Centrality and Circumstance: Influence of Multidimensional Racial Identity on African American Student Organization Involvement

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Abstract

In order to explore the social realities and centrality of race for African American students at a predominantly white institution, this inquiry applied case study methodology to the multidimensional model of racial identity (MMRI). Rather than following quantitative methodology which operationalizes racial identity through surveys, the study utilized in-depth interviews to capture students' racial realities. Directly utilizing survey items from the multidimensional inventory of black identity (MIBI) in the interview protocol, this methodology allowed participants to be reflective of the influence of the institutional environment. Findings revealed insight regarding how African American students exhibit their understandings of race through involvement in student organizations. Challenges to overcoming stereotypes and barriers to black group connectivity gave evidence to the need for a heterogeneous approach to the involvement and identity development of African American students.

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Introduction

Studies on college student development are built on foundational theories which illuminate the social integration of various student groups (Fisher, 2007; McEwen, 2005). While the most widely used theories provide cognitive understanding of student development, it is important to consider the basis for each theory. Not only did many frequently cited theorists in developmental literature base their studies on predominantly white males, they also constructed theories from their own worldview and perspective. Few of these theorists considered the role of race in creating the theory (Patton, McEwen, Redon, & Howard-Hamilton, 2007). Current researchers must therefore determine how applicable theories are to specific subgroups. Deconstructing theory allows scholars to approach knowledge as socially constructed and to identify sources of power and oppression which affect students of color (McEwen, 2005). Furthermore, "constructs such as race or sexual orientation have meaning only when they are viewed or considered within social, political, and historical contexts" (p. 18). Scholars have the ability to not only deconstruct previous theories, but also consider alternate methodological approaches which systematically approach race and critical perspectives of socially constructed concepts. The evolution of inquiry has allowed scholars to use constructivist approaches which acknowledge the reflexive process involved in research (Bonilla-Silva & Zuberi, 2008; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Renn, 2004) in order to capture individuals' lived experiences based on their socially constructed realities.

Objectives and Purpose of the Study

Since the integration of colleges and universities throughout the nation, extensive research has been done on racism and adverse campus climates for black students at predominantly white institutions (PWIs) (Cooper, 1997; Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin, 2002; Gusa, 2010; Parker & Flowers, 2003). Race has been accepted in the social sciences as a socially constructed concept (James, 2008; Renn, 2004), and the theory of racial identity entails a sense of collective identity or psychological attachment based on a perceived common heritage or history (Harper & Quaye, 2007; Sanders Thompson, 2001). While previous research has linked racial identity and student involvement to show the important role that race plays in development (Cross, 1991; Parker & Flowers, 2003; Taylor & Howard-Hamilton, 1995), the study of the interaction of racial identity and African American social integration is problematic for several reasons. First, the majority of racial identity development studies have been conceptually theorized as a movement through stages (Cross, 1991; Helms & Cook, 2005); stage-like models which place individuals within categories fail to capture the full extent of race

as fluid and situational. Moreover, the majority of racial identity models, even new theories which acknowledge the complexity of race, (Cross, 1991; Cross & Fhagen-Smith, 2005), are still operationalized through quantitative methodology (McEwen, Roper, Bryant, & Langa, 2005).

African American students seek affiliation in racially-based organizations when existing campus groups fail to reflect their cultural interests; they correspondingly participate in traditional, mainstream organizations to address the inadequate representation of African American students in those groups (Harper & Quaye; 2007; Museus, 2008). Because they hold multiple memberships in various groups, African American students constantly interpret the salience of race based on the cultural context (Sanders Thompson, 2001). Examples of racially salient involvement experiences include leaders' feelings of separation from others in their racial group, conflict in predominantly white organizations in taking on the role of racial spokesperson, and a sense of responsibility to their racial group for becoming involved on campus (Arminio, Carter, Jones, Kruger, Lucas, Washington, Young, & Scott, 2000). Renn and Ozaki (2010) affirm that literature is still needed which provides greater understanding of the reasons students choose to be involved in various groups as related to their identity development. The purpose of this study is to explore the connection between the organizational involvement of African American students at a PWI and their racial identity development. The study utilizes the multidimensional model of racial identity (MMRI), which acknowledges stable and situational components of race (Shelton & Sellers, 2000) but is operationalized through the multidimensional inventory of black identity (MIBI). Because research is dominated by paradigms and methodologies which fail to explore the racial realities of individuals (Feagin, 2013; Harper, 2012), this research employs case study methodology to explore how black students' beliefs about race reveal their choices in student organization involvement. The terms African American and black are used interchangeably.[1]

Conceptual Framework

Stage models specifically created for the study of African American racial identity imply a progression towards a healthy mental state that must be achieved (Sellers, Shelton, Cooke, Chavous, Rowley, & Smith, 1998); however, recent racial identity models have evolved to account for the variance of racial values within black group membership (Sanders Thompson,

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[1] Interchangeable use of black and African American terminology does not imply inclusiveness of various black nationalities (i.e., Dominican, African, Jamaican). The theoretical framework encompasses a focus on the unique experiences of oppression associated with African American identity in the United States. Therefore, black refers to the socially constructed self-identification of this group, based on the sociohistorical and political context of African Americans in this country.

1995).   Using an integrated framework, the multidimensional model of racial identity (MMRI) describes the complexity of race for African Americans and seeks to capture qualitative meanings of group membership to predict behavior (Sellers et al., 1998). The MMRI theorizes racial identity through a phenomenological lens as stable, but also situationally influenced. Furthermore, the MMRI assumes that individuals hold various identities which are hierarchically ordered, with the MMRI more concerned with the status of racial identity at a particular period or point in time rather than development through stages (Sellers, Shelton, Rowley, & Chavous, 1998).

Four dimensions make up the MMRI: racial salience, racial centrality, racial regard, and racial ideology. Racial salience involves the situational aspects of racial identity centered on contextual cues in a particular moment in time which individuals interpret (Sellers et al., 1998). Racial centrality is considered to be stable across situations and recognizes the hierarchical ranking of the identities within a person's core self-concept (Rowley, Sellers, Chavous, & Smith, 1998). The evaluative judgments individuals place on their race refer to racial regard, ranging from positive to negative dispositions. Private regard refers to personal feelings of membership in the black race, while public regard relays an individual's perceptions on how others collectively view African Americans (Sellers et al., 1998). The final dimension, racial ideology, represents attitudes concerning African Americans' interactions with others in society and includes four philosophies: nationalist, oppressed minority, assimilationist, and humanist (Shelton & Sellers, 2000). The MMRI conceptualizes racial identity as a process through which situational cues interact with stable dimensions to determine the extent to which one feels race is salient during a specific event and responds accordingly (Sellers et al., 1998).

In order to operationalize the MMRI, Sellers, Rowley, Chavous, Shelton, and Smith (1997) developed the multidimensional inventory of black identity (MIBI) to measure racial centrality, regard, and ideology. Consisting of 56 Likert scale items, it was created to capture a more complex view of African American racial identity (Sellers et al., 1998). Because racial salience is considered situational and sensitive to context cues, it cannot be operationalized using the MIBI and has been suggested to be measured through experimental and quasi-experimental methods (Shelton & Sellers, 2000). While the MIBI shows distinction from previous developmental models, it is still operationalized through a quantitative lens. Therefore, the qualitative lens of this study allowed local context and description to give meaning to the MMRI. A paradigmatic shift to racial identity studies is critical, in that studies often make assumptions that black students at PWIs are homogeneous, with little research focusing on

differences within group (Chavous, 2000). Recent studies have called for a heterogeneous group model approach to challenge monolithic stereotypes of African Americans; this conceptual approach allows not only the study of outgroup stereotypes but also ingroup variability and multiple perspectives (Celious & Oyserman, 2001; Harper & Nichols, 2008). Qualitative methods therefore were used in this study to provide description to MMRI constructs to study racial identity for students at a PWI; these methods connected the heterogeneous group approach to racial identity to explore the multitude of experiences among black students.

Methodology

Data Sources

Site and Sampling

Unity University is a research intensive institution located in the southern region of the country, which is of particular importance in that monolithic student bodies and campus cultures based on dominant group norms still affect many PWIs today. This PWI was chosen as a single site case study in order to study race within a bounded system and examination of a social group (Merriam, 1988), due to its highly homogeneous and conservative reputation. In order to protect the anonymity of participants, specific details regarding the university's racial demographics are not outlined in this report. However, the percentage of African American students is represented by single digits; this factor of low African American enrollment made it all the more critical to protect the anonymity of participants. To contextualize the campus culture, student activities at Unity are closely tied to campus traditions, with student involvement being essential to the majority of the student population. In addition to general student programs, there is also a multicultural center which houses ethnic and racially-based student programs. Black organizational membership reflects the common practice that the majority of African American students fulfill involvement through multicultural programs or National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC) fraternities and sororities.

Participants

Six participants were chosen for this study using a purposive sampling approach (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1988). Because qualitative methods focus on in-depth study and contextual transferability rather than generalizations (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), a small sample size was intended to maximize experiential knowledge and explore variance in the black student community. Recruitment was aimed at including three students involved in racially-

based organizations (i.e., NPHC sororities and fraternities or black student associations) and three students in mainstream or traditional organizations (i.e., student government and campus orientation programs) (see Table 1). The rationale for methodologically structuring the sample in this way was built on previous research which connected student involvement with racial identity and explored major patterns of black organizational affiliation (Cross, 1991; Museus, 2008). For the particular PWI setting, mainstream organizations are tied to university traditions and are more likely to reveal white institutional norms. Bonder was the term utilized in the study to describe all individuals within the student body at Unity University. Using the context of institutions in the Midwest such as the Indiana Hoosiers and Wisconsin Badgers, the term Unity Bonders was meant to reflect the strong university bond and sense of pride held by students within the community. [2]

Study participation required that students self-identified in at least one socially constructed racial category as African American. While this study is founded on the premise that racial categorization can be problematic, the MMRI is based on the uniquely situated experiences of African Americans (Sellers et al., 1998). All students within the study were upperclassmen, as freshman and sophomore perspectives might reflect developmental issues related to adjustments to the college environment. Referrals of prospective participants were requested from student affairs professionals who held advisory roles for various student organizations. The nomination process shed valuable light on the culture of black student participation in mainstream organizations. Several advisors expressed interest in the findings, as they felt the study would provide valuable knowledge of the challenges they faced in encouraging greater African American student engagement in mainstream organizations.

Positionality

As a researcher, I am invested in affirming the importance of critical theories that acknowledge the permanence of racism in our nation's institutions (Morfin, Perez, Parker, Lynn, & Arrona, 2006). Feagin (2013) highlights the "myth of racism" and analyzes scholar's unwillingness to explore racial realities, particularly in their conformity to the dominant paradigmatic "box." This study challenged the dominant frame of research with an epistemological stance which allowed for a critical approach to racial identity. Moreover, this study intended to utilize experiential knowledge so that African American students in the PWI

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[2] The titles of organizations as well as discussions referring to black or white utilize lowercase lettering in order to reflect the social construction of race rather than the ideal of racial categories as fixed and biological.

context could name their own reality, a methodological tool challenged by the dominant perspective in scientific inquiry (Delgado Bernal, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 1998). Due to my experience within several intuitional types as an African American educator, learner, student leader, and scholar, I was able to connect with participants regarding the racialized experiences which influenced their core identities. Additionally, the role of reflexivity as a black researcher was highly salient, as I kept in mind that centering a study on racial centrality has the ability to create centrality where it does not exist. Therefore my reflexivity involved constant cognizance of the role of the researcher as the instrument (Stewart, 2010) in order to represent participants' genuine voices.

Data Collection

This study was conducted using single-site, instrumental case study methodology (Merriam, 1988; Stake, 1995). A multi-method qualitative approach was followed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In order to create triangulation for the study which would reflect rigor and complexity (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000), multiple forms of data collection were used, including interviews, reflective journals, and fieldwork observations. Because the MIBI survey includes a total of 56 items to operationalize the centrality, ideology, and regard dimensions of the MMRI, the items were divided between four interviews for each participant in order to maximize time for reflexivity. With a total of 24 interviews, each interview on average lasted 90 minutes. Constructs were taken directly from the MIBI to be used as a framework for the interview protocol (see Appendix A). The aim was not to treat original constructs as a priori categories, but to use the MMRI as structure for a qualitative study in allowing students to provide unknown meaning to each survey item through in-depth discourse. The flexibility of semi-structured interviews allows exploration of additional topics beyond a study's original discussion points (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993); therefore, additional protocol items afforded students the opportunity to make connections between MMRI dimensions and the context of a predominantly white environment.

Observations were also employed to align the situational nature of racial salience more properly with the axioms of naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Each student was observed twice for a total of twelve participant observations, in organizational meetings as well as campus events to reveal how salient race was to them in particular campus spaces. In specific instances, students may have been the only black member of an organization or the only black representative in certain spaces, versus conditions in which the majority of

organizational members represented students of color or consisted entirely of African American students. The intent of observations was to determine how racial salience was reflected throughout their daily interactions.

Participants correspondingly kept a reflection journal in which they created entries throughout the length of the study. Reflective writings give additional information regarding individuals' lived experiences as well as add depth and confirmation of topics not fully elaborated during interview dialogue (Hays & Singh, 2012). Although the length and duration of entries remained fairly unstructured, students were prompted to journal between interviews to reflect on their constructed meanings of black identity and provide details of their lived experiences with race on campus to be discussed at subsequent interviews. Trustworthiness was built through a variety of qualitative methods, including persistent observation, peer debriefing, member checking, audit trail, and a reflexive journal which I kept to guide methodological decisions throughout the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Data collection lasted from spring 2013 to the beginning of fall 2013 to allow for prolonged engagement (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Due to the importance of perception in the MMRI framework, data collection and analysis involved multiple opportunities for member checking during which the participants were asked for input and feedback.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was an ongoing, interpretive process allowing for contextual narrowing of the study (Merriam, 1988). Interviews were transcribed by hand to ensure for continual engagement with the data and each transcript was unitized for content analysis. With the researcher creating units of data which are coded to identify major categories of discovery, content analysis is an analytical process which reduces descriptive words into categories with shared meanings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Coding for each round of interviews was conducted twice, once as a comprehensive analysis of all participants and then separately based on the two organizational types. Analysis was framed using the constant comparative method, a technique which entails an interactive process of creating and restructuring categories until emergent themes have been saturated (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Analysis incorporated interview transcripts, observation field notes, research memos, and participant reflection journals.

Limitations

This study has several limitations. The decision to only study the PWI context excluded variability based on institutional type. However, this methodological choice allowed for in-depth study within one specific context in order to add richness to the situational component of the MMRI. With the percentage of African American students still represented by single digits at this institution, data was intended to provide a rich description of challenges to diversity. Another limitation involved the study's variation from statistical findings linking subscales of the MMRI to student involvement. Previous MMRI studies have statistically shown relationships between subscales, such as a positive correlation between centrality, private regard, and the nationalist ideology subscale (Sellers et al., 1998). While this study did not produce numerical correlation, the in-depth qualitative approach provided evidence to create connections between MMRI dimensions. The study's design contrasted the generalizability and quantitative representation normally established through the MIBI; yet its constructivist approach allowed students to describe construct correlations and to engage in critical discourse on racialized challenges within the PWI context.

Findings

Within the larger study, a comprehensive picture of the MMRI was created based on the interaction between the four dimensions of the model. However, findings for this paper focus on the first interview as it encompasses the racial centrality dimension. In order to further understand how students conceptualized racial ideology, regard, and salience, the interview based on racial centrality first provided in-depth description of the density of race related to students' core identities which they used to make meaning of their social relationships. While initial connections between racial identity dimensions guide this paper, forthcoming works will directly discuss subsequent interview data for the remaining dimensions as well as the detailed relationship between MMRI dimensions. Participants were aware of the intent to critically approach survey items and gave thoughtful reflection on the complexity of their beliefs; these beliefs guided their black group membership and experiences in a predominantly white environment. Four major themes emerged from the data most related to student organization involvement: black self-image related to core identities, connectivity to group orientation, sense-making of stereotypical imaging in the PWI environment, and racial cognizance in social relationships. These themes describe how race was manifested in their organizational affiliations on campus, based on their racial identity development as outlined by the MMRI and reflective of the institutional environment through the incorporation of qualitative methodology (see Figure 1).

Racial Centrality

Black Self-Image Related to Core Identities

As Lincoln and Denzin (2005) attest, "Any gaze is always filtered through the lenses of language, gender, social class, race, and ethnicity. There are no objective observations, only observations socially situated in the worlds of- and between- the observer and the observed" (p.19). In order to get a better sense of the hierarchical identities which shape their worldview, participants were asked to articulate their top five descriptors in order of importance to their core identities (see Table 2).

Black group identity was among the top five social identities for all participants, even though situated differently for each individual. In the PWI environment, students were always aware of how black association interacted with their other identities and interpretation of experiences. The MMRI is theoretically founded on the notion that race differs in centrality for each individual, therefore situating personal identities as hierarchical. The necessary focus of the MMRI on race in studying the unique sociohistorical realities of African Americans does not necessarily allow for an explicitly stated intersectional approach to multidimensional identity as established in previous literature (Jones & McEwan, 2000; Stewart, 2009; Stewart, 2010). Despite the confined wording of MMRI constructs which could be viewed as problematic, a constructivist approach with the researcher as the instrument allowed an understanding of identity intersectionality to guide further probing and analysis of participants' experiences (Bowleg, 2008; Stewart, 2010). As minoritized individuals (Harper, 2012) in various spaces, they were empowered through multidimensionality to not only overcome the negative black image but to also see themselves as multifaceted black individuals.

A theme through discourse was how they countered imposed, deleterious black images through their incorporation of a positive black image in their core identities. As Greg articulated:

> I feel like being an African-American where I am in my life at Unity, it definitely lets me view myself differently, a sense of pride in what I've done. Everyone on this campus should be proud of themselves but me doing it as an African-American definitely makes me feel better. Knowing that this world and the system wasn't necessarily made for me.

Greg's statement is highly reflective of the interaction of group identities within which black identity acted as a self-regulating motivator. Black group membership was never expressed as in conflict with other identities but rather as an influence to move beyond a socially fabricated

black image. As Amira stated, "Being black definitely changes other people's perceptions which makes me reevaluate my perception of myself." This statement mirrored a cyclical process of reflection. While racial centrality is considered to be a stable component of identity, the sociological influences of the collegiate environment were reflected in their development. Angela expressed this process in relation to how her progression and consciousness of blackness was developed at Unity, stating, "Something that I say all the time is that I'm an evolution which is in itself a revolution. Because the most powerful thing about my transformation is that I don't think I ever lost myself... I gained so much." Her new experiences as a Bonder, feminist, and activist illustrate core identities as continuously added to and developing. Students expressed black identity not in unwavering isolation but as influenced by ongoing social development.

Connectivity to Group Orientation

Although students recognized a disconnect in terms of black students openly embracing heterogeneity related to black student engagement, they all felt that a community of black students existed in the larger scope of their minoritized status. Growing up, Dennis recognized a disconnect to black norms, the societal expectations of black identity which sought to define black activities and behaviors through a stigmatized lens. However, he received support from the black community during his campaign for Traditions Holder, noting that as such a small percentage at Unity, black students banded together in times of need. While students recognized the importance of comfort within the black community, some saw it as a hindrance to involvement in traditional organizations. Ron articulated questioning from black friends regarding his affiliations outside of the black community: "I told them about how it's important to push yourself and break the mold and go outside the scope." Ron and other students in traditional organizations let interests lead their affiliations, but they recognized that the majority of black students at Unity affiliated with organizations based on a group's racial makeup rather than common social interests. This is a finding unlike other studies of black heterogeneity (Harper & Nichols, 2008) based on a variety of institutional types. Given the context of a southern PWI and its black-white dichotomy, only a select group of black students ventured to participate in both organizational types.

While the sociological environment of college provided a primary stage for reflection, connectivity to the larger black group in society and sociocultural events were evident. Angela described how the concept of Ubuntu, an African term for humanity and connectedness, served

as a guiding force in her life. She struggled with the lack of black students freshman year and almost transferred to another university. However, she thrived once she connected through black student organizations and journaled about the resilience of her black Student Coalition staff in bringing connectedness to fruition. Several students expressed the complexity of black connectivity in that it carries with it negative connotations imposed by the dominant society. In response to the MIBI construct "My destiny is tied to the destiny of other black people" Amira replied, "I don't even want to be tied to my generation right now. I try to separate myself from that, but at the same time how can I help an image if I'm so far away from the problem?" As Bruce explained, he desired to bring along as many people as possible in his quest for success, yet he understood that many of his black counterparts were not willing to move beyond socially constructed racial boundaries to embrace new experiences. In this sense, participants acknowledged ease in connecting with black students with similar aspirations while being cognizant of stigmas that hindered the advancement of the collective black racial group to which they were tied.

Situational Cues

Sensemaking of Stereotypes in the PWI Environment

Students constantly referred to the negative stereotypes surrounding the socially constructed black image, such as societal value placed on rappers, black athletes, and damaging images in social media. Because of homogenous group assumptions created by other student groups, participants existed in constant awareness of stigmas placed upon them. As Greg expanded, "There've been situations where I've had to reevaluate what I would do, what I say just so I don't portray the stereotype that I'm sure they have." Several participants spoke of judgments they made in fighting discrimination, directly and indirectly, and when to avoid confrontation to avoid being labeled as the black representative in certain spaces. In contrast, Angela fueled by her biracial background illuminated the importance of intentional exchanges with her white counterparts:

> I'm not here to please, appease, or ease white people…But I'm okay with you looking at me and feeling like you understand a little bit more about black people. Not all black people because we're not the same, but they definitely see me and feel like I can talk to her about race if you approach me correctly.

The contrasting approaches which students elicited reflect the heterogeneity of black identity,

yet all students understood their roles as educators in challenging homogeneity and creating new meanings to the black image.

The title Bonder given to all students within the university community reflected a colorblind perspective of racial silencing. Black students at the university had to battle prejudices which were rarely discussed, whether it be with males assumed to be athletes or racism often concealed as jokes or small microaggressions across campus. While they demonstrated clear distinction between individual behaviors and systemic racism (Feagin, 2013), they understood how ignorance was easily perceived as racism. They referred to many Bonders as sheltered and close-minded, and as Dennis declared, "The scary thing is you have a lot of people at Unity that have not even interacted with black people, you have people from little podunk towns…their only perception of black people is what they see on TV." Participants contextualized the racism displayed by white students based on situational cues in various campus spaces. In his journal Ron recalled an incident in Student Government during which he proposed an amendment to a proposal and was ignored by the Chair. He questioned the intent by stating, "I'm not entirely sure if this is just his arrogant personality or inner racism." In that space, he was the only black representative in a room of 60 members; race was salient and led him to question the action as discriminatory.

Racial Cognizance in Social Relationships

The Bonder title immensely influenced students' social relationships, with the underlying notion in the campus culture that Bonder trumps everything. While participants embraced this membership, they still understood the probable denial of acceptance under other circumstances because of their race. This Bonder experience created a unique paradox for black students. As Angela resonated, "You're gonna say yes to me because I'm a Bonder and THEN I need to prove myself." The concept of legitimacy existed particularly for Dennis as a highly visible Traditions Holder. He journaled his awareness of differential treatment:

> For most people, the status of Traditions Holder gives me legitimacy that I ordinarily wouldn't have. I am very wary of individuals only concerned about my social status…one thing I think is interesting is the change in people's demeanor when they find out I'm a Traditions Holder.

As only the third black Traditions Holder in the history of Unity, he was highly cognizant of his social status. More importantly, he recognized the contradiction in that normally black males

must fight the perceived threat of black male bodies. This awareness along with his strong religious principles afforded him humility and racialized tolerance in his position.

Participants verbalized a sense of being torn between two worlds. Bruce expressed a sense of double consciousness he overcame in maintaining black friendships while creating new outlets of interaction with other cultures. The dichotomy of being involved in either black or traditional organizations furthered ingroup stereotypes. However participants saw themselves as fulfilling an important representative role to pave the way for others. Dennis assumed his position in such a traditionally white role in terms of its significance by expressing, "I'm excited to be a figure that people can look up to…Even if I can convince one person to apply here." Greg tied the black homogeneity assumed by white students to the perpetuation of limited black student representation. As he explained, white students presumed that black students held no interest in joining, therefore, "It's a vicious cycle, like I don't see you in it so why would I give you a flyer. And why would I join an organization if I don't see like faces in it?" Students connected stigmatization to ingroup as well as outgroup perceptions, which ultimately affected large scale black organizational involvement.

Discussion and Implications

A qualitative methodological approach to multiracial identity allowed students to be critical regarding their beliefs about race and their organizational involvement. This epistemological lens added depth to the understanding of racial centrality and positioned the current study as a significant contribution to the MMRI, as dialogue allowed participants to express an interconnectedness of identities which reflected prior studies of multidimensionality. While research previously emphasized outgroup stigmas in predominantly white spaces (Gusa, 2010; Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000), this study adds to literature which reiterates the need for focus on ingroup differences which affect African American student communities as well. Participants discussed behavioral norms of the black student community to be involved in African American organizations, which created stigmas on black student involvement in traditional organizations. Norms of involvement were described as a cyclical process (see Figure 2).

An in-depth qualitative approach combined with the MMRI framework allowed students to be descriptive as well as diagnostic of their involvement. Because participants' responses elicited deep reflections of their own preconceived stereotypes, they were able to challenge barriers to connectedness. Bruce, for example, reiterated a need to address the selective

amount of black students always counted on to fill black representative roles. He recognized the need for intentionality in allowing others to fulfill those roles. Intentionality in approaching the black community as heterogeneous was an emerging development from the study's discourse.

The majority of participants (five out of six) held affiliation with both mainstream and racially-based organizations. This factor distinguished them from standard patterns of black student affiliation at Unity, but allowed them to break the perceptions that affiliations outside of the black community indicated a desire to disassociate. Students' involvement in mainstream organizations focused on disproving stigmas and negotiating positive images of black students, while membership in racially-based organizations was described as freedom to advocate for black values. Students of the latter organizations spoke of the scrutiny of their organization and the need for excellence in programming. An implicit division among the black community was the disconnect between black Greeks and non-Greeks on campus, as non-Greeks viewed NPHC members as portraying a sense of elitism and as holding self-interest as an isolated subgroup of the black student community. While this division is explored in subsequent interviews and is beyond the scope of this paper, it is in line with Harper & Nichols' study (2008) which indicates how heterogeneity stifles communication and collectivism. This represents another layer of tacit separation which elicits further discourse on ingroup differences.

Several noteworthy implications emerged from this study. In regards to higher education practice, administrators, faculty, and staff who are willing to explore racial realities of their students can create opportunities to explore stereotypes of group homogeneity. The colorblind approach of integrating students through a university title indirectly treats all students as a "homogenous public" (Gusa, 2010), with an unspoken culture of white institutional presence passed through student subgroups, but rarely addressed by those in power. Ron recalled two black females at orientation who asked him if racism and prejudice really existed at Unity. This evidence of new student socialization into the veil of racism represents the continued presence of barriers to diversity and the need for those in power to create new avenues for discourse across and within groups. Specifically for those who work closely with African American students in academic and social development, a heterogeneous approach can be used further to explore ongoing challenges such as retention, recruitment, leadership, and programming needed to provide greater engagement and campus discourse.

Another implication for further research is the need for more constructivist approaches to racial and ethnic identity for various subgroups. Models of racial or ethnic identity are critiqued

for only exploring a single dimension of identity (Jones & McEwen, 2000), yet they do allow study of a specific groups' sociohistorical development and current social stigmas. While a narrowed focus on race might give the assumption of a monolithic or additive approach to group identity, this study provides evidence that constructivist methodologies combined with race-specific theories allow for an in-depth look at ingroup experiences to explore heterogeneity and multiple identities. This implication is of particular importance as our nation's demographics are constantly shifting; survey methodology fails to capture contextual information of individuals' racial realities. For example, the sociocultural linguistic view of identity can be used to study groups such as Arab students to relate language and social positioning to current group stigmas through discourse (Bucholtz & Hall, 2005). Constructivist methods create avenues for this necessary dialogue and give voice and meaning to our students' experiences.

Conclusion

This study gave insight into students' reasoning for their choices in student involvement at a PWI based on the centrality of black identity created by their cognizance of a racialized environment. The current study adds to the scope of multidimensional racial identity by stepping further outside of the dominant paradigmatic box and offering a qualitative approach to the MMRI to give additional meaning to the heterogeneity of black group membership. Diversity entails the incorporation of not only variance of beliefs across groups, but also in-group differences that move us forward from a constrained and fixed treatment of racial identity. Through the incorporation of experiential knowledge, participants provided greater understanding of how an institutional environment influences individuals' continuous reflections on their own racial beliefs. Critical engagement with how students make meaning of their identity development and make decisions regarding racial representation is essential if we seek to deconstruct the experiences of African American students in today's campus climates. As students continue to seek social justice in their representation at PWIs, current research needs to reflect the complex realities of their identities which go beyond survey responses.

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Appendix A

Interview Protocol

1. Tell me about your background growing up (i.e., where you are from, what kind of schools you attended).

2. Growing up, did you have any particular incidents regarding being black that shaped how you identify now?

3. What influenced your decision to come to this institution?

4. Tell me about your experience during freshman year and how the adjustment to college was for you. What do you think about the racial makeup of the school?

5. Tell me the top 5 descriptors you might use to describe yourself, in order of importance (i.e., woman, student, mother, African American)

6. How do you feel about filling out forms about your racial identity? (show student the MIBI survey) How effective do you think surveys are in understanding how you feel about your race?

We are looking at racial identity which has been normally measured by surveys. Today I want to use some of the survey items that focus on how important race and being black is to your identity. I will give you a survey item, and I would like you to describe how you feel about each statement. When discussing each item, please also include your experiences here in college in the groups you belong to as well as previous experiences that have shaped who you are.

Racial Centrality Constructs (extent to which individuals define themselves with regard to their race; hierarchical ranking of various identities)

7. Overall, being black has very little to do with how I feel about myself.
8. In general, being black is an important part of my self-image.
9. My destiny is tied to the destiny of other black people.
10. Being black is unimportant to my sense of what kind of person I am.
11. I have a strong sense of belonging to black people.
12. I have a strong attachment to other black people.
13. Being black is an important reflection of who I am.
14. Being black is not a major factor in my social relationships.

Table 1. *Participant Student Organization Involvement*

Participant	Classification	Upbringing	Organizational Affiliation
Dennis	Junior	Military family; homeschooled until high school; predominantly white high school	African American Southern Student Conference (R), Males of Excellence (R), Bonder Male Society (T/M), Christian Freshman Leaders (T/M), ROTC (T/M), Traditions Holder (T/M)
Angela	Junior	Diverse neighborhood and high school	Coalition of black Students (R), Scholars (R)
Bruce	Junior	Predominantly black neighborhood and high school	African American Southern Student Conference (R), black Student Alumni (R), Cultural Awareness and Development (R), National Pan Hellenic Council fraternity (R), Bonder Representative Council (T/M)
Greg	Junior	Military family; diverse military town and high school	African American Southern Student Conference (R), Bonder Class (T/M), Performance Hall (T/M)
Ron	Junior	Military family; predominantly white neighborhood and high school	Males of Excellence (R), Bonder Classes (T/M), Freshman Bonders (T/M), Rookie Experience (T/M), Sophomore Leaders (T/M), Student Radio (T/M), Student Government (T/M)
Amira	Senior	Military family; predominantly white high school	Bonder Representative Council (T/M), Global Initiatives Society (T/M), National Pan Hellenic Council sorority (R), ROTC (T/M), ROTC Honors Society (T/M)

Note: R = Racially Based Organization (based on commonalities of race or cultural experiences); T/M = Traditional/Mainstream Organization (based on dominant traditions of the institution or white culture); All participants and organizations were given pseudonyms to protect anonymity. Organizations encompass involvement since freshman year.

Figure 1. The Interaction of Racial Centrality and Situational Cues in the Institutional Environment

Racial Centrality

black Self-Image Related to Core Identities

Connectivity to Group Orientation
(Outgroup & Ingroup Membership)

Manifestation of Race in Student Organization Involvement

Situational Cues

Sense-Making of Stereotypical Imaging in the PWI Environment

Racial Cognizance in Social Relationships

Note: Process of racial identity influences adopted from Sellers et al. (1998)

Table 2. *Participant Descriptors (Self-Identified)*

Participant	Descriptors
Dennis	black, ROTC, Christian, family-oriented, social
Angela	African-American, woman, activist, Bonder, Southerner
Bruce	African-American, male, leader, mama's boy, role model
Greg	Christian, African-American, male, Bonder, Eagle Scout (good person)
Ron	Christian, African-American, leader, family-oriented, friend
Amira	Christian, woman, culturally adaptable, black, Bonder

Figure 2. Cyclical Outcomes of Black Student Organization Involvement

Preconceived perceptions hinder Black involvement in traditional organizations

Limited Black representation; Black students who do affiliate take on a representative role

Other Black students lack incentive to join due to perceived stigmatized role; stigma remains in tact

Racial organizations remain dominant for Black student involvement; new Black students socialized through this lens