



Navigating Silence: White Student Leaders' Silence and Fear When Addressing Race

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This general qualitative study examined how white undergraduate student leaders at three historically white institutions (HWIs) understood and navigated race, whiteness, and leadership. Using photo elicitation in semi-structured interviews and focus groups, data were collected from 18 participants (n = 18). Thematic analysis revealed a culture of racial silence, fear of missteps, and limited racial consciousness in leadership contexts. Participants described discomfort discussing race and often withdrew from cross-racial engagement. The findings suggest that whiteness operated invisibly, reinforcing ethnocentric norms and limiting students' readiness to lead across difference. The study recommends intentional leadership education that integrates critical reflection about race, raising racial awareness through dialogues, and empathy building through leadership opportunities in diverse teams.

Introduction

Colleges and universities are vital incubators for developing future leaders (Chunoo & Osteen, 2016), offering student leadership roles that are often formative and influential well beyond graduation (Bialek & Lloyd, 1998; DeSantis, 2007). These formal leadership positions—such as roles in student government, fraternities and sororities, campus organizations, and residence halls—offer students opportunities to develop interpersonal, organizational, and ethical competencies (Komives et al., 2011; Dugan, 2017). While it is common for leadership frameworks to emphasize the ethical responsibility of leaders to inspire positive social change (Komives, 2009), leadership development programs can be silent on the issue of race (Taylor, 2023).

On college campuses, student leaders are positioned to challenge or perpetuate racial inequalities that persist within higher education environments and the broader society. Specifically, research has demonstrated that white students play a pivotal role in sustaining systems of racial inequality and discrimination on college campuses (Cabrera, 2019; Cabrera & Hill-Zuganelli, 2021; McKinney, 2013), yet they often have limited awareness of their racial identity (McKinney, 2013). Foste (2019a, 2019b) suggested that some white student leaders demonstrated discomfort when talking about race or framed themselves as racially innocent, while Beatty et al. (2021) found that some white students exhibited resistance when engaging with race-related dialogues in leadership settings. However, there remains a significant gap in understanding the racial attitudes, experiences, and leadership practices of white student leaders. This study seeks to address this gap

by examining how white student leaders perceived their own racial identity and the racial identities of others, and whether (or how) these perceptions shaped their leadership practices and decision-making.

Positionality

In any study that addresses social identities, the identities of the author affect the analysis. I am a white male leadership educator at a large public land-grant university in the Mid-South. I came to study race and leadership through the experiences, stories, questions, frustrations, and joys of students. In my interactions with university student leaders, they have shared stories of explicit individualized racism and structural racism, as well as examples of individualized racial healing and opportunities for systemic racial equity. I approach this study with the belief that, while students can create and perpetuate racial inequities, they can also be catalysts and leaders for racial healing.

Purpose and Research Question

The purpose of this study was to explore how white student leaders at three historically white institutions (HWIs) understood race and its effects within the context of their leadership experiences (Taylor, 2023). Central to the study was the question: How do white undergraduate student leaders in formal institutional leadership positions make meaning of their race in their leadership roles and experiences (Taylor, 2023)?

Review of Literature

Although white students at HWIs frequently occupy many influential formal institutional leadership roles, such as student government association officers, fraternity and sorority executives, student council officers, and homecoming executives, relatively little research has explored how race and race consciousness influence their leadership experiences and development. Dugan and Henderson (2021) criticized this silence around race and racial injustices from student leadership development scholars and researchers, arguing that silence makes the field complicit in the injustices.

Much of the existing scholarship on race and student leadership centers the barriers encountered by Students of Color—challenges that stem not only from underrepresentation in high-impact positions (Arminio et al., 2000) but also from emotional and psychological strain (Beatty & Lima, 2022). These students tended to gravitate toward culturally specific organizations or diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) related positions, where they could find safety and shared understanding. As Tatum (1994) argued, affiliation with racially similar peers provided relief from the constant demands of code-switching, while Beatty and Lima (2022) underscored the cumulative burden of racial battle fatigue that many Students of Color experience while navigating predominantly white leadership structures.

In contrast, the racial dynamics influencing white student leaders remain relatively understudied. This gap in the literature is notable. White students frequently hold influential leadership positions

that shape campus culture. One of the few studies on white student leaders examined co-curricular involvement and concluded that the white student leaders wanted to frame their leadership work through a lens of progressive, racially conscious innocence (Foste, 2019a). According to the study, the students saw racism or racial prejudice as something that happened among other bigoted students, but never within their own leadership work or the structures or programs in which they were leading. Foste (2019b) also found that white student leaders, either consciously or unconsciously, wanted to maintain the status quo, resulting in reproducing white-centered leadership cultures.

While some white student leaders undoubtedly articulated commitments to inclusion and justice, others relied on colorblind frameworks that attempted to minimize inequities (Cabrera, 2019; Modica, 2015; Taylor, 2023). Scholars have noted that white racial consciousness likely varies due to personal relationships with People of Color or lack thereof (Kunst et al., 2022; Tatum, 1994), political or religious ideologies, and the ability to engage in difficult conversations about race (Oluo, 2018). Additionally, fears around losing influence or disrupting familiar leadership hierarchies may have caused some to resist structural changes that would elevate Students of Color to more visible leadership roles (Foste, 2019b; Dugan & Komives, 2010). In a broader population than just student leaders, Norton and Sommers (2011) found that white people saw race as a zero-sum game. In this study, Norton and Sommers (2011) highlighted the perception from white participants that, if prejudice decreased toward Black people, it must increase toward white people. This concept of reverse racism is sometimes held within groups of white student leaders (Taylor, 2023) and hotly debated among race scholars (Delgado & Stefancic, 1997; DiAngelo, 2018; McGhee, 2021; Oluo, 2018).

While the broader fields of student development have explored racial identity development among white students (Cabrera, 2019; McKinney, 2013) and offered insights into inclusive leadership pedagogy (Beatty & Manning-Ouellette, 2018; Dugan, 2017; Kroll, 2023), specific attention to white student leaders remains scarce (Foste, 2019a, 2019b). This study seeks to address that gap. In an era where national debates around race and racial justice have become increasingly polarized and suppressed in many settings, understanding the beliefs, behaviors, and blind spots of white student leaders is critical. For leadership educators and institutions seeking to foster inclusive communities and train leaders for the reality of multicultural workplaces and communities, this inquiry offers a timely and necessary contribution.

Methodology

This study employed a general interpretivist qualitative design grounded in the constructionist paradigm (Patton, 2002) and implemented an arts-based research (ABR) approach. Rooted in the belief that knowledge is socially and individually constructed, the study sought to understand participants' personal interpretations of leadership and race within their campus environments. Eighteen ($n = 18$) students from three universities participated in the research, each engaging in an in-person focus group followed by a virtual one-on-one interview. In alignment with Covey's (1989) principle to "seek first to understand," the researcher approached the inquiry with openness to the participants' constructions of leadership and whiteness.

While the study did not begin with a guiding theoretical framework, the analysis process drew from the body of critical whiteness studies (CWS) to deepen the interpretation of patterns and absences in the data. CWS offered a lens to explore how participants articulated racial consciousness, inclusion, and power—or failed to do so—and highlighted how broader racial narratives and silences were woven into their leadership stories.

Participants

Eighteen white undergraduate student leaders from three large public universities participated in the research. The universities were public research HWIs located in the South, Mid-South, and Midwest. Each participant took part in two conversations—an in-person focus group and a follow-up one-on-one interview via Zoom, both lasting close to an hour and a half. The 18 white student leader participants were in high school or college during the 2020 COVID pandemic and the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement for racial justice. To qualify for the study, participants were required to meet three inclusion criteria. First, each participant had to be an undergraduate student currently enrolled at one of the three selected university sites. Second, participants needed to currently hold or have previously held a formal, institutional student leadership position, such as serving as the president of a student organization, treasurer of their college’s student council, student government association (SGA) vice president, fraternity or sorority recruitment chair, or a comparable role. Finally, all participants were required to self-identify as white (Taylor, 2023).

Arts-Based Research and Photo Elicitation

With the goal of eliciting salient, concrete examples of leadership praxis from the participants, the design incorporated participant-generated photo elicitation as the central method of data collection. The participants submitted between four and seven photographs in response to the prompt: “On your campus, what does leadership look like to you?” These images—ranging from peer-led initiatives to institutional symbols of leadership—acted as visual prompts for deeper storytelling, evoking personal memories, emotions, and reflections. In total, 94 photographs were collected from the 18 participants.

Each photo served as an entry point into the students’ lived leadership experiences, often sparking narratives that moved beyond the leadership moment in the picture. The data collected demonstrate the core premise of arts-based research—that the arts offer a unique way of knowing, revealing dimensions of identity, belonging, and power dynamics that may remain hidden through traditional interviews alone (Latz, 2017; Mulvihill & Swaminathan, 2020). The photographs facilitated what Yates (2010) describes as two windows of understanding: a view into the participant’s world and a view into the participant themselves. Integrating photo elicitation into the study design was not merely a stylistic choice—it was essential to cultivating the kind of vulnerability, specificity, and authenticity that gave the study its depth. As students described the context and significance of each image, their stories unearthed complex intersections of race, leadership, and meaning-making. The resulting data were not only rich and layered but also emotionally resonant, providing insight into how white student leaders made meaning of race in the context of their leadership praxis.

Data Analysis

To analyze the data, I prioritized participants' own interpretations by adopting an emic lens, focusing on how students made meaning of their experiences. This approach of centering the members' meanings (Emerson et al., 2011) shaped my choice of coding methods. I began with *in vivo* coding to stay grounded in participants' language. I then layered descriptive coding to identify patterns, themes, and relationships across the data. To ensure trustworthiness, I triangulated across multiple data sources: 94 student-submitted photographs, 1,939 minutes of transcribed dialogue, and extensive field notes capturing context and tone. Furthermore, there was a high level of participant engagement in the study with the photo selection, interactions with their peers in focus groups, and the follow-up one-on-one interview.

Findings: Silence and Fear

The following sections detail experiences shared by the 18 participants. Table 1 identifies the participants and their primary formal leadership roles. The pictures shared in the following sections were submitted by the students prior to their focus group. Overall, students described a pervasive—sometimes imposed—silence surrounding race in their leadership roles, along with a fear of being “canceled” if they shared opinions about race in those roles.

Table 1

Participants and Their Leadership Roles

Student alias	Primary formal leadership role
Bella	First-year Leadership Team Officer
Billy	IFC Officer
Carol	Panhellenic Officer
Carson	Fraternity Chapter President
Chad	IFC Officer
Colin	SGA President
Derek	First-year Leadership Team Officer
Elaine	Student Programming Board Executive
Jake	Fraternity Chapter Officer
Johnny	New Member Educator, Pre-Law Fraternity
Katie	Student Programming Board President
Kayla	Women in STEM Sorority Officer
Liz	Pre-Health Club Officer
Luke	IFC Officer
Mason	Fraternity Chapter Officer
Olivia	Mental Health Club Officer
Rebecca	Student Philanthropy Executive Director
Theia	Tutoring Student Supervisor

Silence: Whiteness Unseen and Unspoken

One of the most consistent patterns that emerged from participant interviews was the tendency not to acknowledge or discuss their own whiteness. This finding is consistent with other white racial identity scholars (McDermott, 2020; McKinney, 2013). Nearly every student required prompting to consider the role of whiteness in their identity or leadership, even though each participant understood prior to the focus group that the study was about the intersection of their white racial identity and leadership experiences. Only two participants—Katie and Mason—brought up the topic of whiteness unprompted. Interestingly, these two students were the ideological extremes in this group of participants, with Katie identifying as a “hardcore conservative Bible-believing Christian Republican” and Mason describing himself as a “socialist” and “on the left.” Despite their ideological differences, both admitted to avoiding race talk. Mason noted, “Essentially, we’re not talking about it,” referring to his fraternity. Katie also acknowledged a tight boundary around those conversations, stating she only discussed race with “family and a few close friends who agree” with her.

Other participants also acknowledged silence around race and whiteness in leadership discussions. Billy shared the picture below (see Figure 1) of a fraternity newsletter introducing the executive team of which he was a part. He identified all of the student leaders as white.

Figure 1

Fraternity Newsletter: “Just Elected and Eager to Make an Impact”



Billy shared this photograph because he was proud of the leadership impact he had on this executive team. When asked about how race affected his leadership decisions, he paused and, as if thinking about it for the first time, said, “Well, we were all white, so I guess it didn’t.” His statement acknowledged a belief that race is only significant for those who are not white, a sentiment echoed in other whiteness research (Helms, 1995; McDermott, 2020). Billy went on to explain that the group never talked about race and never considered race as a part of their leadership work. It is important to note that their leadership work specifically affected historically white fraternities with, as described by Billy, limited racial diversity.

Beyond interview discussions, the silence surrounding race and whiteness extended into the artifacts students shared. Of the 94 images submitted as part of the study, many similar to Figure 1 above, not a single one was chosen with race or whiteness in mind (the recruitment email specifically noted that the study was exploring whiteness and leadership). To reiterate, every participant selected multiple photos to share, and each participant was asked why they chose each photo. Not a single participant mentioned race as a part of their answer. It was only after specific prompting that participants mentioned race or whiteness concerning their photographs. This trend suggests not only a silence around whiteness but a deep-seated social conditioning in which whiteness was rendered invisible to these participants.

A Culture of Silence: Self-Censorship and Speech Bans

Participants often described navigating an environment in which conversations about race were avoided—not just by personal choice but as a perceived or explicit group norm. While some silences were voluntary, many described a broader cultural atmosphere where such conversations were discouraged or even banned. The picture below (see Figure 2) is of Chad’s fraternity giving a gift to their house mom. Chad shared that one of his leadership values was showing gratitude, and this picture was an example of that value. When I asked how race affected his leadership experiences in his fraternity he noticed the lack of racial diversity. Of the 16 people pictured, he confirmed that all were white. He went on to describe a leadership culture in which differences, especially race, were not talked about in his fraternity. He explained that they would have a diversity talk in chapter presentations during Black History Month, but there “wasn’t a need to talk about it otherwise.”

Figure 2
Fraternity Executives: “Expressing Gratitude” at Christmas



For some participants, silence around race and whiteness was less about choice and more about enforcement. Carson, a leader in one of the most influential fraternities on his campus, stated bluntly: “We’ve outlawed talking about most things like that.” He explained that race conversations were “polarizing,” so the group decided to avoid them altogether. A message was sent in a group message to the entire fraternity that discussions around race or other possibly polarizing topics were “banned.” Others described this silencing as “damage control.” Billy, reflecting on a previous racial scandal in his fraternity, admitted, “I’m scared. I don’t trust fraternity members to not be stupid.” Chad added, “I’m scared that the racists are going to get caught, and I’m not going to have a fraternity any longer.” These reflections revealed that students perceived silence as a safer path than engaging in potentially polarizing discussions—especially when reputations or group status were on the line.

Jake articulated the subtle consequences of that avoidance: “I think it builds a culture of distance. It feels like you can’t talk about some in-depth things. You can’t cross this line or this line.” Theia echoed this when she noted, “...College kids, they’re not going to talk about race unless they’re in a class about race theory or something.” This reticence was not just passive avoidance—it reflected an internalized fear of saying the wrong thing or being perceived as offensive. Derek, who stated that he opposed most DEI initiatives, admitted that he avoided conversations about race or whiteness unless he was confident the person agreed with his views, sharing, “I don’t want other people to think of me in a bad light because I don’t really agree [with DEI].” Overall, a prominent theme emerged—the white student leaders interviewed were not talking about race or whiteness in their leadership contexts, and sometimes this silence was imposed through organizational demands.

Silence Around Race in Leadership Development Trainings

In addition to self- and group-imposed silence, participants described a clear gap in formal leadership training around racial identity and awareness. When asked directly whether before the study they had ever considered how race affected their leadership actions, 10 of the 18 participants expressed sentiments similar to Johnny’s: “I have never thought about how race affects leadership.” The data highlighted a clear gap in leadership training; these white student leaders had not received leadership training discussing racial dynamics or racial consciousness in leadership. The general absence of race-conscious content in leadership programming meant that students were left unprepared for the complexities of leading in increasingly diverse environments. Another participant, Rebecca, shared about a leadership experience during the BLM movement. As a first-year leader, her sorority tasked her with writing a public post for the sorority in response to George Floyd’s murder, but she recalled having “no training” and being unprepared for the criticisms of “white performative posts” that she received. Before this moment, she was unaware of the whiteness of her historically white sorority and reported she felt “set up to fail” by the lack of training.

Figure 3

Sorority Executive Team: "I Love Being with My Girls"



Similarly, Carol shared a picture of her sorority's executive team (see Figure 3). She identified only one member of the team who did not identify as white. I asked Carol what leadership training she received regarding race or DEI to navigate the challenges of leading a sorority. She talked about having a DEI chair for the sorority as a formal leadership role (this was the one Person of Color on the executive team), but when I asked again what training she received, she stated, "I guess I didn't get any training. We didn't talk about it. The DEI chair covers that for the house." Carol expressed the common theme throughout the data that these student leaders were not receiving specific training regarding race consciousness, dialogues about race, or how to create diverse, equitable, and inclusive communities; rather, there was silence around race in leadership trainings.

Several participants described DEI presentations as a part of the communities they led. While many fraternities and sororities now include DEI presentations, their impact appears limited and often polarizing. Katie, for example, described DEI efforts as attempts "to indoctrinate me," and Derek shared that he often felt that "no one is allowed to ask questions." Even among those who valued the intent, the delivery was questioned. Luke observed, "They often consist of somebody standing up and telling everyone to not be racist." In response to whether these topics surfaced in leadership team meetings, answers were unanimous: "No." Elaine reflected, "We just don't think about it. We have work to get done." Carson's blunt assessment stood out: "We've outlawed talking about most things like that." This points to a broader issue in leadership education: not only are

conversations about race absent, but they are also perceived as unrelated—or even detrimental—to the practical work of leadership.

A Desire for Dialogue

One of the fascinating tensions of the study was the dichotomy between the silence regarding race and whiteness and a thirst for honest and vulnerable leadership conversations about race. In the follow-up interview, Rebecca mentioned that her entire focus group stayed in the parking lot talking about race and being a white leader for over an hour. Jake echoed this sentiment naming his focus group as one of the “best and hardest” conversations he had in college. Carson, who was also in Jake’s focus group, remarked that he loved hearing from his peers who had different ideas than him.

The overall takeaway from the participants was that they craved more candid conversations about race and whiteness with peer leaders. The silence around race and whiteness, as described by many participants, appeared to stem from an underlying fear—fear of misspeaking, of being judged, or of being labeled as racist. This fear often translated into avoidance, reinforcing a cycle where silence replaced dialogue. Jake, reflecting on the consequences of this dynamic, noted how avoidance not only maintains the status quo but actively reinforces narrow perspectives: “I feel like it almost brings more closed-mindedness instead of open-mindedness.” He argued that the reluctance to engage does not foster neutrality; it breeds insulation. By staying in comfortable circles where conversations remain restricted or in echo chambers, he claimed: “the potential for real understanding shrinks.”

Juxtaposed Stories of Racial Awareness

One of the more memorable stories from the data started with Jake sharing a picture of his fraternity’s executive team (see Figure 4). Jake talked about his love for his fraternity. While he did not mention race proactively, when asked about how race affects his leadership experiences in his fraternity, he mentioned that almost his entire fraternity is white, and all of the members of the executive team were white. At first, he said that race did not affect his leadership experiences at all; however, later in the interview, he recounted a story about his fraternity and the BLM movement.

Figure 4

Fraternity Executive Team: “Just Me and the Guys”



Jake remembered a BLM march that went on the street directly in front of his fraternity house. His fraternity was a large, influential, historically white fraternity. The house was situated on a hill above the street. The fraternity members gathered on the lawn, looking down on the march. Jake recalled that his friends in the fraternity “just stood around watching and talking” and sometimes “laughing.” Overall, he felt that the experience was innocuous. Then, a few days later his fraternity was “called out” by some of the Black students in the BLM march. The Black students said that they felt intimidated or threatened by a group of white men looking down on them. In the interview Jake said that he had not even thought about the optics of an all-white group of young men with folded arms, a group who largely disagreed with the movement, looking down on the group of Black protestors. After further prompting, he also noted that he had not considered the fact that his fraternity was standing in front of a multi-million-dollar fraternity house in a prime campus location, whereas the historically Black fraternities did not have an official fraternity house. In the interview, Jake mentioned that he and “the entire fraternity” were “unaware” of the ramifications of his fraternity's actions.

Juxtapose Jake's story with a story from Colin. The picture in Figure 5 was significant to Colin because his grandma impressed upon him the importance of voting, reminding him not to take voting for granted because there was a time when women were not allowed to vote. Consistently in the interviews, Colin mentioned inclusive leadership practices, was thoughtful about his position as a white leader, and talked about some of his considerations for historically marginalized students in his leadership decisions. Colin also identified as a member of the LGBTQ+ community. It is possible that Colin's connection to similar societal experiences of marginalization or oppression and his relationships with others who taught him to see people from these groups informed his inclusive leadership actions and raised his racial awareness.

Figure 5

Grandma and Me: My First Time Voting



Fear of Being Canceled

For many students, the threat of being "canceled" shaped how they engaged—or chose not to engage—with discussions about race. For example, Derek shared an experience in which a guest speaker came to a group of which he is an officer. The speaker was from the university's financial aid office. Derek felt like it was discriminatory that he could not apply for some scholarships because he was white. He stated that he was genuinely curious to learn why there were scholarships based on racial identity, and he wanted to ask the speaker about it; however, he expressed that he did not feel like he could ask his question because of the fear of ridicule from his peers.

Derek went on to describe a pervasive anxiety about sharing his viewpoints, noting: "There are certain things you don't wanna say because people will not agree with it, and then those people will cancel you." His approach to leadership included a calculated silence, saying, "If I can help it, I will never talk about [race]." He viewed race-related topics as too risky to navigate, particularly during high-tension moments such as the BLM movement. The fear of losing friends or being labeled a racist consumed him. "If you said anything... really anything about a Black person in my opinion, you could be labeled as a racist," he said. This apprehension led him to keep quiet around peers whose views he suspected differed from his own, reserving candid conversations for those he trusted to agree. His silence was not rooted in indifference but in a desire to avoid misinterpretation and the reputational harm that might follow.

Politically Strategic Silence

It is imperative to understand the socio-emotional experiences behind Derek and others' words. The participants explicitly mentioned their fear of saying the "wrong thing and being canceled." Bella, who was in the same focus group as Derek, spoke after he shared the story above. She was supporting his claims but also differentiating her perspective (she later acknowledged in her follow-up interview that she found his views "problematic"). She gave a reasoned response that she appreciated people "thinking about what they're saying" and holding others "accountable for purposely saying hurtful things," but lamented that the fear of being canceled may have led to a "lack of willingness to learn." Bella perfectly captured this tension, explaining the current context for student leaders:

It's this tension of wanting to say the right things and wanting to be the right kind of leader, but also being terrified of even stepping into the arena because you don't wanna hurt someone. You don't want to say the wrong thing, so it just kind of stops...it stops you from even starting to learn about the issues for yourself. It's just easier to be quiet, avoid the topics, and just share your opinions when you know you are with people who already agree with you, that way you don't have to learn new things or consider another opinion or change what you're doing (Taylor, 2023).

Bella's statements above illustrated the collective hesitancy among participants to engage with race-related topics. Her reflection underscored the powerful role of social risk in shaping student leadership behavior. Students shared that, rather than being driven solely by apathy or lack of awareness, they withdrew from conversations about race because they feared the consequences of getting it wrong—being misinterpreted, judged harshly, or pushed to the margins of their social circles. Bella's reflection highlighted how this fear did not just silence individuals; it created environments where vulnerability, curiosity, and growth were stifled. Bella and Derek both reflected that the high social cost of missteps—whether real or perceived—discouraged them from stepping into complex dialogues around race, and in Bella's reflection, one could see how that ultimately reinforced patterns of disengagement and self-censorship within leadership spaces.

Navigating Belonging Through Silence

One perceived consequence of addressing race and whiteness in a leadership role is the potential loss of social belonging within one's peer group. Katie, a highly politically motivated student, expressed a belief that conservative students like herself were particularly vulnerable to being silenced. Katie shared a picture of a leadership team of which she is the president (see Figure 6). She selected the picture because of her influence on the leadership team and the campus-wide significance of the team. When asked how race affected her leadership choices, she said that it did not; race was "just a box I check." She said that talking about race only divides groups, so leaders "shouldn't talk about it." She shared her frustration with her sorority and the university for "caving into the woke agenda and DEI nonsense." In multiple instances, she expressed a belief that her viewpoints were "silenced," "canceled," and "unwanted." She accused the media and universities of suppressing right-leaning voices. This perception led her to retreat into spaces she called "safe places"—groups of like-minded peers where she could share her opinions without fear of backlash.

Like others, Katie avoided public confrontation, not out of neutrality, but because she did not want to be “canceled” or subjected to ridicule.

Figure 6

Campus-wide Events Planning Team: “The Best Who Applied”



While Katie’s views were the most dogmatic of the participants, her views were not isolated. Participants consistently expressed a fear of being canceled, so in response, to ensure a sense of belonging, they remained silent, avoided conversations about race and whiteness, and retreated to groups of people who they perceived shared their pre-existing viewpoints.

Discussion

By pursuing members’ meaning (Emerson et al., 2011) in data analysis, the data from the 18 participants indicated that white student leaders experienced a persistent silence around race and whiteness within their leadership contexts. Additionally, their narratives revealed a fear of being canceled, which contributed to a gradual withdrawal into groups they perceived as ideologically or culturally homogeneous. The following sections explore the reasons behind students’ choice of silence and examine the phenomenon of ethnocentric monoculturalism as a way of understanding the participants’ responses.

Why Silence?

The participants reported a deafening silence around the topic of race in student leadership. Dugan and Henderson (2021) confirm this finding regarding leadership development programs and scholars. The silence begs the question, why?

I specifically asked many of the participants that question, “Why do you believe there is a silence surrounding race and whiteness among white student leaders?” The following is a verbatim response from one participant. It is formatted as a poetic transcription. Poetic transcriptions are

verbatim accounts; however, the words have been reformatted into poetic verse, highlighting repetition, contrasts, and themes to allow readers to see the uncommon insights in the common, making the invisible visible (Ellingson, 2011; Glesne, 1997).

It Threatens Them

So, when you ask
the question of
why...
why there's such a
silence
from student leaders
who are white?

Well,
if somebody were to say,
that you got all this,
you're so successful
because
you're
white.

Well,
it threatens them.

I think the reason
why there's such
a discrepancy
between people that are
allies
or...
not allies
is because
it
threatens
who
they
are.

At the very root
of their person,
it threatens them.

This was just one participant's perspective from the study, and yet it reveals something hidden deep within the silence around race: fear. Heifetz et al. (2009) argued that people do not fear change but the loss that may come from the change. It is possible that the participant above was expressing

this fear of loss that could come from acknowledging the nuanced and complex influence that race has played in their experiences. Taylor and Manning-Ouellette (2022) adapted Vygotsky's zones of proximal development into a leadership learning model discussing the socio-emotional challenges that students face in leadership learning, specifically regarding socially just leadership development. The intersection of Heifetz et al. (2009) and Taylor and Manning-Ouellette (2022) is the realization that students from dominant narratives, specifically in this study white student leaders, will have an emotional obstacle to discussing race and leadership because the outcomes of the conversation could be perceived as a threat to their own self-worth or identity, a threat of loss.

For leadership educators, this emotional obstacle does not dictate silence but intentionality. Participants from this study consistently remarked that they wanted more spaces to have these conversations. Of the 18 participants, 12 stated that they wished they could talk about race and/or whiteness more. Silence is not a helpful response; rather, thoughtful, intentional dialogues are needed, and in those dialogues, discussion about the real emotions that accompany growing one's racial awareness is a necessity.

Ethnocentric Monoculturalism

Throughout the data, participants expressed that race was insignificant to them. Similar to McKinney's (2013) finding in which a white student stated, "I could tell my life story without mentioning my race" (p. 1), 16 of the 18 participants in this study mentioned that they did not regularly think about their race. Katie and Theia stated that they felt like being white was just a box they checked. Theia said, "It's just like a descriptor. It is what it is. It's just a box. It just hasn't impacted me positively or negatively.... It's just a box." This statement is an expression of the phenomenon known as ethnocentric monoculturalism. Sue (2004) defines ethnocentric monoculturalism as a system of belief or action that assumes that the dominant culture's norms are shared by all. In this study, ethnocentric monoculturalism presented itself as a white student leader not having to think about their race or the effects their race may have on their actions because they assumed that all people shared their experiences.

As an example of ethnocentric monoculturalism, Liz shared the picture in Figure 7. She loved her experience volunteering at a local food bank as a part of a leadership team. I asked about how race affected her experience, and she remarked, "It didn't. Like [there was] no racism. I didn't see anything that had to do with race."

Figure 7

Volunteering at the Food Bank



Interestingly, she equated race being significant with racism. Later in the focus group, Liz interrupted another student and said, “Wait a minute! My entire group volunteering was white, and the staff was mostly white too. And I think most of the people receiving the food were Black.” It is important to acknowledge the challenges with Liz’s account that conflates socioeconomic status with race. While poverty is unequally distributed, it is a faulty assumption that racially minoritized people are always impoverished. Yet, in Liz’s reflection, she started to see how race may have influenced her experience. She concluded with the following reflection: “I’d never thought about [race] until now.”

Her proclamation of never thinking about race was an epiphanic moment of recognizing ethnocentric monoculturalism—the unconscious assumption that her race was normative, that her experiences were shared by all instead of a culturally informed perspective. Thus, a primary challenge in leadership education is to get students who often express race as insignificant in their lives to recognize the significance it has for others. While Liz previously never thought about race as a leader, race was likely significant to some of the people that she led. The educational challenge lies in guiding a white student who views race as merely a checkbox to understand the deep and pervasive impact of race. Consequently, there is a need for further exploration concerning how to enhance student learning about ethnocentric monoculturalism and how to move beyond this often unconscious posture in leadership.

Implications for Future Practice and Research

The findings and discussion detailed in this article suggest a need for leadership educators, university professors and administrators, and student services practitioners to engage in meaningful programming and organic conversations with students in multiple contexts. The following sections will discuss the implications for future practice to create opportunities that intentionally navigate the socio-emotional barriers and ethnocentric monoculturalism skillfully. Furthermore, future research is needed to explore wise practices and changing contexts.

A Need for Empathetic Dialogues

Recalling the juxtaposed stories of Jake (see Figure 4) and Colin (see Figure 5), those vignettes inform future practice by highlighting the importance of empathy. Empathy is a teachable skill. Curricula, both inside and outside the classroom, can foster perspective-taking and create space for critical reflection, helping students recognize how systems of oppression have harmed people in their lives—even those they know and love. Thus, scholars and practitioners should explore how to navigate the challenges of today’s polarized context through empathy development.

From this study, the data suggest that empathy was a primary entry point to critical reflections about the intersection of race and leadership. Jake, when confronted with how his fraternity’s actions made some of the student marchers feel, engaged in perspective-taking, but only after discussions forced him to reflect. He put himself in the shoes of the marchers and saw the situation differently. He said in the interview, “I just didn’t realize what we were doing. We didn’t mean anything by it, but we screwed up.” In the moment, he was not able to see how his actions were problematic because he was unaware of the racial dynamics of the group for which he was the leader. Then, through a moment of critical reflection, empathy created a pathway for him to see the situation from another’s perspective. He concluded that portion of the interview by wishing he could go back and lead differently. Therefore, student services professionals, leadership educators, faculty, and administrators should consider spending more time and resources creating structures that facilitate critical reflection and empathy development. Students are having the experiences necessary to learn; however, do universities have structures in place to help students critically reflect on their experiences to create meaningful learning moments? Moreover, intentional dialogues can become one of those reflective constructs to help students make meaning of their experiences.

A Need for Further Research

While this study explored the experiences of these 18 participants at three different universities, the study also revealed a need for further research regarding the experience, attitudes, and beliefs of white student leaders in various university contexts. There is a need for studies in private schools, religious universities, community colleges, and other large public research institutions. Furthermore, the culture is ever-evolving, thus there is a need for future studies to explore the changes in how white student leaders experience the intersection of race and leadership. As laws and policies change at universities concerning race, the student experience changes too. Therefore, future research should explore how the changing contexts affect the worldviews and leadership postures of white student leaders.

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Finally, there is a need for future research that identifies wise practices for how to engage students in empathetic dialogues and navigate the socio-emotional barriers that many white student leaders face when entering discussions surrounding race. Research that prioritizes pragmatic skills for practitioners to engage in race-conscious leadership training will prove invaluable in developing student leaders prepared to lead in a global society.

Conclusion

This study offers important insights into how white student leaders navigate race, whiteness, and leadership within higher education. Participants' narratives revealed a persistent silence around race, shaped by racial unawareness and fear of being canceled; however, findings also revealed a desire for informed dialogues. These findings underscore the need for leadership development programs that more intentionally address racial identity and awareness. The research indicates that white student leaders are not aware of their race, a sign of ethnocentric monoculturalism, but through intentional conversations, empathy building through perspective-taking can prove an entry point to more inclusive leadership practices.

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