

The Raised Fists Photo Incident at West Point: A Case Study Examination of Systemic and Color-Blind Racism

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Introduction

A pose. A photo. A public outcry. Without a doubt, none of these young women expected the furor that was to erupt, first on social media, then in mainstream media, about a photograph taken of them in celebration of their achievement at West Point.

On April 26, 2016, sixteen African American women cadets, all soon-to-be-graduating members of the West Point Class of 2016, posed for an “Old Corps” photo. The photo, which depicted the cadets in attire (full dress uniforms with some modifications) and poses similar to those of 19th century cadets, was one of several photos taken as part of a long-held tradition of current cadets paying homage to the Long Gray Line. (The United States Military Academy [USMA] at West Point, founded in 1802, is the oldest of the federal service academies, and its cadets and alumni make up the every growing Long Gray Line.)

In one image, the cadets were stoic, some with raised cadet sabers, in a pose typical of “Old Corps” photos (see Appendix A). In another, now infamous photo, they have raised fists instead of sabers (see Appendix B). It is these raised fists that caused the uproar – or rather, it was the fact that African American women cadets were posing in uniform with raised fists that incited the powerfully negative response. Some observers saw these women making not only a political

statement (an act which is against Department of Defense regulations while in uniform), but also a militant or even threatening one.

What caused the uproar? What was it about this image that led some people to call for the cadets to be punished or even expelled? And why did some see the raised fists in this photo as not only a political symbol, but also a threatening one? How is this incident representative of systemic racism and color-blind racism in our institutions, in higher education, and in our country?

I will evaluate the recent raised fists photo incident through the lens of critical race theory (CRT). Harper (2012) argued that CRT is useful “in examining complex race-related phenomena and problems in U.S. colleges and universities” (p. 24). In particular, I will use systemic racism and color-blind racism as frameworks for analyzing the institutional, public, and social media response to this photograph.

Theoretical Framework

To understand the deeper problems related to this incident, it is first important to understand systemic (and institutionalized) racism. Notions of individualized racism (a racist person) are more commonly understood than the larger institutionalized concepts of racism (a racist culture). Spears (1978) explained it this way:

Many people have the view that racism is an overt phenomenon which attaches to the individual. Racism has to do with personal attitudes and

willful behavior. This view can be contrasted to that which holds that racism does not reside only in the individual. More importantly, racism is a basic feature of the entire society, being structured into its political, social, and economic institutions. Since it is institutionalized, all cases of racism do not result from the willful acts of ill-intentioned individuals. It is in its more profound instances, covert, resulting from acts of indifference, omission, and refusal to challenge the status quo. Thus, an individual need never have willfully done anything that directly and clearly oppresses minorities, she/he need only have gone about business as usual without attempting to change procedures and structures in order to be an accomplice in racism, since business as usual has been systematized to maintain blacks and other minorities in an oppressed state. The institutionalized view of racism does not see it as a function of individual attitudes and preferences, then, but as a clash of group values and interests, namely, the maintenance of privilege. (pp. 129-130)

In short, institutionalized racism is a set of behaviors built into our society and enacted by institutions (such as institutions of higher education, the media, etc.) that serve to maintain the status quo of white privilege. This article examines the ways that institutionalized racism set the stage for the dialogue around the raised fists image. What underlying assumptions were projected on the image? Do the assumptions of viewers override the intentions of those in the photograph?

In addition, the concept of systemic racism explains race and racism both historically and today. The literature stresses the importance of looking beyond the surface of events to explore the deeper roots and meanings of behaviors today in the historical context of race in American culture. According to Feagin (2014):

Systemic racism involves both the deep structures and the surface structures of racial oppression. It includes the complex array of antiblack practices, the unjustly gained political-economic power of whites, the continuing economic and other resource inequalities along racial lines, and the emotion-laden racist framing created by whites to maintain and rationalize their privilege and power. Systemic racism thus encompasses the white-racist attitudes, ideologies, emotions, images, actions, and institutions of this society. This racism is a material, social, and ideological reality and is indeed systemic. . . . Each major part of U.S. society – the economy, politics, education, religion, the family – reflects the fundamental realities of systemic racism. (p. xiv)

Viewing the photograph of the African American cadets with raised fists through the lens Feagin described above is not only appropriate, but also important. To fail to look more closely at this incident would be to go about “business as usual” and “be an accomplice to racism” as Spears (1978) observed. Instead this work seeks to disrupt that pattern and encourage a deeper examination of the event.

Color-blind racism is another concept in contemporary America that applies to this incident. Color-blind racism is an ideology that “explains contemporary racial inequality as the outcome of nonracial dynamics” (Bonilla-Silva, 2014, p. 2). There is a myth that pervades much of today’s society that we are all now on a level playing field and racism is a thing of the past – that the Civil Rights movement is decades behind us, that we have had a Black President, that we need to “move on.” This myth leads to color-blind racism and for people to say, “I don’t see color, I just see people.” According to Gallagher (2003), “embracing color-blindness allows whites to be blind to or ignore the fact that racial and ethnic minorities lag behind whites on almost every quality of life measure” (p. 33). It also allows Whites “to define themselves as politically progressive and racially tolerant as they proclaim their adherence to a belief system that does not see or judge individuals by the ‘color of their skin’” (Gallagher, 2003, p. 26). Several scholars, to include Bonilla-Silva and Gallagher, have asserted that colorblindness is currently the primary lens that Whites use to examine race in America. In analyzing people’s responses to the raised fists photo, then, it is crucial to establish whether and how their commentary and use of language reveal color-blind racism.

Researcher Positionality

It is important to acknowledge upfront that I am a White female USMA graduate (Class of 1985). I am thus intimately familiar with the West Point

experience and culture and what it is like to be a woman at an institution that is predominantly male and profoundly masculine. In addition, my identity as White informs my work and thinking. Being White afforded me a chance to be an outsider looking in on a context with which I was very familiar.

My identity as female is also a strength here since there may be not only underlying racial implications, but also gender implications. While gender is not the focus here, it does inform both my perspective and potentially the ways in which others responded to the photo.

Methodology

As a West Point graduate, I have access to alumni social media outlets where there was considerable discussion about the raised fists photo incident. I found some of the discourse there to be indicative of systemic and color-blind racism, as was discourse in open access social media. In order to access a variety of perspectives, I used open social media, mainstream media, and publicly released documents from USMA as primary sources.

I employed qualitative textual analysis of social media (primarily Facebook and blogs) and mainstream media, as well as the publicly released documents. My intent was to discern public and institutional responses and analyze them through the lenses of systemic and color-blind racism. Qualitative textual analysis has been used before with social media (Broersma & Graham, 2012; Papacharissi & de Fatima Oliveira, 2012), and Carney (2016) used

qualitative textual analysis on social media to analyze racially charged events through the lens of CRT.

United States Military Academy Context

Situating African American Women within the Corps of Cadets

African American women make up a very small percentage of West Point cadets and alumni. In the forty-one years that women have been at the Academy, there have only been about 400 African American women graduates (K. McDermott, personal communication, June 2017). An average West Point class graduates around 1000 cadets, and the overall strength of the Corps of Cadets is about 4,400. Historically, African American women have made up only about 1% of the Corps of Cadets, but recently that percentage has increased slightly as West Point has more actively recruited students of color and admitted more women.

Between 1992 and 2009, African American cadets made up only about 6% of the Corps (Kirby, Thie, Naftal, & Adelson, 2010, p. 29). There has been an increase in African American cadets in recent classes, with 15% of the Class of 2019 being African American (*Welcome*, 2015). From the early 1980s until the mid-2000s, women made up 10% of the Corps of Cadets; they then increased to about 16% (Kirby et al., 2010). More recently, with the opening of combat arms to women, women make up 22-23% of incoming classes (*Welcome*, 2015). Even with these increases, however, the percentage of cadets who are both African American and women is still less than 2%.

The USMA Class of 2016 -- and the class represented by the women in the raised fists photo -- began with only 21 African American women (D. McDonald, personal communication, July 2016). Sixteen of them, all but one of the remaining African American women in the Class of 2016, were in the raised fists photo. Thus, almost the entire cohort of African American women was represented in that one contentious photo.

Historic Culture of USMA

The U.S. Military Academy has provided officers for the active duty Army since 1802. USMA is a four-year, federally funded service academy that provides each cadet with a tuition-free education and commissioning as a Second Lieutenant in the United States Army (Kirby et al., 2010). Cadets earn a Bachelor's of Science degree, regardless of major, because there are so many required math, science, and engineering courses. There is also a heavy liberal arts component, as well as very stringent physical fitness requirements.

Cadets live a very regimented life, wearing uniforms, living in barracks, following military rules and regulations, and operating under a cadet chain of command. While there are military science courses and drill and ceremony during the academic year, most military and tactical training is held during summer months. The admissions process for USMA is highly selective and involves not only academic requirements, but also medical, physical, and leadership requirements. In addition, most cadets must receive a nomination from a member

of Congress or other authorized person, and some cadets enter as enlisted soldiers from the active duty military (Petersen & Eckman, 2016).

West Point was an all-male institution for most of its 214-year history and is still a White male-dominated institution training cadets for a White male-dominated profession. The culture continues to be based on White male norms. Almost 70% of West Point cadets are White, and about 50% are White male (*Welcome*, 2015). West Point is training these cadets to become officers and leaders in an Army that has a much higher (and increasing) percentage of soldiers of color, mixed race, and Hispanic background than West Point (*2014 Demographics*, 2014).

The command climate and commander's intent can have a huge impact on diversity and inclusion. The current Superintendent (somewhat the equivalent of a university president), Lieutenant General (LTG) Robert Caslen, has been a leading advocate for positive change at West Point. Under his leadership, USMA has increased emphasis on admission, retention, and success of underrepresented groups and established an Office of Diversity, Inclusion and Equal Opportunity (Outing, 2014). The USMA Strategic Plan for 2015-2021 includes the goal to "Leverage Diversity and Foster Inclusiveness":

This goal supports a blend of excellence at West Point that reflects diversity in our Army and contributes to the collective strength of the Academy. An environment that maximizes the potential of individual

talents and backgrounds will create a stronger Academy able to shepherd leader development within the Army and stand as an example to academia.... While the current Administration is arguably the most progressive ever in striving to make USMA more diverse and inclusive, there is still considerable work that needs to be done. (“USMA Strategic Plan,” 2015)

USMA Culture for African American Cadets

While African American women West Point cadets are virtually non-existent in scholarly research, there is some scholarship on racial integration at West Point (Hansen, 1999). Most of the information on the experiences of the first African Americans at West Point comes from historical documents and from the African American cadets themselves. This work includes the memoirs of Henry O. Flipper, the first African American graduate of West Point in 1878 (Flipper, 1969 [1878]), and the autobiography of Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., the first African American to graduate in the 20th Century (1936) and the first African American four-star general (Davis, 1991). Although African American males were allowed to attend West Point after the Civil War with the passage of the 14th and 15th Amendments, only 12 were admitted between 1870 and 1887, and only three graduated (Nedergaard, 2007). Once Reconstruction ended, no African Americans attended USMA until 1918, and none graduated until Davis in 1936 (Nedergaard, 2007).

African American cadets at West Point were not welcomed. They were, to a degree, tolerated, but were almost unanimously shunned by an informal institutional tradition known as “silencing” (Shellum, 2006). This practice lasted until after WWII and President Harry S. Truman’s call for the racial integration of the armed forces. Silencing was a cadet form of censure, usually reserved for those who were seen to have violated the Honor Code but had not been expelled (the usual punishment for Honor Code violations) (Hancock, 1902). Silencing meant a cadet would only be spoken to on official business; he also typically would room alone and eat alone. The intent was that silenced cadets would find this isolation and ostracism so unbearable they would leave the Academy, and it often worked (Hancock, 1902). Although not officially sanctioned by USMA administrations, silencing for honor violations was tolerated until 1973 (Osser, 1990).

African American cadets, however, were not silenced because they had done anything wrong; they were silenced simply for being Black. Both Flipper and Davis wrote extensively about the loneliness and isolation of their four years at West Point having virtually no social interactions (Davis, 1991; Flipper, 1969 [1878]). Shellum (2006) summarized the experience of Charles Young, one of the three 19th century African American graduates: “Despite the advantages he accrued as a graduate, the experience was tremendously painful for him, leaving wounds that remained raw a quarter of a century later” (p. 2).

There is no scholarly literature on the African American cadet experience after racial integration of the military. There is some on diversity in general within the US Armed Forces (Kamarck, 2015). Additionally, there is some research on diversity at West Point and the other service academies, especially more recently as the service academies strive to diversify their student bodies and align more closely with the armed forces overall (Kirby et al., 2010).

That said, the examination of the raised fists incident seeks to fill a gap around issues of race and specifically a void of research on African American cadets at West Point. The historic issues of isolation and exclusion inform the institutional and historical contexts in which these 16 African American cadets found themselves. While times have changed, this history remains important to understanding the African American cadet experience.

USMA Culture for Female Cadets

Women were first admitted to West Point in 1976. There is some scholarly research on the integration of women at West Point, most of it coming from (or dealing with) the time that the Class of 1980, the first class to include women, attended the academy (Adams, 1984; Diamond, 2005; Janda, 2002; Priest, Prince, & Vitters, 1978). The most famous research on the integration of women at West Point is the four volume Athena Project, based on research conducted by West Point on the first four years women attended the Academy (Adams, 1979; Adams, 1980; Vitters, 1978; Vitters & Kinzer, 1977).

The admission of women to the service academies was mandated by a bill signed into law by President Gerald Ford on October 8, 1975 and was met with general antagonism and displeasure by the all-male Corps of Cadets, West Point Alumni, and many in the Army (Janda, 2002). The Class of 1980 had some particularly challenging four years as they encountered severe sexism and misogyny; 119 women were admitted and only 62 graduated (Janda, 2002). That said, women were quickly integrated throughout the Corps and did not encounter the widespread silencing their early African American male predecessors had. The more rapid integration of women was no doubt affected by the fact that women made up around 10% of a class rather than only one or two cadets in the entire Corps.

The acceptance of women has increased over the years, but there is still some sexism and misogyny in this male-dominated institution that is training cadets to be leaders in a male-dominated profession. With the increased role of women in the military and the recent admission of women into the combat arms, the future regarding the acceptance of women at West Point continues to unfold.

While the focus here is on race, the role of gender should not be overlooked. In examining the raised fists photo incident, it is important to be cognizant of the role that the intersection of race and gender played.

USMA Culture for African American Female Cadets

As mentioned above, scholarly literature related to the experience of African American women at West Point is virtually nonexistent. The only scholarship related to this topic includes a very recent dissertation on African American women field grade officers (Thompson, 2016) that discussed both race and women in the military. For more information about African American women in White male-dominated spaces, we have to look to scholarship beyond the military. For example, there is an article on female African American firefighters (Yoder & Aniakudo, 1997), as well as articles on African American women in other settings like business (Shorter-Gooden, 2004; Terhune, 2007; Thomas, Witherspoon, & Speight, 2008). There are also articles on African American women working in higher education (Clayborne & Hamrick, 2007; Harley, 2008; Henry, 2010; Patitu & Hinton, 2003).

Without any significant context on the experiences of African American women at West Point, the emergence of the issue here is even more important. In the case of the raised fists photo incident, African American women cadets (a largely invisible group) were suddenly the target of public outrage (hypervisible) in both social and mainstream media. In the process, they were described as militant, disrespectful, and insubordinate, instead of being portrayed as proud, strong, successful, and united. This case study is helpful in providing more

context to issues affecting African American women in systems such as higher education, the military, and the culture as a whole.

Overview of Incident

The Photo

On April 26, 2016, a cadet photographer took nine photographs of the 16 African American women cadets in full dress uniform on the steps of Nininger Hall. The first three photographs were traditional “serious” poses, with raised sabers. The cadet photographer then told the women they could take another pose. Two of the women suggested the raised fists pose. Two cadets expressed concern and asked “Are we really doing this?” Another cadet said, “This isn’t an EO violation and we won’t get in trouble for it” (as quoted in “Preliminary Inquiry,” 2016). The second three photos featured the cadets with raised fists.

The photographer then took the last three photos, which depicted the cadets in “silly” poses (“Preliminary Inquiry,” 2016). Within about an hour of the photo shoot, the cadet photographer emailed the women cadets three photos, one with each pose.

Social Media Response

Some of the photos were then quickly posted on social media, although it is unclear by whom. The more traditional “serious” pose with the raised sabers elicited positive responses. For example, Sue Fulton, a member of the first West Point class with women and Chair of the USMA Board of Visitors, reposted that

photo on Twitter noting: “THIS. Fearless, flawless, fierce. Ready” (Fulton, 2016). Patrick Murphy, then acting Secretary of the Army, retweeted it (Shortell, 2016).

The raised fists photo, however, immediately elicited concern among cadets in on-campus social media. According to CNN, a West Point representative stated that the raised fists photo created “an on-campus controversy – a potential break in the taboo against advocacy by military personnel” (Shortell, 2016). On April 28, in response to this concern, West Point officials opened a preliminary inquiry into the photo (Philipps, 2016).

The situation soon escalated when the photo received national attention after blog and Facebook posts by John Burk (2016a), a former Army Non-Commissioned Officer (NCO), went viral. Burk (2016a) shared in his blog *Inside the Arena* that several West Point cadets had contacted him about the raised fists photo. He said the cadets felt the women were making a political statement not only while in uniform but also by posting about the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement in West Point’s Yik Yak (an anonymous social media platform popular at many college and university campuses). Burk (2016a) wrote that the male cadets were afraid to come forward on their own about the African American women’s photo and postings because of fear of retribution and being called racist. One of the West Point cadets sent Burk a copy of the raised fists photo. Burk published the photo on his blog and Facebook page on May 3. Burk’s (2016b)

Facebook post received 700 comments (most of them reacting negatively and viscerally and calling for the women to be “kicked out”). In addition, his post was shared more than 1,400 times, thus spreading awareness and outrage about the photo. Burk (2016a) wrote of the photo: “This overt display of the black lives matter (sic) movement is not, in itself wrong, but to do so while in uniform is completely unprofessional and not in keeping with what the USMA stands for, and as well as (sic) violating the DoD directive 1344.10....”

Department of Defense (DoD) Directive 1344.10 (2008) provides the primary guidance to members of the U.S. Armed Forces regarding political activity. According to the U.S. Department of Defense Standards of Conduct Office (2016), “active duty personnel may not engage in partisan political activities and all military personnel should avoid the inference that their political activities imply or appear to imply DoD sponsorship, approval, or endorsement of a political candidate, campaign, or cause” (p. 2). West Point cadets are considered active duty Army personnel. Burk and others who argued that the women cadets were violating the directive, stated that they were doing so because they were supporting the BLM movement with their raised fists and were thus making a political statement while in uniform. Burk (2016a) went on to ask:

[W]hat happens when those same cadets identify with a group that has been known for inflicting violent protest throughout various parts of the

United States, calling for the deaths of police officers, and even going so far as to call for the deaths of white Americans[?]

Mainstream and Growing Social Media Response

A significant number of people – military-affiliated and not – agreed with Burk’s statements and further complained in social media spaces, to the press, and to West Point administration. According to Lombardo (2016), the military newspaper *Army Times* received the photo on Wednesday, May 4, “from several readers who [were] concerned the women violated Department of Defense Directive 1344.10.” The story then spread to other mass media outlets, both in print and online (e.g., *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, and CNN), as well as on major network and cable news programs and shows.

West Point responded with a public statement on May 5 stating: “Academy officials are conducting an inquiry into the matter” (Lombardo, 2016). West Point was also contacted by angry graduates, most of whom were older White males. In addition, many threatened to discontinue making monetary donations to their alma mater if the women cadets were not punished.

There was considerable traffic on the West Point Association of Graduates (AOG) LinkedIn page, mostly in response to a castigating open letter to LTG Caslen from one of his West Point classmates. This letter garnered multiple thumbs up from USMA alumni and generated well over 100 comments, some

supporting the women and Superintendent but most echoing the poster's negative sentiments.

Soon after the negative social media posts started, other individuals posted counter responses. According to Shortell (2016), "scores of alumni have lined up in support of the young women, who have not publicly spoken about the photo or been identified by West Point."

On May 5, Mary Tobin (2016), a 2003 African American USMA graduate and mentor to some of the women cadets, published a Facebook note "This Is Not About a Fist." Her note addressed not only the photo incident but also what it was like to be an African American growing up in the South, at West Point, and in the Army. Her note spoke explicitly to the racism she had experienced. Tobin also talked about what it was like to be an African American woman cadet and to go through such a challenging four-year experience as a member of such a small, underrepresented group. Her piece was reposted extensively on social media, and Shortell (2016) quoted her note in his CNN story.

When Shortell (2016) subsequently interviewed Tobin, she told him that she had spoken with some of the women cadets, and they had told her the pose "had nothing to do with politics." She continued: "They weren't doing it to be aligned with any particular movement or any particular party. It was 'We did it [made it through four years of West Point] and we did it together'" (Shortell,

2016). Mainstream media outlets (e.g., *The New York Times*, CNN, CBS News) then interviewed Tobin as an unofficial spokesperson for the women cadets.

Other Academy alumni and former cadets posted notes in social media in support of the cadets in the photo. For example, Samuel Jackson (2016), an African American, pastor, and member of the USMA Class of 1985, posted on the incident, on his experience as an African American cadet, and on issues of racism related to this and other incidents in his blog *Faith in Living Color*. CNN (Shortell, 2016) also quoted Jackson's post.

Several supporters had articles published in mainstream media. For example, a 2015 White male West Point graduate and his African American senior officer mentor, co-wrote an opinion piece for *USA Today* (Ruth & Goodwin, 2016). Other supportive editorials and opinion pieces included "Don't Punish West Point Cadets for Raising Their Fists in Pride" in *The Washington Post* and "Strong, Proud Black Women at West Point" by Vanessa De Luca, the editor of *Essence* magazine, in *The Wall Street Journal*.

USMA Response

At West Point, after interviewing the 16 women cadets and others involved in the incident, the inspecting officer concluded that the raised fists pose had been impromptu and not intended as a political statement. According to his report, "all participants indicated the intent of the 'raised fist' photograph was... to display 'unity, solidarity, and pride' due to a sense of accomplishment resulting

from graduating and commissioning from the United States Military Academy” (“Preliminary Inquiry,” 2016). In addition, “No member of the photograph admitted to involvement, allegiance to, or support of a political or social movement” (“Preliminary Inquiry,” 2016). The officer concluded that the cadets had not “directly” violated DoD Directive 1344.10.

However, he did find their actions “contrary to the spirit of the Directive” because they could be “interpreted as being associated with ‘issues specifically identified with national or State political parties and associated or ancillary associations or clubs’ [from Definition E2.4. Nonpartisan Political Activity, DOD Directive 1344.10]” (“Preliminary Inquiry,” 2016). He added that although cadets within the group had raised concerns, everything took place so quickly that there had been no time for the cadets to discuss the pros and cons of the pose.

Superintendent Caslen (2016) published the Academy’s official response in a May 10 letter. He also stated that because the cadets had not violated any regulations, they would not be punished. However, he wrote, because cadets and future Army officers need to be aware of perceptions, the 16 women cadets would receive “a developmental block of instruction... to address their intent versus the impact of the photo” (Caslen, 2016, p. 2).

Response to USMA’s Decision

Reaction to West Point’s decision on how to address the incident was mixed. While often very negative, both in social media and in comments posted to

online mainstream media outlets, there was also a supportive response from those who felt the women had been wrongly accused or targeted. This was especially true of other African American West Point graduates, both male and female, but also from male and female White graduates.

While most of the protest about the photo was from outside the Corps of Cadets, there was some dissatisfaction expressed in online forums such as the West Point Yik Yak. Most of the broader public protests and outrage seemed to come from White males (including military members/veterans and even West Point graduates). That said, some White females also echoed the sentiment that the women cadets had done something wrong and should be held accountable.

The concerns focused on what was perceived to be a racial and political statement. The photo was not unique – cadets often raise their fists as an act of celebration or victory, and some people posted photos of White male cadets and mixed groups of cadets doing just that. What was unique to this situation was the race of the cadets involved. Rather than seeing the photo as a celebration of success by African American women at West Point, many observers, having no information beyond the photo itself, saw it as a political, race-based action.

Analysis

Overview

The raised fist has been a symbol throughout history and one that has transcended social movements. “The iconic symbol of the raised fist clearly

demonstrates strength and power and has come to be associated with a number of movements, including communist solidarity and Black Power” (Goodnow, 2006, p. 171). In this photo, the raised fist symbolized different ideas to different people. To some it was clearly about race and politics: the Black Lives Matter movement; Black Power, as represented by the raised fist podium salute of African American athletes Smith and Carlos at the 1968 Olympics; and the Black Panthers movement from the 1960s. To others, the fists in the photo told a story of unity, strength, and pride: of a cohort of people celebrating their success, of the power of persistence in completing a difficult journey. The raised fists photo of African American women cadets elicited a variety of responses, and most people assumed they knew what was intended just from looking at the photo.

Reactions

Raised fists as political statement. The first type of response was that the women cadets had made a political statement while in uniform. This quickly escalated on social media, and many called for the women to be punished, with some advocating expulsion. Those who were calling for punitive action perceived the raised fists as a symbol of militant action. For some, it was the BLM movement, for others the image symbolized Black Power or the Black Panthers, and some viewed it as both militant and threatening. Many opposed the idea of these African American women becoming officers and leading soldiers because

they had an “agenda.” Some who voiced their concerns went so far as to call the African American cadets “racist.”

Many who espoused this first response used language that demonstrated at best color-blind racism and in some cases overt racism. One example was the website *MilitaryCorruption.com*, which touts itself as a place for military personnel to “sound off” in “fighting for the truth... exposing the corrupt” (“About Us,” n.d.). The site published a particularly visceral post, one that thanked Burk for his original posting of the photo. *MilitaryCorruption.com* called the 16 African American women “idiots” and went on to state: “Note the sullen, street thug-like expressions on most of their faces. With the short hair and uniforms originally designed for males, a quick glance could deceive the viewer into thinking that 16 gang members from the south side of Chicago had been transplanted to West Point.” Associating the African American women cadets with Black gang members is clearly racist. This passage shows not only the criminalization of Black males – “One cannot prove blackness innocent because guilt is a forgone conclusion” (Dillon & Page, 2015, p. 283) – but also the transformation of the Black women into Black males for easier targeting. Use of the term “thug” is an example of “coded language.” Smiley and Fakunle (2016) explained the phenomenon as follows:

Although historically in America overt racist language was socially acceptable, there has been a cultural shift of social intolerance to this

blatant racist behavior. This does not mean that racism or discriminatory actions have been eradicated but rather driven beneath the surface and reemerged as coded language, gestures, signs, and symbols to indicate difference. Terms such as “thug,” “ghetto,” “hood,” “sketchy,” and “shady” are all examples of coded language that are used to refer to or speak of Blackness without overtly sounding racially prejudiced. (p. 354)

The fact that so many of the negative reactions were based on one photo with no context (or even a willingness to ask questions to clarify the cadets’ intent) is indicative of systemic racism. While the assertions focused on West Point cadets, this becomes a racial issue because these were Black women performing the behavior. The concerns raised around the photo align with Spears’s (1978) assertion that systemic racism works to maintain the status quo and to sustain white privilege. Black women with their fists raised must be political (BLM) and therefore must be removed from the system (expelled) or retrained to know their place (given additional education in a punitive context).

That so many immediately associated the African American women raising their fists with the BLM movement, perceived as militant and threatening, is also important. Different people and groups have very divergent opinions about the BLM movement in terms of its purpose and impact. A simple definition of BLM is that it is “a political and social movement originating among African Americans, emphasizing basic human rights and racial equality for black people

and campaigning against various forms of racism” (“Black Lives Matter,” n.d.). On its website (<http://www.blacklifematters.org>), BLM defines itself as “an organization dedicated to the betterment of the African American community.” According to Smiley and Fakunle (2016), “#BlackLivesMatter has become a recognizable hashtag on social media, which has been used to connect individuals and organization in solidarity against police brutality, excessive force by law enforcement, and racial profiling” (p. 362).

Nowhere on the BLM website do they advocate violence, yet many who posted about BLM in relation to the raised fists photo saw BLM as threatening and violent. Burk (2016a) asserted in his blog post that the women cadets were identifying “with a group that has been known for inflicting violent protest throughout various parts of the United States, calling for the deaths of police officers, and even going so far as to call for the deaths of white Americans.” Burk associated the women with the BLM movement solely on the basis of their skin color. Seeing the organized promotion of Black interests as automatically into violent is a further example of color blind-racism.

The assertion by many that the women cadets were “racist” because their raised fists indicated the BLM movement is also an indicator of color-blind racism. According to Gallagher (2003), “the use of group identity to challenge the existing racial order by making demands for amelioration of racial inequities is

viewed as racist because such claims violate the belief that we are a nation that recognizes the rights of individuals not rights demanded by groups” (p. 27).

Raised fists not a political statement. The second type of response to the raised fists photo was that the women cadets had not made a political statement while in uniform and should not be punished. Those who responded in this way perceived the raised fists as an indication of victory and success. They saw the women showing a sense of pride or unity at having completed four difficult years at West Point. In fact, people in this group often pointed to other photos, readily available on the internet, that portrayed individuals or groups with raised fists that clearly indicated unity, strength, or even support for an athletic team. The Superintendent of West Point himself pointed out such photos in his official response letter. He described a raised fist pose that the Class of 2019 had spontaneously taken at the playing of the Army Strong song during the 2015 West Point Fourth of July celebration. He also described a photo where he and other West Point staff and alumni had raised their fists in support of the Army football team during an Army-Navy football game pep rally (Caslen, 2016).

Many in this second group expressed that they saw those in the first group as reactionary and even racist in their postings and comments. Whether they were familiar with the term color-blind racism or not, they identified the behavior as exemplifying what the concept means. Needless-to-say, members of the first group did not respond well to accusations of racism. Those who see the world

through the lens of color-blind racism are oblivious to both their racism and white privilege (Gallagher, 2006).

John Burk (2016c) wrote in his May 10 blog post:

As of now, I am being called a racist and having brought shame to the uniform.... They'll continue to blast me and label me all manner of things, but the reality of it is that the information I was given came to me from within the very walls of West Point itself. Too bad these people crying "racist" aren't seeing that, but would rather see themselves as being victimized.

Burk did not perceive himself as racist. His statement is an example of what Feagin (2014) described as "the emotion-laden racist framing created by whites to maintain and rationalize their privilege and power" (p. xiv).

Raised fists not political, but unwise. Not all those involved in the discussion saw the action as simply political or non-political. Some felt the women cadets had not made a political statement, but they should have been more attuned to potential perceptions of their actions. This group felt the women should not be punished, but should receive remedial training in perception awareness. This group did not perceive the raised fists as political, militant, or threatening, but could see how others might.

USMA's official response aligned with this third response. LTG Caslen (2016) wrote:

We must all learn from this incident. As members of the Profession of Arms, we are held to a high standard, where our actions are constantly observed and scrutinized in the public domain. We all must understand that a symbol or gesture that one group of people may find harmless may offend others. As Army officers, we are not afforded the luxury of a lack of awareness of how we are perceived. Accordingly, the Commandant will administer a developmental block of instruction for these cadets to address their intent versus the impact of the photo. There are teaching points that must be captured, and this is an opportunity to learn them. (p. 2)

While Caslen's (2016) words imply that all cadets and future Army officers would benefit from perception awareness training, his letter stated that only the 16 women would receive the training. Thus, the 16 African American women were singled out for education related to the incident. When examined through Feagin's (2006) lens of systemic racism, the complexity of the issue emerges. Yes, the 16 African American women were the participants in the incident, but if all cadets would benefit from perception awareness training, then all cadets should receive the training. Instead, this is again color-blind racism.

While perhaps well-intentioned in this case, the final result is that the marginalized group (African American women cadets) need to be (re)trained because their understanding (and only their understanding) of political

implications are deficient. This serves as an example of racism as “a basic feature of the entire society, being structured into its political, social, and economic institutions” (Spears, 1978, p. 129). What the Administration decided to do was not necessarily racist, but the ways in which it deployed the new education was. Even when “the system” identified all members as needing additional education, only a very few were required to participate in it.

Cannot tell what the raised fists mean. Finally, there was also a minority fourth response. This group stated that one could not tell simply from looking at the photo if the women were making a political statement. They added that one would have to ask the women what they intended and investigate the incident further. That is exactly what the USMA investigation was designed to do, and it answered the question of intent adequately for the West Point Administration.

In summary, responses of the first type – the most dominant on social media – showed both systemic and color-blind racism, and at times overt individual racism. They assumed political and militant intent in the pose based simply on the race of the cadets. The other types of responses did not assume a political or militant intent of those in the photo. Some saw the pose as indicative of unity and pride or celebration. And some felt people should not read any intent into the pose without asking more questions.

Limitations and Implications

Limitations

This analysis was focused on a single incident at a single institution.

While there have been numerous examples of race-related events in the context of the BLM movement, each campus history and culture matters and is very specific. The raised fists photo incident at West Point is no exception. The type of institution (in this case, service academy) and its unique culture may also have come into play. Clearly, the fact that the African American women were in the military and at one of the nation's most prestigious service academies was important for this particular case.

The incident is so recent that there is not yet any other scholarship on it. In addition, there is no other scholarship on African American women West Point cadets to compare it to. It is too soon to know what the long-term implications of this incident might be.

Implications

Despite the limitations, there are multiple practical implications as well as implications for future research to be taken from this incident. Practical implications fall into two key areas: institutionalized process and institutionalized training and awareness.

Institutionalized process. It is imperative in the current context that institutions of higher education be intentionally reflective about potential

responses to incidents that may have unintended or unnoticed systemically racist components. In this situation, the African American women involved were seen (externally) and addressed (internally) in ways that others (White women, White men) have not been addressed in the past. How might a similar incident, where the respondents perceive negative intentions based primarily on participants' race, play out at other types of institutions and how would the administrations respond? Administrations would also be wise to have a plan for responding to racist social media discourse whether internal to the institution or about events occurring at the institution.

Institutionalized training and awareness. Changing educational settings from places where tradition is founded on historically racist, marginalizing, and problematized practices is slow and challenging. This requires (re)education not only of students, but also of faculty, staff, administrative leadership, alumni, donors, and others. Culture change takes significant time. What types of training can institutions provide their campus communities on systemic and color-blind racism? And what types of dialogue can students, faculty, and staff have around campus incidents involving systemic and color-blind racism?

While in many ways the response of the USMA leadership was exceptional – leaders did not succumb to the vitriolic pressure of the public and some alumni – there also could have been a chance for more extended education for the entire Corps of Cadets. If it is important for all future Army officers to be

aware of potential perceptions of their words and actions, as the Superintendent stated in his letter, then training for all cadets, and not just the 16 African American women, would be appropriate. And perhaps that is being done. In addition, as USMA continues to strive to “leverage diversity and foster inclusiveness” (“USMA Strategic Plan,” 2015), including dialogue and training on systemic and color-blind racism for all members of the USMA community would be helpful in preparing cadets to be officers in an increasingly multicultural Army.

Implications for future research. Due to the dearth of research on African American women at USMA, more scholarship is necessary to understand the broader implications and additional experiences of African American cadets. The intersectionality of race and gender is an important element not explored here, but of tremendous value.

In addition, more scholarship on the explicit but also the implicit racist policies, processes, events, and institutional reactions in higher education is essential. As more and more issues are raised on campuses across the nation, the need for this work is vital for anyone working in higher education or with college students – of any race or identity.

Conclusion

People can perceive a raised fist in many different ways: as a political gesture; as a symbol for unity, pride, and strength; as celebration of victory; or as

a threat of violence or physical harm. Certainly, the context in which one sees a raised fist should help one decide how to interpret the action.

That so many people perceived the raised fists of the 16 African American female West Point cadets in just one photo as political, militant, and threatening is indicative of systemic racism. A number of people made assertions, accusations, and allegations based on the image alone. Those involved did not make the same assertions about photos of White cadets or racially mixed groups of cadets striking similar raised fist poses.

This incident at one institution of higher education provided a case study on systemic and color-blind racism, within the institution as well as externally and publicly. As we continue to wrestle with our complicated racial past, it is imperative that we critically examine situations like the raised fists photo.

Without critical review of this and other incidents, we perpetuate an America that increasingly demonstrates racial polarization in its discourse. More importantly, we perpetuate actions that serve to oppress minoritized populations in an attempt to maintain white privilege and power.

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Appendix A

Traditional Pose - West Point "Old Corps" Photo



(Retrieved from Twitter.com)

Appendix B

Raised Fists Pose - West Point “Old Corps” Photo



(Retrieved from AP – taken from Twitter.com)