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Privilege and Oppression: Exploring the Paradoxical Identity of White Women Administrators in Higher Education

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Race is a prominent issue in higher education, which has intensified demands upon postsecondary leadership to acknowledge and respond to increasing racial tensions within campus communities. Many administrators, who are mostly White, are left perplexed regarding how to address such demands. Having leaders who understand bias can potentially support institutional responses to racial tensions. As such, this study focused on the second largest share of college administrators, White women – an identity rooted in both privilege and oppression. White women may better understand the conditions of oppression given their gendered status, yet may also be unaware of the extent of their privilege or its effects on their leadership decisions. Their unique positioning calls for a deeper exploration of the role identity plays in leadership, especially in times of racial discord. Utilizing Putnam’s bridging capital and bonding capital framework, findings highlight where their privilege and oppression emerge in study participants’ leadership, leading to recommendations for future research and practice.

Race and racism remain prominent issues in the United States, and thus higher education, evidenced by demographic shifts in which non-White population growth continues to outpace White population growth (Chappell, 2017; Parker et al., 2020; Nichols, 2020), contention around Affirmative Action as a federal policy (Wright & Garces, 2018), and a rise in student protests against racism on many college campuses across the nation (Bauer-Wolf, 2019; Thomason, 2015). Because of the constancy, such events have intensified the need for postsecondary leaders to address increasing racial tensions within campus communities, and society more broadly. For far too long, race-related concerns have been dismissed, or worse, perpetuated by members of

higher education communities, limiting racial progress (Taylor, 2020). Prior research has found that “discussions about diversity, privilege, and social justice are often sources of discomfort for faculty, staff, and students” (Watt, 2007, p. 116). Many postsecondary administrators are perplexed regarding how to address these issues. This is even more so for some White administrators, who hold the lion’s share of leadership positions (Statista, 2019) and may self-select out of the discourse for fear that their privileged identities and/or organizational roles might either derail the conversation or further marginalize the students they serve (DiAngelo, 2011, 2018; Endres & Gould, 2009; Gillespie et al., 2002; McIntosh, 1988, 2012). Further, scholars argue that this population elects not to engage in race-focused conversations for fear of White guilt, or worse, losing their privilege (Bonilla-Silva, 2013; DiAngelo, 2011, 2018). Moreover, research has established that some White people view themselves as without a racial identity (Frankenberg, 1993; Garner, 2017); therefore, normalizing and centralizing the White lived experience and making race and racism the problems of *others*. However, as decision-makers on most college campuses remain predominantly White, and race and racism continue to be of concern in higher education, it has become difficult for White administrators to overlook or ignore their importance in responding to such issues.

Ensuring administrators understand bias is one way to support institutional responses to racial tensions. Therefore, we bring to the forefront a group that represents the second largest share of college administrators (Statista, 2019), and whose identity is rooted in both privilege and oppression – White women. Johnson (2005) explained that because White women can experience oppression, they may

better understand the conditions of oppression than White men, who comprise the largest population among postsecondary administrators. At the same time, Whiteness brings a form of privilege to their identities and roles within organizations. This racialized and gendered positioning then calls for a deeper exploration of the role identity plays in leadership. As such, the research question that guided this exploratory qualitative study is: *How, if at all, do White women administrators' racial and gendered identities manifest in their leadership?*

To answer the research question of this study, we utilized narrative analysis (Bamberg, 2004) and applied Putnam's (2000) bridging capital (work across diverse groups) and bonding capital (work within one's own affinity groups) framework to shed light on whether White women administrators' paradoxical identity influences their efforts. The women in this study acknowledged race and gender, yet were unaware that bonding over their racial privilege and bridging with racialized others through their gender oppression has the potential to yield leadership shortcomings. These findings advance the underexplored discourse on the confluence of administrative leadership and identity, providing specific insight into where, in this instance, White women's privilege and oppression emerge, either helping or hindering their efforts.

Relevant Literature

As race and racism remain major concerns for postsecondary leaders, White women administrators are certainly facing such racial tensions and must respond by the nature of their positions. Yet, little research explores paradoxical identities, particularly in leadership roles, and even less has explored whether intersecting identities among members of this group manifest in their leadership. Hence, this study was informed by

the prior literature's focus on women's plight in higher education including their pursuit of leadership roles, and White women's privilege.

Women in the Academy

Historical practices in higher education depict an academy that has always been hostile toward diversity and inclusion. For example, the root of women's status in higher education can be traced back to "America's historical antagonism toward women's higher learning" (Alemán & Renn, 2002, p. 3). With the 1636 founding of Harvard College, American institutions of higher education were established to prepare young White men to be clergy and government leaders. Since women were not viewed as suitable for such roles, they were not considered to be potential students (Allan, 2011). Compounding these historical realities, women have also been considered less intellectual than men, and/or hyper-sexualized (Alemán & Renn, 2002), thus interpreted as incapable of contributing to the advancement of society. Hence, the establishment of colleges for women were the direct result of their exclusion from mainstream institutions of higher education (Parker, 2015). Notably, these institutions were predominantly White (Guy-Sheftall, 1999). As a result of creating these colleges, specifically White women's access to and inclusion within higher education improved greatly, yielding far different educational experiences and outcomes compared to their Women of Color peers. The academic success and continued advancement of White women, more so than racially and ethnically minoritized groups, can further be attributed to Affirmative Action policies (Crenshaw, 2006; DeBerry, 2016; Massie, 2016). Crenshaw (2006), refuting what she referred to as *distorted discourse*, expressed "the primary beneficiaries of affirmative action have been Euro-American women" (p. 129). Cumulatively, women's gains in

higher education, only paying minimal attention to Women of Color, have perhaps reinforced White women's understanding of both oppression and privilege. As such, it is important to know whether this overlap presents itself in their positioning as the second largest leadership group on college and university campuses, especially in responses to the racial tension plaguing higher education.

Women and Leadership

Women have made great gains in their educational pursuits. Yet, despite this increase in gender parity with respect to college enrollment, "women are much less likely than men to be considered leaders" (Hill et al., 2016, p. 1). Specifically, in higher education, "relatively few women advance to top academic leadership positions such as dean, provost, president or chancellor" (Bilen-Green et al., 2008, p. 3). This is unfortunate, given prior research has found that the pipeline to academic leadership is through the professoriate. Baker (2020) explained that more women occupy assistant professor roles, and trail at the associate and full professor ranks, conceivably restricting their ascension to leadership status in colleges and universities. Not having women in leadership roles has the potential to limit an institution's progress. Bilen-Green et al. (2008) concluded that "attaining a critical mass of women in the leadership structure is especially important to position an institution for change" (p. 4). Similarly, Hill et al. (2016) expressed having women leaders positively affects an organization's bottom line and performance outcomes. Moreover, it is worth mentioning that women themselves benefit from serving in leadership roles.

So when women are excluded from top leadership, they are denied power to make a difference in the world. Leaders enjoy high status and privilege, and leadership in one area opens doors to other opportunities, which further amplifies the perks of leadership. Leadership also pays. In most organizations, the top

leader is also the most highly compensated, and managers and supervisors tend to have higher salaries than workers who are not in leadership roles (Hill et al., 2016, p. 2).

While it is advantageous to hire women in leadership positions, both for the organization and the women themselves, it is important to be mindful that within the gender parity conversation are racial disparities. Universal references to the obstacles *women* in the academy face (Allan, 2011; Alemán & Renn, 2002; Bilen-Green et al., 2008; Johnson, 2017; Lord & Preston, 2009) more often than not reflect White women's experiences (Frankenberg, 1993; hooks, 1981); altogether dismissing the discernible struggles of Women of Color (Hill et al., 2016). Such an understanding conceivably further underpins White women's perception of gender oppression, and perhaps allows them to overlook their racial privilege or opportunities to pursue racial and ethnic equity through their leadership roles.

Up to this point, we have come to learn a few things. Higher education administration continues to be predominantly White; this is inclusive of the majority of the women who rise to postsecondary leadership. Further, having women in leadership is advantageous for an institution's advancement. And given increasing racial tensions, there is an imperative to have leaders who understand bias. Therefore, exploring a group whose identity is rooted in having overcome the "gendered nature of the academy" (Lord & Preston, 2009, p. 771), coupled with their racial privilege, offers broader implications beyond women being instrumental for the advancement of other women in leadership (See Bilen-Green et al., 2008). As women continue to increase among the ranks of mid-level and senior leaders on campus, they will be in positions to respond to the growing racial uneasiness on college campuses. Thus, there is a need to

know how their gendered and racialized identities influence their efforts. This is particularly important when attempting to be a bridge for racially/ethnically minoritized others who also navigate similar systemic and internal barriers in pursuit of academic advancement.

White Women's Privilege in the Academy and Society

There is a dearth of literature that explicitly examines the practices of White women administrators in higher education; even less has explored the influence of their paradoxical identities. Accapadi (2007) observed White women student affairs professionals, and explained that White women have “one up/one down identities” (p. 210), referencing an ability to relate to both oppression and privilege. Through the lens of the Privilege Identity Exploration model (PIE), she found White women deny any personal connection to racism, rationalize status quo practices, had “false envy,” and used “benevolence as a defense tool” (Accapadi, 2007, p. 213). Further, race and gender overlapped when White women became emotional. Their tears both deflected from and shifted conversations about race and racism. Such findings align with the dominant or grand narratives (See Bamberg, 2004) regarding a tendency for White people to disassociate themselves from race-based concerns and shapes such narratives particularly so for White women in the academy. In direct contrast with Accapadi’s (2007) findings, Case (2012) found White women, through reflective efforts within their participation in an anti-racist group, acknowledged being racist. Further, unlike the White feminists Frankenberg (1993) interviewed, Case’s participants identified with White privilege, which enabled them to see how racism affected their daily lives. Thus, they engaged in empathy, activism, and spoke up to interrupt racism.

These findings reinforce both dominant narratives (See Bamberg, 2004) and counter-narratives (See Solórzano & Yosso, 2002) associated with White identity in educational contexts, which have been illuminated in prior literature. One emphasis of the counter-narratives is that White people are capable of acknowledging their race and their privilege. Scholars have long pointed to the need to evaluate the social identities of and relationships between White women and Women of Color (e.g., Hurtado, 1989). Referring to what Fellows and Razack (1998) called “the race to innocence,” they identified the power and privilege dynamics that affect women’s positions and responses to social issues and others’ narratives. These dynamics tend to support women in highlighting their own oppression while also denying the oppression of those from other identities and backgrounds or, as they wrote, “women making a truth claim that they are subordinate in one system and failing to see their domination in another” (Fellows & Razack, 1998, p. 340).

Such conclusions further highlight this thin narrative for White women in higher education. Similar experiences have been found when other educational contexts have been taken into consideration (Bailey, 1999; Case & Hemming, 2005; McIntyre, 1997). With a growing body of work focused on White women in higher education, there is an opportunity to advance our understanding of this group, particularly as leaders. Given their position and the current racial climate, there is a need to explore whether their paradoxical identity has any bearing on their leadership; and if so, in what ways.

Theoretical Framework

To explore White women administrators’ racialized and gendered identities in practice, this study is framed using Putnam’s (2000) bridging capital and bonding capital

framework. His adaptation of social capital theory connects well with Johnson's (2005) *Privilege as Paradox*, illuminating where this particular group's intersecting identity emerges in their leadership. Bridging capital and bonding capital expands on the traditional notion of social capital, which is rooted in the need for individuals to actively participate in groups, thereby creating the necessary networks for one's advancement (Bourdieu, 1986; Farr, 2004; Fuller, 2014; Gauntlett, 2011; Portes, 1998). Two things are certain for these networks: 1) individuals must be able to benefit from their engagements; and 2) individuals must gain access to valuable resources and connections. Central to Putnam's (2000) analysis is the idea that as communities became more diverse people began to withdraw (Martin, 2007), and commenced to protest the change. Similarly in higher education, as a result of increased diversity, certain groups begin to withdraw and further take an oppositional stance. His conceptualization of bridging capital and bonding capital illuminated *how* networks are formed and *how* individuals benefit. Therefore, this version of social capital makes sense of how White women administrators' racialized and gendered social identities influenced their leadership practices and decisions.

Putnam (2000) explained bonding capital denotes exclusivity and bridging capital explicitly promotes inclusion. Bonding happens between socially homogeneous groups, allowing members of communities to come together and support a collective need. In this way, bonding capital is particularly beneficial for "undergirding specific reciprocity and mobilizing solidarity" (Putnam, 2000, p. 22). Wuthnow (2002) explained this type of network is about a group's shared interest. Within the context of higher education, an example of bonding would be membership in a fraternity or sorority. Bridging capital, on

the other hand, is about reaching outside of the bonds “for linkage to external assets and for information diffusion” (Putnam, 2000, p. 22). Bridging happens between socially heterogeneous, or diverse groups, and allows for the dissemination of information and opportunity. Coffé and Geys (2007) expounded that “bridging associations are more likely to generate positive externalities than bonding associations” (p. 122). Thus, why bridging is critical for *getting ahead*, offering a means to understand how people move outside their social sphere (Fuller, 2014). An example of bridging capital would be a student protest or a justice rally. Thereby, bridging capital and bonding capital are not mutually exclusive, but are compatible and work together. Bridging without bonding creates ineffective resource pools, while bonding without bridging facilitates marginalization.

Putnam’s (2000) social capital foreshadows how bridging and bonding may affect White women’s leadership. This group’s professional positionality and responsibility to address campus racial tension, and their familiarity with both their racial privilege and gender oppression, positions them within Putnam’s conceptualization in a way that is underexplored. These women are often overlooked, potentially because of their often-sole focus on gender and their dismissal of racial privilege (Frankenberg, 1993; hooks, 1981).

Methods

The racialized and gendered identity of White women, given the inconsistent narratives associated with this group, required that we situate the participants’ responses within the dominant (See Accapadi, 2007; Case, 2012; Frankenberg, 1993), and counter-narratives (See Case, 2012). Doing so yielded an understanding of an

understudied area (Babbie, 2011), specifically how privilege and oppression manifest in their leadership. Frankenberg (1993) explained that race is a “taboo” topic amongst White women; and as such can engender “memory lapse, silence, shame, and evasion” (p. 23). Hence, data in this area of focus is data not easily collected. Therefore, consideration was then given for the participants’ potential discomfort level as White women talking about race, gender, and leadership with a Black researcher, which has been limitedly referenced in past studies. The first author felt obliged to use a method, focus groups (Lederman, 1990; Morgan, 1996), that created a space where White women, together, could grapple with and talk about their race, gender, and leadership experiences. This approach, which is “a strong tool for exploratory research” (Morgan, 1996, p. 40) also lends itself to developing more structured research questions and tools (Babbie, 2011; Rowley, 2002) for future inquiry. Utilizing a focus group further generated even richer narratives (Gill et al., 2008, p. 293) than would have been gleaned from individual, one-on-one interviews (Morgan, 1996; Lederman, 1990; Williams, 1964).

Researcher Positionality

Our research examines the ways postsecondary infrastructures promote or inhibit equity and inclusion for students, faculty, staff, and campus leaders. This includes a focus on the leader practices and identity, which have the potential to influence the ways in which historically disenfranchised students transition to and through higher education. Research about White women is predominantly conducted by White women, often presenting both the dominant and counter-narratives that govern our understanding of this group within the academy. Thus, as a Black woman, and

former scholar-practitioner, the first author could push the boundaries of prior research through her own experience with gendered-racism (Essed, 1991) – the convergence of sexism and racism that often harm Women of Color – offering insight into where White women’s racial privilege and gender oppression influence their leadership and most importantly, the consequences of this overlap. While it is plausible that the first author’s race, gender, and professional connections had an impact on this group, these women were outspoken about their identity. They spoke freely regarding their racial privilege, and boldly about their gender oppression, expressing some understanding of the racial tension plaguing college campuses. However, they neglected to observe the pitfalls related to how these two intersectional identities work in tandem. That interaction exhibited a “synergy individuals alone don’t possess” (Krueger & Casey, 2014, p. 22), and provided an understanding of the effects of having a paradoxical relationship with privilege and oppression. The second author, a White woman faculty member with administrative responsibilities, provided independent analysis of the data as the two authors worked together to generate findings from this research study. Given that identity, it was important to explore the influence of lived experience and bias in that interpretive work. We aimed to minimize those effects through researcher journaling throughout the analytic process as well as team conversations in which we explored both the results and any potential effects of our individual lenses and lived experiences.

Site Selection and Recruitment Process

This study took place at a private predominantly White institution (names and places are pseudonyms) on the west coast that has multiple campuses. Like many other colleges and universities, the predominantly White leadership were forced to

engage in institutional-wide conversations about race and racism, and were faced with student protests. Therewith, we employed a purposeful sampling strategy “to discover, understand and gain insight” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 96), in this instance, White women administrators’ identity and where it emerges in their work.

The majority of the administrators across two of the multiple campuses were White men, followed by White women. The first author invited 10 upper-level women administrators presumed or known to be White, who were in positions of program director or higher, and who directly worked with students by participating in institutional programming (e.g. recruitment, orientation, events/activities, and advising) to participate in this study. Six White women: Scarlett, Pearl, Maverick, Willow, Daisy, and Dixie (See Table 1) from various divisions of the institution and two of the campus sites accepted the invitation.

Table 1: *Participants at-a-glance*

Participants	Leadership Position	Division of Higher Education	Years of Service at the Institution
Scarlett	Dean	Academic	>10
Pearl	Assistant Dean	Student Affairs	>20
Maverick	Dean	Academic and Student Affairs	>10
Willow	Director	Academic	>5
Daisy	Associate Dean	Student Affairs	>10
Dixie	Chair	Academic	>5

The four who were unable to participate in the focus group were invited to participate in one-on-one interviews with the option to meet over the phone or in person; and were

also given the option to submit typed responses to the protocol questions, yet they declined.

Data Collection

The first author facilitated a focus group during the summer. She provided the participants the opportunity to review the semi-structured protocol in advance, with the option to also submit typed responses prior to the formal meeting. Doing so allowed the participants to think through the purpose of the study and develop talking points, which maximized our limited time together. As they responded to questions, periodically, they would reference that they had reflected on that particular question. Thus, providing the protocol in advance made for an in-depth and much richer dialogue. Only one participant, Willow, submitted answers in advance.

The semi-structured protocol was grounded in prior research and Bamberg's (2004) focus on *pre-existing* perceptions, in this instance, regarding race, gender, and leadership. The questions were also reflective of Putnam's (2000) conceptualization of social capital theory, particularly the ways in which their identity shows up in relationships within homogeneous and heterogeneous groups, respectively. For over an hour, these women went back and forth adding to one another's responses and witticisms. The first author observed laughter, collegiality, and the affirmations that filled the room. As these women grappled with questions regarding race and racism, and their interactions with Students of Color, as well as gender and sexism, she further witnessed them expanding on each other's sentiments. After the interview, she made note of observations and reflected on the interactions with these women. She journaled about how they used their racial privilege in practice and how gender bias was a

consideration in their efforts. In a focus group, researchers can run the risk of groupthink (Lederman, 1990), which may have been present when, for instance, the conversation focused on *women* and *gender oppression*. However, as previously mentioned, this approach allowed for observation that enabled an accounting for the dialogue between the women, which enriched the data. For instance, the participants challenged one another and asked clarifying questions of each other, which forced them to take individual responsibility for their responses.

Data Analysis

We applied Bamberg's (2004) narrative analysis, which enabled a focus on the participants' identity, and the "pre-existing meanings, beliefs, and practices" (Bamberg, 2004, p. 364) these women held about race, gender, and leadership. This type of analysis highlighted the "inconsistencies, contradictions, and ambiguities that arise as [participants] try to find ways to mitigate the interactive trouble of being misconstrued" (Bamberg, 2004, p. 365), rather than our own biases.

As an exploratory study, the analysis process was open and focused on specific aspects of the group in question (Schutt, 2012). We coalesced the data – field notes, reflections, professional transcriptions, and the recording. Initial codes were generated during the interview (Merriam, 2009). In this instance, we made note of words and/or phrases such as misogyny, White men, mothering, deficit, and gender oppression, that accentuated the point the women made. These initial codes became headers in an excel spreadsheet. After reading the transcript and revisiting the audio recording several times, we highlighted quotes that were most reflective of these initial codes. These codes were then aggregated into larger emerging codes, accounting for how these

administrators used their identity, particularly when they were considering the race of those with whom they were interacting. Next, we noted observable patterns and discussed these with peer-debriefers (Lincoln & Guba, 1986) and with each other. By the end of numerous debriefing dialogues, cross-referencing observation notes, participants' accounts, and Putnam's (2000) theory, we identified three themes that make it plain where White women administrators' racial privilege and gender oppression manifested in their leadership, as explicated in the Findings section below.

Trustworthiness

In addition to having aligned the protocol with the theory and prior research, we ensured anonymity with the use of pseudonyms for participant names and places, and employed first-level member checks (Horvat, 2013), providing an opportunity for the administrators to review the transcript and the final themes. Further, we provided a thick description (Lincoln & Guba, 1986) and used the participants' own words as if the reader was in the room with us (Bamberg, 2004). And as previously mentioned, we also worked with critically informed peers, who Lincoln and Guba (1986) refer to as peer debriefers. They were three White women administrators with faculty appointments; all who are qualitative researchers and work directly with students. Doing so enabled us to check whether the analysis aligned with the findings, and whether we answered the intended research question. Finally, each author independently reviewed the data and engaged in coding and journaling, before meeting to review those findings and synthesize the analysis. We also spoke at length about our potential biases and worked to ensure we were removing them from our interpretation of the data if needed.

Findings

Following the approach through which data were collected, we present findings in a chronological narrative to best reflect the evolution of study participants' expressed ideas around race, gender, and leadership as they engaged in conversation with each other. Findings begin with themes related to racial identity, and then broaden to include gendered identity. Evidence of both bridging and bonding (Putnam, 2000) is present throughout these findings.

Institutional Structures and Approaches

Study participants explicitly acknowledged the alienating system of higher education, and how bias embedded within the establishment and practices of postsecondary institutions have underscored their efforts. When addressing the racial tension on campus, one of the pressing issues Scarlett highlighted was:

Our systems increasingly seem to be pushing to treat [students] the same. Not just [every student] equitably, but [every student] the same; and view that as sort of a fair policy...So I think that's one of the key advocacy things is to try to be kind of a voice of sanity in all this and to think about the impact of these institutional policies that on the surface seem fine.

While this idea of treating all students the same appears to be fair or equal in measure to some, these women recognized such an approach has a prejudicial impact. It is at this point where these White women administrators' began to reference the role both their racial and gendered identities play within their leadership.

In their attempt to reconcile incongruent policies, participants bonded over their racial privilege and their gender oppression, respectively. As we get deeper into the dialogue, it becomes clear these women used the former as a tool, in conjunction with their administrative position, in an attempt to challenge discrepant policies and

practices. They further used the latter to bridge with Students of Color. Scarlett described seeking to address the myriad inequitable effects of financial aid policies and practices as an example. While taking up this approach has utility in attempting to resolve race-related concerns, participants may have been unaware of how bridging revealed a deficit perspective of racialized students, and how bonding conceivably reinforced their privilege.

The Utility and Pitfalls of Racial Privilege

Study participants shared their reflections on their racial identities. This included the privilege they held as White women, as well as their perspectives on how they were called to action in response to racism and racial disparity. For example, Daisy explained:

Because I'm White, I have privilege and a lot of my learning over my lifetime has been how to minimize that impact and how to maybe even educate other people who are my race about the context that we work in and how we can be more inclusive if we're aware of that privilege.

Dixie elaborated on the racism and racial disparity concept:

I'm really clear about my role as an ally in my head. I mean, my job is to talk to other White people. Because the situation isn't going to improve only through the actions and the involvement of a historically marginalized group, the dominant people have to do the majority of the work. And so I can be heard. I'm 100% clear on that.

Not only did the participants agree they have racial privilege, but it was their intent to use it to shed light on higher education as a discursive system, and to address some of the issues Students of Color were facing within such a system. They recognized race, specifically the utility of their race, and the need to work with other White people through that lens.

While they all talked about the importance of having those aforementioned difficult conversations with other White people, the discussion then turned to the specific spaces where these women use their race. Willow shared:

I was on the [Diversity and Inclusion] committee as a White woman, and there were other White women and men on that committee. I think that's okay since not all work on behalf of diversity can be done by People of Color.

As previously stated, most college administrators are White people. In their roles, they are faced with having to respond to campus racial tensions; thus, they are more likely to serve on committees related to diversity and inclusion. The participants deemed this to be acceptable, mostly because they themselves have recognized that the racial tensions Students of Color face are not by their own hand but by a greater system that was never intended to account for racial diversity. Additionally, there was evidence of cognizance that these students further lack the social power to bring resolve to such challenges, therefore these White women saw themselves as stepping in on behalf of Students of Color. Acknowledging race, then, is imperative within their leadership. However, it was overlooked in the conversation that such an acknowledgement is not an exercise widely adopted by White people. Further, conversations that center around diversity and justice may not come easy for this group, so an additional task would be to help other White leaders also name race, otherwise serving on a Diversity and Inclusion committee could be an impediment to attending to challenges related to race and racism on college campuses.

As we continued to delve into where and when these women acknowledged race, and more specifically, used their racial privilege, Maverick reflected on a previous conversation with other administrators, expressing that it made her more

“vigilant...about resources and spaces that serve students who haven’t historically been served well.” She further shared:

When I hear conversations about reallocation and that we don’t need the Diversity Center, inside I’m screaming, and sometimes externally, too, because I know not only is that an important student success space for students, but oh by the way, it may also have a relationship to Title IX obligations.

During leadership conversations around resource reallocation, or shifts in how funds are distributed, that may seem harmless, there is a need to think through how all organizational functions have the potential to exacerbate or alleviate campus racial tensions. One might further observe that study participants’ broad vigilance can quickly deflect from racial concerns. While race/ethnicity was the initial focus, the mention of Title IX obligations without, in this instance, any acknowledgement of gendered-racism (Essed, 1991), and the challenges Women of Color students may face, has the potential to center White women and to shift the priority of the conversation to gender-specific challenges, thus away from race-specific challenges. Findings call attention to the possibility of an unintentional lack of focus or consistency when centering the needs of Students of Color and addressing racial tensions on college campuses.

Gender Oppression as a Proxy for Understanding Racial Bias

As we continued to discuss race, gender, and their administrative roles, and how they converge with their interaction with Students of Color, the conversation shifted to the motivation that underscores their efforts. Given their perspective of systemic bias, and that Students of Color have historically been underserved, Daisy explained:

[The work is] still not done. We’re not done. [Women] have more chances to speak up than we did 40 years ago, but I see there has been more progress [in advancing women] than there has in race in my [lifetime]. Allowing people who are not of the dominant race to have a voice has taken a lot longer than it has for women.

This perception reflected her understanding of oppression, with which the other participants agreed. Daisy explained, “somehow [being] White trumps gender in some areas.” Scarlett’s observation was “gender is less of an issue than race,” which is not a sentiment evidenced to be widely captured within the dominant narrative of White women. When asked whether they all agree with these statements, they unanimously responded affirmatively, believing that being White was far more advantageous than their gender. Their stance was an acknowledgement that race has afforded these women, as Dixie expressed, a “sophisticated understanding of all the forces that are [playing out] at the same time,” which undergirded their efforts.

As the group further articulated the utility of their understanding oppression and how they bridge with Students of Color, Willow shared:

I think about [the race of my students] because I realized that I never had these issues that they’re struggling with. Not so much the issues, but the kind of background [that marginalizes them]. I mean, many of them are first generation or have no kind of support – they just don’t know.

Willow’s acknowledgement of her students’ race reiterated early parts of the conversation that not all students are the same, particularly that Students of Color, both when aggregated and disaggregated, have unique needs. Yet, negative assumptions were being made about such students. Daisy followed Willow’s sentiment by stating that “[White students have] learned through their prior experiences and their families how to navigate systems better, perhaps.” At this point, it was perceivable that their understanding of oppression, based on gender, perpetuates a racial divide rooted in deficit thinking. As the conversation progressed, Daisy did share that some students are

disadvantaged because they are navigating a system formed by and for White people, and that:

We have not helped *all* of our students learn that navigation process. And that's part of what we do every day, is help people navigate a system that is – the people who set it up call it fair, but I think there's a bias in their interpretation.

This dialogue revealed a misunderstanding of racialized students that may be hindering these women leaders' bridging efforts. While some Students of Color might identify as a first-generation college student and/or are coming to these women for support, that should not lead to assumptions that these students are lacking. In this instance, the assumption was one of lacking support for students from other sources such as family members or community role models. In their attempt to support students, study participants not only conflated marginalizing characteristics at times, but their assumptions about Students of Color underline a deficit perspective. Situated within the counter-narrative of their well-meaning approach, their desire to, as Willow expressed, create a place where “*all* can come with [their] baggage... where there is greater sensitivity and awareness of [issues related to] race, gender, diversity, and inclusiveness,” would require these women to be aware of their unconscious bias just as much as they are of systemic bias.

Discussion

While White women's racial and gendered identities have been explored in prior research, very few studies have investigated whether these identities manifest in their leadership. To that end, to address this gap in the literature, we drew on the positionality of this group who co-dominates postsecondary leadership positions with White men, who more than likely had been called to respond to the racial discord afflicting college

campuses. We asked the following research question: How, if at all, do White women administrators' racial and gendered identities manifest in their leadership? Through the lens of Putnam's (2000) conception of social capital, the participants' responses and dialogue shed light on the ways in which their intersecting identities not only manifest in their leadership but how they help and/or impede their efforts while bridging and bonding. Because of the dominant (Accapadi, 2007; Case, 2012; Frankenberg, 1993; hooks, 1981) and counter-narratives (Case, 2012) regarding White women in the academy, we expected these women to acknowledge gender oppression and the plight of women; however, we tempered expectations as to whether the participants would acknowledge their race or privilege. We found that participants drew on their racial and positional bond to work with other White people. In particular, they acknowledged that higher education is a system founded on patriarchy and racism, challenged expressed efforts to treat all students the same, and questioned shifts in resource allocation. They further drew on these bonds through their participation on diversity-related committees. And they bridged with Students of Color explicitly through their understanding of gender oppression. Collectively, the findings lay the groundwork for future studies focused on race, gender, and leadership.

Guided by Putnam's (2000) notions of bonding and bridging social capital, questions as to whether this group could act beyond their bonds (race, gender, and administrative roles) were at the forefront of this research study. By specifically acknowledging their race, their professional proximity to other White administrators, and the progress made by women, the participants demonstrated how privilege and oppression, respectively, played out in their leadership. Yet, they provided some

evidence that they were unaware of how their bonding might have contributed to deficit-thinking, “negative, stereotypical, and prejudicial beliefs about a diverse group” (Ford et al., 2006, p. 176), and other shortcomings.

More often than not, dominant narratives about White people include that they continue to evade conversations about race and privilege and would rather opt out of difficult conversations (DiAngelo, 2011, 2018; Endres & Gould, 2009; Gillespie et al., 2002; McIntosh, 1988, 2012), including dominant narratives about White women (Accapadi, 2007; Case, 2012; Frankenberg, 1993; hooks, 1981). The perspectives of the White women leaders in this study provide counter-narratives about White women. These counter-narratives emerge in their comfort with talking about race and privilege, doing so with other White people, and when highlighting systemic bias embedded within institutions of higher education, though through the lens of gender oppression. Consequently, because White people take up space where campus racial tensions are being addressed, for example on diversity and inclusion committees, it will be important for this subset of the prevailing leadership group to be mindful of other White leaders’ discomfort with race-related conversations. Such may derail or halt racial resolve, and/or possibly lead to interest convergence (Bell, 1980) in an effort to pacify race relations on college campuses.

Equally as important, White women leaders in higher education need to be cognizant that their understanding of oppression perceivably dismisses the role racism plays in the lives of some women, and the compounded challenges they face on campuses. Oppression, as does racism, varies from group to group and over time. Therefore, study participants' understanding of and experience with oppression may not

be akin to others' experience with oppression; assuming otherwise may aggravate, in this case, the racial tension they want to address. Hence, their leadership including their direct support of Students of Color may not only exacerbate racial gender gap, but perpetuate deficit thinking. While these White women's recognition of race forfeits the use of color-blind ideology (Bonilla-Silva, 2013; Gooden, 2012), in that "the norm is for race to be avoided" (Garner, 2017, p. 114), "unfortunately like all thinking, deficit thinking affects behaviors" (Ford et al., 2006, p. 176-177), which means these leaders may act on their thoughts regardless of their impact. The White women administrators in this study were quick to recognize that there is an association between race and privilege. That consensus could have been the results of groupthink (Janis, 1971; Lederman, 1990), or potentially the presence of the first author. Nonetheless, it affirms that race does shape White women's lives (Frankenberg, 1993), as well as, in this instance, their leadership. However, in leading through that lens, their efforts may fall short if systematic approaches to development, dialogue, and assessment are not pursued.

In using gender oppression as a proxy for understanding oppression writ large, one misses how oppression has manifested differently for groups affected by the same White cisgender patriarchal system. Thus, these individuals may be unaware as to how this leads to a misunderstanding of the challenges faced by women, widely, and deficit thinking, particularly, when bridging with Students of Color. As previously noted, when White women reference gender oppression or the challenges faced by *women*, they are more often than not referring to the plight and positionality of White women (Frankenberg, 1993; hooks, 1981), which has the potential to further underline their

racial privilege. Throughout the focus group, there was no account of the intersectional relationship between race and gender, particularly for Women of Color. A lack of intersectional perspectives matters because gender oppression looks different for White women than it does for Women of Color (See Essed, 1991; Frankenberg, 1993; hooks, 1981). Overlooking intersectional identities means administrators may not be fully serving this population of students. They may also be dismissing the challenges their Women of Color colleagues are facing (See Hill et al., 2016).

It is important to note that White women's willingness to use their racial privilege does not make these women White saviors (Hughey, 2014). The idea that White people deliver racialized others from tragedy (often brought on by systemic practices, nevertheless); instead, their reflections revealed where their racial and gendered identities emerge in their efforts. Findings suggest they do not dismiss the exclusive and racist tendencies of this White male dominated system. Nevertheless, doing so begins to put some White women administrators in a position to "acknowledge [the] colossal unseen dimensions," sound the alarm "surrounding privilege," "[think] about equality or equity incomplete," and not "[protect the] unearned advantage and conferred dominance" (McIntosh, 1988, p. 281). However, it is not possible without first unpacking privilege and broadening their understanding of oppression.

Implications for Practice

The findings of this study lend themselves to implications for practice, specifically professional development opportunities and mentoring programs. Ruben et al. (2016) highlighted the various approaches to leadership development, emphasizing the "early intervention model," "institutional or campus-based programs," "a multi-

institutional model,” and “cross-institutional programs offered by professional associations” (p. 348). The authors were clear there is utility in such programming, and presented the importance of assessing, in this case, the institution’s need, as well as the “knowledge and competencies required for effective leadership” (Ruben et al, 2016, p. 362). With that, given the ongoing racial climate on higher education campuses, professional development models within this context should facilitate dialogue around the role of identity within leadership.

Additionally, mentoring programs, or what Ruben and colleagues (2016) referred to as “Peer-to-peer Learning” (p. 354) could also be advantageous. Such interaction could promote leadership networking ensuring that White and minoritized colleagues work across groups. Perceivably, this could thwart pitfalls and shortcomings in White administrators’ efforts, and extend leaderships’ overall bridging capital and bonding capital. The participants in this study clearly articulated that the issues of exclusion cannot solely be fought by the disenfranchised. Sponsorship, ad recruitment, and increased representation among Men and Women of Color in key administrative roles are critical in campus policy development and enactment.

At the same time, this exploratory study suggests an opportunity for institutional leaders to assess and facilitate the knowledge of campus administrators when it comes to the experiences of Students of Color who have distinctive needs (Primm, 2018), especially when disaggregated and treated as individuals. Although study participants recognized this, there were other ways in which their perspectives about Students of Color seemed to be rooted in deficit mindsets or unfounded assumptions. As acknowledged by study participants, higher education is a system formed by and for

White people (See Wilder, 2013); and as such differentially perpetuates and exacerbates the challenges Students of Color can face. The study thus points to an opportunity to examine campus policies and related training for administrators to ensure an active anti-racist stance when implementing such policies. For example, Title IX was raised by study participants. Prior studies have demonstrated that Title IX policy has been far less advantageous for Women of Color across educational contexts for White women (Pickett et al., 2012; Rhoden, 2010). Thus, policies related to Title IX represent an area where professional development and institutional research could be helpful if applied as anti-racist measures.

Implications for Research

We navigated the tension between the dominant narratives and counter-narratives to reveal where White women administrators' racial and gendered identities manifest in their leadership. The White women who participated in this research study indicated feeling it is their job to talk to other White people. Observing and coding such dialogue, similar to Accapadi's (2007) approach, could help to uncover more potential barriers to the bridging and bonding process. Further, supplementing such studies with interviews with White administrators and Students of Color could also be advantageous in understanding how to effectively respond to the racial discord on impacting college campuses nationally. Additionally, exploring how the few Women of Color postsecondary administrators' intersectional identities, having further to contend with negative stereotypes (Cook, 2013) and the privilege of their colleagues (Lucal, 1996; Watt, 2007), affects their leadership is also an underexplored topic.

Conclusion

Demographic shifts, contentious policies, and student protests against racism underscore the racial tension that has to be addressed by White institutional leaders. While the women in this study had good intentions, how their identity emerged in their leadership indicates there is still work to be done. The analysis highlighted how big the dark cloud is (oppressive practices of higher education), through which runs a fine silver line (willing White women administrators). Though these administrators recognized race, as Frankenberg (1993) suggested, interrogating their biases will be just as critical in the future. Reinforced racial privilege and deficit thinking cannot be simply dismissed by administrators. With that, dialogue into where White women administrators' racial and gendered identities manifest should continue. Doing so could yield a deeper understanding of how to respond to racial and systemic injustices without perpetuating them.

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