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Kyle S. Martin

Grand Valley State University, martikyl@gvsu.edu

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Racial and Cultural Awareness in White Fraternity Men: Contributors to Misunderstanding

Kyle Martin, Grand Valley State University, Grand Rapids, MI

When many of us think about fraternity life on a national level, many stereotypes come into play. Being a fraternity man myself, I unfortunately know that many of these stereotypes are warranted and perpetuated by uneducated members across the country. Some of these unfortunate realities include alcohol abuse, hazing, and an elitist mentality. Many cases of alcohol abuse and hazing, or both, have been well documented among fraternities and college students in general. There have also been a number of incidents where fraternities have events that are culturally insensitive or outright racist. However, not many people have an idea or understanding of where their cultural awareness, or lack thereof, may come from and how it can lead to misunderstandings. I would like to examine this trait further, particularly in White fraternity men, and hopefully develop an understanding of why some fraternity men are this way and what student affairs practitioners can do to help remedy this.

Focus of Theory

As mentioned above, I would like to focus particularly on the development of White fraternity men; many Black fraternity men (particularly in historically Black fraternities) and other underrepresented student groups have different experiences in Greek letter organizations (GLOs). It is easy to say that many of these students showing signs of elitism or bigotry could be a result of joining a selective group or one with a history of producing quality alumni members, but there are many contributing factors to these developments. Perhaps the most important factor in this is cultural awareness in these men and how that is developed before and during their membership. As an example, say that a fraternity member on a campus uses an improper racial term during a closed chapter meeting. Not every member is going to understand that it is improper depending on their individual awareness and sensitivity. Whether or not that member is corrected or challenged says a lot about the cultural awareness of the group, or at least some of the members. Compare this to the same thing happening during a meeting on campus where there are non-members present and they correct the member or hold the group accountable for the statement. The personal accountability of the group and individual members is important to true development of cultural awareness.

Foundational Theories and Research

Among the more important contributors to cultural awareness are the understandings of privilege and White racial consciousness. Utilizing Rowe, Bennett, and Atkinson's (1994) White racial consciousness model, we can view these groups as having *unachieved White racial consciousness* or *achieved White racial consciousness* (as cited in Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010). People who have unachieved White racial consciousness have three types of attitudes: *avoidant*, *dependent*, and *dissonant*. The fraternity member, and perhaps the entire group, referenced earlier could fall somewhere on this side; having not had to think about race (avoidant), creating a superficial sense of White consciousness (dependent), or having confusion or disconnection (dissonant). The achieved White consciousness side is composed of four types: *dominative*, *conflictive*, *reactive*, and *integrative*. There is a possibility that the fraternity member could fall on the achieved White consciousness side of the theory, seeing Whites as superior (dominative) or being opposed to obvious discriminatory practices but does not take the steps to achieve justice (conflictive). The outsider who corrected the member in the example would likely be considered reactive, recognizing that inequities and injustices exist for people of color, or integrative, seeing the realities of living in a White dominant culture and may be committed to social change.

The understanding, acceptance, and recognition of privilege in fraternity men may come from a number of areas. In college, many of these students are able to separate themselves from past experiences with school, family, and their hometown community for the first time and begin to question what is normal (Tinto, 1975). Their environment previous to their college experience has a strong influence on where they stand when they begin to question what they accept. The pre-entry attributes used in Tinto's student integration model (family background, individual attributes, and pre-college schooling) are good indicators of how White fraternity men may think of different cultures and also the process they may undergo in changing beliefs. Many students will not have awareness of many of cultures before college. Students may have had limited interaction with other cultures due to growing up in a predominantly White area, avoiding different cultures, or having preconceived opinions of cultures due to family, friends, or the media. Men who begin to think differently than their family or community members may be challenged by these groups and have a more difficult time in transitioning thoughts.

Each student may go through a stage of separation, transition, and incorporation upon entering college (Tinto, 1988). Students who separate themselves more from previous exposures may develop ideas and concepts that are more accepted by others at college. Students in the transition stage may be looking for a way to bridge the old and the new. During this stage a student may have a difficult time adjusting to a new situation or environment, particularly if it is different from what is normal for them. Some men in this stage may look to join a fraternity as a way to form a connection with their new environment. When looking for an organization to be a part of, a student in this stage would likely look for a group who has similar values to what they are used to. In their mind, they are bridging the gap between their new and old environment by joining a student organization with similar values to their family, friends, or other hometown group. However, this likely inhibits interactions with other cultures (assuming that the

group is predominantly White), inhibits an opportunity to recognize their privilege, and limits cognitive development by joining a group of similar minded individuals. The last stage, incorporation, may have students who have joined fraternities and organizations for other purposes and have had an easier transition socially and academically. Someone in this stage may join a fraternity in order to boost their resume, meet new people, or develop stronger connections on campus.

The role of a fraternity in these young students' lives can be instrumental in helping them develop awareness and acceptance of various groups, or it can be detrimental. If a fraternity, or even some of its members, are unaware or negative toward differing ideas it could prohibit other members' development in this area. Individuals go through college and create their own understanding of culture and race. It is helpful to think of their diversity development as being on a spectrum. Through each encounter with various groups, they may move to a different area of the spectrum. Chavez, Guido-DiBrito, and Mallory (2003) developed a framework of individual diversity development to reflect this concept (as cited in Evans et al., 2010).

Chavez et al.'s (2003) framework is useful when considering how a student or fraternity may act in a given situation. Events that they hold, values that they espouse to campus, and the relationships they may have with outside students can also be a good indication of cultural understanding or political correctness. The actions and ideas of the entire organization will fall somewhere on this spectrum, and though they may not reflect what each individual member of the fraternity may think, the action is likely accepted as the norm for the group. Groupthink is oftentimes present in many discussions which can hinder the development of members who may be in the unaware, dualistic, or questioning stages of their diversity development (as cited in Evans et al., 2010).

In Perry's (1970) Theory of Intellectual and Ethical Development, he mentions the dualistic stage of meaning making where there is an inherent right and wrong (as in by Evans et al., 2010). Members in this stage may view outsiders, particularly those of different cultures, as the "other" and designate them as bad. This stage could also come about when joining a fraternity who has a diverse membership in which the student encounters a certain population for the first time. Depending on whether or not this member is made to confront his view can help him understand and become more self-aware. Exposure to different cultures within a fraternity will assist in guiding a member through Chavez's (2003) model from unaware or dualistic, to a more developed way of thinking in the questioning, exploration, and integration areas. As a student moves through this model to the questioning/self-exploration dimension they will begin to develop multiplicity in their meaning-making, which is classified by Perry as "honoring diverse views when the right answers are not yet known" (as cited in Evans et al., 2010, p. 86) and utilizing peers as sources of knowledge. Fraternity men who have their views confronted or altered will often use other members to help guide them through this stage and help them form an idea of how they should view or interact with other groups.

Fraternity members who are more developed thinkers continue to move on to develop their own thoughts with the aid of other members and advisors. Toward the end of Perry's (1970) multiplicity stage they understand that not every situation is going to have an answer and this can create some anxiety; some members may back down and find comfort in earlier forms of thinking (as in by Evans et al., 2010). This could happen

as a result of being confronted by the organization, being influenced again by family, or someone outside the organization influencing opinions. The fraternity may confront the member for a number of reasons – he may not be upholding their standards and they may try to get him to understand their values; or he may understand their values and feel as though the fraternity practices are wrong, oppressive, or not inclusive. This can be a vital point in someone’s membership as some of these members who challenge the fraternal norms could go on to take a leadership role and create a positive change in the group. However, some members who have the same potential may not get the same opportunity as they cycle back to dualism and early forms of multiplicity.

Contributors to Cultural and Racial Awareness

There are a number of aspects of one’s personal history, fraternity, university, and community that have an impact on how a fraternity man views outside groups. This is not to excuse any inappropriate behaviors of men in these groups, but instead is intended to show the contributors that affect how White fraternity men think about race and culture. The following section introduces contributors that help or hinder cultural and racial awareness development in fraternity men. An awareness spectrum is also introduced to help analyze these contributors and the impact that different exposures to different cultures have on awareness.

Contributors

An environment that encourages true awareness, understanding, and advocacy can lead to a more developed understanding of oneself. The potential for this type of environment in many fraternities is prevalent, however, there are a number of contributors that may prevent this type of environment from being created. These contributors are classified each as either a *prerequisite contributor*, *internal contributor*, or *external contributor*. Each contributor can affect where a student is on the spectrum at a given time. Each individual is different so the weight that each contributor carries in their personal perspective will vary.

A *prerequisite contributor* is something that contributes to cultural and racial awareness before joining the fraternity. Past experiences will affect where the student enters on the spectrum in regard to each culture. These contributors could be something as simple as where the person grew up and whether or not they have had much interaction with diverse populations. What is even more important about their hometown is their openness and acceptance toward other cultures and whether or not the student has accepted these thoughts as their own. If there is not much acceptance toward diversity this student may enter as unaware or with a negative prerequisite contributor. Family has an important role, it is typically one of the more consistent presences throughout a student’s college experience. A student who has a strong family influence in their thoughts, but begins to question their opinions is at risk to fall back to what their family believes, even if it is perceived in their college world as improper or insulting.

Time spent in college before joining a fraternity can also have an impact on students and their awareness. Many students who join a fraternity are freshmen, but there

are a number who join after their freshman year. Their experience on campus with other students and with campus programs can also have a strong impact on their understanding of diversity. Gaining experience is positive but there is a chance that some of this exposure could be perceived negatively by the student. There are a number of other contributors as well that include K-12 schooling, childhood friends, and media exposure.

External contributors are those contributors that affect the student after they join the fraternity that are not prerequisite and not related to the fraternity. Questions to be asked in this area are: What type of environment is the University creating for their students? Is inclusion encouraged in student organizations? What types of resources are available on campus to learn about underrepresented populations? How are cultural and racial issues handled by the university when they arise? The approach that the university has regarding each of these questions (and many others) will have an influence on the awareness of the fraternity as a whole and also on each individual student at the school. The history of the school, student, faculty and staff demographics, and location are also external contributors that have an effect on the students.

A student's involvement in the campus and community outside of their fraternity can also contribute to racial and cultural awareness. Demographics of the surrounding community could create new exposures for the students that were previously unknown. Involvement in other student organizations or campus events can also provide new experiences that were previously unavailable to the student. Through these experiences the student is potentially becoming aware of other populations and allowing themselves to interact and form their own thoughts about various populations. External contributors can affect how someone views race and culture and can help shape how they experience college. This can also have an effect on their fraternity and whether or not they make an effort to educate other members and advocate for certain groups. All prerequisite and external contributors have the potential to affect any student. How each student is affected by these in a given situation is fluid and will likely change over time. However, internal contributors are specific to fraternity men in this case. As with other all other contributors, how the student reacts to these contributors and chooses to accept them is fluid and likely to change with time.

Internal contributors are specifically related to the fraternity and can come from a number of sources. The dynamics of the fraternity membership can be a major contributor for a student who is unaware or questioning previous thoughts. If the fraternity has a diverse group of members, this can help to not only develop awareness in the members, but also develop acceptance. That is, if the diversity of the group is embraced and encouraged. However, if the fraternity is made up of all White members then the positive awareness would likely need to come from another contributor. Alumni members also contribute to awareness and their influence on the group can also be a contributor.

How the fraternity reacts to culturally insensitive behavior can be a positive or negative contributor. If the group reacts in a positive and inclusive manner then this is likely to have a positive effect on the individual's cultural and racial awareness. This could also be a time where a student may have conflicting views and be challenged to confront their ways of knowing. Several other factors can also play a role with the fraternity such as educational programming or lack thereof, requirements set by their

national governing body, and collaboration and involvement with other groups on campus.

Awareness Spectrum

The two ends of the spectrum are simply named *unaware* and *aware* and a student can enter and move throughout the spectrum based on their contributors, *exposure* to the specific population, and *confrontations* that arise that cause them to reevaluate their ways of knowing. The number of individual spectrums for each person is nearly endless as the awareness of each population shifts consistently and the number of subgroups continues to grow. There are events, or confrontations, that could have an effect on multiple spectrums, but are kept separate in this concept as exposures will differ for each person. An exposure to a specific group can be a result of their contributors and can cause a shift on the spectrum as the student begins to form their way of thinking about that population. Early exposures, either positive or negative, have the potential to be strong influences in confrontation decisions.

On the unaware end of the spectrum are two subgroups: *oblivious* and *misinformed*. Oblivious members have zero exposure to a certain population and therefore have not been able to form a thought about the group. Slightly above that is the misinformed group. They may have received false information about a population from any one of their contributors. Fraternity men who are misinformed have not had true exposure or interaction but may adapt the thoughts of another member or authority figure in their life.

In the middle of the spectrum there are two more groups: *intolerant* and *tolerant*. Intolerant members have had exposure to a certain group, but do not accept them or have created a dualistic view and view the group as inferior. This mindset could also be a result of a number of their contributors including family, fraternity member education, and initiatives by university and hometown. Tolerant members have also had some exposure to the given population but they do not reject or view them as inferior. Some people in this group may be questioning previous thoughts and could possibly move toward the next group, acceptance, if they have more positive exposure.

On the aware end of the spectrum are two more subgroups: *accepting* and *advocating*. Members who are accepting have had strong exposures and have faced confrontations regarding their feelings. Accepting members view the population as equal and do not acknowledge barriers when working with these groups. Members who are considered advocates are those that have had strong exposure and have been confronted about their thinking. In many cases advocates can be the members who confront other members or students on an issue and challenge their way of knowing. Advocates may also seek to educate others and collaborate with diverse groups in order to create more exposure.

Discussion

This spectrum is fluid and one that hopefully will positively change over time for each individual member. Contributors, exposure, and confrontation are vital in creating

true awareness and understanding. As these fraternity members continue to learn and understand each culture, hopefully they will continue to shift toward the accepting and advocacy side of the spectrum. Each confrontation to their views can cause them to reevaluate their way of knowing. The result of the confrontation can cause a shift both positively or negatively on the spectrum and cause the member to revert back to simpler or former ways of thinking.

What student affairs practitioners need to look for are ways in which they can cultivate confrontations for these fraternities in order to help make them more aware of other populations. This can be done in a number of different ways, particularly through programming in Student Life and Greek Life offices, but also through working with fraternity new member education programs. Some organizations require some sort of cultural education in their new member programs, but not all, and this could be a good way to get new members to challenge their ways of knowing and addressing their privileges for the first time. By no means would this put an end to insensitivity in GLOs, but starting to address the behavior in new member education programs and continuing programming and initiatives throughout their undergraduate experience can help to educate members which will hopefully improve their mentality over time.

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Correspondence regarding this article should be addressed to Kyle Martin at martikyl@gvsu.edu.