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Delegitimizing Race: The Role of Color-evasive Ideologies and HESA Professionals

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This case study examined how eight higher education and student affairs (HESA) professionals' racial ideologies functioned in their understanding of racial conflict. Findings revealed that participants aided in delegitimizing students' perceptions of racial conflict based on their campuses' compositional diversity, history of racial conflict, and available diversity initiatives. HESA professionals viewed these areas through color-evasive frames that allowed them to acknowledge that racial conflict exists while simultaneously minimizing students' experiences with racial conflict. Recommendations for HESA professionals center on reframing racial conflict to address student concerns.

Racial conflict is the rational product of a racialized social system. Within this system, dominant and minoritized people struggle about their positions (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). Racial conflict is an individual or collective struggle, disjointed or highly organized, that can lead to change in the racial order or maintain the racial status quo (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). Essentially, it is the struggle between dominant and minoritized racial groups; the dominant racial group seeks to maintain and protect its racial privileges, while minoritized racial groups question their position in the racial hierarchy. Thus, individuals' beliefs about racial conflict shape or influence practices, policies, and processes related to racial justice.

In the wake of George Floyd's murder by police, Higher Education and Student Affairs (HESA) professionals communicated their beliefs related to racial justice (Wesley et al., 2021). These beliefs include concerns about racial climate, affirming values about inclusion, and commitments to racial justice, among others (Beatty et al., 2020). HESA

professionals' beliefs about their campuses' ability to enact values related to racial justice were corroborated by 80% of postsecondary leaders who believed that race relations on their campuses were positive (Jaschik & Lederman, 2021). Despite these beliefs, Students of Color continue to report hostile racial climates (Comeaux et al., 2021; Pirtle et al., 2021; Rowan-Kenyon et al., 2022; Serrano, 2020). This suggests an incongruence between what leaders profess and what Students of Color experience, which researchers have identified as institutional negligence (Harper & Hurtado, 2007).

HESA professionals' beliefs are important for shaping practices and policies (Brinkhurst et al., 2011), priorities and discourse (Akens et al., 2021). For example, higher HESA professionals are pivotal in student development, learning, and degree completion (Lau, 2003). Further, HESA professionals' beliefs influence racialized practices (e.g., servingness), often resulting in inequitable outcomes for Black students (Pirtle et al., 2021), AfroLatin* and multiracial Latin*¹ students and faculty (Vega et al., 2022), and Indigenous students (Kovats Sanchez, 2021). Thus, beliefs are integral to organizations, specifically in postsecondary racial climate and culture (Hurtado et al., 1998; Museus et al., 2012). However, campus racial climate research has mostly focused on students' perceptions of the psychological climate (Hurtado et al., 2008), despite HESA professionals seeking to create and sustain more equitable environments (Pérez et al., 2017).

¹ For this paper, I use Latin* to represent people with Latin American ancestry and the * (asterisks) in Latin[-] considers Latina, Latino, Latinx, Latine, Latinu, Latini, Latin@, and Latina America (Salinas, 2022). According to Salinas and Lozano (2022), Latin* is inclusive of intersectional identities Latin* people encompass and of terms currently not used in the mainstream vocabulary. Participants from Latin American background in this study self-identified as either Latina women or Latino men, and I use those racial identities descriptors when referring to them.

HESA professionals are often responsible for addressing incidents of racial conflict but receive little to no guidance on how to respond effectively to it (Kim et al., 2012). Additionally, Jones (2019) found no professional standard for training professionals who are charged with diversity issues. While they may experience powerlessness in addressing racial conflict (Harper & Hurtado, 2007), HESA professionals also encounter conflicts over organizational priorities that could prevent them from addressing racism on their campuses (Vega, 2021; Harper, 2017). This powerlessness is often from a lack of ability to act on racism associated with their position, a fear of losing their jobs or being thought of as troublemakers (Harper & Hurtado, 2007). Yet their awareness that Students of Color are cumulatively and persistently affected by racism encourages a closer examination of HESA professionals' racial ideologies. This would provide more insights into how HESA professionals' racial ideologies shape organizational processes and the resources they produce (Ray, 2019). Specifically, studying HESA professionals' racial ideologies could provide more answers to how racial conflict can and should be addressed.

Racial ideologies are organizational maps that inform people's societal actions (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). Designed to be in service of dominant groups, racial ideologies are influential in maintaining the status quo (Bonilla-Silva, 2006) through racialized practices (e.g., admission practices, hiring processes, conflict management). Given their importance in shaping dominant groups beliefs, racial ideologies remain key components of learning how HESA professionals maintain or disrupt racialized practices in higher education. Based on a larger study (see Vega, 2021), this paper is focused on the role of racial ideologies in the perceptions of racial conflict held by HESA

professionals at a Historically White Institution (HWI). The research questions addressed includes: What rationales do HESA professionals use to explain how racial conflict functions on their campus? How do HESA professionals' beliefs about racial conflict impede on their ability to address racial conflict?

Based on the findings, I argue that HESA professionals have developed explanations about racial conflict suggesting dissonance between their beliefs and students' experiences. Using theories of racial ideologies (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Jayakumar & Adamian, 2017; Warikoo et al., 2015), I explore the various ways HESA professionals at one HWI in the northeast delegitimize students' experiences with racial conflict. In so doing, they maintain an organizational environment that does little to create systemic approaches to address racial conflict. By shedding light on their beliefs, HESA professionals may be able to disrupt existing practices related to addressing students' concerns about racial conflict and establish policies to influence organizational change. Increasing awareness about how HESA professionals delegitimize racial climate could provide them with greater agency in the face of powerlessness in addressing racial conflict. Finally, exploring HESA professionals' racial ideologies can foster racial consciousness and create inclusive campus environments.

Race-Based Organizational Conflict

I situate racial conflict within organizational conflict literature, racialized social systems theory, and racialized organizations theory. I then explore how this literature has been used in higher education research. Specifically, I use campus racial climate literature to understand how students experience racial conflict as a context for the existing dissonance between students and HESA professionals around racial conflict.

Students' Experiences with Racial Environments

The organizational dimension of a racial environment includes practices and policies related to curriculum, admissions policies, hiring practices, budgeting, and tenure decisions (Milem et al., 2004). Additionally, it includes practices related to areas such as *servingness* (Garcia et al., 2019) and diversity (Smith, 2012). Within these areas, leadership and conditions that support diverse identities remain important research foci for understanding organizations (Smith, 2012). Researchers have begun to find that racial ideologies remain a key component of how individuals influence or experience practices and policies within organizations. For example, Pirtle and colleagues (2021) demonstrated that practices related to *servingness* in Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HSIs) are deeply influenced by anti-Black ideologies. In their study, students reported feelings of trauma, exclusion, and microaggressions by HSI faculty and professionals who were White and Latin*. Similarly, Vega et al. (2022) demonstrated that ideologies such as *Blanqueamiento* (Whitening) and *Mestizaje* (racial mixing) also pervade *servingness* in HSIs. Using testimonios, Vega and colleagues (2022) extended Pirtle et al. (2021) argument by demonstrating how some minoritized individuals can be implicated in carrying out practices that perpetuate whiteness at HSIs. Vega et al. (2022) and Pirtle et al. (2021) clarify the importance of racialized ideologies in forming and preserving racialized organizations, specifically by analyzing how individuals' beliefs shape them (Ray, 2019).

Another dimension to racial environments includes experiences with compositional diversity. Diversity is noted as a cause of organizational conflict (Burke, 2006; Pondy, 1967). Specifically for Students of Color, individual experiences with

compositional diversity can include stigma, microaggressions, tokenism, and critical mass (Smith, 2012). Further, campus violence—both subtle and overt—tends to target Students of Color and women (Caplan & Ford, 2014). Additionally, researchers have found that as Black and Latin* student populations in higher education increase, so do hate crimes, microaggressions, and other forms of racial discrimination and prejudice (Hurtado & Ruiz, 2015). Hurtado and Ruiz (2015) noted that racial incidents not classified as hate crimes rose with more diverse populations on campuses.

Organizational Conflict, Racialized Social Systems, and Racialized Organizations

Organizational conflict produces discord when there is disagreement about behaviors, values, practices, and policies among individuals or groups within an organization (De Dreu & Gelfand, 2012). Power is often involved as attempts to deter one group from attaining more privileges than other groups or when groups try to maintain dominance or obtain resources (Burke, 2006; Tolbert & Hall, 2009). Thus, dominant groups can thwart the goals, behaviors, or actions of members of minoritized groups. Organizational conflict also occurs for other reasons such as amassing privileges (Burke, 2006; Tolbert & Hall, 2009; Pondy, 1967); competition for scarce resources (Pondy, 1967); increasing compositional diversity (Burke, 2006); and desiring a positive view of organization (De Dreu & Gelfand, 2012).

Although organizational conflicts manifest in different ways, a critical analysis of how racial ideologies shape organizational conflict remains understudied in organizational theory (Vega, 2021). Bonilla-Silva (2001) offered one consideration of racial conflict, described as racial contestation in racialized social systems (RSS). RSS refers to “societies in which economic, political, social, and ideological levels are

partially structured by the placement of actors in racial categories or races” (Bonilla-Silva, 1997, p. 469). Within this system, racial ideologies are formed and become organizational maps that include codes, rules, beliefs, values, and assumptions, which influence how actors behave and often result in struggle, discord, or disagreements. Individual and collective racial struggles are manifested in attitudes and behaviors (Bonilla-Silva, 2001). Racial contestation is a product of this racialized social system exhibiting the different needs, desires, behaviors, and values of each racial group. According to Bonilla-Silva, racial contestation is part and outcome of a racialized social system. While Bonilla-Silva’s (2001) perspectives on racial contestation have significant implications for the study of racism and race, more explanation is necessary to understand how racial contestation operates in organizations.

Ray (2019) built on Bonilla-Silva’s (2001) theory, adding that “organizations are racial structures and a primary domain of contestation over racial meanings and resources” (p. 43). Offering a theory of racialized organizations, Ray (2019) suggested four main ways that organizations are racialized: (a) enhancing or diminishing the agency of racial groups, (b) legitimizing the unequal distribution of resources, (c) relying on Whiteness as a credential, and (d) engaging in racialized decoupling of formal rules from practice. Ray further argued there are external and internal sources of organizational racialization. Internal sources include attempts to garner greater market share through hiring or enrollment, diversity programs, and altering the distribution of resources (Ray, 2019). Conflicts arise in these areas, revealing the interests of those in power and others seeking justice.

Building on Bonilla-Silva's (2001) and Ray's (2019) ideas of racial contestation, I (Vega, 2021) offer an understanding of race-based organizational conflicts by exploring HESA professionals' beliefs about racial conflict. Race-based organizational conflicts are disagreements or discord about tasks, processes, and relationships related to race and racism in postsecondary systems. These conflicts reveal who holds power to change or maintain organizational practices and structures. Dominant groups in postsecondary settings may be white but are also stakeholders, such as HESA professionals, who can shape and guide practices and policies related to race and racism. They are the purveyors of organizational maps guiding processes related to race and racism in higher education. As such, their ideologies about how those practices and policies are determined become critical for analysis.

Theoretical Framework

Race scholars began to rethink racial ideologies and their influence in societal norms after the Civil Rights era, which changed how racism operates in the United States. Often described as the new racism, this era departed from Jim Crow-style racist politics in significant ways such as changing legalized discrimination against Black people (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). Yet, this change in how racism manifested also came with more interpersonal racialized interactions that were not overt.

Racial ideologies offer frames through which individuals filter information and provide additional rationales for racial phenomena and actions that have the potential to oppress minoritized communities further (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). According to Bonilla-Silva (2006), racialized ideologies fulfill five functions in racialized social systems: (a) they provide rationales for why racial inequality exists; (b) they set norms for interracial

interactions; (c) they furnish the basis for racial subjectivity and (d) influence the views of dominated actors; and (e) they obscure the existence of racial domination by claiming universality. As noted earlier, examples include how racial ideologies such as Blanqueamiento and AntiBlackness are embedded in practices within racialized organizations, causing students and faculty to obtain fewer resources (e.g., mentoring, peer interactions, culturally irrelevant curriculum).

Bonilla-Silva (2006) maintained that these functions are accomplished by four frames: cultural racism, naturalization, minimization of racism, and abstract liberalism. Here, I focus on two frames. First, minimization of racism relies on rationales of the past where individuals express that racism is not as severe today due to gross historical inequities. Individuals who hold this frame typically refer to the illegality of overt forms of White Supremacy, such as slavery or lynchings as evidence of racial progress. Next, abstract liberalism goes a step further than minimizing racism. People who hold this frame acknowledge that racism exists yet deny that practices and policies dedicated to combating racism will work. That is, they believe in equality but deny that policies such as Affirmative Action will work to reverse racism; in fact, they reject such policies because they feel they are unfair.

Jayakumar and Adamian (2017) extended Bonilla-Silva's (2006) work by proposing an additional frame, disconnected power-analysis, that White people employ to claim they are racially progressive by evoking antiracist theories and language. Jayakumar and Adamian (2017) argued that disconnected power-analysis is especially salient among White people in highly race-conscious environments such as Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Given the structures, environment, and

conversations that immerse White individuals within these environments, they develop better rationales for racism, disconnecting themselves from racism, without critically analyzing their own beliefs and practices which allows them to have a positive sense of self (Jayakumar & Adamian, 2017).

Warikoo et al. (2015) built on the color-evasive frames conceptualized by Bonilla-Silva (2006) and argued that a diversity frame manifests in White students' perceptions of Affirmative Action and race relations. The diversity frame celebrates differences between racial and ethnic groups "related to cultural practices, ways of understanding the world and taste preferences, taking a group-oriented rather than individualist approach" (Warikoo et al., 2015, p. 862). Those holding a diversity frame believe in integration as a goal and a way to signify racial justice.

Racial frames provide insight into how dominant groups maintain racial hierarchies (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). Bonilla-Silva (2006) argued that although overt racists and White Supremacists should continue as a focus of research, less is known about how "well-intentioned" White people perpetuate racial hierarchies within organizations. Thus, it is critical to explore racial ideologies among HESA professionals who may carry out the tasks and processes of an organization but with the potential to disrupt them.

Methodology

This case study was part of a larger study (see Vega, 2021) in which I conducted a multiple case study (Yin, 2009) of two types of institutions: a HWI and a minority-serving institution (MSI). This paper focused on Jefferson University (HWI) and to achieve the goals of this project, I extracted the interviews with HESA professionals (n=8). The research questions that guided this study are: What rationales do HESA

professionals use to explain how racial conflict functions on their campus? And, how do HESA professionals' beliefs about racial conflict impede on their ability to address racial conflict?

Study Setting

Jefferson University² (JU) is a highly selective university with over 8,000 undergraduates in a large northeastern urban city. Students of Color comprise almost 50%, with half of that being students identifying as Asian and Asian American; the other 50% includes Black, Latino³, Native American, and students identified as Other. Approximately 20% of faculty and 30% of staff at JU were People of Color.

JU defined various forms of conflicts on campus, from aggravated assault to hate crimes (JU Campus Report). According to JU's report, no hate crime was reported during the 2013-2014 academic year. JU was an appropriate site to study because the number and recruitment of Students of Color can determine how racial conflict manifests on a college campus (Stotzer & Hossellman, 2012). For example, Hurtado and Ruiz (2015) found that institutions of 36% or more underrepresented racial minorities (URM) reported the least number of racial incidents (12%), compared with institutions with less than 20% URM. Less than 20% of JU's student population was URM.

Data Collection

Data collection included two phases: (1) reviewing documents, books, and media related to JU and racial conflict; and (1) interviewing participants.

² Jefferson University is a pseudonym for the historically white institution that was used to study racial conflict.

³ JU used the term Latino to describe people of Hispanic/Latin American origin.

Phase 1: Documents

Documents were retrieved between the Summer of 2013 and Fall of 2014. Google, Google Scholar, Lexus Nexus and the JU websites were used to select the documents. Documents were uploaded to Dedoose, a data managing service. Over 100 articles were retrieved that mentioned JU between 1968 and 2013. These dates were used to help me understand why JU HESA professionals described JU as an activist campus and often cited 1968 to distinguish JU students' involvement in political activism.

To learn how JU addressed racial conflict on its campus, I reviewed school conduct codes on racial conflict, one campus crime report, and three school documents/training referring to racial incidents and conflict. From these documents, I found that JU referred to racial conflict as harassment and racially biased hate crimes.

Hate crimes are defined as:

any crime that manifests evidence that the victim was intentionally selected because of the victim's actual or perceived race; religion; gender; sexual orientation; national origin; ethnicity; religion, gender identity, or disability. This includes murder and nonnegligent manslaughter, negligent manslaughter, rape, statutory rape, incest, fondling, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, motor vehicle theft, arson, and also larceny-theft, simple assault, intimidation, and destruction/damage/vandalism. (Campus Report)

No report I found included definitions about less overt forms of interpersonal racial conflict such as microaggressions. There was also no evidence of training to understand racial conflict, although students were offered various diversity trainings such as ally training, but none were specifically related to racial conflict.

Books. According to JU's HESA professionals, the campus has a rich history with student activism. I found three books in which JU described student activism from

the 1960s and documented the college’s racial history with details about how the campuses have dealt with racial conflict.

Media. I consulted newspapers and media to verify participants’ comments about racial incidents as reported in school newspapers and local news covering the years 2013 and 2014. These documents helped me understand how incidents of racial conflict were reported to understand HESA professionals’ perspectives of media reports.

Phase 2: Interviews

The second phase included interviews with eight HESA professionals at JU (see Table 1 for demographics). To maintain anonymity, pseudonyms were used for names, job titles, and departmental affiliations. I asked participants for their definitions and descriptions of racial conflicts, as well as to describe the racial climate and give examples of racial conflicts they experienced directly or heard about on campus, including who was involved and how these events were resolved.

Table 1. *Demographics of Participants*

Jefferson University (JU)	
Name and Race	Position
Laura, African American Woman	Mid-Level Manager (Human Resources)
Kamala, AfroLatina Woman	Mid-Level Manager (Human Resources)
Aisha, Latina Woman	Entry-Level Manager (Academic Affairs)
Saul, White Man	Mid-Level Manager (Academic Affairs)
Judy, African American Woman	Senior-Level Administrator (Academic Affairs)
Mary, African American Woman	Mid-Level Manager (Student Affairs)
Daniel, White Man	Senior-Level Administrator (Student Services)
Teka, Latina Woman	Senior-Level Administrator (Student Affairs)

After the first round of interviews, I identified other potential participants using the snowball technique, which uses word-of-mouth to find “information-rich key informants or critical cases” (Patton, 1990, p. 176). Specifically, I sought positioned informants, who by virtue of their positions could provide rich insights into my research questions. This approach also assumes that informants’ positions inform their behaviors (Kezar, 2002). To meet my research goals, I recruited professionals associated with student affairs, student services, academic affairs, and human resources. These professionals had decision-making responsibilities in positions of *hearing* about racial conflict incidents, despite being positioned to respond at the organizational level; for example, some HESA interviewees were told about these events but lacked administrative power to handle them directly.

Data Analysis

Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and coded using Dedoose, a data analysis software system. After coding the interviews, I identified four emerging themes and created new subcodes to align with them: minimizing race, abstract racial conflict, diversity, and disconnected power analysis. Thus, I could identify themes inductively within Bonilla-Silva’s (2006), Jayakumar and Adamian’s (2017), and Warikoo et al.’s (2015) theories of color-evasive frames (Miles & Huberman, 1994). I applied this new set of codes to the rest of the interviews (see Table 2).

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness in qualitative research reveals the transferability of a study, the credibility of the research methods, and the reflexivity of the researcher. This is done to demonstrate rigor in qualitative research (Shenton, 2004). To achieve credibility, I

Table 2. *Codes, Definitions, and Examples*

Code	Definition	Example
Minimizing race	Reliance on rationales of the past where individuals express that racism is not as severe today due to gross past historical inequities.	Things are better today than they were 20 years ago when we did not have a diversity office.
Abstract racial conflict	Acknowledgement that racism exists. Questioning effectiveness of practices and policies that are dedicated to combating racism while evoking values of justice and equity.	Racial conflict is a problem but we have many ways students can solve those problems.
Diversity	Use of compositional diversity, or the number of racially minoritized students, to describe and understand racial conflict. Initiatives are focused on cultural practices and employ a flattened group approach. Belief in practices and policies related to integration as a goal and a way to signify racial justice.	If more students came to our discussions of diversity, there would be less conflict on campus.
Disconnected power analysis	Belief that students are immersed in a diversity infrastructure such as language, practices, and programs which provide students with skills to handle racial conflict. Evoke language of diversity to rationalize that racial conflict is minimal for students distancing themselves from the ability to handle racial conflict.	Students are 100% capable of handling racial conflict because they are much more savvy when it comes to racism these days. We are not able to share how we addressed incidents due to FERPA Laws.

learned about JU through archival material, consulting appropriate documents such as school conduct codes, hate crime reports. I read books that mentioned JU to understand its activist history. I used this material to triangulate the data I collected from interviews. I also re-contacted respondents to ensure their responses were accurately recorded or understood. As I collected the data, I also presented some of this work at national conferences and discussed findings with peers unfamiliar with my work. Throughout this process I was also reflective about my work by providing a limitations and positionality statement in this paper. Finally, to achieve transferability, I provide a thick description of the case by sharing information about the organization and the study including codes and information about the participants.

Limitations

Transparency aids in the rigor of this research and I acknowledge that the study had some limitations. First, the study uses one case - one historically white institution - and the data used for this analysis involved eight HESA professionals. Second, the data was collected at a particular time (2013 and 2014), which limits how racial conflict may be understood and racial ideologies shaped.

Researcher Positionality

Race and ethnicity are important intersectional factors in my life, shaping who I am and how I make life decisions. One decision included becoming a doctoral student while identifying as Latina. During this time, I was also a higher education professional between 1998 and 2014. I was interested in how HESA professionals make decisions about racist incidents in higher education. As a racism-conscious higher education administrator working with Students of Color from low-income backgrounds, I was aware of the concerns professionals often felt when attempting to support students, such as fear of losing their jobs or being perceived as troublemakers. Discussing these issues with professionals is sensitive, and I wanted participants to know that I understood their position. This informed my decisions such as conducting one-on-one interviews with participants and ensuring confidentiality through pseudonyms.

Findings

HESA professionals at JU employed color-evasive frames in their explanations of racial conflict which allowed them to delegitimize students' experiences with racial conflict. Findings were organized to highlight the following frames: (a) Diversity (b) Abstract racial conflict, (c) Minimizing racism and (d) Disconnected power analysis. The

ways participants rationalized racial conflict also allowed them to minimize their own power to address racial conflict. Finally, participants described campus dimensions or structures that possibly encourage color evasive ideologies among participants.

Diversity Frame

For this study, the *diversity frame* refers to the use of compositional diversity, or the number of racially minoritized students, to describe and understand racial conflict. Participants who held this frame focused on initiatives centered on cultural practices and employed a flattened group approach to approach racial conflict. They believe in practices and policies related to integration as a goal and a way to signify racial justice. Diversity is often upheld in higher education at the risk of minimizing race (Chang, 2005) and marginalizing Black students (Lewis & Shah, 2021). As such, compositional diversity is often flattened and homogenized, which aids in the maintenance of color evasive ideologies (Warikoo et al., 2015). People who hold this frame rely on the past to elevate how much more compositional diversity exists on campuses today than ever before. Thus, they acknowledge compositional diversity as an important achievement for higher education.

Participants in this study who held a diversity frame were proud of the diverse students JU attracted. While JU did enroll higher concentrations of Students of Color compared to other HWIs, JU's HESA professionals pointed out that the majority of those Students of Color were Asian and Asian American. Mary, mid-level administrator in student affairs, said, "Even though it is very diverse, large numbers of students of color are Asian students. So, when we look at our African American and Latino students, the numbers are much lower, and those students have a different experience on campus."

Although JU is still a predominantly white institution, its student body comprises almost 50% of students of color. However, a closer look at the numbers reveals that this diverse body of students does not include a large number of Black or Latin* students. She acknowledged that despite the various types of students that are attracted to JU, Black and Latino students remain a small population and as she stated have different experiences that could possibly be ignored because the overall student population is large and diverse. Mary described further this racially diverse student body as contributing to the racial culture:

I hear from so many students, who say, "I came to JU because it's so diverse"... When we look at the undergraduate population, more than half of our students self-identify as students of color. We have a large international population, and even just geographic diversity. Students are very much attracted to JU for that reason. I think that speaks a lot to the campus culture, that the diverse student body is something that I think a lot of our students really are proud of and really enjoy and would be sad if it wasn't there.

Mary echoed what many of the participants in this study felt - that compositional diversity was an important tool to attract students and make them feel that JU valued diversity, which they felt helped minimize conflict. Judy adds to this perspective by stating that this compositional diversity not only includes students but also faculty and staff. She stated: "But I do know that there are students who still feel [compositional diversity] ... I can literally call a meeting of people in different fields and we can fill up a room... And that's a big difference". Both Mary and Judy were speaking to how much students valued compositional diversity despite how it may affect their individual experiences as individuals who are Black or Latin*. Although they recognized that these individual experiences with conflict exist, they believe students are happy because of the large presence of diversity at JU.

Another layer of diversity that was used by participants was the backgrounds of Students of Color. Participants remarked that more than likely students know how to navigate diverse student bodies in predominantly white institutions largely because this was familiar territory for students. Mary explained that Students of Color at JU may experience minimal racial tension because the Students of Color who attended JU grew up in White environments:

Here we've got a lot of Students of Color who grew up in White environments, went to boarding schools, are very comfortable in a kind of White cultural hegemonic environment. In fact, for some of them, [JU] is more diverse and they're very comfortable with those norms. And so, they operate within them and they don't experience tension, per se. So, I think there's a constant tension, but I think some students of color kind of operate within it fine and others really have a hard time with it.

Mary rationalized that racial conflict may be felt differently depending on where a student was raised or schools they attended prior to coming to JU. Calling it tension, Mary also described Students of Color as being comfortable and happy to be in such a diverse environment, which then led Mary to conclude that this allowed some students to be fine with racial tension while others may not be.

As such, compositional diversity and students' experiences with navigating predominantly white environments provided important rationales for participants in this study. All recognized the existence of racial conflict, but these structural components are also mechanisms in upholding color evasive ideologies that contribute to delegitimizing racial conflict.

Minimizing Racism

Minimizing racism frame refers to a reliance on rationales of the past where individuals express that racism is not as severe today due to overt past historical

inequities. Minimizing racism refers to a technique used by dominant groups within an organization to delegitimize the needs of minoritized groups. Within organizations, dominant groups include people who hold power to make decisions about the institution that influences how students experience the campus racial environment. HESA professionals in this study participate in delegitimizing students' experiences with racial conflict by applying a historical lens and sharing the racialized experiences of other groups (e.g., staff) to distance the campus away from racial conflict. For example, Aisha, entry-level higher education professional in academic affairs, described racial conflict in reference to history and described it as:

battles that are different today...It's not a place where you come to fight. I mean, there are different types of battles being fought now than there were 15 or 20 years ago. So, for example, a lot of our students are interested in social issues, and they do things about it.

Aisha's use of the words "battle" and "fight" provide another perspective about how HESA professionals describe racial conflict. Using time and history, Aisha can allude to a severity surrounding racial conflict as it relates to a historical past. Thus, time and history are particularly useful tools for participants to describe racial conflict.

Referencing time and history allowed participants to minimize how racial conflict is experienced in present times. To emphasize this point, Teka, a senior-level administrator, engaged in minimizing students' experiences with racial conflict by applying a historical lens and comparing JU with other campuses. Teka said:

Go back historically here and read about and speak with alums about the racial tension that occurred here. I don't see that racial tension that occurs as much now, in very open ways, right? I don't see the blatant racism that happens. I think when we do have incidents on campus that happen, it's just done out of ignorance. But I can say with real certainty that it probably is far fewer than most other campuses because we talk about diversity from the recruitment stage through the admissions process through orientation.

Teka has the potential to address and drive agendas in Student Affairs related to racial conflict. While minimizing racial conflict, Teka did so by enacting it in three ways: (a) referring to the past; (b) claiming a perpetrator's ignorance about racial conflict; and (c) distancing the campus away from racial conflict by pointing out that other campuses are culprit to many more instances of racial conflict. I discuss this disconnection further in the disconnected power analysis theme.

Distancing racial conflict away from students was also a mechanism used by Aisha. While Teka suggested that racial conflict was occurring in other campuses, Aisha felt strongly that racial conflict was more severe among other sectors within the campus. Aisha shared:

I have not dealt yet with an issue of a student being discriminated against. And there's a lot of conflict that I don't think it's a big deal at JU. I think that the conflict that I sense at the university is more between the administration and the union. And then, you can add factors of race to that fight, to that conflict. The union is composed mainly of support staff. And support staff are mostly minorities. And yes. I mean, you can look at it that way. But students being discriminated against? No.

Aisha minimized students' experiences with racial conflict by describing conflicts among other institutional stakeholders. Her response revealed she is aware of racial conflict as she described its range in severity but also noted these conflicts are more apparent among support staff (mostly People of Color) and administration (mostly White). Thus, in addition to applying a historical lens, distancing allowed participants to acknowledge the existence of racial conflict but sanitize the experiences of Students of Color with racial conflict. While the participants who held the diversity frame heavily relied on campus structures related to diversity to understand racial conflict among students, the

minimizing racism frame relied on personal perceptions and perhaps experiences with a historical past that allowed them to describe racial conflict as not as severe.

Abstract Racial Conflict

The theme *abstract racial conflict* refers to the ways HESA professionals acknowledge the existence of racial conflict and are confident that the available support in place worked to minimize it. Thus, racial conflict becomes more abstract and allows them to not critically analyze their role in the way racial conflict operates on their campus. HESA professionals in this study all recognized that racial conflict exists similar to people who hold an abstract liberalism frame. However, they were confident that JU's diversity infrastructure was working to minimize racial conflict and used this as a delegitimizing tool. Additionally, for almost every participant of this study, their critical analyses of racial conflict focused on initiatives or processes at JU rather than how they engaged with or understood racial conflict. While such a focus is important, participants employed this mechanism to distance themselves from personal responsibility for addressing racial conflict. Most explained their position on racial conflict by providing evidence of low rates of reported incidents. For example, Teka relied on campus crime reports demonstrating low numbers of bias-related incidents and shared the following:

Given everything else that we do, I think a racial barometer really is around the incidents that happen on campus, and because we have relatively fewer incidents on campus that are reported. I think that is actually quite a qualifier or quantifier for racial incidents on campus. I think people are very readily able to report things and I think over time, we've seen such a decrease in reported incidents on campus.

In addition to referring to reported incidents, Teka also believed that JU provided tools for students to report incidents. For Teka, this support system made incidents of racial conflict low in her eyes, but also more abstract. Earlier, Aisha reported a similar thought

about students' experiences with racial conflict, but Teka adds that students have tools to report racial conflict incidents.

Another HESA professional blamed the media for how racial conflict is perceived. Saul, a mid-level manager demonstrated this by stating: "But I think when you're dealing with the media, then the story gets legs, and then there's all this misinformation and different stories out there." For many participants, the media made it harder for them to figure out how students were truly feeling as media coverage created a spotlight on these issues. But Saul further addresses this point by stating that when incidents of racial conflict do happen, HESA professionals are constrained by policies. One example is the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) which disallows HESA professionals to disclose how students are reprimanded when accused of an incident.

Saul continued:

And you can't necessarily correct the story [by the media] because it's confidential information, and we are dealing with FERPA. And so, sometimes, you just have to explain to students, "We are aware of the issue. We are addressing it. But student disciplinary records are confidential," and you can't really share much more...But when people want to talk about the actual incident, we can't. And that's really hard, especially when others are talking about it.

Saul reveals the way federal policies possibly function in HESA professionals' work.

Given the inability to disclose responses to actual incidents lends to perceptions that the incident is not being addressed. However, it also provides a tool for Saul to not discuss how he or other HESA professionals could respond to incidents, which provides distance from professional responsibility to share with the community how possible incidents of racial conflict could be handled.

For HESA professionals who identified as People of Color, recognizing racial conflict was important. Judy, senior-level administrator in academic affairs, was clear

about her stance regarding the existence of racial conflict but was aware that others may not be. Judy described an incident at JU that targeted Black students:

I did talk to students, and I do feel as an African American woman that it is a responsibility for us to be aware of that history. It's not that long ago and those things still happen. So why shouldn't we be cognizant? And simply from the standpoint of because we work here at the university, I know better... Some of it [HESA professionals' response to racial conflict) may be intentionally dismissive. Some of it is just that I have a job to do and I'm doing my job. So, I just wouldn't have wanted to be in that category.

Judy struggled with her role to address incidents of racial conflict. She has observed how the university handles these incidents by describing the motivations that HESA professionals may be experiencing ranging from being dismissive to doing what is required of them to do such as in Saul's case. While her stance is to not be in that category, she has no guidance from the university to intentionally address incidents. Judy demonstrates that university structures possibly influence the maintenance of an abstract racial conflict frame, even when they are aware that racial conflict exists.

Disconnected Power Analysis

The disconnected power analysis frame refers to the belief that students are immersed in a diversity infrastructure such as language, practices and programs, which provide students with skills to handle racial conflict. Participants who held this frame evoked language of diversity to rationalize that racial conflict is minimal for students distancing themselves from the ability to handle racial conflict. Holding a disconnected power analysis allowed respondents to acknowledge the existence of racial conflict but simultaneously believe that their campus was somewhat better due to robust diversity systems built over time at JU. Participants of this study who saw conflict through this frame sensed that conversations about diversity helped to reduce racial conflict. For

example, Saul believed that bringing important conversations already happening to a larger audience and groups at JU could help ease conflict. Saul shared:

There's a lot of conversations on campus every semester about: What does it mean to be a Black student on campus? What's it mean to be a Muslim student on campus? You know, within those communities. And I think the challenge is: How do we bring this conversation to the greater community to help more people understand what that different experience might be?

When speaking about the greater community, Saul was talking about White students.

Helping those White students understand different experiences heavily relied on two things: 1) conversations that students with diverse racial and religious backgrounds were having and 2) making these conversations broader, thus immersing the community with the experiences of students from diverse racial and religious backgrounds. Saul demonstrates how important he believes students are to addressing racial conflict, and thus, disconnects from his own ability as a HESA professional to address racial conflict issues.

The disconnected power analysis frame also relies on silence from students who experience incidents of racial conflict. If students are silent, participants rationalize that they may not be experiencing it. Saul, for example, described his experiences with student leaders from when he first arrived at JU and at the time of the study. This simultaneous feeling that they were doing all they could as professionals while relying on students to handle these issues also suggested their disconnect from experiences with racial conflict. Saul recalled:

Six years ago, I think student leaders—the President of the Council and other student leaders— may not have believed any of that [private handling of racial conflict]. They would have put up a big stink about, “How come you're not telling us?” Right? But I think that's changed a lot. So, some of the student leaders that I talked to, I think that they're fine not knowing. They believe it [racial incident] was handled.

Saul was referring to disclosing student disciplinary records to other students, specifically students who felt victimized. Under FERPA regulation, student disciplinary records are considered educational records and therefore cannot be disclosed (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). The disconnected power analysis frame also provides more context to how HESA professionals understand students' feelings of powerlessness to speak when involved in an incident of racial conflict. Mary provided an explanation for why students may silence themselves. Mary shared:

And so, you're often dealing with students who experience overt forms of racism. You're dealing with a lot of microaggressions, so students who feel slighted throughout their day, students who feel ignored in class or students who feel like if they speak up in class about a particular issue, that they're going to be stereotyped.

Mary suggests that the silencing comes from fear of being stereotyped as troublemakers. Mary recognizes that silence from students about racial conflict is a tool used against stereotyping that HESA professionals may misinterpret as being "fine" as Saul put it. Believing that Students of Color are fine because they are silent is a form of delegitimizing a students' experiences with racial conflict that needs more exploration. Students of Color's silence also allowed some participants in this study to disconnect themselves from the work of knowing students' thoughts about racial conflict.

A robust diversity system provided respondents with another way to disconnect from their power to address racial conflict. They employed explanations about why their campus was even better today than it was in the past. Systems of diversity at JU allowed participants of this study to disconnect themselves not only from other campuses but even from JU's own past with racial conflict. Daniel, senior-level

administrator in student affairs, used ally training programs to speak about the role they played in reducing racial conflict at JU. Daniel shared:

I feel like it's changed since I've been here. I feel like you see much more of a focus on how to really be a good ally to other groups than you did a while ago.... I do feel like students are making a concerted effort to think, "Okay, how can we work together?... I'm going to support your event and you support mine". So, it does seem like that is one way that things have advanced.

Using history, Daniel remarks on the changes in how incidents of racial conflict have reduced due to the efforts that students have made. Students have historically played an important role in the racial reconstitution of higher education (Kendi, 2012); however, HESA professionals have an integral role in building more equitable environments (Pérez et al., 2017). Despite this important role HESA professionals play in higher education, Daniel's statement is an indicator that racial justice still centers on students' responsibility to address racial conflict thus influencing a mismatch between how students experience racial conflict and how higher education leaders rationalize it (Jaschik & Lederman, 2021).

Discussion

This study demonstrated that HESA professionals recognize the existence of racial conflict on their campuses and have built rationales for how it operates there. These rationales are filtered through color-evasive ideologies that essentially help HESA professionals delegitimize students' perspectives on how racial conflict operates on their campuses. Data from this study extends work by Harper and Hurtado (2007), who found that entry-level HESA professionals were conscious about racist incidents but felt powerless to act. Additionally, I found that participants in my study genuinely believed racial conflict existed but also relied on students' ability to address incidents. Further, participants believed that JU cultivated an environment where *students* were

empowered to address incidents due to a robust diversity campus infrastructure. Finally, findings demonstrate that HESA professionals' beliefs may also allow them to disconnect themselves from addressing incidents of racial conflict and maintain current systems rather than engage in organizational change.

Specifically, in response to the first research question, what rationales do HESA professionals use to explain how racial conflict functions on their campus? I found that HESA professionals relied on diversity infrastructures at JU to explain their understanding of racial conflict. For example, compositional diversity (i.e., JU's Student of Color population was almost 50%) provided respondents with an important frame to understand racial conflict. A diversity frame (Warikoo et al., 2015) signals to those holding this frame that race relations are positive when they see students integrating and getting along.

Reliance on diversity infrastructures to understand racial conflict also allowed HESA professionals to minimize racial conflict. Referencing diversity-related practices that ranged from bias incident reports to conversations in Orientation events, these practices provided a lens through which HESA professionals minimized students' experiences. Additionally, while acknowledging that racial conflict exists, they believed—without evidence—that it happens more often in other institutions. Other practices HESA professionals referred to included conversations and initiatives supported by the university and referenced faculty who discussed these issues in classes.

Minimizing racial conflict allowed HESA professionals to continue to believe in the existence of racial conflict but not as severely as in the past and as happening

among other professionals such as JU staff. Minimization of racial conflict occurred by utilizing references to a past rife with racial tension and uprisings and a campus that lacked diversity initiatives in that historical past. Thus, they could minimize the importance of racism by relying on past historical events. In addition, applying a diversity frame made clear that professionals felt very strongly that today's students are more worldly and so racism is less overt than years ago. This extends Bonilla-Silva's (2006) work on color-evasive ideologies which suggested that people holding color-evasive lenses minimize the role of race by suggesting a decline in overt racism. Yet, participants in this study did so by adding a diversity frame extends to Warikoo et al.'s (2015) finding, that people who hold this frame can suggest the importance of diversity infrastructures in improving race relations without much evidence that this is accurate. In these ways, the diversity frame and minimization frame overlap and require more critical investigation.

In response to the second research question, how might HESA professionals' beliefs about racial conflict impede on their ability to address racial conflict? I found that HESA professionals relied on students' abilities to address racial conflict which in many ways not only relieved the onus of addressing racial conflict away from HESA professionals but also reduced their agency. Additionally, the use of rationales (e.g., history with overt racism, increased diverse populations on campuses, diversity policies and values, suggestions that racial conflict incidents are more severe between other stakeholders on their own campus and at other academic institutions) divert attention away from institutional and administrative power over addressing racial conflict. Further, citing occurrence of racial conflict in other places or among other stakeholders was

more of a deflection than evidence, as it provided a rationale for what they believed they were sincerely doing—creating less hostile environments —by giving rationales of harmonious diversity in which students ‘did not come to fight,’ despite JU’s activist history.

As such, this study extends Jayakumar and Adamian’s (2017) findings, which focused on students’ racial ideologies to HESA professionals, who are important to building equitable postsecondary environments. Pirtle et al. (2019) and Vega et al. (2022) found that antiBlack ideologies were embedded in *servingsness* practices at HSIs. Similarly, my findings demonstrate that racial ideologies, aided by organizational structures such as diversity practices, shape HESA professionals’ attitudes toward racial conflict. I argue that as long as HESA professionals use rationales that are based on little evidence, then understanding and addressing racial conflict will continue to be minimized or ignored which ultimately delegitimizes students’ experiences. As a racialized practice, then, this abets maintaining a racial hierarchy and status quo that prevent conceptualizing systemic ways to address racial conflict.

Implications for Research and Practice

This study has several implications for research and practice. With regard to research, more research is necessary to explore racial ideologies among HESA professionals in different institutional settings, such as Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) or Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institutions (AANAPISIs). Institutional settings may contribute to differences or overlap in racial ideologies. For example, participants of this study revealed overlap between minimizing race, abstract racial conflict, diversity, and disconnected power analysis

frames, which is common (Bonilla-Silva, 2006). For example, some dimensions were more salient within the frames to allow distinctions, as evidenced in how professionals minimized racism by applying a historical lens; shared their understanding of how diverse populations or diversity initiatives promoted a less hostile climate; or disconnected themselves from addressing racial conflict by believing that students could handle incidents on their own or perceiving those incidents as less harmful than they were in a historical past.

Secondly, more research could be focused on the effectiveness of diversity related practices used in response to racial conflict incidents. Findings from this study demonstrate that participants used their diversity infrastructure to minimize racial conflict incidents without any evidence that this infrastructure is effective. HESA professionals could then use this data to develop more effective practices to address various forms of racial conflict incidents. Additionally, more work could focus on different types of racial conflict students experience. Such studies would also provide more accurate data about students' experiences with racial conflict.

Thirdly, it is important to understand the extent to which HESA professionals are embedded in institutions that allow or hinder organizational change. By embedded I mean how closely aligned are the values and beliefs about racial conflict between HESA professionals and the higher education institution they work within. Given HESA professionals' important role to build more equitable environments, they must also be willing to challenge inequitable institutional norms regarding racial justice. Exploring their embeddedness could provide answers to questions such as What role do HESA

professionals play in organizational change to achieve racial justice? And, What values, beliefs, or practices do HESA professionals hold in regard to racial justice?

Finally, findings revealed that HESA professionals recognize and care about this issue. However, given the complexities of racial conflict, such as lack of a systematic approach to address incidents or lack of training to understand racism, participants in this study explained their awareness about racial conflict by minimizing it, diverting attention to diversity, and disconnecting themselves from the ability to address incidents of racial conflict. As such, an important implication for this study includes more research about the different ways students experience racial conflict that goes beyond interpersonal forms of conflict. For example, Vega (2019, 2021) demonstrated that resource deprivation was among the many ways students experienced racial conflict in addition to microaggressions. As such, questions that would be critical to explore would be: What organizational processes produce racial conflict or racialized outcomes? And, which of these processes are salient in the student experience?

Implications for Policy and Practice

This study has important implications for policy and practice. First, this study sheds light on the importance of revisiting racial conflict policies and partnering with institutions who have intentionally focused on centering racial conflict in their diversity initiatives. This would include building on competencies to address racial conflict incidents. By doing so, agency among HESA professionals can be amplified to help address these incidents when they occur and rely less on students to handle them. Further, while HESA professionals are conscious that racial conflict exists in their institutions, their beliefs impede in their own agency to address students' concerns.

While HESA professionals believe that students are equipped to handle racial conflict, it is unclear whether HESA professionals have the same belief about themselves. Given the lack of support they are provided to address racial conflict, it is not surprising that HESA professionals unintentionally delegitimize students' experiences. Using this research and with proper training, HESA professionals can expand their understanding of racial conflict and conceptualize programs that can support students to navigate these various forms of racial conflict.

Second, HESA professionals should engage in more reflection regarding racial conflict concerns. This reflexivity should include students. One area to reflect on is HESA professionals' beliefs that racial conflict was "better" in the present moment and in their institution than at other times or institutions. While this may or may not be true, acknowledging that racism is a permanent part of this society (Bell, 1992) and that conflict is endemic to organizations (Contu, 2019) could reinforce to students that they not only care about the issue, but they also acknowledge students' experiences with racial conflict. However, this must be done regularly since perceptions of the past to an administrator who has witnessed change over time may be affecting current practices and policies that affect students who are now on campus temporarily.

In conclusion, this study provides reasons why HESA professionals need more support to understand, respond to, and reflect on racial conflict, to dismantle their color-evasive lenses and contribute to organizational change. Holding color-evasive lenses does not imply a person is racist (Bonilla-Silva, 2006), but it is important in acknowledging the ways White Supremacist ideologies are embedded in people, organizations, and the society in which they reside.

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