interpreted through the interpretive relativist ontology paradigm, which assumes researchers cannot separate from previous and existing knowledge (Angen, 2000). Researchers' positionalities were present in all phases of the research process. Relativist ontology holds that reality as we know it is subjectively constructed through socially and experientially developed understandings and meanings (Angen, 2000). The researchers used theoretical assumptions of systemic racism to not dismiss lived experiences of participants and to recognize that privileges of Whiteness are frequently invisible to the beneficiaries of the system because of the racist and sexist context of these data (Cabrera, 2015; 2016; Foste, 2020).

The researchers followed Moustakas' (1999) guidelines for conducting phenomenological research to analyze the data. The first phase *epoche* located previous assumptions about White student leaders through reflexive journaling (Ortlipp, 2008). The second phase, *horizons of experience,* developed a list of initial open codes (Moustakas, 1994). Open codes were developed through textural and structural descriptions. Textural descriptions were specific language from the participants to show how they were discussing the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Structural descriptions were based on researcher interpretations of the participants' language.

The researchers utilized axial coding to group open codes into more abstract and complex categories (Saldaña, 2021). Finally, *imaginative variation* (Moustakas, 1994) was implemented to narrow the ways participants demonstrated the enlightenment narrative, and selective coding was applied (Jones et al., 2014; Saldana, 2021). Final themes were organized using code mapping validated by an external auditor as part of trustworthiness strategies (Saldana, 2021).

Trustworthiness

The researchers addressed the standards of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability to facilitate trustworthiness (Jones et al., 2014). Credibility was met through member checking. The researchers incorporated Foste's (2020b) guidance on intentional member checking so as to not amplify participants' potential binary understandings of racism but as a means of "chipping away at the white racial ignorance" (p. 13). The researchers followed the tenets of descriptive phenomenology by providing a transcript of their interviews and a preliminary thematic analysis (Giorgi, 2009). Participants did not ask for changes or disagree with the data analysis.

Transferability was met by providing long and rich quotes for readers to interpret and reflect on their own interactions with White student leaders. Dependability was met by keeping an audit log of research activities and documents (Jones et al., 2014). Confirmability was used by keeping a reflexive journal and using an external auditor who validated the themes. The external auditor, a student affairs/higher education researcher, examined the veracity of the themes, where the researchers accepted necessary feedback to ensure participant voices were sacrosanct.

FINDINGS

Saying the Right Thing

Through interviews with White student leaders, themes regarding saying the right thing and doing the white thing were salient. Within saying the right thing, several sub-themes were noted, including "we are diverse here, let me tell you how" and "I'm not a racist, I'm a nonracist and I can prove it." There was a tendency for the participants to prove their claims through internal checklists and always to center themselves in being able to say what they believe is the right thing.

We Are Diverse Here, Let Me Tell You How. Participants insistently named diversity as a value on their campus by highlighting different programs and initiatives. They suggested that because their campus had people of diverse racial backgrounds or preoccupied with inclusion, their institution could not be racist. When asked about their institution's large policy or systemic efforts, many could only point to smaller programming: e.g., identity awareness months, food festivals, or student diversity trainings. Some identified policies within their student organization: e.g., non-discrimination clauses, open membership, and new diversity/inclusion leadership po-

sitions. Lacey added: "My panhellenic sorority has a recruitment and diversity chair for our NPC [National Panhellenic Council] now. We are making such progress to better get with the times."

Participants romanticized the idea of studying at an institution with a diverse learning environment. Amanda believed that other White students who were oblivious to the number of Students of Color were racist. Yet, her own racist stereotypes revealed her level of awareness. Amanda suggested:

> My campus has a ton of minority students. I see it in the general ed classes and when I walk around campus. I don't know how you can't notice it. You have to be racist to ignore it. They are loud and everywhere on campus in the residence halls and in the dining halls too.

Participants also posited that their campus was one of the "good ones" because they perceived it as being racially diverse and, therefore, they could not be racist. However, all the participants described ways in which Students of Color have "their own" spaces on campus, such as student organizations. Chadwick painted his racially harmonious campus life:

> I do not think my college has a real race issue. We all just kind of get along all the time. I do not hear a lot of racist stuff like the N-word or whatever. Black and Latino students are really represented in catalogs, tour guides, and as student leaders. We have a lot of Black Greek orgs too. We have a lot of cultural orgs and a multicultural office just for them.

Their acknowledgment and recognition of racial diversity were enough for them to consider their campus was collectively not racist. Participants acknowledged that there were larger racial justice movements beyond the campus, but felt incongruence in relation to their campus experience. Lacey noted that Black Lives Matter Movement and other campus protests made her very uncomfortable. She shared that she posted on social media asking Friends of Color if they needed support, and could not understand why they were annoyed with her. Amie also discussed her experience with Black Lives Matter issues:

> I feel like campus changed after BLM and it got so cheugy [gross] and cringy, like you could feel the tensions between White students and our Black students. But I participated in sustained dialogue groups, and I kind of better understand from them some things I may have done or said in the past. But, like, I think the diversity on our campus is huge and taught us all something about us.

She and others believed they benefited from learning about diversity through these issues, which made them better people. This maintained their positive sentiments about racial campus climate. When challenged further, participants were defensive about maintaining a white savior identity.

I'm Not Racist, I'm Nonracist, I Can Prove It. Participants did not want to be labeled as a racist, seen as displaying racist behavior, or socially connected to explicitly racist people. They felt able to process their behaviors of Whiteness and justify their claims through various efforts of correct or corrected behavior by others. Brittany, a marching band leader, added that "I don't associate with White trash and some others like in my band who voted for Trump. I try not to talk politics with them or ignore them cause they are total cringe and racist."
Many would tabulate their friendships or relationships with Students of Color as justification for not being racist. As an example, Brian stated, "I do not think I am racist. I have dated other women of other cultures, like Asian women, and my roommate is part Black."

Beyond not being labeled racist, many participants wanted to be identified as nonracist. Many felt they could achieve this through a sort of an equation by attending diversity-focused programming. If they simply added up enough programs, they would reach a nonracist label. Samantha highlighted this diversity equation:

> We have a halal oven in the main dining hall, we offer Safe Zone training, and all of the RA's have mandatory diversity training. I did tunnel of oppression and some privilege walks. We really have made progress for inclusion here, I feel.

Other participants believed associating with certain student organizations would equate them as nonracist. Affiliated participants often discussed Black or Latinx members in their sororities or fraternities. They noted how their organizations held non-discrimination clauses, open membership, and new diversity/inclusion leadership

positions. Many participants described similar efforts in their organizations that would earn them the label of nonracist. These include committee work, facilitating training, or inviting Students of Color into their organizations. Reagan, involved in student government, stated:

> I sat on a committee as a student for our college diversity statement and for our inclusive residence life guidelines. They are so powerful and make me feel that I am helping and saving our students from racism that comes from off campus.

The participants sought positions that made them appear to support campus diversity efforts. Participants felt confident about being able to identify racism in their peers. They cited examples of when other White friends would actively exclude Students of Color, use racist language, or have political opinions about race. Yet, beyond the identification and saying they understood racism, there was limited proof of action to stop racism. When asked how they intervened with racist behavior among their friends, many felt stymied. They were uncertain about how to change their White friends' behaviors and thoughts. Most could not recall instances of interventions with their friends, believing they had just avoided the issue. Rather they believed they just avoided those conversations with them instead. The deeper push for further understanding of participants' rhetoric and interrogation of their saying of the right thing led to greater defensiveness. This began revealing how their actions continued to uphold Whiteness.

Doing the White Thing

Further inquiry revealed participants' actions were in conflict with their nonracist rhetoric. This was notable in two key ways. First, participants revealed they were engaging in diversity training as a form of compliance rather than with a growth mindset. Sentiments of these training sessions ranged from confusion to animosity. Second, participants positioned themselves as the good White in a "white knight" savior complex by infantilizing Students of Color and minimizing campus racism. They recentered themselves when questioned about racist incidents on campus by dismissing their ponderosity while holding animosity towards Students of Color's concerns.

Diversity Programming as Compliance. Participants had contentious relationships with diversity training and inclusion initiatives. There was little concern about the challenges Students of Color might be encountering, which was a paradox because participants wanted to demonstrate how diverse their relationships were and for others to notice their proximity to them. They became frustrated when their presence or efforts were not publicly glorified. Camila noted, "I am a campus leader, so I can use my white privilege to help Black students. I marched in the BLM campus protests this year, and everyone got annoyed with me because I was up front."

When discussing programs that dealt with diversity and inclusion, all participants suggested participating in such programs made them feel guilty or awful about themselves. Many felt that participation was a necessary compliance process rather than an opportunity for their own growth. Other participants feared not complying. Grayson suggested, "Look, I am a white dude and will get canceled, and I also just want to do the right thing." Still, others felt far more animosity about the programming in place. Emilee shared:

> All these diversity programs and speakers tell me to check my privilege. They call me a white supremacist and discuss all this jargon about intersectionality. I feel it's all bullshit when they get stuff because of the color of their skin, like scholarships or their own student center.

While some changed their perspectives through this programming, changes were limited to such instances as a student organization constitution or bylaws. Participants shared they struggled to integrate their learning about inclusion into their internal equation to reach a nonracist label. Even when looking at individual accountability, participants could identify racism in their peers but not their own complicity in a larger system of Whiteness on their campus. In fact, some participants suggested diversity training helped them see how they, as White students, have been marginalized and what had been dispossessed from them as student leaders. They centered their own efforts as a means to make "real change" when other students got in the way. Ashleigh added:

> I get kind of pissed off when other students tell me our campus does not do enough to help minority students. Our campus is so much better than the other [campus removed], where they have Nazi symbols and confederate flags in the dorms.

Participants generally felt a growing dispossession of influence and were confused about what role they were supposed to serve on their campus. Augustus shared this perspective:

> There are these campus activists who just get in the fucking way all the damn time. They just bitch, and it feels like "oppression Olympics." Most of these supposedly 'woke folk' are just rich hippie snobs with white guilt. Like, remember that you are white and taking up space from people who can actually do something like me.

Participants frequently positioned themselves in comparison to others regarding the good versus bad white polemic. Participants shared that they were tired of focusing so much of their efforts on diversity and inclusion. They offered post-racial and color-evasive perspectives to suggest a potential return to a perceived normalcy where race is not a consideration. This sentiment revealed several cases of invalidating the experiences and leadership experiences of Students of Color.

Invalidating Efforts of Student Leaders of Color. With confusion and frustration directed at diversity programming, similar feelings were directed toward Students of Color on campus. While participants were careful to indicate that they were friends with Students of Color, many felt those friends received more of these benefits than they did as White students. Ryder described their frustration:

> I am confused why I am still a poor white person from a hick town, and I don't get shit, when I have Black friends and they get so much much more than me, like their own sororities and college programs.

The participants believed that student Leaders of Color received benefits such as targeted programs and support offices. The participants discussed how these changes on campus benefited these Students of Color, but then negatively impacted them. The participants deflected any critical assessment of these views, and many named these circumstances as a form of reverse discrimination. Chadwick also stated again:

> I am tired of all this politically correct bullshit. How can we be racist when we gave all of our benefits away to other minorities? I get less financial aid, and everyone thinks I am a bad guy now as a white male. I mean if anything, Black students and other minorities are racist against me. It's reverse discrimination.

Many of the students used color-blind or post-racial logics again in their description of campus diversity and inclusion policies to question their validity. None of the participants discussed meritocracy or a "hard work ethic" in which Students of Color must earn their benefits.

Participants understood concepts of affirmative action and similar policies, often through diversity training. They generally approved of these policies but thought they were not relevant to their own contexts because they believed their generation had overcome the need to apply these policies. The reasons for this varied. Jackson used multiraciality as a post-racial logic and reason for hope:

> Look at all the mixed students and adopted ones with different parents on campus now. They are the future. I mean feel like BLM [Black Lives Matter] had it wrong when we are seeing this progress.

Participants spoke of the importance of supporting Students of Color and often felt they should use what Carl stated as "what they already gave them," referring to student centers and White student leaders' presence as allies. While perhaps feeling they were supportive, these White student leaders revealed ways they had, consciously or not, undermined the efforts of Students of Color.

DISCUSSION

White student leaders in this study followed a post-racial logic of "you do what you gotta do" (Lee, 1989) to justify the ways in which they perpetuated white supremacy in innocuous ways. They positioned themselves as "good whites" at their institutions which they purport to welcome and support diversity. In *Do The Right Thing,* Sal is friendly for the benefit of his business, despite his derogatory remarks about the Black neighborhood (Cooper, 2010; Manley, 2010). Similarly, participants in this study made frontstage performance by *saying the right thing* celebrating diversity and inclusion with private performances of backstage racism by undercutting and demeaning campus diversity efforts by *doing the white thing.*

In *saying the right thing,* students were unaware of the incongruence between their backstage and frontstage performances. They learned only through White privilege pedagogy which contextualized racism as individual behavior centered on speech and rhetoric rather than conceptualizing how white supremacy interlocks oppressions through laws, policies, and cultural practices (Cabrera, 2012; 2018; Cabrera & Corces-Zimmerman, 2017). Rather, this approach allows students to "check off boxes" of marginalization to assume a class minority identity which facilitates punitive, self-righteous orientations toward other white students or other student Leaders of Color (Ashlee et al., 2020; Foste, 2020; Sasso et al., 2022). Thus, these students feel pressure to prove they are antiracist allies, i.e., "doing the right thing" (Foste, 2019, 2020b; Sasso et al., 2022).

By also *doing the right thing,* participants did not see their white racial consciousness as a continual process of self-work (Ashlee et al., 2020). To these student leaders, social justice and inclusion were achievable endpoints, and their inclusion performativity perpetuated an enlightenment narrative (Foste, 2019, 2020b). White student leaders perpetuated racial harmony narratives because they felt institutional diversity programming and racial representation absolved them from being racist and identified them as "good whites."

In *doing the white thing,* students felt guilty about their own Whiteness and infantilized by diversity training. They learned white privilege pedagogy, developed by McIntosh (1988), through exercises such as the invisible knapsack. The intention is for students to become aware of their individual privileges. However, these sorts of curricula do contextualize how a larger system of Whiteness may contribute to the continued proliferation of white supremacy in higher education (Ashlee et al., 2020). White privilege pedagogy does not provide students the opportunity to engage in a critical examination of Whiteness in which students have limited opportunity for conversations about race and racism (Cabrera & Corces-Zimmerman, 2017). Its programmatic efficaciousness has been rooted in allowing students to engage in a critical examination of their racial identities (Lensmire et al., 2013; Levine-Rasky, 2000).

Limitations

The transferability limitations of this study included boundaries of this study to other white student leaders. There were demand characteristics presented by the researchers who have professional *a priori* knowledge about student involvement, but not with the individual lived experiences of the participants. This depth of understanding may have influenced the full disclosure of information by participants and influenced participants to engage in frontstage performances with interviewers. This study also did not account for the individual differences in the purpose and meaning of the racialized narratives and perspectives. Despite these limitations, the researchers anticipate the data collected can provide insight into White student leaders' use of enlightenment narrative. The researchers also recognize that this research may perpetuate a continued focus on Whiteness and the importance of voice for historically marginalized communities (Foste, 2020b). Future research should explore their perceptions and experiences with the enlightenment narrative.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

This study has significant implications for practice for student involvement professionals. These implications are framed through Adaptive Leadership theory which identifies how humans lead by adapting through changes in the systems in which we live and thrive (Heifetz et al., 2009). In this framework, there are *technical* and *adaptive* approaches to challenges.

Avoid Technical Approaches

Technical approaches rely on current knowledge and provide solutions to problems in ways already understood. For example, certain surgeries which were once groundbreaking adaptive approaches are now considered technical because doctors understand how to implement the solution (Heifetz et al., 2009). The idea of a check-box approach, as participants understood diversity programming, highlights students' technical mindsets. White privilege pedagogy, once an adaptive change in language and rhetoric pedagogy, may now be a technical act that avoids deeper behavioral change.

Student involvement professionals should be mindful of relying on forms of white privilege pedagogy. These may create changes in White students' language, but the approach entices White student leaders to claim marginality and which they use to absolve them from being racist (Ashlee et al., 2020). Events that use this pedagogy typically include one-time events (e.g., "privilege walks," "tunnel of oppression") in which White students learn at the expense of working-class students or Students of Color or which they use to check a box of "understanding" (Ashlee et al., 2020). Additionally, technical approaches can act as means of lowering tension when faced with making real change (Heifetz et al., 2009), which potentially perpetuates white comfort over directly addressing racism (Abioye & Sasso, 2023; Applebaum, 2010; Sasso et al., 2022).

Use Adaptive Approaches

Adaptive approaches to challenges require new learning and experimentation through diverse perspectives and necessary time. Along with this, Heifetz et al. (2009) described that "resistance to change stems from the fear of losing something important" (p. 96). Professionals must consider how much ambiguity, disequilibrium, and potential loss will be allowed by an individual or organization to enact change (Heifetz et al., 2009). Participants in this study would be more likely to engage in a technical response, given their dispossession sentiments. However, White student leaders should be encouraged to question their own experiences and how they may be perpetuating an enlightenment narrative.

White student leaders have likely not engaged in an adaptive process of facing this question for themselves. As Cabrera (2012) suggested, "working through whiteness is not an end met, but a continual process engaged" (p. 397), there need to be increased and continuous opportunities for White student leaders to further understand their positionality within Whiteness beyond simply their privileges (Abioye & Sasso, 2023). Thus, programs can use adaptive leadership concepts of observation, interpretation, and intervention (Heifetz et al., 2009) to constantly assess evolving Whiteness (Cabrera, 2012; Leonardo, 2009).

In doing this, student involvement professionals must construct the holding environments for White students so they may confront their own Whiteness (Abioye & Sasso, 2023). For some, this will be reckoning with their own self-conceptualization of being a "good white" and perpetuating "doing the white thing." For other white student leaders, there is the potential for real harm (social, emotional, and possibly physical) from other white peers and family if they take up an antiracist approach (Thandeka, 1999). This work may potentially make White students feel threatened by their own self conceptualizations, as previous iterations of diversity and inclusion programming made them feel excluded (Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000; Cabrera, 2014a; 2014b; 2014c).

Student involvement professionals should be mindful in their approach. Comprehensive leadership programs should include socially responsible or culturally inclusive leadership development models to foster intercultural understanding and humanize the experiences across identities (Dugan & Komives, 2010; Morgan et al., 2015; Zimmerman et al., 2018). While helping White student leaders consider diversity and inclusion programming as a continuously evolving professional sensibility, student involvement professionals should not let such work turn into white confessionals of admitting racism to gain validation and affirmation (Foste & Whitehead, 2022).

The Role of Student Involvement Professionals

To some extent, student involvement professionals have succeeded in overcoming the adaptive challenge of how white student leaders talk about race and diversity through white privilege pedagogy (Abioye & Sasso, 2023; Ashlee et al., 20202). While public language, i.e., "saying the right thing" has shifted, changing racist actions, i.e., "doing the white thing," is a continuing adaptive challenge for White student leaders. However, student involvement professionals must also consider and acknowledge the potential losses they face, within their departments, in taking on adaptive leadership work.

With all change, there is an element of loss (Heifetz et al., 2009). The potential loss of racist perspectives is a welcome outcome of this work. However, student involvement professionals should consider that more obvious losses may include professional capital, time to devise and execute intervention, or even student partici-

pation. These potential pitfalls have a greater risk for those professionals from marginalized identities (Boat-wright-Hororwitz, 2013).

Additionally, potential losses may not be immediately perceived by student involvement professionals. Engaging in work that challenges a campus image as not being racially harmonious may challenge other higher education professionals' sense of their professional identity, causing a sense of loss of competency. This may cause resistance from unlikely spaces within an institution (Boatwright-Hororwitz, 2013). Student involvement professionals should be ready to acknowledge these losses, whether real or imagined, to build political buy-in from various campus stakeholders.

CONCLUSION

White student leaders of this study were conscious of their frontstage performance in "saying the right thing" but were defensive when confronted with their actions of "doing the white thing." In *Do the Right Thing,* Sal upheld an enlightenment narrative feeling no one should dispossess him of his business in the neighborhood. Much like Sal, white students feared displacement from campus equity and diversity programs. Since many student involvement professionals are White, it is important to support them in unpacking and questioning their own experiences. This will aid in ending problematic practices such as white privilege pedagogy which reinforces the enlightenment narrative, dispossession, and backstage racism. Future research should consider the limitations of this research study and explore adaptive leadership practices that demonstrate promise in increasing White racial consciousness in undergraduate student leaders.

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