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Seeing through colorblindness

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Seeing through colorblindness

Abstract

In our work with fraternities and sororities, how often do we reflect on the role race plays in recruitment practices or how it shapes the experiences of members, chapters, organizations, and the fraternity community as a whole? In our estimation, not often enough. However, if we explore the history of fraternities and sororities, we learn these organizations were typically created and organized specifically around race. From the founding of Phi Beta Kappa in 1776 to the beginnings of many other organizations through the late 1960s, historically White fraternities in the United States were legally racially exclusive (Kendall, 2008), most going so far as to include racial segregation policies in their constitutions (Hughey, 2010). During this time of racial exclusion, Black collegians banded together to form Greek-letter organizations collectively referred to today as “the Divine Nine” (Kimbrough, 2003). More recently, people from other racially minority groups, including Latinos, Native Americans, Asian Americans and others, formed Greek-letter organizations (Kimbrough, 2003).

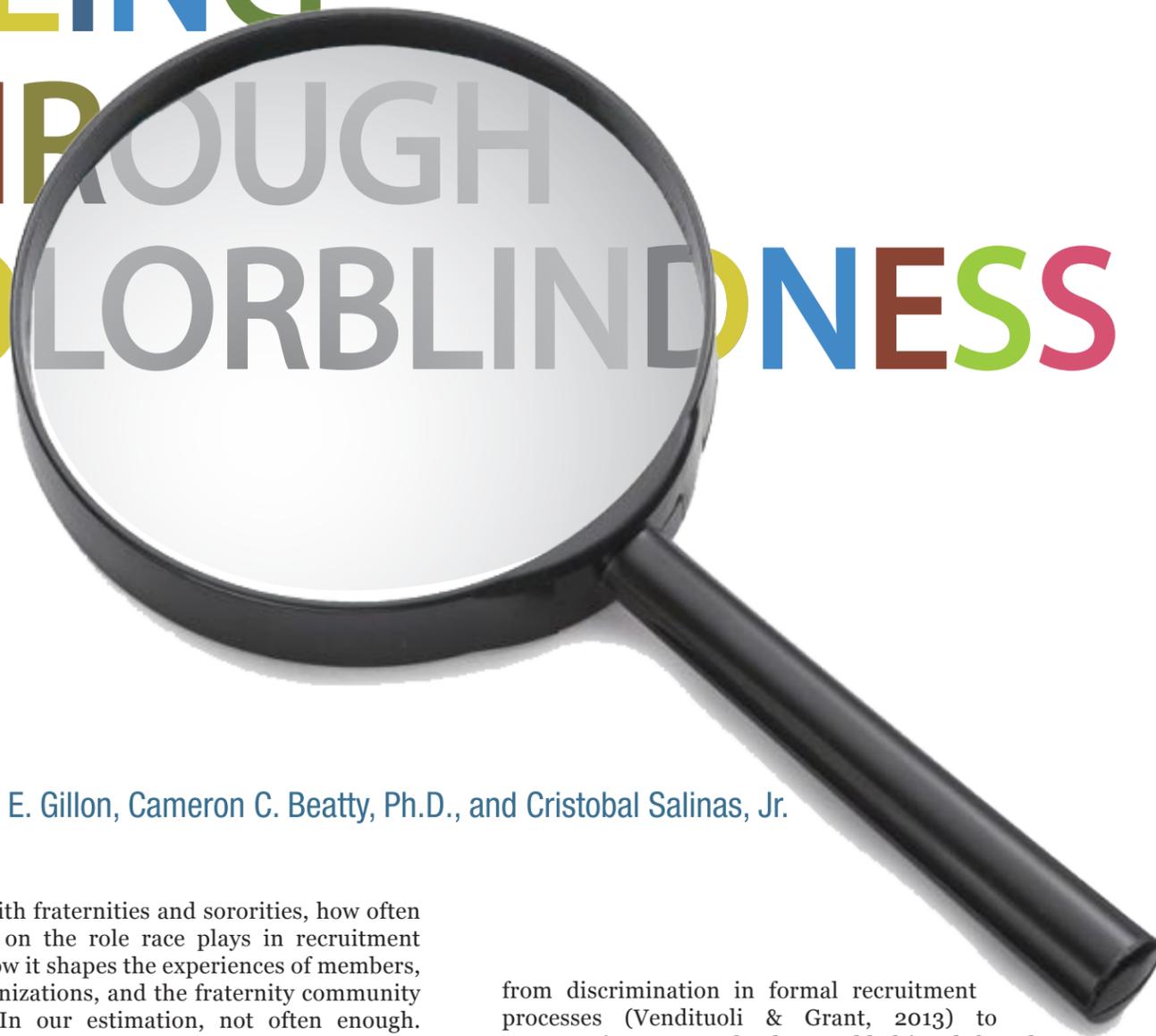
Disciplines

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SEEING THROUGH COLORBLINDNESS



by Kathleen E. Gillon, Cameron C. Beatty, Ph.D., and Cristobal Salinas, Jr.

In our work with fraternities and sororities, how often do we reflect on the role race plays in recruitment practices or how it shapes the experiences of members, chapters, organizations, and the fraternity community as a whole? In our estimation, not often enough. However, if we explore the history of fraternities and sororities, we learn these organizations were typically created and organized specifically around race. From the founding of Phi Beta Kappa in 1776 to the beginnings of many other organizations through the late 1960s, historically White fraternities in the United States were legally racially exclusive (Kendall, 2008), most going so far as to include racial segregation policies in their constitutions (Hughey, 2010). During this time of racial exclusion, Black collegians banded together to form Greek-letter organizations collectively referred to today as “the Divine Nine” (Kimbrough, 2003). More recently, people from other racially minority groups, including Latinos, Native Americans, Asian Americans and others, formed Greek-letter organizations (Kimbrough, 2003).

Recently, race has been at the center of fraternity and sorority conversations especially around recruitment,

from discrimination in formal recruitment processes (Vendituoli & Grant, 2013) to conversation at one school around halting deferred recruitment in consideration of retaining students of color (Cathcart, 2014). Since fraternities and sororities have a history of organizing around race, there also tends to be an assumption students will join and maintain membership in organizations that reflect their own race. Yet, by simply looking in the organizations we advise, we know this is not always the case. We see students of color joining historically White fraternities and sororities and subsequently White students joining historically Black and multicultural organizations. We also know within Black and multicultural organizations, some students of color are choosing to join racially minoritized organizations in which their race is not overly represented. In other words, fraternities and sororities are experiencing students of races other than the (historically) dominant one within the organization showing interest, participating in recruitment/

membership intake processes and completing new member/probate periods to become initiated members.

Higher education scholars and practitioners have written about and discussed race in relation to the organization of fraternities and sororities (Antonio, 2004; Torberson, 2009; Whipple, Baier, & Grady, 1991), but not as much emphasis has been placed on the complexity of race (Hughey, 2010), specifically in regard to its role in recruitment and retention. The dialogue has typically revolved around the idea of integration, rather than critically discussing how race shapes the experiences of individuals within these organizations, specifically those of marginalized racial identities.

One inhibitor to having such critical conversations is the notion that “colorblindness” is positive. Critical Race Theory (CRT), as discussed by Delgado and Stefancic (2012), described colorblindness as a form of espoused “equality”—the idea that rules for and treatment of people should be the same across the board—without acknowledging that the daily experiences of people of color are shaped by their race. So, why is colorblindness harmful, especially within the context of fraternity/sorority recruitment and retention?

Colorblindness, sometimes referred to as race-neutrality, attempts to ignore and maintain the roles race plays in preserving disparities for privileged and powerful populations (Gotanda, 2000; Harper & Patton, 2007). Many students of color bring their experiences of exclusion, oppression and unequal educational and social opportunity to predominately White campuses (Lewis, Chesler, & Forman, 2000). Additionally, students of color, often times, must negotiate their own sense of what it means to be a person of color in the face of racial/ethnic stereotypes (Ospina & Foldy, 2009; Ospina & Su, 2009). Colorblindness allows for the general disregard of the affect of race and racism.

The use of colorblindness has allowed for the creation of many race-neutral initiatives in higher education that were designed to counter race-based programs/organizations, such as the “integration” of fraternities and sororities. Williams and Land (2006) argued that, “non-recognition of race reinforces and reproduces the flawed structure of society because it does not allow for the analysis of social inequality at the core of the problem” (p. 580). We challenge fraternity and sorority advisers to critically reflect on what role the notion of colorblindness (both students’ and institutional) plays in students’ perceptions of race and the fraternity and sorority experience.

In light of the important role race has played and continues to play in fraternities and sororities, we ask our colleagues and fellow educators to engage in critical and open dialogues about race, as it exists today within the collegiate fraternity/sorority community. We must openly and critically reflect on our understanding of race as it relates to power, privilege and oppression, as well as the intersecting identities within all social fraternities and sororities.

Conversations Starters

Answer these questions to begin to critically reflect on how race relates to power, privilege and oppression within your fraternity/sorority community:

- What does race look like on your campus/in your organization?
- In what ways are you cognizant of race during and in preparation for recruitment/membership intake process?
- In what ways are you cognizant of race in regard to retention?
- Does your office keep track of the racial demographics of fraternity/sorority members across all councils and governing groups? What could the implications of doing this be on your campus? For the work you do?
- What are the implications of racially “diverse” fraternity and sorority chapters?

REFERENCES

References for this article can be found online:



Kathleen E. Gillon is a student affairs professional and doctoral candidate in the School of Education at Iowa State University. Her research and practice broadly encompass student access, equity and success in higher education. She is especially interested in the collegiate experiences of racially minoritized students who join historically white fraternities and sororities.



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