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September 2011

## Doing a Good Job at a Bad Thing: Prevalence and Perpetuation of Stereotypes Among Members of Historically Black Sororities

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### Recommended Citation

Tindall, Natalie T.J. Ph.D.; Hernandez, Marcia D. Ph.D.; and Hughey, Matthew W. Ph.D. (2011) "Doing a Good Job at a Bad Thing: Prevalence and Perpetuation of Stereotypes Among Members of Historically Black Sororities," *Journal of Sorority and Fraternity Life Research and Practice*: Vol. 6: Iss. 2, Article 6. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25774/8b9j-wc32>  
Available at: <https://scholarworks.wm.edu/oracle/vol6/iss2/6>

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**DOING A GOOD JOB AT A BAD THING: PREVALENCE AND  
PERPETUATION OF STEREOTYPES AMONG MEMBERS OF  
HISTORICALLY BLACK SORORITIES**

NATALIE T. J. TINDALL, MARCIA D. HERNANDEZ, AND MATTHEW W. HUGHEY

*This study examined how stereotypes among alumnae members of historically Black sororities affected their experiences as both undergraduate and graduate members. This research contributes to the literature on skin color bias and to the stereotypes of Black women. For the majority of women we surveyed for this research, the myths and stereotypes surrounding skin color bias, intra-racial group relations, beauty, and femininity of different historically Black sororities influenced the initial perceptions of members in each group. The findings include some commonality among stereotypes about the oldest sororities (Alpha Kappa Alpha and Delta Sigma Theta), yet stereotypes about the other organizations (Zeta Phi Beta and Sigma Gamma Rho) varied due to age, college life experience, and the geographic location of the interviewees. Implications and considerations for future research are included.*

Limited academic research exists about representations of historically Black sororities and their members. Each sorority shares similar goals and objectives rooted in sisterhood, service, upright character and morals, and networking (Whaley, 2010). Yet each has its own distinctive characteristics and traits (Fine, 2004) that are cultivated and maintained through the membership's use of formal signs and symbols and unsanctioned use of stereotypes to describe group members. Anderson, Buckley, and Tindall (2010) noted: "Especially in the fraternity/sorority world, signs and symbols are important communicators of codes that display precise meanings regarding identities, behaviors, ways of speaking and being, and social understanding" (p. 7).

This study examined how stereotypes based on colorism—or discrimination based on skin color—and elitism might operate as unofficial symbols and signs for historically Black sororities. To examine this problem, the researchers conducted interviews with collegiate and alumnae members of the four historically Black sororities. The interviews revealed that stereot-

types served positive and negative functions for the organizations. These stereotypes were based on the legacy of colorism and classism that served as historical barriers to membership in Black sororities (Giddings, 1994). Today, sorority leaders downplay the issues of colorism and classism as historical anachronistic forms of intra-racial elitism that has little relevance for current members (Russell, Wilson, & Hall, 1992). However our findings indicated stereotypes are a part of the sororities' collective and individual identities, and continue to influence their legacies and current member perspectives.

#### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

##### *Background*

Although collegiate sororities have existed since 1851, the Black sorority movement started in 1908 at Howard University with the founding of the oldest predominantly Black Greek-letter sorority, Alpha Kappa Alpha. In 1913, 22 women who were members of Alpha Kappa Alpha founded Delta Sigma Theta. Zeta Phi Beta, the third Black sorority, was founded in 1920 on

the campus of Howard University. Sigma Gamma Rho is the only sorority to emerge outside of Howard University and at a predominantly White institution. On November 12, 1922, seven women founded Sigma Gamma Rho at Indiana's Butler University. Neumann (2008) recognized that the sororities came into existence because Black women had a need to "carve out a place for themselves" (p. 170). Although founded at different times and places, the mission of these organizations is universally consistent with Du Bois' (later abandoned) idea of "the talented tenth," the notion that the top 10% of Black people would lead the race through the inculcation of fellowship and camaraderie of sisterhood, the promotion of "finer womanhood," the accomplishment of high scholastic and moral standards, and social justice and community activism (Hernandez, 2008).

### *Race-Based Stereotypes*

Historically, race has played a significant role in the lives of Black Americans (Mahoney, 1997). The social construction and concept of race is tied to skin color and phenotype (Omi & Winant, 1994). The color caste system was formulated under slavery when a need existed to deny equal rights and treatments to Blacks and to determine the race of a child born of one White parent (Wright, 1997). Those slaves with lighter skin and features closer to European rather than African tones received better treatment than others without these physical traits (Bennett, 1993; Hurtado, 1999; Quarles, 1965). Graham (1999) wrote: "It was a color thing and a class thing. And for generations of Black people, color and class have been inexorably tied together" (p. 4).

Research has shown that the legacy of differential treatment of Blacks during slavery endures with the existence of a "racial hierarchy" that privileges those with lighter skin today in marketing various social, economic, and political arenas (Hunter, 2005; Keith & Herring, 1991; Hochschild & Weaver, 2007). Moreover,

research on colorism in Black communities and mate-selection suggests that women with lighter skin are privileged in the dating and marriage market by being perceived as more beautiful and feminine (Hill, 2002; Hunter, 2005). This study offers a unique approach to understanding the stereotyping of historically Black sororities as a way to informally provide a "brand" for each organization and to market differences in femininity, beauty, and status between the groups.

Both historically Black and predominantly White sororities emerged during the Victorian era. The prevalent norms of that era influenced the cultural norms surrounding women's behavior and expectations. According to Turk (2004), the Victorian standard of true womanhood declared that men and women occupied two separate, distinct spheres of influence. For women, that sphere was confined to home and centered on marriage, romance, and subservience to manhood (Berkowitz & Padavic, 1999). Finding a husband was the ultimate goal. As mothers and wives, women were responsible for upholding the family using grace, passivity, and morality.

The first generation of sororities did not challenge the sphere of true womanhood; rather, members sought to expand the definition of the feminine ideal to include intellectual capacities. Turk (2004) claimed that the women of the first set of predominantly White sororities "created an identity that combined the seemingly conflicting roles of 'scholar' and 'woman'" (p. 40). For U.S.-born Black women during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, elements of the Victorian gender ideology were viewed as desirable although not always plausible or realistic. Giddings (1984) argued Black women wanted the opportunity to live family-centered and focused lives; however, the marginal status of Black men in post-slavery economies forced many women into jobs in order to provide for the household. Nonetheless, the Black sororities and their precursor, the Black women's club movement, implemented and fomented the Victorian ideals of family, home, hearth, and moral

sanctitude among themselves and in the community as a method to counteract the virulent stereotypes about Black women.

There is a range of topics yet to be explored in depth including stereotypes associated with the groups, development of the membership's racial identity, and practices of colorism by members (Parks, 2008). The existing scholarship tends to focus on two themes: historically Black sororities serving as a comparison group for predominately White sororities, and the service and philanthropy sorority members perform.

### ***Historically Black Sororities as Comparison Groups***

The first body of scholarship highlighted differences between the experiences of historically Black sororities and other organizations (Berkowitz & Padavic, 1999) and between the experiences of little sisters for predominantly White and historically Black fraternities (Stomblor & Padavic, 1997). A limitation of research comparing historically Black sororities with other organizations is that it fails to consider that the expectations of members in historically Black sororities may differ from predominantly White sororities. For example, historically Black organizations have a relatively higher number of active, dues-paying members involved with graduate chapters (Giddings, 1994; Hernandez, 2008; Whaley, 2010). Scholars also frequently reported that women who joined predominantly White sororities for support and networking in college decreased active participation in these organizations over time (Whipple, Baier, & Grady, 1991). In contrast, women who joined historically Black sororities do so with the understanding that sisterhood is an identity you grow into, rather than out of. For example, over 70 percent of Delta Sigma Theta and Alpha Kappa Alpha's membership are alumnae. Post-college involvement is important to sustaining historically Black sororities (Hernandez, 2008).

Comparative sorority research has grown beyond a "Black vs. White" model, to investigate a wide array of cross-racial memberships within the fraternity and sorority system. For example, Chen's (1998) research examined Asian-American women who joined historically Asian-American, White, and Black sororities. Hughey (2007) provided one of the first sociological and historical accounts of cross-racial membership in Black fraternities and sororities. Hughey also examined the dynamics of non-Blacks joining historically Black fraternities and sororities (Hughey, 2008), the place of White fraternities on historically Black college campuses (Hughey 2006), and ways that shared racialized meanings continued to structure non-White membership in White fraternities and sororities (Hughey, 2010). Together, these comparative studies offered interesting insight into our understanding of how non-Blacks may perceive historically Black fraternities and sororities. In various reports, non-Black members tended to cite the focus on community involvement, academic achievement, and supportive relationships between members as motivations for joining these organizations instead of predominantly White groups (Chen, 1998; Fine, 2004; Hughey, 2007, 2008).

### ***Historically Black Sorority Members and 'Good Deeds' Research***

The second body of literature dealt with the "good deeds" conducted by historically Black sororities' members such as philanthropic acts (Gasman, Louison, & Barnes, 2008). Researchers have praised historically Black sororities for encouraging members to "get ahead" by using higher education to improve personal and professional opportunities and to "give back" by contributing to their communities (Berkowitz & Padavic, 1999). Some scholars noted the influence of the Black women's movement in developing feminist thought within the organizations (Giddings, 1994; Neumann, 2008). Even social events such as debutante balls have

in part thought to contribute to the racial uplift and community service ethos of the organizations (Kendall, 2002). In these scenarios historically Black sororities are highlighted as benevolent organizations credited with performing good deeds and developing women of good character.

Comparative studies are often limited to exploring the undergraduate experience as the norm. Yet for historically Black sororities, membership in alumnae chapters is larger than undergraduate chapters and has grown over the years. Researchers have tended to ignore the impact of intra-group relations after graduation, particularly those as salient within Black communities based on colorism and elitism. Research focused on philanthropic work and community service has painted a positive picture of membership, but largely ignored organizational pressures fostering tension between individual members and different historically Black sororities due to stereotyping. An organizational lens model was used to frame the unexplored questions this review raised.

### ***Conceptual Framework: Organizational Culture and Symbols***

One method organizations use to imprint the ideas, philosophies, and viewpoints of their culture is the use of symbols and imagery. Hatch (1997) noted that embedded within tangible and intangible representations is the “conscious or unconscious association with some wider concept of meaning” (p. 219). Symbols are important functions for corporations, serving as the organization’s public images (Grunig, 1993; Shields, 2004). Symbols are consciously chosen by organizations as they strive to create an authentic relationship between the organization and its audiences, promote their products, and brand themselves. The chosen symbols present and represent the values of the organization and must succinctly communicate those values with internal (members) and external (nonmember) audiences (Shields, 2004).

NPHC sororities each endorse symbols and signs to represent their organizations. For example, Alpha Kappa Alpha’s colors are pink and green, and ivy serves as a symbol of the organization. Yet, symbols attributed to a sorority can be interpreted outside of the parameters of meaning and interpretation set by the organization (Hatch, 1997). According to Hatch, “Management can exercise considerable control over the design and display of its artifacts, but the symbolic messages with which artifacts become associated are far less easy to control” (pp. 219-220). Stereotypes of members based on skin color, class, and femininity often serve as un-sanctioned symbols of sororities.

Although organizations attempt to control their identity through the use and publicity of certain symbols and images, individuals inside and outside of the organization also shape and define the organizational image (Bromley, 2000; Plowman & Chiu, 2007; Whetten & Mackey, 2002; Williams & Moffit, 1997). The organizational image is how organizations position their identity in communications with audiences (Whetten & Mackey), and this positioning can come in many forms: visual symbols and “the mediums [sic], products, or tactics of communication” (Plowman & Chiu, p. 4). The organizational image can be both the intended and unintended consequences of the constructed organizational identity (Gray & Balmer, 1998). As Cooperrider (1990) explained, “organizations as made and imagined are artifacts of the affirmative mind” (p. 115). Individuals create and form images based on their experiences with the organization and the leadership of the organization. According to Shields (2004), “Image formation is an emotional and psychological process that is based on other experiences that the individual has had with a particular person, company, or object in the past and in the present. . . . The past and present experiences influence the perceptions of and the possibility for future experiences” (p. 8).

Shields (2004) noted that organizational im-

age can ebb and flow based on the audience's understanding of the organization and attachment/involvement with the organization. Thus, an organization can have a variety of images and use these different images with multiple audiences. As she noted, "The image of the corporation is no longer only determined by the symbols that are chosen." The terms and symbols used and associated with certain sororities can prompt a viewer or listener to connect the visual elements associated with the term. For example, the pyramids, ivy, and doves have explicit meanings to members of Delta Sigma Theta, Alpha Kappa Alpha, and Zeta Phi Beta, respectively. Per Hatch (1997), for sorority members, these symbols have a tangible form and ascribed meaning.

### **Research Questions**

Organizational identity can be socially constructed through stereotyping behaviors. As previously noted, stereotypes surrounding historically Black sorority organizations have been grounded in gender norms, colorism, and elitism (Whaley, 2010). The present study was intended to examine how these stereotypes might affect sorority members' experiences. Specifically, the authors posed the following research questions:

- How do sorority members make meaning of and understand the ideals of femininity in relationship to the stereotypes and perceptions of the four National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC) sororities?
- How do members of the four NPHC sororities understand and perceive colorism and elitism in relation to their own organization and with other organizations?

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Overview of the Instrument**

Based on the theoretical framework and the research questions, the researchers used in-

depth interviews to gather "detailed description of situations, events, people, interactions, and observed behaviors" (Patton, 1980, p. 22). This study also attempted to understand the complexity of the social interactions at play in sorority identities and how sorority members attributed these interactions (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Through in-depth interviews, the researchers examined the constructions and projections of organization identity and stereotypes in the four NPHC sororities. Because an in-depth interview is a "conversation with a purpose" (Rubin & Rubin, 1995), the researchers used a semi-structured protocol during the interview. A key list of questions and probes was developed based on the concepts articulated in the literature review. For example, the researchers adopted the colorism questions from Cain (2006). The instrument used for this study is included as Appendix A. Interview participants were also free to introduce new topics, and in those instances the researchers allowed the participants to "tell their story in their own terms" (McCracken, 1988, p. 34) through tangential but meaningful conversations.

### **Selection of Data and Variables**

To obtain representation from each organization, the researchers used quota sampling, a type of purposive sampling (Miles & Huberman, 1999). Quota sampling is a sampling strategy that allows the researcher to find participants based on certain criteria until certain parameters, or quotas, are met. In an effort to gain as much diversity and representation from the scores of women who are members of the NPHC sororities, the researchers attempted to interview a minimum of three members of each organization.

### **Demographics of the participants**

Between November 2009 and January 2010, the researchers interviewed 18 participants. Demographically, two were members of Zeta Phi Beta, three were members of Alpha Kappa

Alpha, and four were members of Sigma Gamma Rho. The majority of the participants, nine, were members of Delta Sigma Theta. Seventeen of the participants were graduate members of the four sororities, and only one was a member of a campus undergraduate chapter. The average age of the participants was 33.5; the median age was 31. The youngest two participants were 22, and the oldest participant was 64 years old. Only one participant became a member of her sorority through a graduate, post-collegiate chapter. The majority of participants who joined at the undergraduate level ( $n = 12$ ) were initiated at predominantly White institutions.

### *Data Analysis*

For data analysis, the researchers used the constant comparative method and coding strategies from grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Green & Thorogood, 2004; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Strauss and Corbin presented three coding procedures based on constant comparative methods that provided greater clarity, specificity, and detail on how to proceed with analysis. Open coding, the first level of coding, is the discovery of initial concepts, dimensions, and properties in the data. Doing a microanalysis or a thorough line-by-line reading of the data, the researcher codes for themes, patterns, and occurrences of meaning and to “open or ‘fracture’ the data ... to generate as many potential codes as possible” (Green & Thorogood, 2004, p. 181). Axial coding, the second level of coding, is the establishment of relationships between the categories, properties, and the dimensions. The coding is done around the “axis” or category. Both open coding and axial coding can be done at the same time. The final level of coding is selective coding; the researcher must integrate the codes together to form a cohesive theory. Also, the researcher must choose a central category that has analytic power and sufficiently binds the research together.

### ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The definitions of sorority were constant across all women and all the sororities. Each participant defined her organization as based on core principles of social progress and racial uplift through service and sisterhood. Each also defined sorority within the parameters of sisterhood, scholarship, service, and commitment. For many, the empowering components of sorority were the bonds and friendships that developed within the sisterhood. Joining was noted by many as becoming a part of a group of like-minded people who had a common purpose and similar interests. As one member stated, becoming a member of a sorority meant engaging in a “commitment to similar belief systems.” Several women individually discussed the fact that each of the four NPHC sororities is based on the same tenets of sisterhood.

Even though the majority of the participants agreed that all of the sororities were attempting to achieve the same set of principles, stereotypes and perceptions influenced their understandings of the other organizations. The participants also discussed the prevalence of the sorority stereotypes in the fraternity/sorority community, the media influence on these perceptions of Black sororities, and how organizations and members might change these perceptions.

### *Stereotypes about the Sororities from Other Historically Black Sorority Members*

*Perceptions and stereotypes of Alpha Kappa Alpha.* To describe Alpha Kappa Alpha, the participants used adjectives and phrases such as classy, rich and well-to-do, delicate, pretty, dainty, snobby, “siddity,” prissy, and light-skinned with long hair. A Delta who described herself as “a tall, thin, pale straight-haired person” knew that most people thought she would be an Alpha Kappa Alpha member because of her physical appearance and, “some of them might assume that I was an AKA because of the

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stereotype that AKAs are lighter. And I probably get from people, Black people, [when] we're talking about sororities, many would probably assume that I'm an AKA."

A member of Delta Sigma Theta had a best friend whose mother was a member of Alpha Kappa Alpha and from an early age, she knew that she would not become a member of the organization because of the mother's attitude and appearance: "She was the stereotypically AKA, you know, light skin, long hair, siddity, that sort of thing. And it was always a turn off to me at an early age because I really didn't identify myself as that, being the, I guess, that stereotypical female."

A member of Zeta Phi Beta who was initiated in the Southeast considered the members to be "very girly; they're very pretentious from what I can see." After looking at the organizations and knowing her friends and family within Alpha Kappa Alpha, she was not convinced that the organization was a fit for her. She noted: "I'm sure that is a stereotype. I have many, many, many friends who are AKAs, but it just as a whole sorority it didn't seem like, it didn't fit my personality."

The mismatch between the stereotypes of a sorority versus the experiences of group members is a common theme from the interviews. One member of Alpha Kappa Alpha was astounded when she first heard of the stereotypes because the common and persistent perceptions of her organization were not a part of her lived experience as a member:

When I was in undergrad, we had a girl sign our website one time and said, "just because y'all driving fancy cars and all y'all are light skinned." And all of us—we just deleted the comment because we were thinking: What? Most of us were brown to dark-skinned. And I think the fanciest car any of us had was a Solara or something like that, you know. Like none of us were ballin', so I was like, what is

she talking about? So I guess it's just something that's been passed down, and people just assume even before they get to know somebody, they must be a part of this stereotype if they're in an organization.

*Perceptions and stereotypes of Delta Sigma Theta.* Among the interview participants, members of Delta Sigma Theta were classified or labeled at two extremes: as business-oriented, service-focused, involved, hardworking, cool, laidback, and down-to-earth women or as tough, "ghetto," and aggressive women who were prone to fight. Members of the sorority saw the organization as one full of professional women. One member who was initiated in the South remembered her cousin went to her same university and became a member of Delta Sigma Theta. This connection led her to the organization when she saw the members were "about business, being on target, having it together. You have to have goals."

The negative perceptions of the Delta Sigma Theta members were that the members were angry and aggressive. One participant said that the "Deltas are a little bit of the loose cannon girls. Even if they are business-like, they're the ones that if you find out someone got arrested for a fight, she's probably a Delta." The perception of Delta Sigma Theta members as fighters was common as another participant (a member of Zeta Phi Beta) stated, "It's unfortunate that you may have an individual who is just a rabble-rouser. Like if she had overalls on, she'd be throwing blows. It just happens that perhaps one time she's throwing blows, she has a Delta jacket on. So people see that individual who is fighting who happens to be a Delta; therefore, all Deltas are fighters."

Fewer participants mentioned stereotypes of Delta Sigma Theta members in term of skin color; however, if it was mentioned, they were always considered to be dark-skinned. As one member of the sorority stated:

My mother told me that the reason she



originally became a Delta was because she was sought by the Deltas and that even if she wanted to be an AKA she was too dark-skinned. So here we are my mother and her sisters have started what's now a family tradition; we have more than, like we almost have 70 Deltas in our family, counting extended family in our family. And you know the younger ones of us don't even know that, oh wow, this might have been just because of their skin color. Now it's something more.

The use of skin color to describe members was more prevalent for women in Alpha Kappa Alpha and Delta Sigma Theta than for other groups. These organizations are the oldest and largest of the four sororities in the National Pan-Hellenic Council. Historically the two groups have competed for members, awards, and recognition on college campuses (Giddings, 1994; Graham, 1999), which may be a reason for the continued comparison between the organizations.

*Perceptions and stereotypes of Sigma Gamma Rho.* The majority of participants from the other three organizations had limited knowledge of Sigma Gamma Rho and considered the organization to be less relevant because of its size and its lack of a presence on some campuses and in some communities. Even members of the organization acknowledged that perception. A member from the Midwest said: "With us not being so much in the limelight as you know other sorority organizations I'm not sure what negatives we have." For those who knew about the organization, the widest range in characteristics and attributes associated with the organization was for Sigma Gamma Rho. Only two major stereotypes or perceptions existed for Sigma Gamma Rho. Some participants saw them as the creative artists, and the smart and studious women who did hard work on campus. As one member stated:

We define ourselves as nerdy. We, even with two of us on the yard, we had the highest GPA. I don't know what (her sorority sister) was carrying, but we still had the highest GPA out of all the other organizations on campus, and this was spring '08 semester. We had the highest GPA that semester. I would say we are nerdy. A lot of my sorority sisters carried high 3 point (grade point averages). I guess that would be our biggest stereotype, we're nerdy. We still like to have fun.

*Perceptions and stereotypes of Zeta Phi Beta.* Along with being seen as compassionate and smart women, the members of Zeta Phi Beta were stereotyped and characterized most often as being portly, unattractive, homely, and dark-skinned women. As one member of Alpha Kappa Alpha stated, Zeta Phi Beta members were "country" and the third choice for women who could not get into her chapter or Delta Sigma Theta. A member of Zeta Phi Beta recalled hearing disparaging comments about the physical attributes of the her organization after she crossed (i.e., was initiated): "It was more in joking, you know, like half jokes so of course they would say, 'You know you don't even look like a Zeta' and 'You didn't even give AKA a chance' and 'Did you look at all of them?' so yeah, I don't know. It was fine. It was more like a half joke." A member of Sigma Gamma Rho from the Northeast noted that the biggest perception of Zetas was that they were ugly and masculine: "fat, manly, ugly—that stereotype does them a disservice because I think they're some of the hardest working women that I've seen, but I think that stereotype does them a disservice."

Regional differences in the stereotypes, specifically for Zeta Phi Beta existed. A Sigma Gamma Rho noted that obviously in different parts of the country, the stereotypes would change and shift: "It depends on where you are. It depends on who has the most people." A Delta Sig-

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ma Theta member echoed the same sentiment, “If some of these stereotypes exist, they may exist depending on the type of campus. I’m sure there are distinctions between pledging at a Black campus and pledging a White campus, state school, private school, and it may also be determinant on the people who are selecting the pledges.” A member of Zeta Phi Beta who crossed in Maryland saw the differences in her travels:

I would say it depends on where you are. It depends on the region from what I can see. When I first went over and started touring and visiting, when I was really into it, it would depend. In the South, you would probably see more chapters who had heavysset girls, dark girls. Up north, well not up north, but in New York, no, all those young ladies ran the gambit. I’ve met sorority sisters who were Asian. I don’t know. But just in general you know then when I have gone to meetings, um, it varies so technically it’s just a perception. I think the perception is kind of skewed. But the reality is not the case.

### *Functions of Stereotypes in Sorority Life*

In their acknowledgment of stereotypes, participants noted that individual members perpetuate these beliefs both within and beyond the chapter level. As a member of Zeta Phi Beta said, “We as Greeks keep stuff going.” As one member of Sigma Gamma Rho said, “It goes from perception to reality when you say it.” As evidenced in the interviews, many members of the sorority community were not knowledgeable about the other organizations and their histories. Thus, they relied on the perceptions drawn from their interactions prior to becoming members, and with their sisters after joining a sorority based on information received through informal socialization in the organization. As a member of Sigma Gamma Rho commented:

Whatever the stereotype is you’re going to find some people that fit into that category just because that’s human nature. There are going to be stuck-up AKAs because there are stuck-up people in the world. There are going to be dark-skinned Deltas because there are dark skinned people in the world. And maybe some of them just happen to be Deltas. I think stereotypes do fit. They kind of fit more because I think that some people get caught up in the nonsense, or kind of engrained in it, kinda like I said, passing down that kind of stuff. You need to act this way. This is how we do. So even if the person is not that way, outside of physical characteristics, if they’re not that way, sometimes they try to fit in that way quote unquote because that’s what they think their organization’s supposed to be—if that makes sense. So I think we as NPHC organizations kinda uphold stereotypes forcing ourselves into these boxes to make us fit the stereotype.

Internally, or inside the historically Black sorority and fraternity community, those stereotypes are projected and reiterated through conversation. Externally, outside the historically Black sorority and fraternity community and to the general public, those stereotypes are reiterated through step shows, chants, calls, yard shows, and other public forums where member behaviors are on display. One participant, who is also a fraternity/sorority advisor, recalled a series of events on her campus that fueled stereotypes and perceptions based on the organizational members’ actions at the events:

This homecoming, the grad NPHC members from this show acted absolutely horrible. My supervisor and me were like who are the kids, and who are the alumni because they just came to the undergrad party when they had their own party and

just (laughs) tore the club up, acting ridiculous. At the step exhibition earlier in the day, you got AKAs who were doing the Deltas' Founders Chant and throwing this fake money on the stage, and just—doing stuff you would think you'd have to get undergrads for. Students in the audience are watching that, that's just going to fuel the Delta vs. AKA issue.

The participant felt frustrated and angered by the behaviors that were perpetuated in the name of the historically Black Greek organizations: "And students came back and said stuff about that. I was like here we go. You know these people act a fool and then they go home. And we're left to try and clean up the mess."

Although some members considered the stereotypes and perceptions as something that members did to joke with one another, they understood the serious repercussions outside of the organizations. One member of Delta Sigma Theta noted:

I think it's funny that once I became a member I got a little bit exposed more and some of them we do just jokingly. Some of them, you know the AKAs are supposed to be pretty girls and it's funny to even hear. ... I was with people my age and we were watching something on YouTube and they were like, "Oh my god, how did they let her in? I thought AKAs were pretty." And literally I stopped breathing for a second. I was like how does a 30-year-old person say something like that? This is a college-educated person who is playing into a stereotype.

A Delta Sigma Theta participant mentioned that all of the sorority members "perpetuate our own stereotypes internally and externally." Through personal actions and the use of disrespectful chants and regular talk, historically Black sorority members perpetuated the

stereotypes about their own organizations and other NPHC organizations. No sorority was immune, although the organization's leadership has not been known to sanction this behavior. This was a learned behavior most often occurring during members' socialization into the organization and resulting in the emission of stereotypes and derogatory statements in public demonstrations and private conversations. A member of Zeta Phi Beta stated: "Sometimes we as Greeks are the worst people because we keep stuff going that doesn't need to keep going." A member of Sigma Gamma Rho reiterated:

Honestly a lot of the stereotypes come from our own organizations and our own chapters. I think NPHC groups do a very good job at a bad thing, which is passing down nonsense. That's where all the hazing comes from and everything else. I think perceptions and stereotypes are not immune from that. I think that a lot of times people don't check particular attitudes or stereotypes. I think that's where it comes from a lot. I think people just sit around and if someone has a SGR ho joke, it's like aha ha ha ha ha ... or they engage in it or ignore it. And neither one is helpful. Nobody necessarily challenges it. And so then you have neos (new members) coming into organizations that think that's okay, or that's cute and funny, or that's what you're supposed to do because such-and-such did it and she's been in such-and-such years. It just kind of spirals down.

Many participants considered Alpha Kappa Alpha as the only organization whose members capitalized on its stereotypic portrayals. One participant mentioned that some members of Alpha Kappa Alpha engaged in "flipping" the stereotype or reversing the stereotype to their benefit. Flipping is the reimagining and reshaping of a stereotype where members deconstruct

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the negative and form a positive self-identification for the label. Members will appropriate, upgrade, and embrace elements of the negative stereotype and making it a badge of honor within the organization. A collegiate member of Alpha Kappa Alpha agreed:

Before I was a member (laughs) I was offended because I knew that it was an organization I wanted to be a part of. And I knew that it would be something that my name was tied to. So I mean like now that I am a member, you hear it so much either you blow it off or you roll with the punches and you kinda use the negative. So I guess we've kind of taken the whole stuck up thing and you'll hear it in chants, yes, we're stuck up, yes, we're conceited.... If I had someone come up and say to me you're stuck up and you're an AKA, I think I'd pretty much be offended because you just judged me based on my organization and not me.

Engaging in the stereotypes does create a *façade* or a false front as noted by one member of Sigma Gamma Rho who worked with an undergraduate chapter of Alpha Kappa Alpha: "When they're together, it's kinda like we have to put on a show. They even say it. ... It goes from perception to reality when you say it. But then when they're each individually alone it's not. It's like the guard is kinda let down."

Concern for the impact on their individual organizations was apparent for most participants. When members reiterated and acted upon the stereotypes of the organization, everyone and the entire messaging and identity of the organization suffered. The perceptions, stereotypes, and myths surrounding the organization, according to one participant, are "one of the driving forces behind all of the wrong. ... A lot of the wrong that goes on have to do with the myths that we tell each other about what's supposed to be; what used to be. ... Young sorors

and new sorors coming in believing it's the gospel. It does so much damage." A collegiate member of Alpha Kappa Alpha felt that the acting on the stereotypes of being prissy and pretty damaged the organization:

A lot of people are kind of losing the meaning or not caring for the meaning of these organizations. And you'll have individuals who are joining not because you know you were founded over 100 years ago and you're still continuing to provide the community with service but because they want to be a pretty girl in 20 pearls. It's like, so I think by doing those things we are perpetuating them. And we're only hurting ourselves.

### *Getting Past the Stereotypes*

Many participants noted that the contentious and competitive campus culture created an "us versus them" personality for members. In the "real world" post-college, people are focused on other demands. After graduation, the women focused on chapter and regional activities, not on other groups. Individual campus experiences can encourage thinking in extremes about other organizations, which lessened for participants after graduation. Yet the stereotypes persisted in some form, readily activated when solicited. An example of this was offered by a Sigma Gamma Rho member:

I know that they're not true. I have friends in every organization. I've worked with every organization, and I continue to. But why do I continue to cling to some of the myths about each of the organizations? I truly don't know. I don't know. It's something that I'm going to have think about. ... And you know more often than not, I concentrate about what we can do together. It's not something I go around thinking about on a daily basis. But as I'm talking to you, I'm going, "You still have

all those things in your head.” All of that stuff, it’s still there in the back your mind. You probably are still using some of those when you make decisions about who you want to work with on certain projects, or you know what I mean ’cause if I’m going to do something at the City Mission, am I thinking, “Oh I’m not going to ask the Alpha Kappa Alpha chapter ’cause they’re not going to want to get dirty?”

#### IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

At the start of this project, a fraternity member approached one of the researchers and said that doing this research perpetuated the ugliness within NPHC organizations. The goal of this research was not to traffic and promote stereotypes, but to shed light on what stereotypes exist and the influence of these stereotypes on organizational members. This is one of the first studies to examine the perceptions, stereotypes, symbols, and myths surrounding historically Black sororities, and this area is suitable for further exploration and investigation.

This research contributes to the literature on bias and the internalization of stereotypes of Black women (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2004; St. Jean & Feagin, 1998). By using an organizational lens to highlight how colorism can enforce stereotypes and consequentially distinguish the membership of sororities, we expand the current scholarship on historically Black sororities (Roberts & Wooten, 2008). Our research also adds to the scholarship on intersectionality by examining how women of color navigate space within a race, gender, and class hierarchy within the interracial environment of historically Black sororities (Collins, 1990; King, 1988). Harrison (2010) noted that historically the derogatory labels used by Blacks to describe others illustrates the power of prejudice and stereotypes (in that the group members being discriminated against buy into the system to such a degree that they begin using

it to discriminate against themselves), but in many ways helps to substantiate and further expand on notions of colorism for the general public.

One of the practical implications of this work is the expressed need that the four NPHC organizations must actively engage in the management of their organizational identities. If change is to occur, challenges to the stereotypes of each group must come from sorority leadership. This will not be without challenges, as even within the small sample of respondents featured in this study, members did not necessarily want change. Thus, one of the practical implications of this project is to reveal the divisiveness created within, between, and outside of the organizations.

This strand of research might be further developed by applying concepts from organizational and communication management to understand the creation of stereotypes and how these perceptions emerge. Scholars applying this framework might also explore how organizational messages implicitly and explicitly reiterate perceptions and stereotypes of sororities, and how to change and align internal and external images and perceptions with the organization’s mission and vision. For example, research on the organization’s presentation of its culture and identities might be studied via content analyses of step shows, stroll competitions, come out shows, and new initiate or proselyte presentations; public organizational documents such as brochures and media releases; and organizational websites. The perceptions of those who consume these messages might also be studied.

#### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

By only examining the perceptions of those women who are members of the four sororities within the NPHC, the researchers attempted to understand how members understood and perceived other organizations and the impact of stereotyping on intragroup relations. Examining

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ing stereotypes held by group members helped further discussion on the historical influence of skin color and elite status of members and to understand how these stereotypes promote difference within and between the organizations. The stereotypes used to describe sororities are helpful to understand further the organizational identities ascribed to each group.

Interviews revealed that stereotypes played multiple roles in the cultures of historically Black sororities. The stereotypes identified served as distinctive markers for the different organizations and helped members identify boundaries of who fit in a specific group. That said, labeling behaviors can be negative, hurtful, and can cause frustration for those who do not fit. The stereotypes identified in this study were based on historical forms of colorism and classism, forms of intra-racial elitism the sorority leaders tend to downplay as part of the history of their organizations and as having an impact on their legacy and current membership.

Results from this study suggested problems associated with colorism seem to persist within the organizations, as appearance undergirded the discussions of sorority stereotypes. Often participants referred to color in conjunction with organizational stereotypes. Specifically with Alpha Kappa Alpha, the prevalent mentions were related to the perceived typical member of the sorority, light-skinned and long-haired. Although interviewees acknowledged this perception did not match their experiences, they still used those frames and tropes to define the membership of the organization. Additionally, Alpha Kappa Alpha members also used those same frames to position themselves and their organization.

Results also suggested that some members luxuriated in the stereotypes, even if the benefits were simply social or emotional. Belonging to a group with a well-respected organizational identity or brand has benefits, even if it is unofficial and unsanctioned. The interview data revealed Alpha Kappa Alpha members tended to

be evaluated most favorably due to hegemonic beauty standards based on skin color politics. Additionally, Delta Sigma Theta members tended to be thought of as well-respected and hardworking. Although the respondents noted that many members did not fit the stereotypes, none of them argued that the public identity of the groups was incorrect.

Traditional femininity and the cult of true womanhood had definite impact on the roles and ideals of White sororities. Those same aspects influenced the feminine ideals that were the basis of the Negro clubwomen movement and its successor, the Black sorority. Stereotypes may fill in the gaps, as little other public information is available for people interested in locating where they most likely fit. The results of this study suggested sorority members engage in the reinforcement and reiteration of positive and negative stereotypes of the four NPHC sororities. Those stereotypes can combine with other forces to create a self-fulfilling prophecy and the continuation of misperceptions about skin color and elitism between the organizations.

### LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Obtaining support and interest from the historically Black sorority community was challenging. Many members were understandably reticent to participate in research that may be critical of their respective organizations. A significant resulting limitation was the scope of the study. Though a cross-section of 18 participants were involved in the study, further research is warranted before broader generalizations may be made. Future research efforts that could strengthen this area of scholarship may include quantitative analyses of stereotypes, examining the perceptions of the sororities from those outside of the organizations (i.e., non-sorority and non-fraternity members), and looking at undergraduate members solely. Finally, this research focused on the perceptions and

stereotypes among the women for whom it matters the most: the members of the organizations. Examining the perceptions of historically Black sorority members among nonmember Black women would further facilitate a broader understanding of the stereotypes.

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### Personal Information

- What is your full name?
- What is your age?
- Where were you born?
- Where were you raised?
- To what sorority do you belong?
  - When were you initiated?
  - In what chapter?
  - Are you currently financial/active?
  - If yes, in what chapter?
  - If no, why not?

### Sorority Life

- How do you define the word “sorority”?
  - Probe: When you hear that word, what do you think about?
  - Probe: Do you believe that word applies to the other organizations? Why or why not?
- What made you join XXXXXX (organization name)?
  - What appealed to you?
- When did you make that decision?
- Before you crossed/became a member, where you told that you fit or match a sorority’s stereotype or perception?
  - If yes, which ones?

### Perceptions of Other Sororities

- What are your perceptions of the other sororities?
- Where do these perceptions come from?
- Where did you hear or learn about these perceptions?
- How much emphasis do you place on these perceptions?

### Racial/Ethnic Identity

- How do you racially identify?
- How do you ethnically identify?
- Have you always used these words to describe your racial identity? If not, what other words have you used?
- At what age did you begin identifying this way?
- How would you describe your skin tone?
  - Why that term?
  - Where did you get that terminology from?
- [ ] Very Light
- [ ] Light Brown
- [ ] Medium
- [ ] Dark
- [ ] Very Dark

### **Colorism**

- Let's first start by defining what colorism means to you.
  - How old were you when you began noticing color issues? Can you describe the circumstances involved?
- How do you define colorism? What prompted you to participate in this discussion?
- How is (has) your life shaped because of your skin colors? (i.e. What does it mean to be an "X" skinned Black woman)?
- What types of names, either positive or negative, have you used or heard when referring to people with light skin? (List as many as you can think of...)
- What types of names, either positive or negative, have you used or heard when referring to people with a medium skin tone? (List as many as you can think of...)
- What types of names, either positive or negative, have you used or heard when referring to people with dark skin? (List as many as you can think of...)
- What stereotypes do you think are associated with light-skinned women? Dark-skinned women? Women with medium-skin tone?
- Does skin color affect any aspect of your life? If so, what aspects? Do you think this is true for other African American/Black women?

### **Learning about Colorism**

- At what age did you become conscious of your skin color and the meaning/value of different skin tones?

### **Sorority Life and Colorism**

- When did you become conscious of skin color and the sorority stereotypes?
- Tell me about your experiences with colorism in your sorority.

### **Community/Friends and Colorism**

- In reflecting on your everyday experiences, how are you made aware of colorism in your day-to-day interactions?
- How significant is the issue of colorism among your peers?
- In what ways does skin color affect your interactions and relationships with other Black women? Black men?
- What are the skin tones of the Black women in your current friendship groups? In what ways (if any) have your views/beliefs about skin tone impacted who you have developed friendships?
- How do you think your generation views this issue, compared to other generations (i.e., how are you a product of your generation in light of this issue?)

### **Femininity**

- What does the word "femininity" mean to you?
- When someone mentions femininity/masculinity, what comes to mind?
  - Probe: Why do those things come to mind?
- How do you feel about masculinity/femininity and your sorority? How do you think others perceive it in association with your organization?