The Impact of Colorism on Historically Black Fraternities and Sororities

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The Impact of Colorism on Historically Black Fraternities and Sororities

By

Patience Denece Bryant

A Dissertation Proposal Presented to the Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences of Nova Southeastern University in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Dedication

My dissertation is dedicated to my parents Andrea and Jimmie. For without their support for almost three decades I would not be here today. Despite being born into a world that often said that being black and being a female automatically put two strikes against me, they never told me what I could not do, but only encouraged me to be the very best at what I wanted to do.

So thank you Mommy and Daddy, I love you.
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Abstract

This dissertation study was conducted in order to examine and gain an insight on two topics that are considered to be highly under researched: American historically black fraternities and sororities and colorism within the back American community. The purpose of the study was to examine the impact that colorism has had on black American collegiate Greek letter organizations. Using the qualitative phenomenological approach, 18 graduate or alumni members, two from each of the nine historically black Greek letter organizations that make up the National Pan-Hellenic Council were interviewed using open ended questions to see what impact (if any) colorism has had on historically black fraternities and sororities. During the interviews the following five major themes emerged: discriminatory practices between black Americans, stereotyping black Greek letter organizations, stereotyping skin tones, colorism as a part of American history, and colorism as being permanently a part of the black American community. The following theories were also explored during the study: Social Identity Theory, Double Consciousness, Primary Identification Theory, and Conflict Caused by Colorism, to further see what impact colorism had on historically black fraternities and sororities. Through these five themes and theories, it was found that colorism has had and continues to have a significant impact on not only members of historically black fraternities and sororities, but also that of members of the black American community as a whole.
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Introduction

Throughout American history black Americans have had to overcome some difficult circumstances due to the way that they look. Their appearance has left them feeling stereotyped and discriminated against because of their skin color, not only by non-blacks but by other blacks as well. The skin color discrimination that black Americans have experienced at the hands of other black Americans is referred to as a colorism, skin tone bias, and/or having a color complex and is defined as “Within the African-American community, what is often called a color complex—a historical preference for light skin and other white physical attributes—is seldom openly discussed…” (Gmelch, 1998, p.105). Though the issue of colorism among black Americans is considered to be a taboo subject, it is one that continues to have a strong presence within the black American community. In particular, it is the way that black Americans “differentially attend and respond to shades of black skin” (Bond & Cash, 1992). It has been found that colorism is an equal opportunist practice, both dark skin and light skin black Americans have fallen victim to it.

Traditionally, the color complex involved light-skinned Blacks’ rejection of Blacks who were darker. Increasingly, however, the color complex shows up in the form of dark-skinned African Americans spurning their lighter-skinned brothers and sisters for not being Black enough. The complex even includes attitudes about hair texture, nose shape, and eye color. In short the “color complex” is a psychological fixation about color and features that leads Blacks to discriminate against each other (Russell, Wilson & Hall, 1992, p.2).
The color complex within the black American community has resulted in creating a line of division between dark skinned and light skinned black Americans that is rarely spoken about, but still lingers like a dark cloud over the black community. The cloud itself has been the basis of some resentment, jealousy, and mistrust among all parties involved. Throughout history, the preferred skin tone often has achieved a higher level of education and has gained a higher economic and social status than the less desirable skin tone. In the case of the black American community, the preferred skin tone has traditionally been light or fair skinned individuals. (Russell, Wilson & Hall, 1992).

The decision to study the nine historically black Greek organizations that make up the National Pan-Hellenic Council was because though they were all founded with the same objectives; supporting black American college students and assist in helping to uplift the black American community, they are all very different. “Despite their 100-year existence, little substantive research has been conducted on BGLOs, and even less has been published” (Parks, 2008, p.2). The National Pan-Hellenic Council is made up of nine historically black fraternities and sororities. The organizations are collectively sometimes referred to as the NPHC, Divine Nine, and/or BGLO (Black Greek Letter Organizations). The fraternities and sororities that make up the council are: Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity Incorporated, Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority Incorporated, Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity Incorporated, Omega Psi Phi Fraternity Incorporated, Delta Sigma Theta Sorority Incorporated, Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity Incorporated, Zeta Phi Beta Sorority Incorporated, Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority Incorporated, and Iota Phi Theta Fraternity Incorporated. All of these organizations were founded during a time in which black Americans were experiencing many hardships in the United States, during the heart of Jim Crown Laws (early 20th century) and during the Civil Rights movement of the 1960’s. Each of them continues
to serve as positive groups within the black American community that promote camaraderie, academic excellence, economic progression, and community awareness. Individuals interested in joining any of the organizations have the opportunity to do so as an undergraduate college student. Once a student has graduated with their undergraduate degree, they also have the option to pursue membership by joining a graduate and/or alumni chapter of the organizations.

Even though the organizations were initially founded with black American students in mind, they do not discriminate based on race, culture, and religion when it comes to potential members. Each of the fraternities and sororities has their own mottos, mission statements, main objectives, official colors, symbols, traditions, and national programs that represent them and what they stand for separate from the other organizations (Ross, 2002). All of the organizations operate separately. In addition, they are not identical as some previous research and scholars have stated.

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. Yet each has its own distinctive characteristics and traits that are cultivated and maintained through the membership’s use of formal signs and symbols and unsanctioned use of stereotypes to describe group members” In order to add to the lack of research done on historically black fraternities and sororities, it is important for each of the organizations to be explored and looked at differently, by researching them and by interviewing members from each of the organizations (Tindall, Hernandez, & Hughey, 2011, p.36).
During the end of the 20th century and into the 21st century when there was an increased interest in studying historically black Greek letter organizations, scholars discovered that the research done on historically black Greek organizations was quite limited. The research has not fully shown what makes each of these organizations unique.

**Statement of Problem**

As reflected in the *Bibliography of Research on the College Fraternity, 1996-June 2012* (Eberly, 2010), the majority of the research done on collegiate Greek life has been based on organizations that are predominantly white and male. These previous studies have failed to include historically black fraternities and sororities leaving a void in the research of collegiate Greek life in the United States. According to some critics, historically black fraternities and sororities never truly fit the mold for collegiate Greek organizations whose precedence was set by traditionally white collegiate Greek organizations.

Since the establishment of a Black fraternity, Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc., at Cornell University in 1906, America’s institutions of higher learning have struggled with a racially dichotomous Greek system. The so called “Black Greeks,” with their smaller chapters, lack of student housing, and elaborate recruitment, do not fit in well with the models posed by traditional Greek organizations (Kimbrough, 1997, p.603).

By not fitting into this traditional mold, black Greek letter organizations have been grouped together in order to represent all collegiate Greek organizations of color, therefore not allowing for each organization to be explored individually.
This study looks at a group that is known within the collegiate Greek life community, but still remains under researched. One of the issues that need to be further explored about black Greek letter organizations is their internal workings, such as the way that they are structured, membership intake, and also includes their possible issues with color. Colorism has been present within the black American community since the days of slavery, when slave owners showed preferential treatment towards light skin black slaves over the dark skin black slaves. “Colorism, or skin color stratification, is a process that privileges light skinned people of color over dark in areas such as income, education, housing, and marriage market” (Hunter, 2007, p.237).

Research has shown that people of color who are light skin often have an advantage in life because their skin color allows them to access to more educational, social, and financial opportunities than their darker counterparts. This is due to the fact that, they are closer in color and appearance to the ruling group, which is traditionally whites and those who possess European features. Due to this scholars feel that colorism is the result of a skin tone hierarchy set by the ruling group “colorism is directly related to the larger system of racism in the USA and around the world” (Hunter, 2007, p.237).

The television show A Different World (that was created and directed by black Americans) that ran from 1987 to 1993, followed the lives of college students attending a fictional historically black college and one of the main characters, Whitley Gilbert, was a light skin southern bell with long curly hair. She came from a wealthy and educated family, she lived in the residence hall that her family had built (Gilbert Hall), and she treated everyone like they were beneath her. Her roommate was Kimberly Reese, a much darker girl from the Midwest. Kimberly was very friendly, liked to have fun, came from a hard working blue collar family, and had to get a part time job to help pay for her tuition.
Despite the fact that colorism and skin tone bias has played a role in shaping the black American community, there has been limited research done on the impact that colorism has had on historically black American social groups and/or the black American community. “When color consciousness pervaded the ranks of fraternal and benevolent societies, the result was often internal conflict and division that they could ill afford. This mentality was counterproductive against their purported aims of racial unity and uplift” (Brown, Parks, & Phillips, 2005, p.73). Traditionally, black fraternities and sororities have been among the most popular social groups in the black American community. However little to no research has been done on what impact colorism has had on these groups, their members and/or their potential members. My dissertation will attempt to fill the research gap on this subject.

**Purpose of the Study**

“For African Americans, the hesitancy in openly discussing intra-racial skin color discrimination is the unsettling fear that racial antagonists, employed by rich conservative foundations, institutes, and ‘think tanks,’ may listen intensely to the acrimonious” (Davis, Daniels & See, 1998, p.64). In order to gain insight on an under researched group of individuals (members of historically black Greek fraternities and sororities) and an under researched topic (colorism within the black American community), and the impact that colorism has had on black Greek letter organizations; this dissertation will attempt to answer the following research questions:

1. Is colorism still an issue among historically black fraternity and sorority members?

2. What is the perception of color among members of black fraternities and sororities?
3. Is colorism a thing of the past or does colorism still play a part in dividing the black American community?

4. How does colorism play a part in the identity of black Americans?

Prior to doing this study I felt that there was not enough research and studies done on the fraternities and sororities that are a part of the National Pan-Hellanic Council. From personal experience, I knew that the issue of colorism or skin tone bias was one that was often discussed by black Americans who were both members and non-members of historically black Greek letter organizations. The fact that colorism being practiced within organizations that are held to a high regard within the black American community by its members, has not and is not being researched and/or discussed on a scholarly level was something that I felt that needed to change.

The issue of skin tone bias among black Americans is a topic that historically has had a big impact on the members of their community, is one that individuals are aware of but that very few have taken the time to really explore what colorism has done to those practice it and to those who are victims of it. Being a black American I have been fully aware of skin tone bias being practiced by black Americans by other black Americans and the awareness of it allegedly being practiced within social organizations that produce some of the black American community’s finest citizens. The lack of research on the issue was one that I felt me dissertation could contribute to.

The primary area of research for this study will be black American Skin Tone Bias and the Social Identity Theory, W.E.B. Dubois’ idea of Double Consciousness, and Primary Identification Theory. The mentioned concepts and theories were selected because I felt that
they did the topic justice when it came to exploring not only those individuals who practiced colorism, but those who have been victims of colorism as well.

Definitions

Throughout this dissertation there will be a multitude of words and terms that will be used while discussing the topic’s literature, research, and subjects. Many of these words and terms that will be used have had their meanings changed over time. Also, there are some that can be used interchangeably with other words and terms. Defining the various terms and words that are going to be used during this dissertation are important because many of the words and terms are no longer popular and/or are not currently used. In addition, some of the words and the terms used are considered to be politically incorrect and racially insensitive. However, for the sake of completely understanding the impact that colorism, discrimination, prejudice, and labels have had on the black American community, they must be used. Tindall, Hernandez, & Hughey (2011) in their study stated it best:

…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 (p.47).

The major words and terms that will be used are listed below:

Black Americans: For this dissertation black Americans will be used interchangeably with black, people of color, African-American, colored, and Negro to represent the race of the main subjects
of the study by the author. Descriptions such as dark, light, fair, yellow, and brown will be used to describe the skin tone/color/shade of the subjects (Russell, Wilson & Hall, 1992).

**Collegiate Greek Fraternities and Sororities:** Fraternities and sororities are fraternal organizations that are traditionally made up of undergraduate students found on college and university campuses. Fraternities are organizations that are traditionally made up of all male members and sororities are traditionally made up of all female members (Eberly, 2010).

**Colorism:** Also known as skin tone bias and/or the “color complex;” is defined as prejudice and discrimination towards people based on skin color and when one skin tone is preferred over another (Russell, Wilson & Hall, 1992).

**Color Names Associated with Light, Dark, and Medium Skin Tones**

The following words are some that have been used to describe an individual’s skin color, depending on the shade of brown (Parrish, 1946, p.14 & Wilder, 2009, p.190):

**Light**: coolie, bright, light bright, high yellow, red, red bone, red-skinned, sexy red, dirty red, fair, pretty skin, house nigga, yellow, mulatto, caramel, mixed, white, Oreo, browning, vanilla, half-white, high-brown, olive, light brown, and French vanilla.

**Medium**: Brown, brown skin, tan, milk chocolate, dark brown, chocolate brown, caramel, and pecan tan.

**Dark**: Jiggaboo, black, blackie, darky, burnt, midnight, chocolate, blue-black, purple, super black, African, darkness, charcoal, sexy black, rusty black, ink spot, tar babies, and watermelon child.
**Frat:** Term used by fraternity members when referring to members of the same organization, the fraternity members also use the term Frater, Bruh, Brother, and Fraternity Brother (Ross, 2002).

**Historically Black College and/or University (HBCU):** Colleges and/or universities that were historically founded for the purpose of education black Americans (Williams & Ashley, 2004).

**Historically Black Fraternities and Sororities:** Collegiate black Greek letter organizations founded by black Americans, they are also known as the Divine Nine (D9) and Black Greek Letter Organizations (BGLO). The organizations belong to the National Pan-Hellenic Council (Brown, Parks & Phillips, 2005). They are:

- Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity Incorporated, founded December 4, 1906
- Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority Incorporated, founded January 15, 1908
- Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity Incorporated, founded January 5, 1911
- Omega Psi Phi Fraternity Incorporated, founded November 17, 1911
- Delta Sigma Theta Sorority Incorporated, January 13, 1913
- Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity Incorporated, founded January 9, 1914
- Zeta Phi Beta Sorority Incorporated, founded January 16, 1920
- Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority Incorporated, founded November 12, 1922
- Iota Phi Theta Fraternity Incorporated, founded September 13, 1963 (Hughey & Parks, 2011)
Mixed Raced Blacks: Black Americans in the past were defined and sometimes often divided based on how black they were. The following labels were created in the early 20th century to define black American of mixed races by white sociologist Edward Byron Reuter (Kerr, 2006, p.5):

- Mulatto: Negro and white
- Quadroon: mulatto and white
- Octoroon: quadroon and white
- Cascos: mulatto and mulatto
- Sambo: mulatto and Negro
- Mango: Sambo and Negro
- Mustifiee: octoroon and white
- Mustifno: mustifiee and white

Mulatto: According to the 1910 U.S. Census Report mulatto was “…all those members of the Negro race with a visible admixture of white blood. Thus used, the word is a general term to include all Negroes of mixed ancestry regardless of the degree of intermixture” (Bird, 2009, p1).

Paper Bag Test: When the color of a brown paper bag is used as the marker that differentiates light skin from dark skin. A paper bag was often used as a way to determine whether a black American was light enough to engage in certain activities or were too dark to be considered light skin (Kerr, 2006).

Predominantly White Institution (PWI): Colleges and/or universities where the student population is predominantly white and/or were founded by white Americans for white Americans (Williams & Ashley, 2004).
**Pure Black:** Blacks of African descent who are not mixed with any other race (Frazier, 1957).

**Racial Ambiguity:** “Those whose racial identity is indistinguishable as black or white and/or whose racial heritage is unknown” (Kerr, 2006, p.XVIII). Up until the early twentieth century, often black Americans who race was undetectable would chose to “pass” or live their lives as white Americans as opposed as black Americans in hopes of having a better life in a segregated world.

**Soror:** Term used by sorority members when referring to a fellow member. Also, used by male fraternity members when referring to “sister” sorority i.e. Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity and Zeta Phi Beta Sorority or Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity and Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority (Ross, 2002).

The following chapter is a review of previous literature and studies that touch on the issues of the history of colorism among black Americans in the United States of America, historically black social organizations, collegiate student organizations, the formation of black Greek letter organizations, and what has become of black Americans due to colorism.
Chapter 2

Literature Review

Introduction

In the following literature review, I will discuss the relationship between historically black fraternities and sororities, and colorism among black Americans. This will be examined by first looking at the history of colorism among blacks in the United States of America. Secondly by reviewing the historically black social organizations, collegiate student organizations, and the formation of black Greek letter organizations. Finally, concluding with what has become of black Americans due to colorism.

In order to understand the relationship between historically black fraternities and sororities and colorism, one must know the history of skin color and blacks in the United States. Skin tone bias was introduced to black Americans during slavery by their masters. Not only were light skin slaves worth more monetarily than dark skin slaves, slave masters often had sexual relationships with their female slaves. They favored their light skin slaves over their dark skin ones which often resulted in the birth of a light skin slave child. These not so secret sexual relationships often produced children; therefore, producing more light skin, if not lighter black American slaves. Due to the fact that many light skin slaves were set free by their masters and/or were able to buy their own freedom during the days of slavery, following the civil war there was a large successful light skin black American population in the United States (Frazier, 1957). Most white Americans preferred interacting with light skin blacks to dark skin blacks. Due to this, light skin black Americans were able to benefit from their skin color and achieved
financial, social, and academic success. They also formed their own schools, churches, businesses, and social groups (Kerr, 2006).

Following the American Civil War, black Americans had access to more resources than they had in the past; specifically, they were able to enter higher education. The group who had the most immediate access to these opportunities was light skin blacks. This was due in part to the fact that the majority of free black Americans pre-Civil War was light skinned black Americans. Due to the opportunities that were available to light skin blacks, it was perceived that they began to discriminate against dark skin blacks in certain ways in order to achieve social acceptance by white Americans which included their social organizations (Lake, 2003). The previous literature and research done on the topics of colorism and historically black fraternities and sororities shed some light on how the former has had a major impact on the latter. It also explores the ideas of identity and belonging through Social Identity Theory, Double Consciousness, and what is one’s Primary Identifier.

History of Colorism and Black Americans

*If you’re white you’re all right.*

*If you’re yellow, you’re mellow.*

*If you’re brown, stick around.*

*But if you’re black get back!*

--Parrish, 1944, p.90

The quote by Parrish explains the way skin tone hierarchy and the practice of colorism is broken down within the black American community. Historically, the United States of America’s society has been dominated by whites, who gave social and economic privileges to
light/fair skinned blacks that were not made available to dark skinned blacks. This acceptance and inclusiveness given to light skin black Americans by whites, created a society that portrayed light skin blacks as being more successful when they were compared to their darker skinned counterparts. In his book Black Bourgeoisie, Frazier (1957) wrote that mulattos and/or blacks mixed with white ancestry led a more privileged life when compared to blacks that were what he considered to be “pure black” due to the history of blacks in the United States. Because the ties that mixed blacks had with whites, following slavery mixed blacks were able to gain advantages in education, occupation, and property ownership. In order to keep the advantages that their skin tone awarded them “the majority of prominent Negroes, who were themselves mulattos, married mulattos” (Frazier, 1957, p.257), therefore producing light skin heirs that carried their skin tone privileges into the twentieth century. Allegedly, some light skin black Americans were so intent on keeping their family color line pure light skin, they would marry fellow family members. Keith and Herring (1991, p.716) while doing their research found that skin tone had a big role in “…shaping the social and economic stratification patterns in the black community,” meaning that the practices of the past set the precedence for the present and for the future.

History has shown that the skin tone and the privileged relationship between blacks and white stems from the days of slavery. Whites placed greater economic value on light skinned slaves and in return created the foundation of preferential treatment towards light skinned blacks. “…light-skinned blacks were initially preferred because they were more esthetically appealing to whites and because the prevailing racial ideology of that time held that blacks with white ancestry were intellectually superiors than those of pure African ancestry” (Keith & Herring, 1991, p.762).
The ideology of this time period led to slave owners selecting lighter skin black slaves as mates which resulted in the production of mixed race children who often, also received the privileges of being a lighter skinned black. Frazier (1957) found that the privilege separation of light and dark black slaves went beyond the auction block; it was also reflected in their work as well. Most slaves that were descendants of mostly “pure African ancestry” worked as field hands. They were expected to do physically demanding work, were frequently isolated from general society, did not receive many opportunities to learn skills, and were consistently treated poorly. Lighter skinned black slaves were often given house servant jobs that often allowed them to be trained in a skill, come in contact with the rest of the world outside of the plantation, and received better clothing, food and shelter. It also sometimes gave them the opportunity to learn how to read, write, and earn money of their own. Even while blacks were enslaved, skin color set the precedence of where one would be in black American society, “As a result of this, skin color became criterion for the attainment of prestige in the African American community” (Wade, 1996, p.359). This division of labor resulted in what is now known as the “house slave vs. field slave” debate among black Americans.

It was noted by Frazier (1957) that the separation of skin tones was clear between the slaves. It was this separation that left slaves of mixed origins feeling as though they were superior to their darker counterparts and allowing them a sense of prestige. “It is wise to remember that prejudice of any kind creates systems of privilege as well as oppression. Skin-color bias is no different; while many Blacks are hurt by colorism, others benefit from it” (Russell, Wilson & Hall, 1992, p.4). As the children and/or descendants of slave owners, mulatto slaves were often freed or given the chance to buy their own freedom by their masters, “therefore, [light skinned blacks] overrepresented in the free black population and the
underrepresented among slaves” (Keith & Herring, 1991, p.763), resulting in a great amount of free light skin black Americans in the United States.

It was not uncommon to find free light skin black Americans who were not only financially well off, but also who had their own property, owned their own black slaves and had white servants in their homes. In the state of Louisiana because of the high population of mixed/light skinned blacks in the nation during the years of slavery, they introduced a three caste society, in which there was a white population, black population, and free population of blacks with mixed blood. This caste system not only separated the blacks by skin tone, but also separated them by class. Due to this string of events, black Americans of mixed ancestry lead the social hierarchy among blacks following the Civil War.

To be mulatto almost identified you with a powerful white family. Those children had more opportunities. They were sent away to school and formed their own societies in northern cities. Usually they intermarried with other (fair blacks) to maintain the masquerade (Kerr, 2006, p.57).

Mulattos also kept and/or achieved higher social standings in the years following the Civil War (Kerr, 2006).

In *The Blacker the Berry*, Wallace Thurman (1921) wrote about the color complex in the black community. He described the way that light skin blacks had separated themselves from their darker brothers and sisters by trying to keep their color line as light as possible and by forming their own communities that included groups such as the Blue Vein Society.
In their veins was some of the best blood of the South. They were closely akin to the only true aristocrats in the United States. Even the slave masters had been aware of and acknowledged in some measures their superiority. Having some of Mars George’s blood in their veins set them apart from ordinary Negroes at birth. These mulattos as a rule were not ordered to work in the field beneath the broiling sun at the urge of a Simon Legree lash. They were saved and trained for more gentle jobs, saved and trained to be ladies’ maids and butlers. Therefore, let them continue this natural division of the Negro encroachments. Their motto must be ‘whiter and whiter every generation,’ until the grandchildren of the Blue Veins could be easily assimilated so that problems of a race would plague them no more (Thurman, 1992, p.19).

Following World War I, Frazier (1957) noted that there was a societal shift and that among black Americans the influence of skin tone had declined. Professional standing, education, and economic success began to carry more influence; however, the importance of skin tone had not been completely eliminated. Though more darker skinned blacks began to enter education, find more economic success, and marry into mulatto families; Frazier also found that skin tone still carried some weight for black Americans receiving social and economic success because most whites continued to be more comfortable dealing with light skinned blacks because they looked similar to them and thought that they were smarter and less intimidating than darker skinned blacks. Being black was often associated with being evil, dark, dumb, and/or lazy. Most black Americans did what they could to not be tied to such negative stereotypes about their race, even if that meant separating themselves from their race entirely and living their lives as a white person.
In *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Hurston, 1937), the main character Janie (who was a light skin black woman with long hair) met a white woman who encouraged her to use her skin tone and hair as an advantage and as a way to act better than other blacks. She told Janie that she should try to lighten up her race in order to make it better. Though there was a number of light skin blacks who wanted to be accepted by all black Americans, the majority of light skin black Americans who were fully aware of the advantages that their skin tone and class awarded them, did what they could to separate themselves from dark skin and/or poor black Americans in order to maintain those privileges in fear of being treated poorly by white Americans.

…the upper colored group is desperately afraid of being represented before American whites by this lower group, or being mistaken for them, or being treated as though they were part of it, they are pushed to the extreme of effort to avoid contact with the poorest classes of Negroes. This exaggerates, at once, the secret shame of being identified with such people and that anomaly of insisting that the physical characteristics of these folk which the upper class shares, are not the stigma of degradation (DuBois, 1933, p.199).

In order to gain success and acceptance, dark skinned black Americans often tried to mimic the look of their lighter counter parts. “The basic myth of racism is that white skin color brings with it superiority-that the white is more intelligent, more virtuous, more sexually controlled by the mere fact of being white” (Clark, 1965, p228). They purchased concoctions such as bleaching creams and liquids in attempts to lighten their skin. Tools such as hot combs and chemicals were used by black Americans in hopes of making their hair straighter as well. Black Americans were not only encouraged by whites to use these products, they were also encouraged by other blacks to use them in order to help them be accepted by mainstream society.
One Azalia Hackley [light skin black woman] provided what might be considered the most profound example of negative views of African features. She proposed that African American girls were unattractive given the shape of their lips, nose, and mouth. Ostensibly their mouths were too large because of excessive grinning and loud laughter…She averred that the African American nose needed a “hump” which she thought could be obtained by pinching, thinking, and willing the hump (Lake, 2003, p.52).

These practices are still used to this day among black Americans and by many other cultures around the world in hopes of achieving a more “European” look so that they can gain mainstream societal acceptance.

Skin color and skin tone are a big part of the black American community; however, the topic is not explored to a large extent in the comparison to the weight of the importance of the topic. “Many African Americans fear that discussing these issues in culturally mixed groups, will lead to misinterpretation and be used to defeat much of the positive civic and political change for which so many African Americans fought and died” (Breland, 1997, pp.3-4). Keith and Herring (1991) in their study looked at whether or not black Americans’ success was still being influenced by skin tone despite the fact that society said that it was losing its importance. Using only blacks who identified themselves as black American citizens as subjects for the study, they found that skin tone still had a large influence on the success of black Americans. This resulted in causing issues among black Americans, leaving members of the community to wonder what type of impact the practice of colorism will have on generations to come.
What then can be the destiny of a people that pampers and cherishes the blood of the white slaveholder who maimed and degraded their female ancestor? What can be the future of a class descendants’ of slaves that implicitly gives slaveholders greater honor than the African women enslaved? What can be the end of a class that pretends to honor blackness whole, but secretly it despise working class black skinned women whose faces reveal no trace of white blood? (Jeffers, 1981, p.47).

The late 1960’s and into the late 70’s was considered to be a time of “black consciousness” in the United States. Black Americans were taught to embrace their African ancestry by dressing in African garb, straying away from the “European” look. They were drawn to “natural” hair styles that did not involve the use of chemicals or other tools to straighten their hair to show their cultural pride. Many black Americans wore their hair in afros and braids as a way to show that were happy about where they descended from. The “black is beautiful” movement was “A new standard of beauty that celebrated dark skin, naturally kinky hair, and full lips…” (Craig, 2002, p.23). Many dark skin blacks felt that their time of physical acceptance had arrived and that their features were what was deemed beautiful because “black was beautiful”.

However, some light skin black Americans felt alienated during that period because they felt as though they had to prove how black they were to other black Americans (Sandler, 1993). They felt that they had to date the darkest person that they could find, try and make their hair look kinky, and denounce any ounce of white blood that they might have had in their family lineage. Despite the “black is beautiful” movement that swept the nation during the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s where blacks were told to embrace their heritage, skin tone, and African
features; colorism continues to reside within the black community. “A high value is placed on light skin because white society is more accepting of African Americans whose skin color closely approximate European standard of attractiveness” (Harvey, 1995, p.5). American society has been primarily influenced by Western Europe and that influence has set the standard of beauty in the United States.

During this time of social change in America there was also a group of black Americans that Dr. Kenneth Clark (1965) referred to as living “The Negro Fantasy.” They were made up of mostly light skin blacks who were okay living separately from whites as long as they received everything that whites got. They appeared to be happy with their lives and were accommodating and accepting of the way that they lived.

Or, as one successful Negro professional, who lives in a beautiful home, is wont to say:

“All Negroes need to do is prepare themselves, save money invest properly, buy decent homes, and then there would be no more prejudice.” A common fantasy is to deny one own’s identification with the racial dilemmas: “I have no racial problem; I get along with all whites.” … The truth is that every Negro has racial problem, repressed or otherwise, and that no American social institution is truly color-blind (Clark, 1965, p226).

Those light skin black Americans who were happy with their lives were uninterested in participating in social movements because they felt that all black Americans had to do was work hard and they too could have what whites had, just in their own communities. That there was no need to go ahead and rock the boat so to speak. They often tried to stay away from issues that would cause controversy and/or problems between black Americans and white Americans.
Today colorism continues to have an effect on black Americans. Black Americans have criticized the media for primarily featuring light skin black women in music videos, as models, and as lead characters on television and in film (Breland, 1997).

African American issues of skin tone are rooted in the history of oppression and the enslavement of the first Africans forcibly transported to the shores of America. As African Americans moved from the plantations to cities and towns, the color based caste system followed (Breland, 1997, p.16).

The issue of colorism has created an invisible line of separation between dark and light skinned black Americans.

Extremely light skin color evokes envy and resentment on the part of darker persons, who come to harbor a genuine distrust and suspicion of light colored Negroes. These negative attitudes, however, are not directed toward the highly valued, light color but rather toward the persons who, because of their light skins, are believed to be conceited and snobbish” (Parrish, 1946, p.20).

The line of colorism has caused animosity, deep rooted scars, and dislike in the lives of light skin black Americans and dark skin black Americans alike.

In 1993, John Langston Gwaltney published a book *Drylongso: A Self-Portrait of Black America* that resulted from an anthropological field study that he conducted in the 1970s of northeastern urban black Americans. The book included interviews, observations, and the sharing of Gwaltney’s own personal experiences. In many of the interviews he conducted there
was mention of skin tone biases in the black American community and some of the subjects’
disdain for the hypocrisy of it.

People should judge me by what I do to them. I think we should break up this business of
light people marrying only light people and dark people marrying dark people. People
just worry too much about color, and if it’s wrong for white people to do it, I mean, make
people’s lives miserable for such unimportant cause, then it’s just wrong for our people to
behave like that (Gwaltney, 1993, p.81).

Though many blacks at the time were against the preferential treatment that light skinned blacks
received and often spoke out against their behavior, they still sought out ways to be like them
whether it was in appearance or in action (Lake, 2003).

The need for light skinned black Americans to be accepted by mainstream white
American society was evident. They felt that if they could not be treated completely equal as
their white counterparts, that they would create their own world where they could control the
treatment that they received. Light skin black Americans wanted to create a society that would
award them the same opportunities and advantages that they saw white Americans were
receiving. In order to gain these things, light skin blacks formed their own communities with
banks, schools, churches, hospitals, and organizations that included social clubs for youth and
adults alike, and collegiate fraternities and sororities organizations. Starting their own
communities and organizations often gave light skin black Americans another way to show
whites how they differed from dark skinned black Americans, deepening the division between
the two groups.
History of Social Organizations and Black Americans

*There is no denying it, Negroes have color-phobia. Whole Negro communities have it. Some Negro families have it. Some Negro churches have it. The fairer some Negros are, the better they think themselves.* ~ Nannie Helen Burroughs (Kerr, 2006, p.59)

Burroughs’ quote spoke about the ever presence of colorism within the black American community. Following the Civil War the “mulatto elite” felt that they needed to separate themselves from the newly free dark-skinned black American population in order to maintain their status in American society. They did this by forming exclusive light skin communities. The communities included private and boarding schools, churches, and social clubs. The elite mulatto social clubs were formed based on color and class and as a way to ensure that their way of life would be maintained. Members included the “blue veiners” who were black Americans that were so light that one could see the color of their veins through their skin and the “bon tonners” those blacks who were free before the Civil War and considered themselves to be “bonafied free coloreds” (Lake, 2003).

“During the early part of the 20th century, social clubs, churches, fraternities, and sororities used a variety of methods to weed out potential dark skinned applicants to create and maintain social distance between blacks with light skin” (Maddox & Gray, 2002, p.250). To obtain membership into some of the social organizations one was sometimes required to take a series of tests. These tests included the paper bag test in which the members would see if the person requesting entry was either darker or lighter than a brown paper bag by holding their arm and/or face next to a typical brown paper bag. Often if it was found that you were darker than the brown paper bag, then you were not accepted into the organization. The comb on a string test
in which the members had to walk under a comb hanging from a string and see if it would slide out of their hair or remain stuck, it was used as a way to determine one’s texture of hair. The blue vein test was a test in which potential members had to show the organization that their skin was light enough to have the veins in their arms can be seen. However, on occasion darker members were accepted into the organizations if it was found that they had a high level of education and were highly successful economically and socially (Gatewood, 1990). “To this day exclusive Black social clubs like Jack & Jill and Links have significant majority of light-skinned members. Many churches, schools, sororities, fraternities, businesses, and even neighborhoods are also reputed to be partial to light-skinned Blacks” (Russell, Wilson & Hall, 1992, p.25). Many black Americans feel as though exclusive membership practices continue today within historically black social organizations throughout the United States.

**Student Organizations in Higher Education**

*History of Higher Education in the United States*

One of the basic purposes of higher education is the preservation, transmission, and enrichment of the important elements of culture: the product of scholarship, research, creative imagination, and human experience. It is the task of colleges and universities to utilize this and other educational purposes to assist the student in developing to the limits of his/her potential and in making his/her contribution to the betterment of society (McClellan & Stringer, 2009, p.11). Colleges in the United States were originally created to produce individuals who were going to give back to society in the fields of business, government, education, and religion. Harvard University was originally founded under the name of New College in 1636 and is credited with being the oldest institution of higher education in the United States. The first
curriculum was centered on training young men to become ministers. The private institutions that were created before the Revolutionary War or shortly after were Harvard University, The College of William and Mary, Yale University, and the University of Pennsylvania. Each of them catered their student population towards white males from financially well off families (McClellan & Stringer, 2009).

The Morrill Land Grant Act of 1862 opened up higher education opportunities to a wider variety of American citizens that included the sons and daughters of farmers and merchants. Land Grant institutions were publicly funded and were a mix of public and private institutions that allowed students (mainly white) from lower economic backgrounds an opportunity to get a higher education (Schwartz, 2006). In the years preceding and in the years following the American Civil War, there was a rise in higher education institutions established that were geared towards educating free black Americans. Many of the institutions founded after the American Civil War were the result of states not wanting to integrate their land grant institutions, so in 1890 the second Morrill Land Grant Act was passed as a way to require states to provide institutions of higher education for their black American residents. Though the institutions were originally established to help educate black Americans, they also welcomed non-black American students as well. Such as Hampton Institute (now University) implemented a Native American studies program for Native Americans who were interested in gaining an education that ran from 1878 to 1923. Allowing black Americans to gain access to colleges changed the face of higher education in the United States (Schwartz, 2006).

The passing of the G.I. Bill in 1944 further changed the face of higher education in the United States. The G.I. Bill provided stipends for education for military veterans. Life on college
campuses began to change as it welcomed older, nontraditional undergraduate students and variety of students from different cultural, racial, and religious back grounds. Due to this change students began to get more involved on their college campuses and more student organizations began to emerge not only at the local level, but also at the national level as well. National student organizations such as the United States Student Assembly and the National Student Association were formed out of concern for not only what was occurring on their college campuses, but also because of what was going on around the world. “Out-of-class activities provide opportunities for development of leadership skills, such as teamwork, decision making, and planning, which are increasingly important for effective participation in civic and community affairs” (Kuh, Schun, & Whitt, 1991, p.9). Students began to take on a more active role in their own education by becoming more aware of what institution administrators and the government were doing to higher education. Students no longer just attended classes and dances, but they were engaged and concerned with the running of their government, colleges, and universities. Student organizations not only became a way for students to meet individuals with similar hobbies, but also as a way for them to exercise their power and opinions. Student organization involvement was and continues to be greatly encouraged in higher education and continues to grow with each new generation entering institutions of higher education (Schwartz, 2006).

Collegiate Student Organizations

Individuals involved in higher education believe that being involved on campus is pivotal to the development of a college student, in particular at the undergraduate level.
Students involved in out-of-class activities are more positive about their college experience, are more satisfied with their social life, living environment, academic major, contacts with faculty, and are more likely to graduate than students who are not involved. In addition, students who were involved in college attribute some of their job success after college to participation in out-of-class activities (Kuh, Schun, & Whitt, 1991, p.8).

Extracurricular activities are viewed by undergraduate students as a chance to have fun, learn new skills, give something back, and as a way to make connections outside of the classroom. Outside classroom involvement often gives students the tools that they need to succeed in college. “Higher education is supposed to effect desirable changes in students’ values, intellectual capacities, and esthetic sensibilities. The impact of the college experience on students is increased when they are more actively engaged in various aspects of college life” (Kuh, Schun & Whitt, 1991, p.5). Studies have found that “students who make connections between what goes on inside and outside the classroom report a more satisfying college experience” (Light, 2001, p.14). Outside classroom involvement is encouraged in higher education as a way for students to apply in class lessons with the real world application.

One of the biggest changes that has occurred in present times on college campuses is the change in the actual students’ demographics. The student population has changed greatly to include students of all ages at varying levels of their education as well as students from a wide variety of social, economic, religious, cultural, and racial backgrounds. Being involved with on campus extracurricular activities that allow students to be exposed to people and opportunities that they would not have normally had a chance to be.
A large number note that these four years at college may be one of the few opportunities of a lifetime to live in an environment in which nearly all members of the community really do share a critical set of assumptions…Certain organizations, and a selective college is one, are particularly likely to offer an environment in which such key assumptions are widely shared (Light, 2001, p.133).

College can be considered to be a free a trip around the world. Many students would not normally engage with some of the individuals that they meet on their college campuses, if it were not for student involvement through clubs, Greek organizations, student events, etc.

Student organizations often create a sense of belonging for students; they let them know that there is a place for them at their chosen institution of higher education. Being involved in extracurricular activities not only allows students access to each other outside of the classroom, but they are also given the opportunity to meet with the faculty and staff outside the classroom and office setting. “Not only do students benefit in terms of sense of belonging when they engage their peers in educationally purposeful ways (e.g. through clubs and sports-related activities), but students also derive a sense of belonging from socializing with faculty members outside of class” (Strayhorn, 2012, p.111). These sorts of connections give students a chance to engage with faculty and staff on a different level that might make a variety of opportunities available to them.

When students are a part of the minority population of a college and/or university they often look to student based organizations as a way to connect to other students who they have things in common with. Strayhorn (2012) in a study looked at black male college students and their sense of belonging at their various institutions of higher education.
Not only has a sense of belonging been identified as a goal or desired end for black male collegians, but it also acts as a motive for academic and social behaviors. For instance, some Black men aspire to establish a sense of belonging in college—that is, “to fit in” and devote sufficient time to studying and class preparation, participate in study sessions and workshops that enhance their writing and thinking skills, and/or access help where needed. Yearning for a sense of belonging or “community” on campus drives some other black men to engage in educationally purposeful activities such as mentoring programs, clubs and organizations, or leadership experiences. Participating in campus clubs and organizations is another way that some black men negotiate their sense of belonging in college (Strayhorn, 2012, p.83).

Strayhorn found that fitting in and feeling like they belong was very important to black male college students and that it could have an influence on their academic lives as well. Strayhorn also noted that when black males joined black Greek letter organizations, they were often provided with opportunities to work with and congregate with individuals who had similar perspectives like their own. For many of the members of black Greek letter organizations, their fraternity provided them with a sense of family while they were away from home. Black Greek letter organizations have often helped black male students adjust to their college life, make their time at a predominantly white institution easier, and given them ties to other student organizations geared toward black students (Kimbrough, 1998).

History of Collegiate Greek Fraternities and Sororities in the United States

Fraternities and sororities originally began by students who wanted to meet secretly to discuss issues that were not thought to be appropriate by the faculty and staff of their colleges and/or universities. Today fraternities and sororities are social, professional, and/or honorary
groups that help to promote community service, leadership, and academic achievement at institutions of higher education (Syrett, 2011).

What is arguably the most notable collegiate Greek organization, Phi Beta Kappa Society was founded on December 5, 1776 at the College of William & Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia. The students who formed the organization originally met to debate and discuss topics that were not a part of their academic curriculum. The founders of the organization established their own organization as a way to promote congeniality and good friendship. The society chose the motto “Philosophy is the guide of life.” The society spread to form chapters at Yale University and Harvard University. During the time that they were spreading to other colleges and universities, the organization began to develop more and has now become an influential association of faculty and a select amount of students from various colleges and universities. Today Phi Beta Kappa Society continues to celebrate and advocate excellence in the liberal arts and sciences (http://www.pbk.org).

Kappa Alpha Society was founded at Union College on November 26, 1825 and is considered to be the first general Greek letter society in the United States. The founders of the organization adopted many of the traditions practiced by Phi Beta Kappa, but geared their membership to only students, excluding the involvement of faculty as members. The organization was said to be influenced by Freemasons when they implemented some of their secret practices and fraternity traditions. Many other collegiate Greek organizations established after Kappa Alpha Society, would also model some of their practices after the Freemasons. It is not uncommon for someone to be both a member of the Freemasons and a collegiate Greek fraternity or for a female sorority member to be also a member of the Order of the Eastern Stars.
The student body greatly supported the organization, but the faculty did not approve of a group that they considered to be a secret society (http://www.kappaalphaorder.org). The formation of Kappa Alpha Society inspired other students to start their own secret societies and/or Greek organizations.

Founded on March 4, 1831, Sigma Phi Society became the first national fraternity in the United States when they established a chapter at Hamilton College in 1831. On May 15, 1851 the Adelphean Society was founded at Wesleyan College as the first secret society for women, and they currently function under the name Alpha Delta Pi Sorority with the motto “First, Finest, Forever.” The first fraternity for Jewish men was founded as Zeta Beta Tau Fraternity at City College of New York on December 29, 1898. The first fraternity for black American men, Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity was founded on December 4, 1906 at Cornell University. The first sorority for black American women Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority was founded at Howard University on January 15, 1908. Rho Psi Society was founded in 1916 at Cornell University as a fraternity for male students of Chinese descent. The first Latino fraternity Phi Iota Alpha Fraternity was founded at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute on December 26, 1931. In 1993 Sigma Chi Omega Fraternity was the first multicultural fraternity established. The first fraternity for Native Americans, Phi Sigma Nu Fraternity, was founded February 13, 1996 at the University of North Carolina Pembroke (Syrett, 2011).

While at Cornell University, the seven founders of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity Incorporated felt excluded from the majority white student body when it came to student activities and looked for a way get involved on campus. “Students who are more involved in college life also tend to feel a stronger connection with others on campus than those who are
involved less, or not at all” (Strayhorn, 2012, p.107). They also wanted a group that would act as a support system for the black American male population that they saw dwindling every semester. Some of the founders worked in the white Greek organizations’ houses and saw that there were things to be gained by belonging to a fraternity such as an on campus support system and networking opportunities. The founding of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity Incorporated led to the formation of eight other historically black fraternities and sororities being established on both historically black colleges, university campuses, as well as, predominantly white institutions across the United States. The nine historically black fraternities and sororities were all founded during a period of America’s history when black Americans were denied essential rights that were awarded to whites. All of the organizations continue to maintain high positive standards for their members and continue to working on helping to uplift the community at large (Parks, 2008).

**Black Greek Letter Organizations**

Historically black Greek letter organizations (BGLO) are made up of the nine collegiate fraternities and sororities that as a unit have formed the National Pan-Hellanic Council (NPHC). Fraternities and sororities are fraternal organizations that are traditionally made up of undergraduate students found on college and university campuses. The organizations were founded as a way to support students of color on college campuses during the early twentieth century.

Since their inception in the early 1900s, Black Greek-letter organizations have had at the forefront of their agenda, the state of the Black community…Black-letter organizations have been a significant part of Black culture and have helped to shape the Black
Experience. Members of these organizations have represented some of the best and brightest students on their respective college and university campuses (Harris, 2005, p.1).

The organizations are: Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity Incorporated founded December 4, 1906 at Cornell University, Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority Incorporated founded January 15, 1908 at Howard University, Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity Incorporated founded January 5, 1911 at Indiana University Bloomington, Omega Psi Phi Fraternity Incorporated founded November 17, 1911 at Howard University, Delta Sigma Theta Sorority Incorporated founded January 13, 1913 at Howard University, Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity Incorporated founded January 9, 1914 at Howard University, Zeta Phi Beta Sorority Incorporated founded January 16, 1920 at Howard University, Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority Incorporated founded November 12, 1922 at Butler University, and Iota Phi Theta Fraternity Incorporated founded September 13, 1963 at Morgan State University (Hughey & Parks, 2011). “With the founding of Negro Greek-letter organizations, black students sought to emulate their white counterparts in organizational structure, while at the same time incorporating aspects of racial identification, cultural heritage, and social uplift” (Brown, Parks, & Phillips, 2005, p.181).

The National Pan-Hellenic Council was formed on May 1, 1930 on the campus of Howard University with Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, and Zeta Phi Beta Sorority as its original members. Alpha Phi Alpha and Phi Beta Sigma Fraternities joined in 1931, followed by Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority in 1937 and Iota Phi Theta Fraternity in 1997. The National Pan-Hellenic Council’s purpose and mission is “Unanimity of thought and action as far as possible in the conduct of Greek letter collegiate fraternities and sororities, and to consider problems of mutual
interest to its member organizations” (http://www.nphchq.org). The National Pan-Hellenic Council not only unites collegiate historically black Greek letter organizations, but it also acts as a liaison to other organizations and other groups that work to uplift minorities. Groups such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the United Negro College Fund, the National Urban League, various political groups, etc., and work closely with the nine historically black fraternities and sororities to improve the lives of minorities and the underprivileged (Floyd, 2009).

The collegiate black Greek organizations founded in the early years of the 20th century were mainly made up of black American students who had the financial means to attend college and came from a certain social class that allowed them the luxury of entering higher education and joining social organizations.

Howard University, founded a few years after the end of slavery, began to serve the growing Black American middle- to upper-middle class. Further until the 1920s, reportedly 80 percent of the student population at Howard and many other historically Black colleges…were allegedly of light-skin complexion (Whaley, 2010, p.18).

It is said that when W.E.B. Dubois (member of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity Incorporated) designed what he called the “Talented Tenth” the idea that one in ten black men will become leaders for the black race in the world, with the assistance of higher education, writing books, and/or being involved with social change (Russell, Wilson, & Hall, 1992), that he was mainly referring to people who were of mixed ancestry like him, due to the education opportunities given to mulattos (Willis, 2001).
The majority of people who made up the black American upper class was of a certain skin tone and preferred to only interact with other black Americans who were like them; those feelings trickled into the institutions of higher education that they attended and into their social organizations as well.

Cliquish social circles and biased admission policies were also common at many of the historic Black colleges and universities established in the nineteenth century…At some of the most prestigious of the schools, including Spelman, applicants were allegedly required to pass a color test before being admitted (Russell, Wilson & Hall, 1992, p.28).

Due to the history of their founding, black Greek letter organizations have been accused of discriminating against people who wanted to join their organizations, but did not meet what was considered the normal look of their particular group (Graham, 2000).

In the past, even guests of student members at color elite organizations were subject to the paper bag tests. From the 1920s well into the 1960s “color tax” parties were common in Black fraternities. The darker a fraternity member's date the higher the tax he had to pay at the door (Russell, Wilson & Hall, 1992, p.30).

Lake (2003) looked at the way African Americans have internalized the negative images that were created about them by Europeans and what has resulted from that. These negative images also resulted in light privilege in which lighter skinned African Americans were given certain advantages over their darker skinned counterparts. “Norma Boyd, one of the founders of the AKA (Alpha Kappa Alpha) sorority, claimed that her role and the role of others like her - fair skinned, educated, and wealthy - allowed for a foot in both worlds, Black and White” (Whaley,
These privileges often resulted in the creating of African American organizations such as the Links, Jack and Jill, Boule, and The Blue Vein Society, in which the majority of its members had skin color and hair texture that was close to that of white Americans.

It has been found that certain historically black sororities and fraternities have been criticized for practicing elitism, classism, and colorism.

For example, AKAs (Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority Incorporated) are renowned for their light-skinned good looks, an image that is reflected by the words and gestures of their step routines, in which they use their hands to represent mirrors. In addition, “paper bag tests” have reportedly been used to determine the acceptability of candidates, denying membership to those whose skin is not lighter than a brown grocery bag (Brown, Parks, & Phillips, 2005, p.355).

Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity Incorporated was founded in 1914 and the organization’s three founders wanted to start a group that would be open to all the male students on Howard University’s campus, no matter what their skin color or their economic level was. They wanted to promote true brotherhood, scholarship, and service, something that they felt was lacking in some of the previously founded historically black fraternities. It has been said that the founders of the Zeta Phi Beta Sorority Incorporated (the sister group to Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity Incorporated) made it known to interested young ladies that skin color and class level were not an issue for them. Allegedly, most of the original members of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority were made up of female students who were rejected by Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority and Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, two sororities who were known for preferring lighter skinned members.
It is certainly perception, and sorority photographs in Howard yearbooks suggest it, that through the 1930s, ‘40s, and ‘50s the women who were selected for Zeta were generally darker than the women who were selected for AKA and significantly darker than the members of Delta Sigma Theta. (Although AKA is most often charged with complexion-based discrimination, Delta women are historically, based on the photographic evidence, undeniably, and the fairest hues women at Howard) (Kerr, 2006, p.95).

In 1987 while working on a project as an undergraduate student at a predominantly white institution, Audrey Kerr (2006) was introduced to the idea of the paper bag test by an African American female student:

Everybody knows that the AKAs (Alpha Kappa Alpha sorority members) on campus here used to have what they called a paper bag test. That meant that in order to be considered for membership they would hold a paper bag up to your face and you would have to be lighter than the bag. Of course they don’t do that anymore. But if you look at most of them, you will see that they are mostly fair. AKAs on many campuses practice this. And at black schools, the rules are enforced even more (p.25).

Outside of the church, black Greek letter organizations are considered to be the largest and strongest organizations in black communities.

The history of Black Greek-letter organizations (Alpha Kappa Alpha, Delta Sigma Theta, Zeta Phi Beta and Sigma Gamma Rho Sororities; Alpha Phi Alpha, Kappa Alpha Psi, Omega Psi Phi, Phi Beta Sigma and Iota Phi Theta Fraternities) has exemplified dedication to their founding principles of: community service, brotherhood and
sisterhood and scholarship. Over the years, these organizations have grown to be among the strongest political, social and cultural forces in the Black community (Harris, 1998, p.1).

The organizations were formed as a way to build unity for college students during a time “in which the national climate upheld racial injustice, inequality, and separate but ‘unequal’ doctrines that marginalized the existence of African Americans” (Bonner, 2006, p.17).

The first black Greek letter organization (Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity Incorporated) was started in 1906 at the predominantly white Cornell University in Ithaca, New York. It was founded as a way for the black American men on the campus to have contact with other black male students, in order to form a support system for each other. Even though a few blacks had been initiated into Phi Beta Kappa by the 1920s, membership remained fairly exclusive, and the black Greek letter organizations served as symbols of academic excellence for black American college students. Along with their educational purposes, the organizations served to expose black students to fuller collegiate experiences (Kimbrough, 1997, p.604).

At predominantly white universities, including Cornell University in the early 20th century black American students faced many obstacles including fitting into the student body as a whole. “Being black meant banishment from social organization such as glee clubs and literary societies and relegation to segregated cafeterias if allowed admittance” (Giddings, 1988, p.81). The seven men, who started Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity Incorporated, saw that there were many benefits that came from being a part of a fraternal organization while some of them were working in Cornell’s white fraternity houses as laborers. Being a part of a fraternal organization gave the members a sense of security and acceptance not felt before on campus. “Prior to the
Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, Black Greek Letter Organizations supplied requisites such as housing, funding, social and academic support, hospitality, opportunities to bond with students with similar experiences” (Floyd, 2009, p.26).

Despite some of the negative backlash black Greek organizations have received, throughout history, fraternities and sororities alike have become and continue to be a form of support for its members in various avenues. “[Greek] organizations are a ready-made market of affluent ambitious and influential professionals, and can be a great networking resource to those interested in expanding their careers or business ventures” (Dunbar, 1990, p.23). The organizations provide some of their members with same sex role models who are of the same race for the first time, academic support, high self esteem, networking opportunities, long-term friendships, a family atmosphere, and show them what successful males and females of color could look like. “Black Greek sororities focus on empowering black women to be assets to themselves and their communities” (Floyd, 2009, p.29). Black Greek organizations focus on destroying negative stereotypes about people of color and on highlighting their accomplishments. The organizations have produced some of the most successful people of color in the United States.

The last 15 years, have seen individual Black Greeks achieve their greatest triumphs since Alpha member Thurgood Marshall won the famous 1954 Brown v Board of Education case, which outlawed segregation in public schools. Omega ‘brother’ Doug Wilder, became the Black governor of Virginia. Two Alphas, David Dinkins and Willie Brown respectively became the first Black mayors of New York City and San Francisco. And Johnny Cochran, a Kappa, won the ‘trial of the decade’ in the O.J. Simpson case.
During this period, Carol Mosley-Braun, a Delta, became the first African-American woman elected to the U.S. Senate, AKA soror Mae C. Jeminson became the first Black woman astronaut, and her ‘sister’ soror, Hazel O’Leary, became the U.S. Secretary of Energy (Ruffins, 1999, p.103).

Though historically black Greek letter organizations have proven themselves to be groups that often provide a safe haven for students and a place where they can foster meaningful relationships, they have faced their fair share of criticism as well (Harper & Harris, 2006). All nine of the Greek organizations wanted and selected the best members possible. The organizations have been accused of being like cliques, discriminatory, elitist, and classist. The groups have been often been viewed as segregating themselves from the rest of the student body and looking down on non-members (Kimborough, 1997).

The concept of these closed membership organization has always been one of exclusivity and self-interest. And many outsiders viewed them as nothing more than elitist social clubs. However, not only are black social orders, some of the most stable and independent organizations enrolled by blacks (Watkins, 1975, p.26).

In an *Essence* magazine article titled “Greek and Elite”, the author shared her experience with Greek life as an undergraduate college student and why she made the choice not to join a sorority. “…I’ve gradually come to realize what the Greek system means to Black undergraduates: disunity through elitism” (Jenkins, 1988, p.124). The author found black fraternities and sororities at the undergraduate level to be negative and often influenced and encouraged segregation among its members. The author felt that those who joined Greek organizations often lacked self-esteem, did not know who they were, and needed to join
organizations for acceptance. She stated that “…I believe the sacrifices involved far outweigh the benefits of sororities” (Jenkins, 1988, p.124).

“Greek organizations were intended to promote brotherhood and sisterhood between black college students and counter racist exclusion by whites, yet from the beginning they were marked by rivalry, clannishness, and, to some extent a color caste system” (Williams & Ashley, 2004, p.152). Kerr (2006) interviewed a woman named Evelyn who joined Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority at Howard University and though she was a very fair skinned black woman she made the choice not to be active with the sorority after she graduated due to the skin tone biased often expressed by some of her sorority sisters. “I’ve heard sisters [in AKA] say things about dark girls, and I didn’t appreciate it. They would talk about how they look, how they sound. I felt that these were human beings, and who were we to say that they aren’t good enough” (p.96). Though Evelyn did not agree with the things that the members said, she never expressed her displeasure because she said that was how things worked in her sorority at the time. Skin tone bias was the norm and therefore it was accepted within the chapter of her sorority.

In contrast, there are those who believe that historically black fraternities and sororities provide social support for its members and the student body as a whole. It has been noted that white college administrators are often surprised at the high standards that black Greek letter organizations set for their members for grade point average requirements, community services involvement, and public persona (Floyd, 2009). Harper (2007) while interviewing college students for his research study found that members of historically black sororities view each other as a source of comfort and applaud their organizations for setting of a positive example for the student body.
It is tough, and at the same time rewarding for me to be affiliated with so many successful and talented Black women. They have set the bar really high for the rest of us. Every day I realize that I am representing myself as well as AKA (Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority Incorporated). I try really hard to represent my organization and our members well, especially when I am wearing AKA paraphernalia in class….I don’t want to say something stupid and misrepresent the sorority, or myself (p.105).

Though there has been little research done on the black collegiate Greek experience, the media has taken on the task of “exposing” the goings on of black Greek letter organizations. Movies such as Spike Lee’s *School Daze* (1988) and most recently *Stomp the Yard* (2007) have been said to depict collegiate black Greek organizations as being party animals, over sexed, enemies, gang like, and often putting other black Greek letter organizations down based on their socioeconomic level, skin tone, and family lineage. “Colorism—the counterproductive practice of skin color bias practiced by the broad and full spectrum of skin gradations in African American, White, and all communities of color— is a specter that haunts BGLOs” (Whaley, 2010, p.19).

Though a fictional movie Spike Lee’s *School Daze* (1988) tackled real life issues of that time period that included: the preservation of historically black colleges and universities, higher education, political issues, collegiate Greek life, social class, and the division of black Americans due to skin color and hair texture as seen through the eyes of black students who were members of fictional historically black fraternities and sororities and attended a historically black university (Lee, S. & Jones, L., 1988).

Lee, in his representation of black Greek life presents two diametrically opposed views on black culture and perception of self in *School Daze*: the haves and the have-nots. The
haves are the Wannabe characters, beige to light-brown-hued men and women…who are color conscious, flaunt crass materialism, are politically (a)pathetic, are presented as a mimeiry of white fraternal members…Lee calls the have-nots Jigaboos. These dark-brown-hued college students are Afro centric and politically focused (Whaley, 2010, p.15).

Lee’s film questioned what black Greek letter organizations were doing for their communities and asked whether or not the organizations’ color biases and class elitism were not only limiting them, but the rest of black America as well. The colorism depicted in School Daze brought forth issues and stereotypes that still touch historically black fraternities and sororities to this day. “School Daze is a postmodern production of the house versus field slave narrative often espoused black nationalists in the 1960s, which held that skin color influenced the insurgency of African slaves” (Brown, Parks & Phillips, 2005, p423). Students have said that on Historically Black College and University campuses skin color can affect social opportunities, in particular among fraternities and sororities. Some students feel that membership in these organizations can depend on one’s skin color and the texture of their hair (Russell, Wilson & Hall, 1992).

This separation by skin tone could not be seen more clearly than in Lee’s “Good Hair vs. Bad Hair” musical number from his film (Lee, 1988). That scene takes place in a beauty salon, a traditional meeting ground for women of color, and consists of two main feuding female groups (the wannabes and jiggaboos). They talk down to each other through name-calling and the use of racial slurs based on each other’s appearance.
Just as African Americans are taught very early that their hair is “good” or “bad,” they are also taught that their self-worth is directly linked with the color of their skin. The salience of color within diaspora African communities is indicated by the cast lexicon of terms that denote degrees of blackness (Lake, 2003, p.70).

Words such as nappy, tar baby, jiggaboos, high yellow and white girl wannabe were used by the ladies to insult each other (Lee, 1988). Throughout the making of the film Lee purposefully separated the actors by their characters’ labeled groups and treated the groups differently from each other hoping to create the real life tension that often separates dark skin and light skin black Americans.

The color and class the film explores was a very real thing for the actors, and it started early on with the separate hotel arrangements—the Jigs at the modest Ramada Inn and the Gamma Rays and all the male actors at the plush Regency Suites. At the auditions I spoke with various actors about the issue, and they said, ‘It’s only a movie, we can step away.’ But many weren’t able to. There were some Jigs who gave Tisha a hard time, just refused to look beyond her character. The dark skin/light skin thing had a noticeable effect on them and the Gamma Rays. With the Gamma Rays it was about acting like ‘superior beings’ (Lee & Jones, 1988, p.98).

When Tisha Campbell who portrayed the light skin, blonde hair, blue eye contact wearing Jane wanna-be in School Daze asked a member of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority (Deltas) about colorism among black sororities, she ended up feeling that Lee fashioned the Jiggaboos and Wannabees around two particular sororities:
I never got to talk to any of the AKAs. I did ask the Deltas, “Are all of you dark skinned?” And they said no. And I said, “Are all the AKAs light skinned?” They said yes. I guess we were divided that way (Brown, Parks & Phillips, 2005, p.418).

Due to the treatment that they received on set, some the actors stated that throughout the process they began to feel themselves falling for some of the stereotypes that often accompanied dark skinned and light skinned black Americans (Lee, S. & Jones, L., 1988). Spike Lee further explored this when he displayed a dialogue between the two characters Rachel and Dap, showing that skin tone bias is not one sided (i.e. light skin blacks disliking dark skin blacks).

“…Colorism among African Americans exists within all color spectrums; skin color often becomes an aesthetic cultural wager in a basically racially intolerant and color-conscious world” (Brown, Parks & Phillips, 2005, p.423). Dap had a deep hatred for light skin black Americans because he feels as though they wanted to be white. Rachel feels that he has forgotten that everyone has some mixed ancestry. Rachel also feels that Dap’s hatred for light skin blacks is so deep that the only reason he is dating her is because she is one of the darkest girls on campus and her skin color allows him to prove his blackness (Willis, 2001).

Rachel: I know I have my problems with them, but for you it’s a crusade. I’m beginning to think you’re color struck. You definitely have a thing against light-skinned Blacks.

Dap: Who me?

Rachel: Yes, you.

Dap: No, no Rachel, it’s them, not me. Come on, I adore octoroon, quadroon, mulattos… they’re so unpure.
Rachel: And you’re one hundred percent pure? Massa was in your ancestor’s slave quarters just like everybody else’s (Lee, 1988).

Some of the credentials that some sororities require their members to have was explored in a study (Hernandez, 2011) and it was found that some of the requirements were not included on the application. The additional credentials are often considered to be unspoken knowledge. Members of sororities are taught that their actions, dress, and speech are always to be at their best in front of members and nonmembers. By carrying themselves a certain way and by looking a certain way members of black sororities often hope to defy popular culture images of black women, in particular, negative ones.

Norma Solomon White, supreme basileus (president) of Alpha Kappa Alpha, says we need to put skin color behind us. ‘It is not as much of an issue as it was many, many years ago,’ she says. ‘At one time the perception was that a person had to be a certain complexion in order to get into certain sororities, but I think that if we look at all of our sororities and fraternities now, they are all multicolored. I think that the few people who feel that you have to look a certain way are in the minority (Kinnon, 2000, p56).

Some chapters of black sororities have been accused of including hair texture and skin color in their membership selection process in order to display a certain type of image to others (Hernandez, 2011).

The more elite the fraternity or sorority, the lighter-skinned its members. The highly regarded Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority and Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity might still contend
with reputations for being partial toward Blacks with light skin and “good” hair (Russell, Wilson & Hall, 1992, p.30).

Through six years of research the author of *Our Kind of People: Inside America’s Black Upper Class* (Graham, 2000), traces some of black America’s upper class members all the way back to the 1800’s and through present day. Through historical research and personal accounts he discussed the importance of the right kind of school, families, social clubs that included historically black fraternities and sororities, and skin complexion to the black elites of America and the racial divide that they continue to cause today among black Americans. Graham found that what is considered to be the “right” way to be, could be traced back to the rules set by light skin black Americans during the days of slavery. The rules themselves were based on the way that white Americans deemed the best way to live.

**Results of Colorism**

Consequently, colorism has produced skin tone bias among many black Americans, by creating a dislike, like, and/or preferences for one skin tone over another. These preferences have been found not only in black American adults, but also among black American children and black American adolescents as well (Goering, 1971; Bond & Cash, 1992; Robinson & Ward, 1995). The praise, acceptance, and social standing often associated with being light skin, left many black Americans wanting to keep their families as light as possible.

There was nothing so silly as the creed of the blue veins: “Whiter and whiter, every generation. The nearer white you are the more white people will respect you. Therefore all light Negroes marry light Negroes. Continue to do so generation after generation, and
eventually white people will accept this racially bastard aristocracy, thus enabling those Negroes who really matter to escape the social and economic inferiority of the American Negro” (Thurman, 1929, p.37).

Research studies have discovered that the preference leans toward lighter skinned black Americans over dark skinned blacks, even if the person in question may not be the preferred skin tone (Bond & Cash, 1992). Colorism has also caused ill feelings between some dark skin blacks and some light skin blacks.

It’s the hatred mixed with adoration, the despising coupled with envy that make color issues so complex and psychologically debilitating to Black people. We hate someone because they think they’re better than us, different than us, blacker than us just because they’re lighter than us (Allen, 1982, p.127).

In the 1940’s husband and wife psychology team Doctors Kenneth and Mami Clark conducted an experiment titled: “Racial Identification and Preference in Negro Children” (1947), using 253 black American children from across the United States as subjects who had attended either a segregated or an integrated public school. In their study they looked at “the specific problem of this study is an analysis of genesis and development of racial identification and self awareness in Negro children” (Clark & Clark, 1947, p.169). They asked the children a series of questions and asked them to answer the questions by selecting one of four dolls. The four dolls were all identical in face and dress, except that two of the dolls were brown with black hair and two of the dolls were white with yellow hair. The questions asked by the doctors were:

1. Give me the doll that you like to play with the best.
2. Give me the doll that is a nice doll.

3. Give me the doll that looks bad.

4. Give me the doll that is a nice color.

5. Give me the doll that looks like a white child.

6. Give me the doll that looks like a colored child.

7. Give me the doll that looks like a Negro child.

8. Give me the child that looks like you (Clark & Clark, 1947, p.169).

The results of the study showed that the children, who ranged between the ages of three and seven, were aware of race and racial differences. The children were all able to identify their own races, but the majority of the subjects preferred the white doll over the brown doll. Some of the subjects when asked to color a drawing of themselves selected white and yellow crayons instead brown and black crayons. It was also noted that some of the children got visibly emotional when they had to identify which doll looked like them. “A seven-year old northern light child went to great pains to explain that he was actually white, but I look brown because I got a suntan in the summer” (Clark & Clark, 1947, p.178). The white doll was described by the children as being pretty, as having a nice color, and having clean; hair, hands, ears, elbows, hands, and knees. The rejection of the brown doll by the children was an example of how the lighter is better mentality starts at a young age. The experiment showed that even at a young age children can identify skin color and the disparities between them. Their experiment was eventually used as evidence in the Brown versus the Board of Education case that helped to end
racial segregation in public schools because it was ruled that separate but equal was not constitutional. The study was duplicated in 2006 with very similar results. Black Americans continue to live with the thought that lighter is better because they have a history of being mistreated and discriminated against for being darker than the ruling white group. Some feel that, if they become light enough than they would be seen as equal to whites.

The preferential treatment that light skinned black Americans have been accused of receiving have left members of both the dark skin and light skin black American communities feeling confused on how they should feel about their own skin color and the skin color of those who are different from them. Some darker skinned black Americans historically have accused light skin blacks as not being black enough and/or wanting to be white. Feelings of distrust, alienation, and envy have been said to have caused a barrier between dark skin and light skin black Americans. Many light skinned blacks have found themselves trying to prove their blackness to their counterparts in order to fit into the black community. Zora Neal Hurston (1937) touched on this in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, with the main character Janie. Due to her mixed black and white ancestry Janie was light skin with long hair, but did not want her features to separate her from the rest of her black community.

Although Janie enjoys possessing these features, she refuses to allow her light skin and long hair to separate her from the Eatonville community. Indeed, much of the novel concerns Janie’s struggle against the community’s attempts to place her, because of her features (particularly her hair), on a social level that is above and apart from the community (Ashe, 1995, p.579).
Janie like many real life light skin black Americans, did not want to be seen as a light skin black, but just as a black woman like the rest of the women in her community.

In *Light, Bright, and Damned Near White* (Bird, 2009), the author tells the story of Adrian Piper who is black but is so fair that whites and blacks alike question her blackness. The author describes Piper’s life and the names she was called growing up in Harlem, New York. She was often called things such as pale-face and Clorox baby on a regular basis.

She [Piper] recounts many painful memories incurred at the hand of her people and reports how demoralizing and alienating the exchanges made her feel. She uses words like humiliation, betrayal, identity tests, and anger frequently, in describing how her Black neighbors in Harlem treated her and how the antagonistic relationships made her feel (Bird, 2009, p.15).

Piper was often left feeling ashamed and guilty for not being darker, but realized that there was nothing that she could do about it. Despite her personality, some people (black and white alike) already had assumptions about the type of person she was going to be based on the color of her skin.

Studies have found that due to the preferences and stereotypes that often accompany skin tone bias, one’s skin tone can sometimes lead to different socio-economic and psychological outcomes among black Americans. Using the 1979-1980 National Survey of Black Americans, Hughes and Hertel (1990) conducted a research study and found that among black Americans skin tone played a large part in education, occupation status, income level, and relationships with fellow black American and non-black Americans. Keith and Herring (1991) through their
research found that on average a black person with very light skin attained more than two additional years of education compared to that of a black person with very dark skin. Maddox and Gray (2002) conducted a study using black and white participants in which they asked them to report cultural stereotypes associated with dark skin and light skin blacks. They defined stereotypes as “cognitive representations that contain a perceiver’s knowledge, beliefs, and expectations about a social group” (Maddox & Gray, 2002, p.255). They concluded that blacks and whites alike are aware that there are cultural distinctions between light and dark skinned black Americans. The participants in the study used more negative terms and descriptions for dark skinned blacks compared to the terms and descriptions used when discussing light skinned blacks.

Though colorism among black Americans is an issue that affects both genders and many age groups, most of the research on it has been done about its effect on black women and their ideas of beauty. “One need not have extensive exposure to African American culture to know that complexion, as well as phenotype and hair texture and length have traditionally been markers of physical beauty” (Kerr, 2006, p.9). It has been found that black females seem to have been more affected by colorism than black males because of the pressures of the American standard of beauty that plagues women as a whole. This was clearly played out in a scene between a light skinned black girl and two darker skinned black girls in The Bluest Eye by Toni Morrison, a tragic novel that focuses on a young dark skin black American girl who is obsessed with having blue eyes like the white baby dolly that everyone loves so that she could be seen as pretty. “…Maureen screams, I am cute. And you ugly! Black and ugly. We were sinking under the wisdom, accuracy, and relevance of Maureen’s last words. If she was cute, then we were not. And what could that mean? We were lesser” (1970, pp.73-73). What is considered to be
beautiful is usually taught to a young girl at a very young age, whether the standard of beauty for that society is obtainable or not this in turn makes them want to alter their appearances to fit it (Sandler, 1993).

A study conducted on whether skin color was still an issue in black America found that the black people she interviewed felt that black women who were lighter in skin still had it easier than dark skin women when it came to personal relationships and achievements (Kinnon, 2000). However dark skin black men did not have to compete with light skin black men as much as they did in the past. The film Jungle Fever (Lee, 1991) depicted a scene between the female black characters that ranged in skin tones from very fair (could pass for white) to very dark, in which the darker black women told the lighter black women that they had it easier because they were light and that being dark limited their relationship options. The light skin females of the group shared that it was tough for them because they often got mistreated by dark skin blacks for being too light.

As long as Black men are attracted to a woman just because she’s light, light-skinned Black women will remain in the strange duality of being favored by men, but also being doubly discriminated against because they’re Black and because they’re light skinned (Allen, 1982, p.128).

In A Question of Color, Kathe Sandler (1993) made a documentary looking at the experiences of black Americans and skin color. She found that dark skin and light skin blacks both had negative experiences associated with their skin tone. Some of the light skin subjects’ experiences include being labeled as being uppity and that others thought they were better than everyone else. The light skin females felt that being light was often a burden and that they were
not seen as a person...just as a light skin color. The women felt that black men only wanted them because they were light and that for some black men having a light skin woman was like having a prize. There was a belief that black men really wanted to be with white women and if they couldn’t have a white woman, then they would go after light skinned black American women because they were the next best thing to a white woman.

Conversely, the dark skin subjects said that they grew up feeling less than by friends and family members because they were dark. They were told that they should not wear certain colors in fear of it clashing with their skin color, that they could not wear their hair a certain way because certain styles made them look too ethnic, that they needed to work hard in school because if they were not attractive they could at least be smart, that they should take care of their facial features in hopes that their being dark will be secondary, and that they should try to marry a light skin person in order to lighten up their family line. “It is only as we collectively change the way we look at ourselves and the world that we can change how we are seen. In this process, we can look at blackness, and black people, with new eyes” (bell hooks & Sandler, 1993). The subjects that Sandler interviewed collectively felt that they wished colorism was an issue of the past, but confessed that they were victims of it as well.

African Americans were sampled and examined in a study about skin color in relation to self-esteem and self-perceived political, social, and global attractiveness (Wade, 1996). The findings of the study were that fair skinned African American females rated higher in self-esteem and self-ratings of attractiveness than darker skinned African American females. Dark skinned males had no difference from fair skinned males when it came to self-esteem and self-ratings of attractiveness. However, dark skinned males rated higher than light skinned males
when it came to self-ratings of sexual attractiveness, but dark skin and light skin females had no difference. It was also noted that dark skinned black males stereotypically preferred light skinned black females to form romantic relationships with.

Of course, it’s always been common to see light-skinned women with darker-skinned men. Historically the light-skinned woman was the status symbol. She secured the male’s image and, if she properly fulfilled her role as a thorough bread brood mare, she lifted his children into the socially advantaged stage of being light (Allen, 1982, p.128).

In Spike Lee’s 1991 film Jungle Fever, the main character Flipper a dark black man has an affair with a white Italian woman, his wife Drew a very fair black woman calls him out on his preference for light skin black women. Telling him that he always dated black women who were very light and now that his wife was no longer light enough for him he turned to a white woman, in order to make himself feel better about being so black.

…What I mean is you’ve [Flipper] got a complex about color. You’ve always had it. I never wanted to believe it until now….I told you what happened to me when I was growing up…,I told you how they called me high yella, yellow bitch. White honky, honky white, white nigger, nigger white, octoroon, quadroon, half-breed, mongrel… (Lee, 1991).

Flipper felt as though he did not have a preference for skin tone when selecting a mate and that he just liked who he liked. Whereas, his wife saw his attraction to light skin black women and to white women as a form of self hate.
In 1946 Charles Parrish explored the issue of names and stereotypes associated with the skin tone of black Americans. He presented a list of names that ranged from half-white and high yellow to rusty black and tar baby to students. He found that names associated to skin color were not uncommon sayings within the black community. He furthered his study by asking them to associate physical descriptions and stereotypes with some of the color nicknames.

Undoubtedly, “evil,” or some equivalent term, is the first connotation of “black.” Conversely, three-fourths of the interviewees indicated a belief that dark girls are likely to be discriminated against by sororities. These notions may be taken as representative of the deep-rooted conviction that the Negro community provides more opportunities for status enhancement to the light person that it does to the dark person (Parrish, 1946, p.17).

Parrish’s research showed that lighter skinned individuals were assumed to be more attractive, to be well groomed, but to also be conceited and wanted little to do with the black race. Parrish stated “…stereotyping is a time-saving device which is employed in dealing with people whom we do not know very well” (1946, p.18). Darker skinned individuals were said to be to be less attractive, picked their clothing carefully, were friendly, but were extremely sensitive about color and often felt inferior to others. Though Parrish’s study was completed almost more than a century ago some of the same thoughts and stereotypes can be found among the black American community today. “Color consciousness in black America is a consequence of racism in white America. As we struggle to redefine ourselves we must also confront the reality that we live in a society that has failed to embrace all of us” (Sandler, 1993).
In a study on language and the attitudes of skin color among young black women, the researcher (Wilder, 2009) explained that contemporary language and attitudes surrounding skin color. The study involved using nine focus groups that consisted of 58 black women ages 18-25, where color names and stereotypes were discussed. It was found that there has been no change in colorist ideology among African Americans. “The participants discussed 40 color names that are regularly used to describe light, medium and dark skin tones. The terms and attitudes associated with light skin tones were generally negative; conversely the terms and attitudes associated with dark skin tones were derogatory” (p.184). In spite of the 1960s “Black is Beautiful” slogan which brought the emergence of ethnic pride and the embracing of natural chemical free hairstyles, the author has found that the African American women continue to try and lighten their skin and straighten their hair to achieve mainstream acceptance (Craig, 2002).

**Summary**

The previous research studies and literature done on historically black fraternities and sororities, and on the history of black Americans, has proven that skin tone bias is an issue in both groups. Colorism is product of racism and it is something that black Americans have dealt with since slavery and still continue to deal with. The issue of colorism has caused and continues to cause difficulty among members of the black American community. Studying the type of impact that colorism has had on historically black fraternities and sororities can possibly lead to figuring out to what extent the difficulty lies.
Chapter 3

Methodology

Restatement of the Problem and Purpose

Greek life is well known on most college and university campuses, but the lack of research done on historically black Greek organizations would show the opposite. Historically black fraternities and sororities have often been left in the shadows when they are compared to collegiate Greek organizations originally founded for white Americans (Eberly, 2010). Black Greek letter organizations have contributed a great deal to higher education and society throughout history, however there seems to be a lack of research done on the organizations. The organizations were all founded based on certain principles and values, along with a certain culture attached to them. “…Stereotypes based on colorism or discrimination based on skin color-and elitism might operate as unofficial symbols and signs for historically black sororities” (Tindall, Hernandez, & Hughey, 2011, p.36). A part of the culture of historically black fraternities and sororities includes the type of members that they have accepted into their organizations, often the selection is said to be based on the appearance of those seeking membership.

Blacks in the United States of America have experienced various hardships throughout history that continue to have an impact on the lives of present, and even future, generations. One of the hardships that black Americans have had to experience has been their appearance and that includes the issue of skin color bias within their own race; however due to the lack of research on the subject the literature it does not show that (Kerr, 2006). Some black Americans
consider colorism within the black American community to be an issue of the past, some feel that discussing it is to “air dirty laundry” and that discussing it in fact distracts from larger and more significant issues impacting the black American community today (Hunter, 2007). Colorism has had a great influence on the lives of black Americans socially, economically, and their education achievements and this influence is on that needs to be explored. Previous studies have also stated that often skin color is associated with a particular organization within the National Pan-Hellenic Council and this study also was able to discuss what that has meant for members of the organizations

Stereotypes of members based on skin color, class, and femininity often serve as unsanctioned 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 (Tindall, Hernandez, & Hughey, 2011, p.39).

The purpose of this study was to show the impact that skin tone bias has had on historically black fraternity and sorority members. A review of the literature, previous works, and research has shown that there is a gap that needs to be filled on the topic of skin tone bias and black Greek letter organizations.

**Restatement of the Research Questions**

The following research questions were selected as the basis of this study in order to find out what impact (if any) colorism practiced among black Americans has had on historically black fraternities and sororities:
1. Is colorism still an issue among historically black fraternity and sorority members?

2. What is the perception of color among members of black fraternities and sororities?

3. Is colorism a thing of the past or does colorism still play a part in dividing the black American community?

4. How does colorism play a part in the identity of black Americans?

**Design of the Study**

The style of research used for this study was the qualitative phenomenological approach. The study was primarily done using the transcendental phenomenology a style of qualitative research, in which a phenomenon is identified and studied using several people’s experiences. Phenomenology is “a narrative study that reports the life of a single individual, a phenomenological study describes the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon” (Creswell, 2007, p.57). There are two different types of phenomenology: hermeneutic phenomenology and empirical/transcendental/psychological phenomenology. With hermeneutic phenomenology, the researcher focuses on lived experiences and interpreting the texts of life. However, empirical/transcendental/psychological phenomenology focus on more on the description of the experiences of the participants and less on the interpretations of the researcher (Creswell, 2007).

Transcendental is defined as “in which everything is perceived freshly, as if for the first time” (Moustakas, 1994, p.34). That is why researchers who use the transcendental
phenomenological approach are encouraged to set aside their personal experiences and opinions on the subject being investigated and to approach it with a fresh and new perspective. I used the phenomenological approach so that I could examine the impact that colorism has had on historically black fraternities and sororities and their members. Through using the phenomenological approach, I as the researcher was able to go in depth with my research by providing rich detailed accounts of the topic of study (Creswell, 2007).

I opted to conduct interviews using open ended questions. Open ended questioning of subjects are viewed as being unstructured, therefore it allows for the subjects to be more flexible with their responses (Creswell, 2007). An interview with open-ended questions was selected as the best data collection method because it allowed for the subjects to go into detail with their answers, which will allow them to share their personal experiences. An in-depth interview is considered to be a conversation with a purpose (Tindall, Hernandez, & Hughey, 2011). The questions that were created to be used in the interview were a result of the previous research works and literature done on the topics of skin tone bias and historically black fraternities and sororities. When using the transcendental phenomenological method, it is important that the researcher select participants who have experienced the phenomenon being studied and that played a role on how I decided the criteria for subject’s participation (Creswell, 2007). By asking the subjects questions I was able to gain more insight on what each of the nine historically black fraternities and sororities were like. The personal experiences shared by the subjects, along with historical and current information about the organizations, helped to fill in the gap that is currently present when it comes to research and scholarly studies on historically black fraternities and sororities.
Interview

Demographic Questions

1. What age range do you fall into?
   a. 18-23 24-29 30-35 36-41 42-older

2. What National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC) organization are you a member of? (Please include your undergraduate chapter name)?

3. Where did you join (college/university)?

4. Did you attend a HBCU or PWI?

5. When did you join (semester/year)?

6. Are you still enrolled as an undergraduate student?

7. If not when did you graduate (semester/year)?

Interview Questions

1. What did you know about historically black Greek organizations before you went to college?

2. Did you have any preconceived stereotypes/opinions about any of the organizations before you went to college?

3. Were any of the stereotypes seen at your college while you were an undergraduate student?
4. How did your preconceived opinions about historically black fraternities and sororities change when you went to college?

5. Why did you decide to join your respective organization?

6. Did you seek out acceptance and/or tolerance when deciding to join your organization?

7. Initially, did you feel like you fit the “mold” of your respective organization? If yes why? If no why?

8. How was your organization viewed on campus?

9. How were you viewed as an individual?

10. Did you find discrimination/racism towards your organization while you were an undergraduate student??

11. Did you find discrimination/racism within your organization while an undergraduate student?

12. What has been your experience with colorism/skin tone bias among black Americans?

13. What has been your experience with colorism/skin tone bias among members of historically black fraternities and sororities?

14. Have you ever been accused of being a member of an organization that was not your own due to your appearance?
15. Do you think that colorism has ever existed or that the majority members of particular organizations looked a certain way because they were the ones who attended colleges/universities at the time? If so, why?

Subjects

The subjects selected for this study were all members of one of the nine historically black fraternities and sororities that belong to the National Pan-Hellenic Council: Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity Incorporated, Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority Incorporated, Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity Incorporated, Omega Psi Phi Fraternity Incorporated, Delta Sigma Theta Sorority Incorporated, Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity Incorporated, Zeta Phi Beta Sorority Incorporated, Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority Incorporated, and/or Iota Phi Theta Fraternity Incorporated. The National Pan-Hellenic Council was founded as an umbrella organization for all of the historically black fraternizes and sororities to collectively function under, but it also allows for all nine of the organizations to act independently when it comes to the concern of their individual organizations. Founded during times of racial unrest and inequality in the United States, the primary purpose of all of the organizations upon their foundings was to act as support systems for college students of color while uplifting the race. All of the organizations continue to follow their original purposes as well as uplift the community as a whole.

Alpha Phi Alpha

Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity Incorporated was founded on December 4, 1906 at Cornell University and is credited as being the first black inter-collegiate Greek letter fraternity in the United States of America. As a service Greek organization, they developed a model that many
black Greek letter organizations followed after their own founding's. The mission of the organization is to develop leaders, promote brotherhood and academic excellence, while providing service and advocacy for their communities. The colors of the fraternity are black and old gold and their motto is “first of all, servants of all, we shall transcend all” (http://www.alpha-phi-alpha.com). The objective of the fraternity is to stimulate the ambition of its members. The organization seeks to prepare its members for the greatest usefulness in the causes of humanity, freedom, and dignity of the individual. The fraternity works to encourage the highest and noblest form of manhood to less fortunate people in an effort to achieve higher social, economic and intellectual status (Ross, 2002).

The fraternity was organized as an attempt to bring together black men at a predominantly white institution that was filled with racial discrimination and a lack of support for male students of color. It was Henry Arthur Callis who first noticed the need for change in college life due to a large number of African American students on campus that never returned to Cornell University after their first semester. Seven young men set out to establish a foundation of scholastic progression for future aspiring college black men. The organization’s members refer to their founders as the Seven Jewels. The founders of the fraternity were Henry Arthur Callis who became a practicing physician and a professor at Howard University; Charles Henry Chapman, who became a professor of Agriculture at what is now Florida Agricultural & Mechanical University; Eugene Kinckle Jones, who became the first Executive Secretary of the National Urban League. George Biddle Kelley, who was the first African American engineer registered in the state of New York. Nathaniel Allison Murray who pursued graduate work after completing his undergraduate studies at Howard University became a public school teacher; Robert Harold Ogle who entered the career secretarial field and served as a professional staff
member to the United States Senate Committee on Appropriations; and Vertner Woodson Tandy, who became New York’s first registered black architect, with offices on Broadway in New York City (Ross, 2002).

Notable members of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity Incorporated include: actor Paul Robeson, the first black American member of the United States Supreme Court Thurgood Marshall, civil rights leader Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., historian Dr. John Hope Franklin, scholar Dr. Cornel West and co-founder of the National Association for Advancement of Colored People Dr. W.E.B. DuBois. Some of the national programs that Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity is associated with includes their original program Go to High School, Go to College that they began in 1919, Project Alpha, A Voteless people is a Hopeless people, Big Brothers/Big Sisters Mentoring Partnership, Boy Scouts of America, and the Leadership Development Institutes. All of which were established to ensure a significant mentoring system that encourages its participants to strive for greatness (http://www.alpha-phi-alpha.com). The organization was also pivotal in getting the Martin Luther King Jr monument built in Washington DC.

Alpha Kappa Alpha

Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority Incorporated is credited as the first Greek-lettered sorority established and incorporated by African-American college women, for African-American college women in the United States. The sorority was founded on January 15, 1908, at Howard University in Washington, D.C., by a group of nine students, led by Ethel Hedgeman Lyle with the motto “By Culture and By Merit” with colors of salmon pink and apple green (www.aka1908.com). Forming a sorority broke barriers for African-American women in areas
where little power or authority existed due to a lack of opportunities for minorities and women in the early 20th century. Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority was incorporated on January 29, 1913 as a way for the organization to ensure that their traditions and purpose would be preserved for years to come. The early leadership of the sorority is separated by the original group of nine founders, the seven sophomores, and the incorporators. As the sorority grew, it kept in balance two important themes: the importance of the individual and the strength of an organization of women of ability and courage. As the world became more complex, there was an increasing need for associations which cut across racial, geographical, political, physical and social barriers and Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority Incorporated did just that.

Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority Incorporated earliest successes include bringing cultural events such as concerts to the Howard University campus. Sorority members served their university and surrounding community by acting as leaders in organizations such as the YWCA and worked with the campus National Association for the Advancement of Colored People soon after it was formed. As chapters of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority were replicated on other campuses throughout the United States, they began similar programs and activities. In 1917 and 1918, sorority members volunteered to help new arrivals from the Deep South adjust to living in the nation’s capital. Chapters offered programs on African American history, literature, music and art in order to promote and increase race consciousness during a period established as Founders’ Week which became a time to not only celebrate the organization, but to also educate the community. As a means of ensuring chapters exchanged news on their activities, the *Ivy Leaf* magazine (still in existence today) was published.
In 1922, national programming was advanced by the call for chapters to perform annually at least “one act of Christian, social or civic service” for their community. Over time, the national program became the Sorority’s most important activity. Toward the end of this period the Vocational Guidance Program was launched, in addition to a bond-purchasing program. One of their biggest and most successful programs began by the organization is the Mississippi Health Project which is an outgrowth of the desire to improve educational conditions among children in rural Mississippi; the Mississippi Health Project brought primary medical care to people who struggled to receive the most basic health care. The Alpha Kappa Alpha Mobile Clinic, which was invented to handle the large number of people for whom the project was designed, became the first mobile health clinic system in the United States. The project was active for two to six weeks, each summer from 1935 to 1942, and was a model for agencies and other organizations. The organization continues to promote national programs such as: Ivy Reading AKA Academy, Leadership Fellows Program, and Partnerships in Mathematics and Sciences (http://www.aka1908.com).

Notable members of the organization include: the first black American woman in space Dr. Mae Jemison, poet and author Dr. Maya Angelou, Noble Prize winner Toni Morrison, and civil rights activist Coretta Scott King. Since its founding over a century ago, Alpha Kappa Alpha’s mission has been to cultivate and encourage high scholastic and ethical standards, to promote unity and friendship among college women, to study and help alleviate problems concerning girls and women in order to improve their social stature, to maintain a progressive interest in college life, and to be of “Service to All Mankind” (http://www.aka1908.org).
Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity

Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity Incorporated was founded January 5, 1911 on the campus of Indiana University in Bloomington Indiana. The organization was originally selected to be named Kappa Alpha Nu with the colors of crimson and cream. However white students turned the name into a racial slur by calling them Kappa Alpha Nig and the founders decided to change the name to Kappa Alpha Psi. The fraternity was founded by ten men during a time when there were few students of color at their predominantly white institution of higher education. The organization was founded as a way to help boost student moral and unite the small black male population on campus of Indiana University (Ross, 2002).

The ten founders were: Elder Watson Diggs who is considered to be the first founder and is often referred to by members as the dreamer. Diggs started his college career at Howard University on 1909, where he met another founder Byron K Armstrong. In the fall of 1910, they both transferred to Indiana University; not long after transferring they realized how few in number the African American population was. He, Bryon K Armstrong, and the other founders signed the documents for the fraternity on January 5, 1911. Elder Watson Diggs served as a teacher, a principle and even in the US army. Diggs commissioned as a Captain in the Army through the Reserve Officer Training Corp (ROTC), became the first member of Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity to join the United States Military, and to be awarded the Laurel Wreath (the highest award in Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity). Ezra Dee Alexander matriculated at Indiana University in the fall of 1910 and went on to become a medical doctor (http://www.kappalphapsi1911.com).
Byron Kenneth Armstrong served as the fraternity's first Grand Strategus and Grand Historian. During World War I, he served as an investigator for the Department of Labor. Founder Henry Tourner Asher became an instructor at Lincoln Institute at Jefferson City, Missouri and later practiced law. Marcus Peter Blakemore organized the Electric Engineering Company, which he operated until he enlisted in World War I; he then later became a dentist and practiced until his death. Founder Paul Waymond Caine started a catering business that he owned and operated until his death and George Wesley Edmonds became a coal miner. Guy Levis Grant practiced dentistry in Indianapolis, served as a member of the Grand Board of Directors and was one of the fraternity's historians. Edward Giles Irvin practiced journalism until his death. John Milton Lee enlisted in the 349th Field Artillery in March of 1918 and served overseas as a First Class Sergeant and Gunner. His battery enjoys the unique distinction of having been the first battery of black American artillerymen ever to open fire upon an enemy; John Milton Lee fired the first shot (http://www.kappalphapsi1911.com).

The motto of Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity Incorporated is “Honorable achievement in every field of human endeavors”. With programs such as the Guide Right Program, Kappa League and the Student of the Year Competition, it emphasizes education and high moral values to younger generations because they are our future leaders and decision makers. Notable members of the organization include lawyer Johnny Cochran, basketball player Penny Hardaway, entertainer Cedric the Entertainer, and journalist/activist Tavis Smiley. With the motto of “Honorable achievement in every field of endeavors” Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity Incorporated continues to operate as an organization that believes in progress and giving back (http://www.kappalphapsi1911.com).
Omega Psi Phi

Omega Psi Phi Fraternity Incorporated was founded on November 17, 1911 on the campus of Howard University. The letters of Omega Psi Phi were chosen because of the origin of the letters’ meaning, which is “Friendship is essential to the soul”. This phrase was also adopted as the motto of the fraternity, along with the fraternity’s colors of royal purple and old gold. The founders of Omega Psi Phi fraternity Incorporated are Dr. Ernest Just, Frank Coleman, Dr. Oscar Cooper, and Bishop Edgar Love. Dr. Ernest Just, who attained his PhD at the University of Chicago, was awarded the Spingarn Medal by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in 1915. Frank Coleman, a United States Army Officer of World War I, was a teacher and became the head of the Physics department at Howard University. Dr. Oscar Cooper was a medical practitioner in Pennsylvania for approximately 50 years. Bishop Edgar Love earned a Bachelor of Arts degree, Bachelor of Divinity degree, an Honorary Bachelor of Divinity degree, and Bachelor of Sacred Theology degree and served as Bishop of a Methodist church (http://ww.omegapsiphifraternity.org).

Notable members of the organization include poet/writer Langston Hughes, entertainer Bill Cosby, basketball player Shaquille O’Neal, Dr. Carter G. Woodson founder of black history week (later month), Dr. Charles Drew who perfected the use of blood plasma, and civil rights activist Rev. Jessie Jackson Sr. Manhood, scholarship, perseverance, and uplift are the principles of Omega Psi Phi Fraternity Incorporated, and from these ideals the organization was founded. These principles are, also enforced upon the community. Omega Psi Phi Fraternity Incorporated has several affiliate organizations and mandated programs that are meant to provide support for the people who seek help and the communities that need service most. Programs affiliated with
the fraternity are Achievement Week, Social Actions program, Talent Hunt program, and the Voter Registration, Education, and Mobilization. These programs help foster bonds between citizens in any given community and encourage others to aspire to serve by shining light on exceptionally helpful hands. This can be seen in the Achievement Week program, which is designed to recognize individuals, at the local and international level who have contributed to community uplift. This same concept of encouragement is apparent in the Talent Hunt program, which also provides exposure, encouragement and financial assistance to talented youth participating in the performing arts (http://www.omegapsiphifraternity.org).

Delta Sigma Theta

Delta Sigma Theta Sorority Incorporated is a social organization of college-educated woman who perform public service, as in helping the community and place emphasis specifically on the African American community. With the colors of crimson and cream and the motto “Intelligence is the Torch of Wisdom”, Delta Sigma Theta Sorority Incorporated was founded on January 13, 1913, by twenty-two female college students at Howard University in Washington, D.C. These women wanted to use their college strength to promote academic excellence and to provide assistance to persons in need. The founders of Deltas participated in their first public act in March 1913 in the Women’s Suffrage March in Washington, D.C. Delta Sigma Theta Sorority Incorporated has gone on to become the largest historically black Greek letter sorority in the world (Ross, 2002).

The major programs of the sorority are based upon the organization’s Five Point Programmatic Thrust: Economic Development, Educational Development, International Awareness and Involvement, Physical and Mental Health, and Political Awareness and
Involvement. Delta Sigma Theta Sorority Incorporated is involved in many different programs for each different point in the Five Point Programmatic Thrust. For Economic Development, Delta Sigma Theta Sorority has the Financial Fortitude: Smart Women Finish Rich program, which is a process that will help program participants to set and define goals, develop a plan to achieve them, and to put the plan into action. For Educational Development, the organization has the Dr. Betty Shabazz Delta Academy, Delta GEMS – Growing and Empowering Myself Successfully and EMBODI: Empowering Males to Build Opportunities for Developing Independence (http://www.deltasigmatheta.org).

The Delta Academy was created out of an urgent sense that bold action was needed to save young females (ages 11-14) from the perils of academic failure, low self-esteem, and crippled futures. Delta Gems was created to help African American at-risk, adolescent girls age 14-18 year olds achieve their dreams. Delta GEMS provides the framework to actualize those dreams through the performance of specific tasks that develop a ‘can do’ attitude. EMBODI is targeted towards African American males who are going through crisis and are not reaching their fullest potential educationally, socially and/or emotionally. For International Awareness and Involvement, Delta Sigma Theta Sorority has the Mary Help of the Sick Mission Hospital (formerly Thika Memorial Hospital). This hospital is located in Thika, Kenya, has 120 beds and was the first hospital to reopen after Kenya gained independence. For Physical and Mental Health, Delta Sigma Theta Sorority has Healthy Lifestyle: Total Woman: Mind, Body, and Spirit. The mission of the Health Task Force is to educate and facilitate lifestyle change for the physical, mental, and spiritual well-being of sororities and the communities that Delta Sigma Theta Sorority serves. For Political Awareness and Involvement the organization has, Delta Days in the Nation’s Capital, Delta Days at the United Nations and Voting Rights. In 1989, the
National Social Action Commission instituted Delta Days in the Nation's Capital, an annual legislative conference to increase members' involvement in the national public policy-making process (http://www.deltasigmatheta.org).

Notable members include Shirley Chisholm the first black woman in United States congress and the first black American to run for president, activist Dorothy Height, politician Barbara Jordan, and entertainers Ruby Dee and Cicely Tyson. The sorority is made up of more than 300,000 predominantly black college-educated women and has over 1,000 chapters in the United States, England, Japan, Germany, the Virgin Islands, Bermuda, the Bahamas and the Republic of Korea (http://www.deltasigmatheta.org).

**Phi Beta Sigma**

Three young African-American male students founded Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity Incorporated at Howard University in Washington, D.C., on January 9, 1914, selecting the colors royal blue and pure white. The founders of Phi Beta Sigma, A. Langston Taylor, Leonard F. Morse, and Charles I. Brown, wanted to organize a Greek letter fraternity that would truly exemplify the ideals of brotherhood, scholarship, and service. The founders wanted to create an organization that was “a part of” the general community rather than “apart from” the general community. No potential member was to be judged by race, nationality, skin tone or texture of hair. The founders had a great desire to deliver services to the general community. This strive became mirrored in the Fraternity’s motto, “Culture for Service and Service for Humanity” (Ross, 2002).
Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity Incorporated has partnered with the March of Dimes, to work together to prevent premature births and has focused on building strong fathers and male role models within the African American community through Strong Fathers seminars and Stepping To Save Babies. The organization also sponsors Project Vote whose objectives are voter registration, voter education, voter participation and getting out the vote. Notable members of Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity Incorporated include: President Bill Clinton, football player Emmitt Smith, civil rights activist Rev. Al Sharpton, scientist Dr. George Washington Carver, and actor Terrance Howard. In the 21st Century, Phi Beta Sigma has become an international organization of many different members. Members of the fraternity have played key roles in the establishment of the Phi Beta Sigma National Foundation, the Phi Beta Sigma Federal Credit Union and The Sigma Beta Club Foundation. Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, was founded in 1920 with the assistance of Phi Beta Sigma, as their sister organization. The organization considers their most valuable resources to be themselves and strength. Meaning that they are the primary means to which objectives will be achieved. In order for one to accomplish the fraternity’s objectives they must embody, “Culture for Service and Service for Humanity” and promote brotherhood, scholarship and service (http://www.phibetasigma1914.org).

The fraternity’s objectives include, strengthening and serving proactively the brotherhood, as a supportive resource that positively impacts the fraternity’s growth and financial solvency, reaffirming and maintaining a strong commitment to brotherhood, scholarship and service, and ensuring that the fraternity programs are focused and committed to serving humanity. Also, creating an environment that respects the dignity and worth of each brother, as well as, exhibiting integrity and ethical behavior in conducting the fraternity’s business. Serving as a model for all Greek-letter organizations, maintaining and improving the
fraternity’s technological literacy, in order to better service its members and the community at large, fostering and nurturing their constitutional bond with Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc., and encouraging a closer and mutually beneficial working relationship with fellow Greek-letter organizations, other community service organizations, government and select leaders who are committed and have demonstrated their ability to lead (http://www.phibetasigma1914.org).

*Zeta Phi Beta*

Zeta Phi Beta Sorority Incorporated was founded on January 16, 1920 on the campus of Howard University, with the motto of “Scholarship, Sisterly Love, Service, and Finer Womanhood” and the colors royal blue and pure white. In 1920 women who were stuck in the gender roles set by society had just begun to break free of their stigma, but racial tension was still high. Zeta Phi Beta Sorority Incorporated was founded on the ideal that socialization should never minimize the importance of true sorority action that included: supporting the community, aiding victims of discrimination, and working to solve issues of poverty and sickness. The founders and first initiates of the sorority were Arizona Cleaver, the first president of the first college chapter as well as the first president of the national board; Myrtle Tyler, who was the second national president of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority Incorporated, in addition to high school math and English teacher; Viola Tyler, who became a teacher; Fannie Pettie, who was responsible for the founding of two chapters of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority; and Pearl Neal who was the first African American woman to graduate from Columbia University with a master’s degree (Ross, 2002).

Zeta Phi Beta Sorority Incorporated is a very active organization in the community, which is apparent through the diversity of their partnerships and affiliations. Notable members of the organization include: author Zora Neale Hurston, entertainers Esther Rolle and Dionne
Warwick, and Virginia State Senator Yvonne Miller. Some of the organization’s more known affiliations are the American Diabetes Association, the American Cancer Society, the American Lung Association, the Leadership Conference of the Human Rights, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the National Council of Negro Women, and the National Urban League. Each affiliate organization has a prestige that is undeniable just as the organization it represents (http://www.zphib1920.org).

One of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority’s primary community service organizations is Z HOPE. Z HOPE is the foundation that fosters the partnerships between the many affiliate organizations of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority Incorporated. The objectives of Z HOPE are to provide informational activities according to the Z-HOPE program format, create progressive partnerships with prominent community organizations with similar goals, to facilitate further expansion in current community service projects within the sorority, to encourage community service and provide mentorship opportunity for those who seek guidance, to provide an equitable chapter recognition program for community service projects done, and to establish an organized format of keeping record of services rendered which helps the sorority continue to reach out to the areas and people in most need of aid (http://http://www.zphib1920.org).

*Sigma Gamma Rho*

Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority Incorporated was founded on November 12, 1922, at Butler University in Indianapolis, Indiana by seven young educators. The founders selected the colors royal blue and gold along with the motto “Greater Service, Greater Progress”. The organization was incorporated within the state of Indiana in December 1922 and became a national collegiate sorority on December 30, 1929, when a charter was granted. The sorority’s aim was to and
continues to be to enhance the quality of life within the community. Public service, leadership
development and the education of youth are all at the center of the organization's programs and
activities. Founded in the midst of segregation and Jim Crow laws, Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority
Incorporated. It is the only sorority of the four historically African-American sororities that
belong to the National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC), to be founded at a predominantly white
institution (Ross, 2002).

The organization’s national programs include ACT Against AIDS, Project Reassurance,
Project Wee Savers, Operation Big Book Bag, Sigma Youth Symposium, National Marrow
Donor Program, and the Hattie McDaniel Cancer Awareness and Health Program. The Seven
Pearls Foundation, Inc. was established December 2004 by the sorority and received its
permanent 501 C-3 status in 2008. The foundation’s mission is based on seven emphases: to
protect all real property of Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority Incorporated, to be the conduit for
receiving corporate and grant funding, to develop strategies that promote a positive service
image of Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority Incorporated, to develop partnerships that support region
initiatives, to support the technology initiatives at headquarters, to identify resources and
strategies that will assist in eliminating the mortgage, and to host the Life Member Luncheon
during the Boule (http://www.sgrho1922.org).

With over 100,000 members around the world, notable ones include Hattie McDaniel the
first black American to be nominated for and to win an Academy Award, Florida U.S.
Representative Corrine Brown, and Corrine Boggs the first female U.S. Representative from the
state of Louisiana. The organization was created with the hopes of enhancing the quality of life
within the community. Public service, leadership development, and education of youth are the
center of the organization's programs and activities, as well as addressing the concerns that impact society educationally, civically, and economically (http://www.sgrho1922.org).

*Iota Phi Theta*

Iota Phi Theta Fraternity Incorporated was founded on September 19, 1963 during the Civil Rights Movement at Morgan State University in Baltimore, Maryland. Iota Phi Theta Fraternity currently holds 70,000 members and has 300 undergraduate and alumni chapters located over 40 U.S. States, the District of Columbia, the Bahamas, Japan and South Korea. Iota Phi Theta Fraternity Incorporated was the last of the nine black Greek letter organizations to join the National Pan-Hellenic Council. Their motto is, “Building A Tradition, Not Resting Upon One!” and their colors are charcoal brown and gilded gold. The founders of Iota Phi Theta were: Albert Hicks, Lonnie Spruill, Jr., Charles Briscoe, Frank Coakley, John Slade, Barron Willis, Webster Lewis, Charles Brown, Louis Hudnell, Charles Gregory, Elias Dorsey, Jr., and Michael Williams. These twelve students founded what went on to become the nation’s fifth largest, predominantly African-American social service fraternity. The twelve founders were unique for many different reasons. Not only were they longtime friends, but they had also served in the military, worked full time, some had families, and were older than most of their peers all while they were enrolled as undergraduate students. Despite the already established four other black Greek letter fraternities on their campus, the founders were interested in starting an organization that they felt supported the immediate needs of black Americans in their community (Ross, 2002).

The fraternity remained a local fraternity until 1967 with the establishment of the Beta chapter at Hampton Institute (now Hampton University). The first steps toward moving the
fraternity from a regional to a more national organization was upon the creation of the Upsilon chapter at Southern Illinois University in 1974. Shortly after this time, the fraternity’s first four graduate chapters were formed, Alpha Omega in Baltimore, MD, Beta Omega in Washington, DC, Gamma Omega in Hampton, VA and Delta Omega in Boston, MA. Notable members include: basketball player Jermaine Taylor, entertainer T.C. Carson, and United States Illinois Congressman Bobby Rush. To Iota Phi Theta Fraternity Incorporated joining the National Pan-Hellenic Council was an important goal for the organization. The members of the organization wanted to partner with an affiliation that would allow the fraternity to grow and develop over time by providing the necessary relationships. On November 12, 1996, Iota Phi Theta became accepted as a full member of the National Pan-Hellenic Council with all rights, privileges, and responsibilities awarded the other eight organizations (www.iotaphitheta.org).

Iota Phi Theta Fraternity Incorporated has three national initiatives, The National Iota Foundation, The I.O.T.A. Youth Alliance, and The INROADS Partnership. In addition, they have two national affiliations: National Interfraternity Conference (NIC) and The National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC). In the past the organization had programs such as, The Digital Heritage Initiative, which was the African-American History Education Initiative, & the Afya (aah-fee-yah) Njema (j-ma) Program, which means “Good Health” in Swahili, is a concept which allows the fraternity to deal with a number of “health-related” issues faced by African-Americans and persons of African descent. Physical/Mental/Spiritual Health program. The founders were influenced by organizations such as the Black Panthers and the SNCC. Individuals such as Malcolm X and Stokely Carmichael also inspired them. They have always had an interest in giving back and to improving their community (http://www.iotaphitheta.org).
In order to participate in the study all of the subjects were required to have met the following criteria:

1. Be a member of a collegiate Greek organization that is a member of the National Pan-Hellenic Council

2. Had to have joined an active chapter of their respective organizations while enrolled as an undergraduate student at a college and/or university in the United States

Also, the subjects consisted of members of the organizations who had already graduated from college. The subjects’ participation in the study was completely voluntary. Participants were found by contacting the National Pan-Hellenic Council’s alumni and/or graduate chapters that were located in Miami-Dade County and Broward County Florida and by mailing them recruitment letter [Appendix C]. The letter contained the criteria for participating in the study, the researcher’s contact information and explained what the research study was about, as well as, the importance of conducting the study. In the letter, that request was made that the letter be read to their members at their organizations’ next meeting. Potential participants were asked to contact me if they were interested by either phone or email for more information about the study.

Once the potential participants have reviewed the criteria and expressed interest in the study, they were provided a copy of the consent form [Appendix E] by the person that each individual organization designated to oversee their mail and correspondences, which clearly explained the purpose of the research and samples of the questions they were going to be asked. Participants were provided seven business days’ to review the consent form prior to deciding to participate or not participate in the study. The interested participants contacted me via phone
and/or email. During this time we began the process of making sure that they met the study’s participation requirement, schedule an interview time, and I also asked if they had any additional questions or concerns about the study.

I verified the participant’s criteria and scheduled a phone, computer Skype, and/or in person interview. If the participant scheduled an in person interview the consent form was signed prior to the interview. If the participant scheduled a phone and/or computer Skype interview, another copy of the consent form was mailed to the participant prior to the interview and sent back to me in a prepaid self-addressed envelope.

**Procedure**

I selected the topic of the impact of colorism on historically black fraternities and sororities because I felt that there was a large gap in American collegiate Greek letter organization studies because often black Greek letter organizations were not included in studies, research and/or scholarly articles involving collegiate organizations. I researched theorists who had works identity, self-identity, social identity, inner-group conflict, group acceptance and/or race. I then selected Social Identity Theory and Double Consciousness as more core theories that I was going to pull my theoretical framework from as well as get some of my ideas from for my interview questions.

Once I decided on my topic I had to decide on how I would conduct the study, what style of research did I want to use. I knew that I wanted to speak directly with members from each of the nine organizations, preferably members who were from the same the organization but from different backgrounds. I researched various qualitative styles that would allow me to do just
that. I found that the transcendental phenomenological method would allow me to do in-depth interviews with subjects and therefore selected as my research study design. Once the style of my research was selected, the theories were researched, and the literature review was complete I was then able to compose my interview questions. I was careful not to compose interview questions that would take the subjects too far off topic and to remain completely objective with my questioning.

Selecting and interviewing the participants, was followed up by me going through each of the participants’ interviews in order to code, look for common themes, and to look for possible answers for the four research questions that were proposed at the beginning of the study. I looked at each of the interviews separately and then collectively when pulling my codes and themes. My first method of coding was to look at common language. Looking at common language, included exploring what words and feelings did all of the subjects use and express. Following looking at the subjects’ language I looked at their experiences. Such as what did all of the subjects’ personally experience or witness someone else experience during an incident involving colorism. After listing and grouping the subjects’ words, feelings, and experiences I was left with three very large lists. I then went through each of the categories and began to group common feelings, words, and experiences together. After the initial grouping I then went back through the lists again and formed two more groupings. From that final grouping I was able to come up with major themes for the study.

Analyzing the participants’ interviews and coming up with major themes allowed me as the researcher to see what impact colorism has had on historically black fraternities and sororities. The emergence of major themes also allowed for me to see how the selected theories
could be directly applied to the study, answer my four research questions, discover the implications of the study, and see how the topic could be explored in future studies.

**Data Collection**

The phenomenon studied required that all of the participants involved in the study had to be both members of one of the nine historical fraternities and sororities that are a part of the National Pan-Hellenic Council, and they had to have joined an active chapter (a chapter that is recognized nationally, regionally, and locally by their organization) of their respective organization while enrolled as undergraduate students at a college and/or university located in the United States of America. The research created minimal risk to the subjects who participated. All participation was voluntarily, there was no compensation for participating in the study, and the subjects showed their willingness to participate in the study by signing the participation Institutional Review Board (IRB) preapproved consent form.

All of the collected data will be kept for at least three years, whether or not subjects decided to no longer participate in the study and/or if their questionnaire was not used in the study. At any time, the subjects were able to end their interview without penalty. They also were able to continue their interview at a later date if necessary. The demographic portion of the interview was estimated to take two to four minutes to complete. The remainder of the interview was estimated to take one to two hours to complete, however if the subjects needed more time they were awarded the time. The results of the interview were sent to a secure email account, so that they could be collected and later analyzed. Only I as the researcher, the Institutional Review Board, and my dissertation chairperson are the only individuals with access to the consent forms, emails, data and analysis.
Chapter 4

Analysis of Data and Theoretical Framework

Overview

Traditionally, black fraternities and sororities have been left out of previous studies done on collegiate Greek organizations. Historically black Greek letter organizations have been criticized for not fitting what some consider to be the mold of the traditionally white collegiate Greek organizations. Since their establishment, black Greek letter organizations have found it difficult to fit into predominantly white institutions of higher education. “The so called ‘Black Greeks,’ with their smaller chapters, lack of student housing, and elaborate recruitment, do not fit in well with the models posed by traditional Greek organizations” (Kimbrough, 1997, p.603). Due to them not fitting what is considered to be the mold of traditional collegiate Greek organizations, historically black fraternities and sororities have all been lumped together as the sole representation of Greeks of color, not allowing each of these organizations to be seen as separate entities. Black Greek letter organizations are popular among the collegiate Greek life community, however little to no research has been done on them and the issues that directly affect them. This study looked at the topic of skin tone bias, colorism, and how it has influenced a well-known social group such as historically black fraternities and sororities.
Organization of Data Analysis

Using the qualitative phenomenological approach, the primary objective of the study was to see what impact (if any), colorism has had on historically black fraternities and sororities and to see what themes and/or theories may emerge from the research. The focus was on connecting categories and emerging theory, not simply on describing themes. While in the data collection phase of this study, in order to obtain emerging themes and find the core variable of the study, I constantly coded and compared the data.

Subjects

The subjects that participated in the study were all members of an incorporated Greek organizations that is a member of the National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC): Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Omega Psi Phi Fraternity, Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, and Iota Phi Theta Fraternity. The eighteen subjects used in my study consisted of two members from each of the organizations, who had all joined their respective organizations while enrolled as undergraduate students. Prior to participating in the study, all of the subjects had graduated from an institution of higher learning located in the United States of America with their bachelor’s degrees and were over the age 21. The participants were recruited by contacting the graduate and/or alumni chapters of each of the organizations located in the Florida Counties of Broward and Miami-Dade. Through the recruitment letter read to them at their chapter meetings they were able to contact me (without the knowledge of other members), if they were interested in participating in the study. I later interviewed them in person and/or via phone or via
computer using the Skype platform. Each had an understanding that all of their comments expressed during the interviews would remain anonymous.
### Presentation of Descriptive Characteristics of Respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>NPHC Organization</th>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>Semester/Year Joined</th>
<th>Where Joined</th>
<th>Undergraduate Chapter</th>
<th>Semester/Year Graduated</th>
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<td>Fall 1982</td>
<td>Florida Memorial University</td>
<td>Delta Eta</td>
<td>Spring 1983</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority</td>
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<td>Spring 2008</td>
<td>Florida Atlantic University</td>
<td>Colony (now Sigma Iota)</td>
<td>Spring 1998</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity</td>
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<td>Summer 2001</td>
<td>Florida Atlantic University</td>
<td>Tau Delta</td>
<td>Summer 2003</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Spring 2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Iowa State University</td>
<td>Phi</td>
<td>Spring 2004</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Eta Psi</td>
<td>Fall 2006</td>
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<td>University of Central Florida</td>
<td>Epsilon Eta</td>
<td>Fall 2008</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Lincoln University</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Spring 2007</td>
<td>Louisiana Tech University</td>
<td>Epsilon Lambda</td>
<td>Spring 2009</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Research Questions

Black American skin tone bias towards other black Americans, social identity theory, double consciousness, and primary identification theory were the key research areas of this study. The following research questions were used in order to gain more understanding on an under represented researched group (members of historically black fraternities and sororities) along with an under researched topic (colorism among black Americans):

1. Is colorism still an issue among historically black fraternity and sorority members?

2. What is the perception of color among members of black fraternities and sororities?

3. Is colorism a thing of the past or does colorism still play a part in dividing the black American community?

4. How does colorism play a part in the identity of black Americans?

Interview Questions

Based upon the research questions and corresponding literature review, seven demographic questions and fifteen core interview questions were generated. I asked additional interview question depending on the participants’ responses to the core interview questions. The seven demographic questions were as follows:

1. What age range do you fall into?

   18-23 24-29 30-35 36-41 42-older
2. What National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC) organization are you a member of (Please include your undergraduate chapter name)?

3. Where did you join (college/university)?

4. Did you attend a HBCU (Historically Black College/University) or PWI (Predominantly White Institution)?

5. When did you join (semester/year)?

6. Are you still enrolled as an undergraduate student?

7. If not when did you graduate (semester/year)?

The fifteen core interview questions were as follows:

1. What did you know about historically black Greek organizations before you went to college?

2. Did you have any preconceived stereotypes/opinions about any of the organizations before you went to college?

3. Were any of the stereotypes seen at your college while you were an undergraduate student?

4. How did your preconceived opinions about historically black fraternities and sororities change when you went to college?

5. Why did you decide to join your respective organization?

6. Did you seek out acceptance and/or tolerance when deciding to join your organization?
7. Initially, did you feel like you fit the “mold” of your respective organization? If yes why? If no, why not?

8. How was your organization viewed on campus?

9. How were you viewed as an individual?

10. Did you find discrimination/racism towards your organization while you were an undergraduate student?

11. Did you find discrimination/racism within your organization while an undergraduate student?

12. What has been your experience with colorism/skin tone bias among black Americans?

13. What has been your experience with colorism/skin tone bias among members of historically black fraternities and sororities?

14. Have you ever been accused of being a member of an organization that was not your own due to your appearance?

15. Do you think that colorism has ever existed or that the majority members of particular organizations looked a certain way because they were the ones who attended colleges/universities at the time? Why?
Analysis of Data

Research Questions

Research Question 1: Is colorism still an issue among historically black fraternity and sorority members?

The study’s initial research question asks if colorism/skin tone bias an issue of the past in black collegiate Greek life or does it still continue to be an issue among black Greek letter organizations members today. To begin with, all of the participants stated that they knew skin tone bias had been practiced within all of the National Pan-Hellanic Council organizations at one point in time throughout their existence. All of the participants said that they continued to find colorism and skin tone bias to be an issue among historically black fraternities and sororities, despite the fact that many black Americans (members and non-members alike) felt that skin tone bias was only a major in issue for black Americans in the past. Fifteen of the participants personally viewed and/or experienced skin tone bias being practiced within black Greek letter organizations, both within their own organizations and among outside organizations. It was also found that many stereotyping personality attributes were associated with each of the organizations and due to skin tone of their members.

Lighter skin fraternity and sorority members were said to business oriented, studious, and held to a higher regard in society. It was also believed that lighter skin members were also what many black American Greeks and non-Greek college students wanted to emulate. At colleges and universities that were predominantly white (PWI), the lighter skin members were often the members selected to talk with the institution’s predominantly white administration, in hopes of
the organization gaining the institution’s support. Darker skin members of the organizations were thought to be loud, unruly, and wild party animals; therefore they were often placed on the back burner.

A member of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority stated that in her chapter that the darker members were often selected to do most of the work for their events, but the lighter and more attractive members would be asked to sit outside the event to collect money in order to get students to attend. It was not uncommon for members of the organizations who did not fit the stereotype of their particular organization to be questioned about their membership by members and non-members alike. Some participants did admit that they knew that they would not have been accepted into their organizations based on their appearance during the first 30 years of their organization’s existence. They were often accused of being in a different organization other than their own because of their appearance.

“We were not allowed into Caucasian organizations, but we wanted to be like them and with wanting to be like them, we wanted to get as close as possible to mirroring them appearance wise” (Member of Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity).

“I am routinely pegged as an Alpha (Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity), due to my being light skinned and smart looking. Even worse I have a friend who is 165 pounds, light skinned and is an Omega (Omega Psi Phi Fraternity). He often does not get respect and is run through the informational test gambit when meeting other Omegas” (Member of Iota Phi Theta Fraternity).
“When I was an undergrad we would make fun of busted and dark AKA’s (Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority) and tell them that they did not pass the paper bag test. But we were young and not thinking about it. I have been told that I wasn’t brown and black enough to be a Delta (Delta Sigma Theta Sorority)” (Member of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority).

“I’ve gone to schools and saw chapters where everyone in the chapter look alike and fit the stereotypes associated with that organization. I see that with Kappas and AKAs” (Member of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority).

“Zetas (Zeta Phi Beta Sorority) are supposed to be dark and fat while Kappas (Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity) are supposed to be light skin with a nice grade of hair. AKAs are supposed to be light skin, pretty, with long nice hair and Alphas are supposed to be light skin, with a nice grade of hair but nerdy looking. Sigmas (Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity) are supposed to be country, nice, maybe a little dirty, not well dressed while Omegas are supposed to be super buff, wild, and dark. DST (Delta Sigma Theta) women are supposed to brown skin and either big and butch looking or slim with the Delta bob haircut. If you do not fall into those ideas of what those members look like your membership is often questions and sometimes you will not be allowed to join the organizations” (Member of Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity).

**Research Question 2:** What is the perception of color among members of black fraternities and sororities?

Each of the historically black Greek organizations has been labeled with different stereotypes. Many of the stereotypes involve skin color and hair texture. These stereotypes often
determine whether others believe one can join and/or be a member of a particular organization based on their appearance. All of the participants shared stories of stereotypes that they had heard about various groups in the National Pan-Hellenic Council, including their own organizations. For example, members of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, and Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity members were stereotyped as having light skin tones, softer and curlier textures of hair, as being stuck up but intelligent, and were considered to be the most attractive of the historically black Greek organizations.

Members of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority and Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity were stereotyped as being majority medium brown skin tone and good to average looking. They were viewed as being nice, active in their communities, down to earth and as having country personalities. However, Omega Psi Phi Fraternity’s members’ stereotypes were that they were supposed to be dark, loud and barbaric men, who were more interested in partying than in graduating. Members of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority fell under the stereotype of being larger in body size, dark, and as being the least attractive of all of the sororities. The members of Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority and Iota Phi Theta Fraternity were said to not fall under any appearance and personality stereotypes except that they were seen by non-members as being the least popular out of the nine organizations. More than half of the participants acknowledged that based solely on their appearance that they had been mistaken for being a member of an organization other than their own because of the stereotypes and appearance perceptions that were attached to the organizations.

“Before I attended college was I told that AKA ladies were fair complexion, anyone who pledged Zeta (Zeta Phi Beta) or Delta were of the darker complexion. Also, the ladies of
pink and green (AKA) were quiet and well mannered, the others were a little busy you may say. They were loud, loved to go to clubs and party” (Member of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority).

“Growing up I knew about Kappas (Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity) because my brother and I were told in high school that we were going to be Kappas because we were light skin with good hair” (Member of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity).

“Based on the stories I was told the pretty light skin girls were members of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority and pretty dark skin ladies were members of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority” (Member of Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority).

“That’s what I like about my fraternity; we didn’t have a mold or a look that we had to follow. We are very accepting of everyone” (Member of Iota Phi Theta Fraternity).

“Every fraternity and sorority has a look that their members are supposed to fall under. Kappas are supposed to be light skin with good hair and well dressed. AKAs are supposed to be light bright, well dressed, ladies, conservative, long hair and fair skinned, while Deltas are just dark skinned AKAs” (member of Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity).

“There are some Greeks that are obsessed with color. That is all they focus on when looking at organizations, they want to know who would have passed the paper bag test” (member of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority).
**Research Question 3:** Is colorism a thing of the past or does colorism still play a part in dividing the black American community?

Colorism has been rooted in the black American community since the days of slavery and many feel that it continues to live in the black American community today. The idea of there being a skin tone hierarchy among black Americans was set into motion when slave owners would spend more money purchasing light skin slaves, select the light skin slaves to work in the house and the dark skin slaves to work the fields, and began having mixed race children with their black female slaves. Light skin blacks were preferred over dark skin blacks because they were seen as the most attractive out of the group because their appearance was closer to whites (Keith & Herring, 1991). The slaves could see that they were being treated differently based on their skin tone. That set the tone for the way that black Americans would treat each other going into the future. All of the participants felt that colorism still existed within the black American community and that it was not going anywhere. As a people they were stuck with it because people would always see color, therefore forever creating division among each other.

Skin tone bias within the black American community has caused separation among family and friends because it has been credited with causing favoritism and disrespect towards each other over skin tone. Among the black American community though colorism is often the topic of many conversations, it is not one that is often taken outside the community in fear of back lash by groups who do not understand the black American culture and its history (Russell, Wilson & Hall, 1992). There is a fear that non-black Americans would use the practice of skin tone bias by black Americans against them. Skin tone biased however is freely discussed among black American friends and family, whether it is in a serious or a joking fashion. The
participants shared that they had heard comments about skin tone and hair texture since they were children. It was not uncommon topic of conversation for some of them. Some of the participants were advised to think about the way that their children would look when they were selecting a mate, the importance of taking care of their hair depending on its texture, and being mindful that their skin wasn’t too dry or too tan.

“In conversations among friends and family there has been the occasional joke about the light versus the dark, the house slave and the field slave. It continues to be an issue today” (Member of Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity).

“My mom said that she did not want no black nappy headed grandbabies. My mom always says she got flack because she was fair skin and her siblings were darker. My family makes comments and jokes but I don’t take it to heart” (Member of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority).

“It’s amazing how segregated we could be within our own race…People are mistreating each over something that happened over 100 years ago. We are still separating and tearing each other down. We are conditioned and it is crazy. We are keeping our own selves down” (Member of Zeta Phi Beta).

“I’ve seen colorism. In certain settings the darker brother the more heat he receives and there have been situations that light skin girls seem to get the brunt of the disrespect” (Member of Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity).
“Skin color is a major issue for black Americans. I’ve seen family members just out right stop speaking to each other because one of them insulted them by calling their hair nappy or them black. Shoot we all black, it’s silly” (Member of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority).

**Research Question 4:** How does colorism play a part in the identity of black Americans?

Historically, black Americans have had a troubled history with skin tone bias in the United States; often a result of the negative experience has included black Americans having identity issues with their race. The doll experiment conducted by Doctors Kenneth and Mami Clark (1947), showed how seeing one race/skin tone receiving preferential treatment over another, in particular your own, could have a lasting effect on young children. Their study involved 253 black American children who ranged in age from three to seven years old. The children answered a series of questions by selecting one of four dolls (two dolls were white with blonde hair and two dolls were brown with black hair). The study resulted in the majority of the children preferred the white doll over the brown doll, even after they identified themselves as looking like the brown doll. They said that they thought that the white doll was nice and that they would want to play with the white doll.

Skin tone bias among black Americans has been found to affect one’s feeling of acceptance among other black Americans and their self-esteem as well. Both light skin and dark skin participants alike felt that colorism among black Americans needed to be a thing of the past, but felt like it was something that will forever be a part of their culture. Despite the fact that it has hurt people and will continue to hurt people, it would continue to until black Americans are able to look beyond each other’s color. All of the subjects could not understand why some black Americans still carried skin tone biases towards each other because they felt that at the end of the
day they were all black Americans, no matter what they looked like. Instead of knocking each other down over appearance, they felt that the black community needed to join forces and focus on other major issues affecting them.

“I went home with a friend from South Louisiana and she would be what some called creole because of the way that she looked, but she was not. She was fair skin and I met her uncle who was light with light eyes. He was joking with her about bringing home another dark skin guy, and jokingly said that she couldn’t mess up the family line. I laughed it off like it was funny, but it wasn’t funny” (Member of Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity).

“Skin tone is spoken about openly here. I hear it at the bathrooms in the club. If you’re brown skin or dark you have to have really smooth skin. It is bad really bad here” (Member of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority).

“I think we have to understand no one can control when they’re born and how they’re going to look. You could have three kids, with the same parents all a different (skin) tone. You can’t control how light or dark you’re going to be” (Member of Omega Psi Phi Fraternity).

“I think it goes back to self-hatred that African Americans have toward ourselves. We want to be accepted as the status quo. We want to be the individuals with the light skin and the good hair so that we can pass and get the benefits of white America. Anything different, even if it’s our own people, does not fit the plan” (Member of Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity).
“I’ve had black people tell me that I do not know what it is to be black and to be
discriminated against because I am light skinned. But I do know what it is to be
discriminated against. It hurts when it is other black folks doing the discriminating”
(Member of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority).

Major Themes

There were seven demographic questions that were asked to determine the participants’
eligibility to participate in the study, their collegiate Greek affiliation, and membership history.
The data found that the participants attended either historically black colleges and/or universities
or predominantly white institutions while enrolled as undergraduate students. Nine subjects were
24-29 years old, six subjects were 30-35 years old, and three subjects were age 42 or older.
Having a mix of subjects from with a range of ages from different educational institutions,
allowed for a variety of experiences to be shared throughout the study. The core interview
questions were asked in order to determine the Greek organizations members’ perspectives as to
how they believed that colorism has impacted not only the black American community, but
historically black fraternities and sororities in particular. I found five common themes related to
the impact that colorism has had on historically black fraternities and sororities and the black
American community. Those themes were:

1. Discriminatory practices between black Americans

2. Stereotyping black Greek letter organizations

3. Stereotyping skin tones

4. Colorism as a part of American history
5. Colorism as being permanently a part of the black American community

**Discriminatory practices between black Americans:**

During the interviews I asked the participants about their experiences with racism and discrimination, outside of collegiate Greek life and as a part of their collegiate Greek experience. It was mentioned by all of the participants that they had all witnessed or experienced racism and/or being discriminated against by other black Americans. Two participants, who attended historically black colleges, shared that most of the racial opposition they felt while enrolled as undergraduate students representing their respective organizations were from other black Greek organizations who did not want to share the spot light on campus. A participant who attended a predominantly white institution as an undergraduate student told a story with a similar experience.

“We were the first members of our organization on campus, we had to seek approval from student government and everyone was welcoming towards us. However, it was interesting because where we did hit some rifts was with the other NPHC fraternity on campus. They were not as happy with us coming to campus because they felt that population wise that there were not enough minority males on campus to sustain two organizations on campus. So any opposition came from what you would call peer organizations” (Member of Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity).

Some of the participants shared personal stories about being negatively treated by friends and family members because of their skin tone. They said that the treatment they experienced
because of the way that they looked was often painful and taught them how not to treat other people.

“I remember growing up being told by other African Americans that I was not black because I was light skin with long hair. And that I had king features facial features like a white person like my pointy nose. It hurt me” (Member of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority).

“Can’t nobody treat another black person worse than another black person, that’s for sure. We are always tearing each other down and think its okay” (Member of Phi Beta Sigma).

Not only did I ask all of the subjects if their organizations had experienced racism and/or discrimination while they were enrolled as undergraduate students, I also asked if they had experiences racism and/or discrimination within their respective organizations. Both members of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity that I interviewed said that their organization had what they considered to be the “Alpha look”. The members are told how they are supposed to carry themselves and look while they are representing their fraternity. They are expected to look clean, polished, and/or looking like anything else could cause a member to be labeled and reprimanded.

“Us Alphas we have that persona clean cut, well groomed, well kept…I have witnessed where other chapters or members of the organizations have discriminated against those who they didn’t feel that they didn’t fit the stereotype. If they had dreads they’ve been told that they have to cut their hair to join the organization, keep their face shaved and well groomed” (Member of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity).
“When you are not representing you dress and look as you please, but when you’re representing the fraternity you need to have a haircut, your facial hair under control cuz you can’t look nappy, and your attire needs to be polished” (Member of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity).

It was also shared by some participants that a lot of the discrimination in their own organizations comes from older members who often express their opinions about another member’s appearance in relation to their organization. Many of the subjects felt that many of the older members are still living under the old way of accepting members.

“Older members definitely want members to look a certain way. I’ll tell interested members to clean up their look when representing Alpha because I know the old heads are going to say something” (Member of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity).

“Now on the graduate level I see the skin tone bias. It’s amazing to me hear someone older than you say that someone would not fit in with the organization because of their skin tone” (Member of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority).

Whether or not they had personally experienced being discriminated against by another black American and/or they had witnessed a black American getting mistreated by another black Americans, they all recognized that the treatment was wrong. The participants all felt that it was unnecessary to overlook, mistreat, and/or shut out someone because of the way they look because as blacks in America they had experienced enough of bias in the past by other non-black groups.
Stereotyping black Greek letter organizations:

Being one of the most popular social organizations within the black American community, each historically black fraternity and sorority is known for having a particular look and a way of carrying themselves. Often non-members of the black Greek letter organizations assume that all members of the organizations have to be that way in order to for them to be a member of the organization. All of the participants mentioned that all of the organizations within the National Pan-Hellenic Council have stereotypes attached to them that are not only known to the members of the organizations, but also to those not affiliated with collegiate Greek organizations. Most of the participants admitted that before they went to college and saw the black Greek organizations for themselves they believed the stereotypes too. It surprised some of them to find that many, if not all of the organizations were as far away from their stereotypes as they could be.

“I was very shocked when I saw how many members of my sorority were dark skin. I always thought that they were all light skin. My undergraduate chapter had a nice mix of skin tones” (Member of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority).

“When I crossed there was a spring line of AKAs and people were congratulating me about becoming an AKA because I look liked I could be an AKA” (Member of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority).

“When I was in undergrad you could sometimes look at a group of girls and tell which chapter they were from. We had a group of girls in my chapter that we called the AKA
Zetas because they were always dressed up and we had the Omega Zetas because they always like to party” (Member of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority).

They also found that many of the chapters within their own organizations did everything that they could to go against any negative stereotypes that were placed on their organization. They felt that by a chapter focusing on creating the anti-stereotype that they were creating another form of discrimination against interested members.

“There is a chapter of Zeta where unless you asked for the Zetas on campus you would not know who they were. Everyone thinks that Zetas are fat, stocky, and black. At this school they are all very light, most could pass for white and they all look like they could be models” (Member of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority).

However, just like there are chapters of some organizations who fight against the stereotypes there are some who work hard to maintain what they perceive to be positive stereotypes about their organization.

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 (Tindall, Hernandez, & Hughey, 2011, p.44).

Some of the participants stated that they would often visit certain schools and see that the black Greek letter organizations were all carbon copies of their particular organizations’ stereotype.
“Outside of black Americans who look and act white and join predominantly white organizations, blacks have joined the ranks of organizations whose members resemble them, thus perpetuating colorism in these organizations” (Member of Iota Phi Theta Fraternity).

“I have seen skin tone bias in Greek life, especially in the Midwest and on the west coast. In my experience I have never seen a dark skin AKA from the Midwest or the west coast. And on the flip side I don’t think I’ve seen a bright skin Delta in the Midwest” (Member of Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity).

What I found to be one of the most interesting revelations throughout the interview process is that all of the participants said that most of the stereotypes that they have heard about their own organizations have come from non-members. When I asked the participants where they thought the stereotypes might came from and how they might have started not one of them could come up with an answer. However, previous studies have found that the stereotypes that non-members believe to be true about the organizations often originated in some form from the organizations themselves. “Although some members considered the stereotypes and perceptions as something that members joke with one another, they understood the serious repercussions outside of the organizations” (Tindall, Hernandez, & Hughey, 2011, p.45). The participants felt that once non-members of the organizations hear about the stereotypes placed on historically black fraternities and sororities that it becomes harder to control preconceptions about the organizations and therefore the stereotypes continue on with each new group of new members.
Stereotyping skin tones:

Often within the black American community one’s skin tone is associated with certain stereotypes. Many of those stereotypes include certain personality traits. For example, participants associated darker skin with being loud, wild, unruly, and a party animal. Light skin was associated with being classy, smart, quiet, and well behaved. The creation and promotion of skin tone stereotypes has created a line of division within the black American community (Allen, 1992). Many of the subjects found that they had to fight against some of the stereotypes placed on their skin tone. They felt that skin tone stereotyping caused many problems for them growing up. A lot of the times, people would assume that they were going to act a certain way and/or carry themselves a certain way because of the way that they looked.

“When you’re dark you’re expected to be all loud and stuff. People were shocked to find out that I was really a quiet, shy person and they were really shocked when they found out that I had pledged Omega” (Member of Omega Psi Phi Fraternity).

“Many predominantly darker black Americans would joke on me for being so light, they would also make certain comments to me like I should be ashamed to be so light” (Member of Iota Phi Theta Fraternity).

Black American skin tone stereotypes have often been perpetuated in the media through books, television shows, and movies. The television show *Girlfriends* that aired from 2000-2008 and was considered to be the *Sex and the City* for women of color, followed the lives of four black American women who were different skin tones, had different levels of education, and socio-economic statuses. One character was named Toni Childs and was labeled as being the
materialistic business woman of the group. She was the darkest of all of the women and was very particular about who she dated and invited into her social circle. She often frowned upon black Americans who were loud, lower in socio-economic class, and who she thought acted too ethnic. There was one episode where Toni was set up on a blind date and though he was perfect on paper, she rejected her suitor. When her friends asked why, she stated that he was too dark. At the end of the episode she admitted that growing up she had been teased for being dark with big lips and could not put her future children though the same pain.

In a few later seasons, Toni ended up marrying a white Jewish doctor. She proudly declared to her friends when she found out that she was pregnant that she was going to be the only one out of all of her siblings to give her mother grandchildren with good hair (Happy Camper Production, 2000-2008). These feelings of inadequacy and that one has to work hard to prove their place in society by lightening up their gene pool are not uncommon among black Americans. For members of the black American community, the quest to constantly become better and to be accepted seems to a never-ending one.

Throughout the television series *A Different World* (1987), two of the main characters Whitley Gilbert and Kimberly Reese, often portrayed exaggerated versions the stereotypes placed on light skin and dark skin blacks. Many of the participants, also mentioned seeing the Spike Lee movie *School Daze* and assuming that was what black Greek life was like: dark skin Greeks who were cool and represented black Americans well vs. light skin Greeks who wanted to be white. *A Different World* and *School Daze* were for most of the participants their first introduction to black Americans attending college and it left a lasting impression.
“I thought Greek life was going to be like the Wannabes vs. the Jiggaboos (from School Daze). I was ready to fight for my people” (Member of Iota Phi Theta).

“If you’re light skin it is assumed that you’re stuck up and you think that you’re better than anyone. That’s not always the case. Light skin black women get a bad rap and we have no idea why” (Member of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority).

“I know that some blacks view dark as something negative, but I don’t because my black is beautiful” (Member of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority).

Some of the participants shared that they had been guilty of not wanting to “act like the stereotype” especially interacting with non-black Americans, even when it made them personally uncomfortable. They also mentioned that they find themselves doing it around other black Americans as well.

“They expect you to be loud and ghetto if you look a certain way. They peg you walking through the door” (Member of Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority).

“The last thing you want to be is the loud darkie in the room. Gotta act like you’re educated and have some class” (Member of Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity).

The issue of what exactly constitutes as being dark skin or as being light skin was one some of participants brought up when talking about their own skin tone. The participants mentioned that they viewed their own skin color as something different that they were told, this was done by male and female subjects alike. I noticed that two participants who were very far a part in skin color shades both labeled the color of their skin the same exact name. One of them
felt that he was a lot lighter than other black Americans said that he was. The other said that he felt that he was a lot darker than most black Americans perceived him to be.

“Like I consider myself dark but others consider me light. Unfortunately I’ve been told that I’ve only gotten things based on my appearance, like I could not have achieved what I have solely based on hard work” (Member of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity).

“I would consider myself to be a chocolate skin tone, but I’ve had people tell me that I wasn’t that dark skin, but I don’t see it” (Member of Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority).

The idea of stereotyping one based on their skin tone is something that has caused discomfort among black Americans and in some of the participants’ opinions has hindered their growth.

**Colorism as a part of American history:**

Due to black Americans being enslaved and then being mistreated for hundreds of years by non-black Americans in the United States, I asked the participants if they thought that colorism among black Americans was something that had been forced on them or if it was something that they chose to continue. The participants all felt that colorism and skin tone were a permanent part of American history. It is something that was handed down to black Americans by non-black Americans and those individuals now continue to live with and carry it through each generation.

“If you look at the history books or even the history of our respective organizations most founders had fair skin. Unfortunately society systematically only allowed lighter skinned African Americans access to education advancement” (Member of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority).
“I believe that we continue to struggle with institutionalized segregation implemented by non-blacks in order to maintain control during a period of time where blacks were not accepted, however, some were tolerated more than others based on the pigment of their skin. I have heard within my own family amongst my peers the identification of a person based on the lightness or darkness of their skin, or the reference of “good” hair if they have been mixed-breed with someone of another ethnicity or race” (Member of Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority).

The colorism created by non-black Americans on the slave auction block and in the plantation fields has caused an unwritten skin tone hierarchy within the black American community. That hierarchy has caused some members of the black American community to hate each other and fight against each other all because of the color of their skin (Hunter, 2007).

“You’ve got color struck folks who only dated one sort of skin tone and folks hate themselves and who bleach their own skin out here because they’re still living with the house slave and field slave mentality. It’s really messed up” (Member of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity).

“We need to celebrate the diversity of our culture. For some reason we compete with each other. If we just celebrate and appreciate our differences we could network more and help one another move toward advancement” (Member of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority).

“The only way that we’re going to get rid of colorism is if we all go blind” (Member of Alpha Sorority).
“You have to raise your kids to understand and practice equality and equal rights, that no matter what you look like it does not matter. It’s going to take years and years to change and won’t happen overnight, but it can happen” (Member of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity).

The participants felt black Americans did not ask to be separated and to be treated differently, but were because of something that they could not control, the color of their skin. Due to not having any control over their own lives during slavery, black American are now stuck with the division that skin tone bias has caused. All of the participants stated that they were not sure that black Americans could every truly escape colorism.

**Colorism as being permanently a part of the black American community:**

When asked if they felt if the black American community could fully get rid of colorism, all of the participants stated that they felt that colorism would always be a part of black American culture. For the participants, encountering colorism was a natural thing. It was not uncommon for them to hear jokes based on skin tones among friends and family, but it was also accepted without hesitation. One could be considered as being too sensitive; if they expressed that they were offended by skin tone jokes and comments.

There was an episode of the television show the *A Different World* (1987) in which the students were going to put on a tribute performance for Black History Month. As they prepared for the performance, Whitley (light skin black character) decided to display her collection of black Mammy caricatures (a figurine of a black woman who served as a nurse to white children. She was usually an overweight, large-breasted woman who was portrayed as being desexualized, maternal, and nonthreatening to white people). Kimberly (dark skin black character) got really
offended at the sight of the figurines and asked Whitley to take them down. Whitley was unable to understand why Kimberly was so offended over them. Later on two male characters were making “yo mama” jokes that they referred to as ‘cracking the dozens’ (jokes that were shared in an insulting fashion) about women being fat, black, and nappy. Kimberly over heard them and told them that the jokes were not funny. The two guys could not understand why she was so upset until the head chef of the student cafeteria explained to them that everything that they described about the women that they were insulting in their jokes, Kimberly was.

Dwayne: “Mr. Gaines, we were just ‘cracking the dozens’.”

Mr. Gaines: “Don’t you see? She’s fat, she’s black, and she’s nappy. And you two just made her into a joke” (Cosby, 1987).

Jokes such as ‘cracking the dozens’ are not uncommon within the black American community and often occur at someone else’s expense, it was felt by the participants that from a young age black Americans know that there is a hierarchy when it comes to skin tone: lighter is better.

“The lighter you are the better you are. The less scary you are to non-blacks and so you can get ahead further. I see it at my own place of business. It’s sad, it’s not right, and it’s messed up, but its reality” (Member of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity).

“I think that we’re stuck with colorism. We are taught it from an early age without even knowing it” (Member of Omega Psi Phi Fraternity).

“The brown paper bag test by Alpha Kappa Alpha was not a myth. It was a fact. And because your skin tone was tested you feel that you have to test someone else and it
continues. It has changed over time, but there are those who still have that mentality” (Member of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity).

“I think it is critical that the black American community embrace and showcase ‘black is beautiful’ in all skin tones. I’m reminded of a fundraiser where we were designing a flyer for a party, and one of my fraternal brothers complained why he was never on the cover and I was along with other light skinned members. What was said was understood to be true, but yet damning to the black community, our chapter president said, “light skinned people are not perceived as ghetto, or as ‘thugged out’ as dark skinned, plus it looks better on the flyer”. It should be noted the president was one of the darkest shade of black known to man. I say this not to be funny, but to underscore the implied acceptance by the entire black community that being light is better, or more pleasing in the eyes of others” (Member of Iota Phi Theta Fraternity).

Many participants felt that black Americans practiced skin tone bias because they had a negative experience with their own skin tone some time during their life. Treating someone else poorly because of their skin tone was how they dealt with it. Once they put their negative skin tone thought and experiences on another person through insults, jokes, ridicule, etc., they in return caused another person to feel the same way and it becomes an endless cycle.

“My friend who is really dark skin said that he wants a big family but can’t get with another dark skin person because he said that he would have kids who can’t control their hair. Even though I am shocked at this, I think he thinks this way because he got teased when he was younger” (Member of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority).
“We need to stop looking at Beyoncé as the standard of beauty. This is an issue that is very much generational. Once we get past our hang ups we can change. From a Greek standpoint I hate that we don’t address this issue in our communities. We need to stop placing value on appearance” (Member of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity).

“I think that until it becomes socially acceptable that the dark earthy look is the in thing it (colorism) will never go away. Really black ethnic models and actresses that are popular are accepted by white people before black people. We have to learn how to accept ourselves” (Member of Zeta Phi Beta Sorority).

Colorism was something that all of the participants felt that black Americans were victims of one way or another and even though they did not create it or bring it on themselves, it is something that they live with every day.

Research Findings

The impact that colorism has had on historically black fraternities and sororities becomes clearer when the topic is investigated in a qualitative manner that breaks the topic down into five thematic areas:

1. Discriminatory practices between black Americans

2. Stereotyping black Greek letter organizations

3. Stereotyping skin tones

4. Colorism as a part of American history
5. Colorism as being permanently a part of the black American community

Before this study it could have been assumed that the issues of colorism and skin tone bias were ones that had been long dealt with and had no place in the black American community today. It could also have been assumed that the members of the black Greek letter organization community would protect their organizations and state the idea of colorism existing in collegiate Greek organizations was false.

As the researcher what I found to be the most interesting thing about the study is the way that all of the participants knew that colorism and skin tone bias within the black American community was a negative thing, but at the same time declared that it was normal for them to hear their black American friends and black American family members make jokes and comments about each other’s skin tone on a regular basis. For the topic to be considered such a taboo, yet one that in a very relaxed way that these participants discussed practicing and/or witnessing colorism practiced within the historically black Greek fraternities and sororities, as well, as among other members of the black American community was shocking for me to hear. One would naturally assume that a group of people and/or a community would do what they could to help diminish the negative impact that colorism has had on them including not making it into a joke at another person’s expense.

Throughout all of the interviews it was stated by all of the participants that they could not figure out how any of the stereotypes attached to their respective organizations started. An outsider could say that the stereotypes about the organizations were true because of the fact that each of the organizations’ had members who fulfilled them; however the members of the organizations would argue that they also had a great number of members who did not fulfill the
stereotypes placed upon their organizations. None of the participants felt that they personally fit what their organization is supposed to look and act like.

The participants knew that stereotyping of the organizations was wrong, but also admitted to making jokes about it and some knowingly admitted that they knew that the jokes hurt other members of their organizations. Despite the various age ranges and different institutions of higher education that the participants attended, they all shared similar experiences when it came to the topic of colorism. My sense as a researcher is that since the members of these historically black Greek fraternities and sororities are very aware of the negative impact that colorism had caused them, other members of the National Pan-Hellenic Council, and black American community at large, and that they will continue to fight against it. However it will still remain a normal part of their lives to make light of the situation.

**Theoretical Framework**

My initial goal was not to make colorism the main focus of my study. My study’s initial focus was historically black fraternities and sororities and how they have been impacted by colorism, if at all. However, the more literature, previous works, and research that I read and the more interviews I conducted, the more I realized that colorism and the conflict that it caused black Americans was the central focus of my study and the historically black fraternities and sororities appeared to be casualties as a result of colorism. Colorism is when one skin tone is giving preferential treatment over another. In the black American community historically it has been that individuals with lighter skin tones have been seen as being better than individuals with
darker skin tones, but in the last several it has also involved into the mistreatment of light skin black Americans by dark skin black Americans (Bond & Cash, 1992). The act of colorism also extends into black Americans discriminating against each other based on facial features, hair texture, and class. In turn colorism causes mistreatment and discrimination, which can result in conflict among black Americans.

By participating in the practice of colorism, black Americans often separate themselves within their own communities leaving each of them with questions of identity and belongingness. Remarks about being too black or not being black enough to be accepted by other black Americans was one topic that was discussed during my interviews with the participants. Social Identity Theory and Double Consciousness as defined by W.E.B. DuBois both take a look at the idea of identity and belonging. These theories both identify the need of fitting in with a group and the criteria, which one selects, is the group that they decide to identify with.

**Social Identity Theory:**

Social Identity is said to derive from group identification. Group identification includes, acceptance, establishing a role within the group, and not only having success but failures within the group as well. Within the Social Identity Theory, one also places themselves in categories, also referred to as sub groups of the main group. Categorization sometimes results from the in-group favoritism that often occurs within groups. In group favoritism includes in group bias and exists when people give preferential treatment to others when they are a part of their group. The support of the in-group can increase self-esteem and give one a sense of self. However, being excluded from the in-group can bring upon feelings of exclusion and can sometimes result in competition and acts of prejudice (Ashforth & Mael, 1998). In the case of black Americans, it
has been found that when one skin tone feels excluded from the group majority, feelings of isolation and discrimination can sometimes emerge.

**Double Consciousness:**

No Negro who has given earnest thought to the situation of his people in America has failed, at some time in life, to find himself at these crossroads; has failed to ask himself as some time, ‘What, after all, am I? Am I an American or am I a Negro? Am I an American or am I a Negro? Can I be both? (DuBois, 2003, p.221).

DuBois (1903) in the *Souls of Black Folks* spoke about the Double Consciousness that black Americans often face, in which they are split between what they feel are two different worlds. They often feel as though they don’t have a singular identity. The story of W.E.B. DuBois is not much different than that of many lighter skinned black Americans who due to their education, social status, and skin tone felt as though they did not belong to a particular group and had to form their own groups and stick close to their own.

That’s the part of the dilemma of being an American Negro; that one is a little bit colored and a little bit white, and not only in physical terms but in the head and in the heart, and there are days-this is one of them-when you wonder what your role is in this country and what your future is in it; how precisely you are going to reconcile it to your situation here and how you are going to communicate to the vast heedless, unthinking, cruel white majority, that you are here. –James Baldwin (Clark, 1965, p223)

DuBois shaped an understanding of what he considered to be his black identity as a Double Consciousness, a product that separated him and other blacks like him from both black
and white America. DuBois’ Double Consciousness resulted from American racism that excluded black people from mainstream society, white stereotypes that influence the way that black Americans think and act, and the internal conflict that often plague black Americans as they try to figure out where they belong. Double Consciousness for black Americans was also about a question of loyalty, which group did they stand up for first: their nation or their people (Lyubansky & Eidelson, 2005)?

The Double Consciousness conflict often felt by black Americans is that of knowing that though they are more comfortable among their fellow black Americans, there are still parts of themselves that are quite comfortable in mainstream society or rather among white Americans. Also, despite the comfort that they receive by being among other black Americans, they sometimes feel as though they have to fight for a level of acceptance among them as well. The questioning of one’s race and the loyalty to their race are often a result of the conflict that colorism causes black Americans. Participants in the study wondered why they could not just be who they were without being tied to a particular skin tone. Instead of being identified as the light skin Sigma why couldn’t they just be seen as a Sigma. The Primary Identification Theory ties together both Social Identity Theory and the idea of Double Consciousness by looking at how one is perceived and how one self-identifies living in the U.S.A.

**Primary Identification Theory:**

Primary Identification Theory is when one determines what the main group they will identify with. This theory is rooted in the Social Identity Theory and W.E.B. DuBois’ idea of Double Consciousness. Often in the United States of America, people are questioned on who their loyalties belong to first. Who do they identify with: their gender, race, cultural group,
sexual orientation, religion, etc. Skin tone bias within the black community brings up the idea that within a group that there are sub-groups. Often their allegiance to a sub group trumps the main group that is the black community. Primary Identification Theory believes that everyone has an identity, which is his or her primary social identifier.

An individual’s primary social identifier is the identity that they identity with above all else and that identity gets their loyalty first. Often an individual decides to attach themselves to the group that has historically received the most privilege. “Virtually all of our findings parallel those that occurred before are not only historical curiosities from a legacy of slavery and racism, but present-day mechanisms that influence who gets what in America” (Keith & Herring, 1991, p.777). With colorism, often the individual that benefits the most and/or has the most privilege are the individuals who have light skin tones. Hunter (2005) found that black Americans had internalized their racial hierarchies that were set for them by whites, so they used skin color as a way to joke and insult each other, as well as a way to separate themselves from the black race, which is seen as dirty and bad. A dark skinned subject shared her own experience with colorism growing up:

When I was a lot younger you have the jokes, the monkey jokes…I went to a black school and most of us were dark-skinned black, but it was still there. Nobody wanted to be all the way black. They tried to be, “you know I’m Indian” or something…it wasn’t cool to be all the way black (Hunter, 2005, p.90).

This participant in Hunter’s study was an example on how whites did not need to be present for racism and colorism to exist, and that due to the negativity associated with being pure black often black Americans would attach themselves to another cultural group.
Participants shared stories of individuals being questioned on whether they belonged to a particular organization because of their skin tone. They also told of their “blackness” being called into question because of the way that they looked, not being invited to be involved in certain things, and be mistreated and/or disrespected by other black Americans for being too dark or too light.

The economic and social advantages of light skin are clear. In societies where resources are divided by race and color, light-skinned people get a disproportionate amount of the benefits. However, light skin may be viewed as a disadvantage with regard to ethnic legitimacy or authenticity. In many ethnic communities, people view darker-dark skin tones as being more ethnically authentic (Hunter, 2007, p.244).

For light skin black Americans it can often become a burden to constantly authenticate their membership to the black American community, especially to other black Americans. Previous studies have found that there is a complicated relationship between skin color and race consciousness within the black American community. Many of the civil rights leaders and advocates representing black Americans were light skin: W.E.B. DuBois, Julian Bond, Adam Clayton Powell, Malcolm X are some examples. It is believed that many of the leaders were light skin because of the practice of colorism that occurred in many black organizations during the same time period.

This kind of color-based gate keeping in elite organizations gave light skinned-people a distinct advantage in terms of education and social networks. Despite larger trends of dark-skinned people with higher level of commitment to their communities, the history of
black civil rights leaders includes a disproportionate number of light-skinned men and women (Hunter, 2005, p.107).

Presently, despite participating in activism to better the black American community, participants in Hunter’s study shared that they still have to prove their blackness (2005). Constantly being questioned about their ethnicity has caused many light skin black Americans to break off into their own groups. This is so that they won’t be constantly questioned or tested about who they are, whom they belong to, and what they identify as. Previous theoretical studies about culture and racial conflict focused on opposing groups i.e. black people versus white people, Jews versus Muslims, etc. However, this study shows that cultural conflict and racial conflict can also occur among members of the same identifying group.

**Colorism the Cause of Conflict:**

It has been said that there is a hierarchy of skin tones within the black American community. In various studies and literature when asked about skin tone most black Americans have stated that they have always know that to be lighter in the United States was to be better. The practicing of placing one skin tone before another is called practicing skin tone bias and/or colorism.

Colorism is a systematic preference for lightness that stems from the larger and more potent system of racism. It is difficult to distinguish between our own innocent preferences for skin tones and the socially constructed hierarchy of skin tones informed by racism. Many have internalized racism so deeply, that they can no longer recognize
colorism and racism for what they are, and instead see them simply as individual tastes (Hunter, 2005, p.89).

The study’s participants all acknowledged during their interviews that they knew that being a black American with a lighter skin tone often meant that one would be awarded certain privileges. They would be held in a higher regard by not only non-black Americans but by black Americans as well, and that they often achieved more by going further in life. These unwritten rules of black American skin tone hierarchy as they called them, often caused conflict within the black Americans community because it members would attach the way that they were treated and/or accepted to the way that they looked.

Colorism can affect people of color on a daily basis by causing them conflict. “Colorism, like racism, consists of both overt and covert actions, outright acts of discrimination and subtle cues of disfavor” (Hunter, 2007, p.241). In 2003 a dark skin black American man filed a lawsuit against his employer and won $40,000 based on the fact that he was discriminated against by a fellow employee based on his skin color. He argued that he experienced taunting and discrimination by other light skin black American employees because he was dark skin. Many people of color have experienced and/or witnessed unfair treatment and actions by others because of their skin tone. Skin tone bias is also not an uncommon practice in schools. In the United States, light skin and European facial features are often attached to positive characteristics such as: beauty, virtue, civility, and sophistication. If it is found that a teacher (of any race) expects their light skin students to be smarter, better prepared, and to achieve more than their darker skinned students, then it is felt that the students will act as expected (Hunter, 2007).
When conflict caused by colorism occurs the participants shared it was not uncommon for alliances to be formed. They would see light skin black Americans sticking with fellow light skin black Americans and dark skin black Americans working together against those who did not look like them. Hunter (2005) noted that during her study on colorism often opposing skin tones feel threatened by each other because of previous negative experiences and because of what they thought the other group could gain and/or achieve because of their skin tone. Participants in Hunter’s study were not afraid to share their experiences:

In terms of female-to-female relationships, I think that color affects how we treat each other. Like, if you’re lighter and I think you’re better, and I think the guys want you then, I won’t treat you nicely. I’ll take every opportunity to ignore you, or not tell you something, or keep you out of my little group of friends, because I really feel threatened, so I want to punish you because you have it better than me (Hunter, 2005, p.72).

Not only did participants who consider themselves to be light skin share experiences of being excluded because dark skinned black Americans thought that they were going to be stuck up and stand offish, but some participants who considered themselves to be dark skin shared experiences of light skin black Americans not wanting to befriend them because they had experienced mistreatment from dark skin blacks before, also. I found that light skin black Americans thought that dark skin black Americans had an easier because they were easily accepted by other blacks, whereas dark skin black Americans thought that light skin blacks had it easier because they were easily accepted by white Americans.

Though both light skin and dark skin black Americans have experienced some sort of negativity due to their skin tone, it has been more common and more severe for dark skin black
Americans than for light skin black Americans. This negative treatment that dark skin black Americans have received has caused some of them to want to alter their appearance. Hunter (2005) found that almost all of the dark skin women that she interviewed for her study wanted to be lighter for at least one point in their life so that they could achieve light skin privileges. Skin tone has been found to effect women more than men because of what is considered the standard of beauty in western culture. It was pointed out by one of the male participants that colorism would have an easier chance of becoming an issue of the past if the media would change their idea of what they consider to be attractive. However, until then black Americans will continue “to alter their physical appearance towards whiteness” (Hunter, 2007, p.248), by lightening their skin, chemically altering their hair to make it straight, and/or by changing their facial features to look more European through cosmetic surgery.

One member of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority shared sometimes it is just easier to stick with people who look like you because that can give you some level of comfort. However, though one might see themselves as just being around individuals who make them comfortable, others who are not a part of that group might see it as a person turning their back on them. This study showed that when cultural and racial conflict occurs within one group that it can almost be more harmful than when opposing cultural groups are in conflict with each other.
Chapter 5

Discussions, Conclusions, Implications, and Recommendations

Overview

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the members of historically black fraternities and sororities who represented an under researched group of individuals and to examine the under researched topic of colorism within the black American community, in order to look at the impact that colorism has had on black Greek letter organizations. The following four research questions were the basis of this study:

1. Is colorism still an issue among historically black fraternity and sorority members?
2. What is the perception of color among members of black fraternities and sororities?
3. Is colorism a thing of the past or does colorism still play a part in dividing the black American community?
4. How does colorism play a part in the identity of black Americans?
Review of Methodology

The method of the data collection used for this research study was the qualitative phenomenological method, in which a series of interviews using open ended questions was conducted. I selected the qualitative style of research transcendental phenomenology because it would allow me the ability to study a phenomenon using various people’s perspectives. The interviews were done using 18 members of historically black fraternities and sororities, two members from each of the nine organizations that form the National Pan-Hellenic Council: Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority Incorporated, Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity Incorporated, Delta Sigma Theta Sorority Incorporated, Iota Phi Theta Fraternity Incorporated, Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity Incorporated, Omega Psi Phi Fraternity Incorporated, Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity Incorporated, Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority Incorporated, and Zeta Phi Beta Sorority Incorporated. The subjects were found by contacting the graduate and/or alumni chapters of each of the organizations that were located in Miami-Dade and Broward County, both in Southern Florida. In order to participate in the study, the subjects had to have met the following qualifications:

1. Been a member of a collegiate Greek organizations that is a member of the National Pan-Hellenic Council

2. Had to have joined an active chapter of their respective organizations while enrolled as an undergraduate student at a college and/or university in the United States
The interviews were conducted either in person, over the phone and/or via computer using the Skype platform. At the beginning of each of the interviews, I reviewed the consent form with the participants, the reason why they were selected to participate in my research study, and answered any additional questions that they might have had about the study. I also introduced the data instrument with a restatement of the purpose.

The focus of this research is to explore the impact that colorism has had on historically black fraternities and sororities. The research is intended to help build a better understanding on the influence that skin tone bias has had on a group of individuals within the black American community.

During the interviews and subject responses, I used a set of preselected Institutional Review Board approved core questions as the basis of my interviews, but my follow-up questions were asked as needed for further clarification. Once the interview data was collected, the participants’ responses were analyzed and looked at for common themes. There were five common themes that emerged from the interviews:

1. Discriminatory practices between black Americans
2. Stereotyping black Greek letter organizations
3. Stereotyping skin tones
4. Colorism as a part of American history
5. Colorism as being permanently a part of the black American community
The five major themes were examples of some of the issues that black Americans face when colorism is practiced in their community.

Discussions

Seven demographic questions were asked to determine the participants’ membership in a National Pan-Hellenic Council organization. There were two subjects chosen from each organization to make a total of 18 participants. All of the participants joined their respective organizations while they were enrolled as undergraduate students at institutions of higher education located in the United States of America. Also, all of the participants had also graduated with the bachelors degrees and were over the age of 21.

Fifteen core interview questions were asked to determine whether or not the participants felt that colorism still had an impact on historically black fraternities and sororities. The questions also asked the participants about their experiences with colorism and what their opinions were on colorism being practiced within the black American community. From the interviews, five major themes emerged:

1. Discriminatory practices between black Americans
2. Stereotyping black Greek letter organizations
3. Stereotyping skin tones
4. Colorism as a part of American history
5. Colorism as being permanently a part of the black American community
Discriminatory practices between black Americans

During the interviews the participants shared their experiences with discrimination and racism. Their experiences were from both collegiate Greek life and from the world outside their collegiate Greek life experiences. Their experiences included not only experiencing being discriminated by white Americans, but by black Americans as well. Some of the participants stated that some of their biggest opposition on their college campuses came from fellow predominantly black student organizations. One participant shared that her sorority was well known on campus because they did a lot activities for all of the students this opened them up to receiving some of the same funding and support that the majority white organizations did. However, despite the positive example that they set for black organizations on their predominantly white college campus, there were times that they received negative feedback from some other black organizations.

The participants expressed that they sometimes felt that often black Americans could treat fellow black Americans worse than non-black American groups. The participants also shared stories of being discriminated against or witnessing discrimination of black Americans by other black Americans. For some of them, it was not uncommon to have a lighter member of their organizations used as the face of their organization, while the darker members were ignored or sent to do work behind the scenes. Experiences of being treated differently by other black Americans because of the way that they looked, has stayed with some of the participants since their childhoods. There were some participants that expressed that being treated differently by fellow black Americans who often left them feeling hurt, insecure, and questioning their blackness and whether or not they belonged in the black American community.
Stereotyping black Greek letter organizations

Collegiate Greek organizations are often stereotyped by members and non-members alike. Many stereotypes associated with historically black fraternities and sororities include not only personality attributes, but physical appearance as well. Some of the participants found that due to the stereotypes attached to black Greek letter organizations that their membership was questioned because they did not fit the “look” of their respective organizations. The questioning from non-members was expected, but they expressed it could be sometimes shocking and hurtful when members of their own organizations questioned their membership based on their physical appearance. When some of them joined their organizations, some of the participants admitted that they were surprised to find fellow members who did not meet the stereotypical look of their organizations. For many of the participants, it was not until they joined an organization within the National Pan-Hellenic Council, that they realized that many of the stereotypes and misconceptions about the nine organizations were actually untrue.

Stereotyping skin tones

All of the participants stated that they often found that there were stereotypes associated with black Americans skin tones and that most of the stereotypes caused conflict between members of the black American community. Light skin black Americans were thought to be very attractive, educated, financially successful, well established socially, and are what mainstream society and the media find attractive. Dark skin black Americans were thought to be loud, party animals, aggressive, very pro black, laborers, and less attractive to mainstream society and the media. The stereotypes that the black American community has attached to skin tones have caused such a wedge between some of their members, to the point that some of them
have not wanted to build relationships with each other due to the fact that they believe that they will be received negatively by the other group.

**Colorism as a part of American history**

Skin tone bias is a part of American history. Separating individuals based on skin tone and treating them differently is nothing new in this country, especially for black Americans. However, many outside groups do not know to what extent colorism exists within the black American community. Skin tone bias, the practice of giving preferential treatment to one skin tone over another has been occurring within the black American community since the days of slavery. The preferential treatment that light skin black slaves received from their white slave owners did not go unnoticed by the darker skin slaves. Feelings of jealousy, resentment, favoritism were permanently rooted within the black American community. However, now it is not uncommon to see the reverse type of skin tone bias being practiced within the black American community. Dark skin black Americans shutting out light skin black Americans for not being black enough, assuming that they want to be white, or thinking that light skin black Americans naturally think that they are better than all dark skin black Americans.

**Colorism as being permanently a part of the black American community**

The practice of colorism within the black American community is one that was thrust upon them by whites and has stayed with them. As Brelard (1997) shared, the skin color hierarchy set by whites for black Americans continues, it simply was moved from the plantation to the cities. The participants shared that black Americans have grown accustomed to seeing one skin tone group being treated better than another. Some members of the darker skin tone group
have been raised with the mindset that they have to either be on the defensive against light skin black Americans because they are the chosen group or they have grown to dislike their own appearance because they feel as though their skin color is not accepted in mainstream society. Some light skin black Americans feel that they should take advantage of their looks and use them as a way to get ahead in life, that includes associating with only other light skin black Americans and/or making sure that their mate and future children are light skin as well. Some of them have also admitted to having a fear of some dark skin black Americans because they feel as though some of them assume that by being light one has it easier in society, and therefore do not have to work as hard as other black Americans (Sandler, 1993). The five themes that emerged from this study reflected the ways that colorism has had and continues to impact historically black fraternities and sororities.

**Theoretical Framework**

The initial theories that were going to be explored during the study: were Social Identity Theory, Double Consciousness, and a combination of the two: Primary Identification Theory. Social Identity Theory, originated from group identification and includes one establishing themselves within a particular group, it is not uncommon for the group to be a sub-group of a larger group. Often if one feels excluded from the group, the feelings of exclusion, isolation, favoritism, and competitiveness arise (Ashforth & Mael, 1998). Double Consciousness as presented by Dr. W.E.B. DuBois (1903), is about how black Americans often have to work at not only being accepted into the black American community, but into mainstream society as well. This can cause an internal war, for black Americans who are left questioning whether they are black first or whether they are Americans first and is there a way to show equal loyalty to both
groups despite the fact that it might be easier to be in one group than another and often even once they have decided on a group to be a member they still continue to fight for acceptance within their selected group. Primary Identification Theory combines both Social Identity Theory and Double Consciousness and it is when a person selects their main identifying group out of all the groups that they belong to. For example they select whether they identify as an American, as black, as a black American, as a light skin black American, and/or as a dark skin black American.

However, while analyzing the data from the interviews and the major themes, I discovered that a fourth theory had emerged: the theory that colorism causes conflict. The conflict that colorism causes black Americans has had a great impact on their community. The results of the study could be used as a way to show researchers and scholars alike how colorism causes conflict within the black American community and why the topic should continue to be explored.

The findings from the interviews, which can be related to the literature, show how the idea of creating a skin tone hierarchy in which being light skin is seen as being better than dark skin within the black American community, causes conflict in their lives. It was seen through this study that skin color conflict for black Americans was more than one that is solely an external conflict that consists of black Americans versus white Americans or rather one race group versus another race group. This study showed that skin color conflict for black Americans is an internal group conflict as well. When black Americans practice colorism and/or skin tone bias among each other, it puts them against each other and causes a number of issues for the members of the black American community such as: low-self-esteem, identity issues, fighting
within the group, alienation, isolation, discrimination, favoritism, and division among members of the black American community. The findings from this research highlighted on how colorism can cause conflict, how practicing colorism continues to be passed on among black Americans, and the challenges and limitations that black Americans face due to colorism conflict.

**How Colorism Causes Conflict**

Critiques and scholars believe that conflict caused by colorism among black Americans originated during the days of slavery. The physical appearance of black Americans has been an issue for them during the majority of the time that they have been in the country we now call the United States of America. Upon their arrival to this land, blacks were separated from the white population because their darker skin made them look different and were turned into slaves. Once blacks became the property of white Americans they were once again separated because of their appearance, but this time they were split into groups by the tone of their skin - light skin and dark skin, creating sub groups within the larger group. It is said that most white slave owners preferred lighter skin black American slaves over darker skin black American slaves because they found them to be more attractive and less intimidating due to the fact that they were closer in appearance to them (Keith & Herring, 1991).

When necessary the white slave owners would spend more money on the light skin slaves when it came time to buy and sell them. They often assigned them work that required them to learn a skill such as being a house maid, cooking, sewing, nursing, being a black smith and/or butler. At the same time, the darker slaves were regularly assigned more strenuous work that required them to work outside and do physical labor. Some of the white slave owners often chose the lighter black American slave women for their sexual conquests, which at times
produced children, who in return were often even lighter than their mothers. These children were at times given preferential treatment that would include possibly being allowed to learn how to read, learning a skill to make their own money, being able to buy their own freedom, and/or being set free by their masters. The light skin slaves who were allowed to go free and establish themselves independently of their masters, were given a foot up in a society over the darker slaves, therefore laying the foundation for the social and economic practices that are often conducted by black Americans today (Keith & Herring, 1991).

This preferential treatment towards light skin slaves did not go unnoticed by the darker skin slaves, thus resulting in the initial conflict caused by colorism within the black American community. The field slave verses house slave mentality, which lets an individual know which skin color group that they belong to, became a part of the black American community’s culture because of the beginning of skin tone biased being practiced starting on the plantation. The chosen group was clearly evident to all members of the black American community at that time. Dark skin black Americans began to feel as though they were secondary to light skin black Americans, while light skin black Americans did what they could in order to progress and achieve in a world ran by whites. Light skin black Americans often made keeping their family lineage light a priority in order to ensure their rightful place in mainstream society (Frazier, 1957).

Black Americans who were darker in skin tone began to feel as though light skin blacks thought that they were better than them. They isolated themselves from darker skin black Americans because they really wanted to be white, so that they could gain acceptance from society. While, light skin blacks felt that they were going to use their skin color to gain access to
the same things that whites had and sometimes it required them alienating themselves from darker skin black Americans by forming their own private communities (Lake, 2003). The conflict within in the black American community that is caused by colorism created separation within the community because only one portion of the community seemed to be positively benefiting from its practices and many black Americans feel as though it continues today.

**How Colorism Continues to be Passed on Among Black Americans**

The practice of colorism among black Americans is one that seems to be passed on from generation to generation. The colorism conflict was started during the days of slavery, continued post slavery and has carried into the twentieth century as well. Black Americans who were lighter in skin tone have been able to gain more educational and financial achievements than most darker skin black Americans going into the twentieth century giving them a leg up in society, due to their social and economic status. Some light skin black Americans were able to attend not only historically black colleges and universities, but predominantly white institutions as well. They were also able to send their children to boarding schools, create and join exclusive social groups, own property and businesses, run for public office, and more. It was felt that due to the level of privilege created by prejudice and discrimination, just as many black Americans benefited from skin tone bias than those who were hurt by it (Harvey, 1995).

Many light skin black Americans created their own world and communities where they felt that they were receiving the same things and opportunities as white Americans. Light skin black Americans, at one point in time, would even conduct tests such as the brown paper bag test to make sure that someone’s skin was light enough to be included in their group. Tests such as the comb on the string test were conducted to ensure that one had the right texture of hair as well.
Darker skin black Americans had a harder time finding their footing in society during the early twentieth century. Historically, black fraternities and sororities were founded during the early twentieth century by black Americans who benefited from their families’ high social and economic status within the black American community. The members of the organizations often made sure that their groups kept a certain “look” and social status in order to gain acceptance from their peers, social organizations, and higher education administrators.

One of the participants shared that he felt that because blacks could not join white collegiate Greek letter organizations they formed their own and did everything they could to emulate them. Often this included being very exclusive with whom they accepted as members. Literature and previous studies have shown that dark skin blacks felt as though they not only had to fight discrimination against white Americans, but against light skin black Americans as well (Russell, Wilson & Hall, 1992). It is felt by many black Americans that to be light skin is to be better. When one is seen as being better then they will be able to achieve more in mainstream society because having light skin means that you are closer to looking white which makes you more acceptable.

All the participants in the study mentioned, if a black American is light skin with a certain texture of hair that they had it a lot easier than a black American with darker skin person with coarser hair because they seem less intimidating to white people. Some participants felt that the treatment that light skin blacks received from whites was a lot nicer than that of dark skin blacks. Whites could see a light skin black as being their equal more than they could a dark skin black. Light skin black Americans are often found to be more attractive and are what many black Americans try to emulate by altering their skin color and hair texture. Although darker skin
black Americans were also able to gain financial and educational achievements throughout the twentieth century, within the black American community it was still felt that lighter skin blacks achieved more than their darker counterparts due to the fact that they looked closer to white human beings. Studies have shown that a lighter skin black American has a better chance of receiving a higher education and obtaining a quality job than a dark skin black American (Hughes & Hertel, 1990).

The field slave and house slave mindset continued to be carried through new generations of black Americans. Films such as School Daze (Lee, 1988) and television shows like A Different World (Cosby, 1987) though credited with encouraging young black Americans to pursue higher education, also perpetuated skin tone stereotypes. The characters with lighter skin were labeled as being attractive, popular, glamorous, and sometimes stuck up while, the darker skin characters were portrayed as being homely, loud, sometimes angry, and average looking. Recent studies done on skin color within the black American community show that skin tone does matter to some members of the community. Often one’s self esteem (in particular that of a black American woman’s) is attached to the color of their skin. Kinnon (2000) found that the majority of the black women that she interviewed for her study felt to be lighter meant to have a better chance at romantic relationships and professional achievements. Despite the changes and great strives that black Americans have achieved within the United States, the issue of skin color continues to act as a dark cloud over the community.

**Challenges and Limitations Faced by Black Americans Due to Colorism Conflict**

Black Americans face a number of challenges and limitations within their community due to colorism conflict. One challenge is the misconceptions that some dark skin and light skin
black Americans have about each other. For example, some participants shared that it was assumed that because they were light skin that they were given things as opposed to have achieved them through hard work. Also, that because they were light skin that they automatically thought that they were better than everyone else and held a sense of entitlement. Some participants shared that because they were dark skin it was assumed that they were mean, athletic, aggressive, disliked light skin people, and/or were only attracted to light skin blacks. One participant stated that as a darker male, he finds that some light skin blacks do not want to interact with him because of previous negative encounters with dark skin black Americans. If he dates a light skin woman he is accused of being color struck (only being attracted to women lighter than him), and if he dates a dark skin woman he is accused of hating light skin blacks. He shared that it could be hard to fight against stereotypes, especially against ones placed on you by your own people. The misconceptions set by blacks limit the chances that they have to embrace their differences and to learn and grow from each other.

Another challenge and limitation faced by black Americans because of colorism conflict is what black Americans physically considered to be attractive. All of the participants mentioned that society celebrates those blacks who look closest to white and for black women that means long straight hair and light skin. Often black Americans have found that they have to look a certain way in order to be accepted not just by non-blacks, but other black Americans as well. The participants shared stories of coming in contact with individuals who were only romantically attracted to light skin blacks because they wanted their children to have what they considered to be manageable hair and did not want their skin to be too dark. They discussed the hurtful things other blacks would tell them about their skin color, hair texture, and looks. When black Americans rely on non-blacks to tell them what is considered to be attractive it limits the level of
acceptance within the black American community. This results in favoritism being showed towards a particular group, which then results in low self-esteem and self-hate on a personal level for members of the community who belonged to the non-favorite group.

In addition to the other challenges and limitations conflict caused by colorism brings black Americans, the issue of whether one is black enough causes challenges and limitations for them as well. Some of the participants shared experiences about being the butt of hurtful jokes and comments because they were light skin. Their blackness and/or their support for the black American community was often questioned and challenged. One participant shared that he often heard comments by other black Americans and fellow fraternity members that insinuated that he should have been ashamed to be light skin. Some participants spoke about not feeling included in some black social groups because they were told that they weren’t black enough to join. There were participants who considered themselves to be dark skin who shared that they were often expected to be the loud, angry, and/or a militant black person of the group because that was what was expected of darker black men. When one’s loyalty, love, and devotion to their culture and race is questioned because of the color of their skin, the limitations of the group’s growth becomes shortened because they are judging each other based on their appearance rather than taking the time to get to know the individual.

Arguably, the largest limitation and challenge that black Americans face due to colorism is the normalization of practicing colorism within the black American community. All of the participants shared that skin tone bias was a part of their lives while they were growing up on some level. It was not uncommon for comments about skin color to be made in a joking or hurtful manner about fellow black Americans. One was expected to laugh with the rest of the
group, even when it was at their expense. The participants even admitted that they on occasion would participate in the telling of skin color jokes and comments despite knowing that it often caused harm. Due to the fact that colorism is accepted as being a regular part of the “black American experience,” the participants did not think that colorism was going to go away and that generations of black Americans will continue to practice it despite the fact that it knowingly causes conflict among them. Until practicing colorism and joking about it is truly considered wrong among black Americans, each participant felt that it would continue to be permanent a fixture in their lives as black Americans.

Conflict caused by colorism will continue to create division among the black American community as each new generation of black Americans are born, as long as it is considered to be normal for black Americans to treat each other differently based on whether they are light skin and/or dark skin. The results of colorism conflict needs to be explored further in order for there to be some change within the black American community.

Challenges and Limitations

As with any research study there were challenges and limitations faced during a research study and this was no exception.

The study is limited by where I was able to obtain my subjects from. I selected my participants from the graduate and/or alumni chapters of the nine organizations located within the Florida Counties of Miami-Dade and Broward. This limited the experiences that I was allowed to obtain. Had I had opened my subject recruitment up to other counties; I would have...
gained more access to a variety of participants, thus opening up the amount of information that I received through interviews.

The study is limited by the sample size of the participants. Though the participants came from various walks of life, the fact that I only interviewed eighteen people limited the perspectives that I could have received on this topic. A larger sample group could have allowed for me to possibly expand on the number of major themes that emerged during the study allowing for more discussion during the interviews.

The study was challenged by the subjects being willing to openly share their stories and experiences with colorism. I knew that from reading literature and from previous studies done on the topic of colorism involving black Americans, that it was not a topic that black Americans were comfortable with openly discussing, especially when there was a chance that non-blacks would read and learn about the issue. I could tell that some of the participants were uncomfortable initially sharing what they had witnessed and/or heard. It was only once that I reminded them that all of their comments would remain anonymous did they begin to open up to me. However, I feel that if they had initially felt comfortable from the start of the interview process about sharing their personal experiences they would have provided more information during the interviews.

Conclusions

From this study, conclusions were drawn using interviews, previous literature, previous research studies, and theories related to conflict awareness and resolution. The findings from the study answered the four initial research questions presented at the beginning of the study:
1. Is colorism still an issue among historically black fraternity and sorority members?

2. What is the perception of color among members of black fraternities and sororities?

3. Is colorism a thing of the past or does colorism still play a part in dividing the black American community?

4. How does colorism play a part in the identity of black Americans?

**Research Question 1**: Is colorism still an issue among black fraternity and sorority members?

The study in research question one asks if colorism still an issue among historically black fraternities and sororities. Previous literature and studies have shown that colorism did indeed exist among the organizations that formed the National Pan-Hellenic Council in the past since their initial founding. Tindall, Hernandez, and Hughey (2011) found while they were conducting a study on stereotypes among members of historically black sororities, that many sorority leaders down play the issue of colorism within their organizations, but that it is still practiced and is often used as a way of identifying members of the organization, as well as, a way to seek out future members. I also found that during the interviews with the participants that it is still a current issue among each of their organizations. The nine historically black fraternities and sororities have achieved great things, yet the study also shows that there are some matters they have not moved passed and colorism is one of them.
**Research Question 2:** What is the perception of color among members of the black fraternities and sororities?

The participants shared that within the National Pan-Hellanic Council, that each of the nine Greek collegiate organizations all come with a set of stereotypes and the most popular stereotypes are the ones associated with their members’ physical appearance. Each of the groups is attached to a look that fellow Greeks and non-Greeks alike often assume that all of their members look like. Participants shared that it would not be uncommon for one’s membership to be questioned by both members and non-members if they did not look like the stereotype attached to their particular organization. All of the participants shared that if an organization decided to stick with the stereotypical look that their organization is known for and/or sole focus on getting members who look the total opposite of their organization’s stereotypes, that it could be harmful to not only the organization but to the reputations of the other National Pan-Hellanic Organizations. It was felt that all of the organizations’ members should be selected based on their character and not their appearance.

**Research Question 3:** Is colorism a thing of the past or does colorism still play a part in dividing the black American community?

By reading and researching previous literature and studies, it was found that black Americans have been victims of colorism since the days of slavery. The initial preferential treatment that was shown towards light skin black slaves over dark skin slaves was very clear to all parties involved. This set a precedence that continues within the black American community today. It is felt that to be lighter in skin color means to be better and go further in life. Some darker skin black Americans have developed feelings of resentment towards light skin black
Americans. While some light skin black Americans have developed suspicion towards dark skin black Americans in fear of being used as a way to advance in society. The participants shared that feelings such as distrust, favoritism, anger, and discrimination have caused a rift among members of the black American community.

**Research Question 4:** How does colorism play a part in the identity of black Americans?

The participants shared that a lot of the way that some black Americans feel about themselves and others within the black American community is attached to their physical appearance. One’s skin tone could separate them from the group or make you the most popular person in the group. Some of the participants spoke about feeling like they were not black enough and being teased for being light skin. Some participants shared stories of being treated badly because they were dark skin and everyone else around them was light skin. The original doll experiment presented by psychologists Doctors Kenneth and Mami Clark (1947) showed the impact that skin tone bias can have on a child, the recent updated race doll experiment by teen filmmaker Kiri Davis (2006) showed almost identical results as the one conducted in the 1947.

The psychologists used 253 black American children from both northern and southern American states, in an experiment to see how segregation impacted their racial identification, ego development, and self-awareness. Four baby dolls who were identically dressed (two were white with blonde hair and two were brown with black hair), were used as a way for the children to answer a series of race based questions. The results showed that most of the children leaned towards preferring the white dolls over the brown dolls because they thought that they were better.
Their responses to question 3 show that that this preference for the white doll implies a concomitant negative attitude toward the brown doll. Fifty-nine percent of these children indicated that the colored doll “looks bad,” while only 17 percent stated that the white doll “looks bad”….Only 38 percent of the children thought the brown was a “nice color,” while 60 percent of them though that the white doll was a “nice color” (Clark & Clark, p.175, 1947).

The experiment duplicated in 2006 with very similar results. The children expressed that they felt that being lighter meant that one was better. Feelings of inadequacy based on appearance are some that can have a lasting effect on a person. Practicing colorism can leave one open to being the brunt of hurtful jokes and comments by not just strangers, but by friends and family as well. The jokes and comments can affect one’s self esteem and feelings of inclusion within the black American community.

By answering the four research questions, it is shown that colorism within the black American community existed, still exists, and that colorism had a significant impact on the way that social groups, in particular historically black fraternities and sororities function and are viewed by both members and non-members alike. The study also concluded that the impact that colorism and skin tone bias have had on black Greek letter organizations, as well as, the black American community at large, has caused conflict within those groups. It is recommended that this study would be used as a way to introduce further research on conflict caused by colorism within the black American community, in hopes of declining the amount of conflict caused by colorism that occurs.
Implications

The results of this study suggest that it is important to continue researching the impact that colorism has had on the black American community. This study shows that there is a desire to diminish the weight that black Americans have given colorism and skin tone bias in their lives and in their community. The results clearly demonstrate that colorism is not only an issue of the past for black Americans, that it is very present today in their daily lives whether they publicly acknowledge it or not. For example, in the past, black Americans were largely encouraged to straighten their hair for a more acceptable look and one of the participants mentioned during her interview that her mother made it very clear how she wanted her grandchildren look and that she would not accept any nappy headed grandchildren. This is a clear example of: same issues, just a different decade. In terms of impact, the messages coming back to me as a researcher was that colorism did have a strong impact on the lives of black Americans. It often dictates who certain members of the community would get into relationships with and accept into their personal inner circles and also can sometimes predetermine one’s ability to achieve financially and educationally.

What was not expanded on, but what is certainly worthy of further study is the issue of jokes and casual conversations being had about skin tone among the members of the black American community. The study revealed interview question responses involving participants engaging in casual banter about skin tone among friends, family members, and fellow members of the National Pan-Hellenic Council. All of the participants discussed that colorism centered conversations were not uncommon for them to hear growing up and in their current adult lives because it was considered to be a normal practice. The results of this project also provided
insight into other ways that colorism is ever present in the lives of black Americans and that the desire to have the weight of the importance of skin tone within their community diminished is a great one.

Recommendations

Recommendations for Implications

In order to help diminish the weight that colorism carries within the black American community the following recommendations are made for implementation:

1. The issue of skin tone within the black American community needs to become unimportant. The importance of skin color and hair texture both need to be considered a nonfactor to one’s personal and professional success.

2. The issue of colorism needs to be openly discussed among members of the black American community. Members of the community need to share their experiences with each other, so that everyone can see the impact that colorism has had on the black American community.

3. As leaders within the black American community and as a group of people that black Americans look up to, members of historically black fraternities and sororities need to educate fellow members within their organizations
and college students about the impact that colorism can have on black collegiate Greek letter organizations.

4. Members of the black American community need to gain a complete understanding how casual comments and jokes about skin tone can be hurtful and have a lasting impact on individuals.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

Based on the findings of the literature review and the research study I have the following recommendations for further study:

1. This study could be replicated and the subject of colorism could be explored in a number of ways:
   
   i. Study subjects who only attended historically black colleges and universities
   
   ii. Study subjects who only attended predominantly white institutions
   
   iii. Compare the experiences of the same organization members who joined the same semester just one at a historically black college or university and one a predominantly white institution
   
   iv. Study subjects who attended colleges in certain regions of the united states
   
   v. Study subjects who joined organizations within a certain time period
vi. Study the perceptions of non-members on colorism and stereotypes of members of historically black Greek fraternities and sororities

2. Further explore the common themes that resulted from the analysis of findings in this study to learn more about how the issue of colorism continues to have an impact on members of the black American community as a whole beyond collegiate Greek life.

3. Explore colorism among black Americans in terms of socio-economic status. Does class level affect the way that colorism impacts black Americans?

4. Continued comparisons of various generations of members of the black American community to see how they handle colorism differently and the same. Possibly studying the long term effects of colorism on a particular black American family.

5. Study what impact, if any that western media has had on colorism within the black American community. Look at how the images of black Americans are portrayed in popular culture and how that has had a lasting impact on colorism within the black American community.

6. Explore the issue of what is defined as light skin and what is defined as dark skin among black Americans.
Final Thoughts

Colorism still remains a taboo subject for black Americans and is often not discussed outside of the black American community. However, despite it being a closely guarded subject, it continues to have a profound effect on the members of the black American community because generations of black Americans have carried the issue of colorism and its effects with them. What I found remarkable during this process was that the majority of the feelings expressed about skin color and colorism among black Americans, by back Americans in the early 20th century, are some of the same feelings being expressed in the second decade of the 21st century. All of the participants expressed that even though they felt that skin tone bias within the black American community was a hindrance to it, but would more than likely not go away any time soon because it is a permanent part of the black American culture.

Despite this, the participants felt that it was an issue that needed to be discussed openly so that as a united group they could confront it and possibly move past the issue. Though colorism is “accepted” within the group, the conflict that occurs because of colorism and skin tone bias within the community is often long lasting and can be very damaging. Colorism and skin tone bias are topics that need much more attention given to them than they are currently receiving. Like the participants, I feel that bringing light to what is considered to be a “taboo” subject, will help diminish the weight and importance that the skin color has within the black American community and in return will hopefully help to resolve some of the conflict occurring within the black American community and it will also help us gain a better understanding on racism in modern society.
Appendix A

Demographic Questions

Background

1. What age range do you fall into?
   18-23 24-29 30-35 36-41 42-older

2. What National Pan-Hellenic Council (NPHC) organization are you a member of? (Please include your undergraduate chapter name)

3. Where did you join (college/university)?

4. Did you attend a HBCU or PWI?

5. When did you join (semester/year)?

6. Are you still enrolled as an undergraduate student?

7. If not when did you graduate (semester/year)?
Appendix B

Interview Questions

1. What did you know about historically black Greek organizations before you went to college?

2. Did you have any preconceived stereotypes/opinions about any of the organizations before you went to college?

3. Were any of the stereotypes seen at your college while you were an undergraduate student?

4. How did your preconceived opinions about historically black fraternities and sororities change when you went to college?

5. Why did you decide to join your respective organization?

6. Did you seek out acceptance and/or tolerance when deciding to join your organization?

7. Initially, did you feel like you fit the “mold” of your respective organization? If yes why? If no why?

8. How was/is your organization viewed on campus?

9. How are you viewed as an individual?

10. Did/have you found racism towards your organization?

11. Did/have you found racism within your organization?

12. What has been your experience with colorism/skin tone bias among black Americans?

13. What has been your experience with colorism/skin tone bias among members of historically black fraternities and sororities?

14. Have you ever been accused of being a member of an organization that was not your own due to your appearance?

15. Do you think that colorism has ever existed or that the majority members of particular organizations looked a certain way because they were the ones who attended colleges/universities at the time? Why?
Appendix C

*Recruitment letter to graduate chapters*

Patience D. Bryant

3910 NW 174 Street

Miami Gardens, FL 33055

[Fraternity/Sorority mailing information]

To Whom It May Concern,

My name is Patience Bryant and I am Ph. D. candidate at Nova Southeastern University in the Conflict Analysis and Resolutions department. I am currently working on my dissertation entitled: The Impact of Colorism on Historically Black Fraternities and Sororities. With my research I hope to build a better understanding on the influence that skin tone bias has had on a group within the black American community.

I will be conducting face to face interviews with participants who are members of organizations that are a part of the National Pan-Hellenic Council. I would like a wide variety of participants from different walks of life for my research study. If possible could you please read my letter at your next chapter meeting to see if any of your members are interested in participating in my study? The criteria for participating in the study are:

- Be a member of a collegiate Greek organization that is a member of the National Pan-Hellenic Council.

- Had to have joined an active chapter of their respective organizations while enrolled as an undergraduate student at a college and/or university in the United States.

- Be an English speaker and over the age of 18

With this study I hope to expand on the limited amount of research that has been done on the topic of colorism and historically black fraternities and sororities. Ultimately, as the researcher I hope to not only look into an issue that might be causing a racial divide among the black American community, but to also encourage future studies.

If any of your members express interests in participating in the study please have them contact me via phone and/or email. I have enclosed my contact information with this letter and look forward to being in contact with you.

Thank You in Advance,
Patience D. Bryant, M.A.
Phone: 305-333-1386
Email: bpatienc@nova.edu
Appendix D

List of participating organizations and the graduate chapters

Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc.
Gamma Zeta Omega
P.O. Box 471098
Miami, FL 33247

Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Inc.
Upsilon Xi Omega
P.O. Box 120278
Fort Lauderdale, FL 33312

Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc.
Beta Beta Lambda
P.O. Box 510027
Miami, FL 33151

Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc.
Zeta Alpha Lambda
P.O. Box 6072
Ft. Lauderdale, FL 33310

Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc.
Dade County Alumnae Chapter
P.O. Box 52-1806
Miami, Florida 33152

Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc.
South Broward Alumnae Chapter
P.O. Box 82-3404
Pembroke Pines, FL 33082

Iota Phi Theta Fraternity, Inc.
Alpha Lambda Omega Chapter
P.O. Box 17196
Plantation, FL 33318

Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc.
Fort Lauderdale Alumni Chapter
P.O. Box 21
Fort Lauderdale, FL 33302

Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity, Inc.
Miami Alumni Chapter
Miam19821 NW 2nd Avenue
Suite #224
Miami Gardens, FL 333169

Omega Psi Phi. Fraternity, Inc.
Sigma Alpha Chapter
P.O. Box 680577
Miami, FL 33168
Omega Psi Phi. Fraternity, Inc.
Zeta Chi Chapter
P.O. Box 100018
Ft. Lauderdale, FL 33311

Phi Beta Sigma, Fraternity Inc.
Gamma Gamma Sigma
P.O. Box 490606
Ft. Lauderdale, FL 33349-0606

Phi Beta Sigma, Fraternity Inc.
Theta Rho Sigma
Post Office Box 162405
Miami, FL 33116-2405

Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Inc.
Delta Upsilon Sigma
P.O. Box 121145
Fort Lauderdale, FL 33312

Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority, Inc.
Gamma Delta Sigma
1588 NW 87TH Street
Miami, FL 33147
Zeta Phi Beta Sorority, Inc.
Beta Tau Zeta Chapter
P.O Box 471466
Miami, FL 33247
Appendix E

Consent Form for the Research Study Entitled:

The Impact of Colorism on Historically Black Fraternities and Sororities

Funding Source: None

IRB protocol #:

Principal Investigator: Co-Investigator:
Patience D. Bryant, M.A. Dustin Berna, Ph.D.
3910 NW 174 Street Nova Southeastern University
Miami Gardens, FL 33055 3301 College Avenue/Maltz Building
(305) 333-1386 Fort Lauderdale, Florida 33314

954-262-3024

For questions/concerns about your research rights, contact:

Human Research Oversight Board (Institutional Review Board or IRB)
Nova Southeastern University
(954) 262-5369/Toll Free: 866-499-0790
IRB@nsu.nova.edu
http://www.nova.edu/irb

What is the study about?

You are invited to participate in a research study. The purpose of this research is to examine the impact that colorism has had on historically black fraternities and sororities.

Why are you asking me?

You are asked to participate in this study because you are a member of a collegiate Greek organization that is a member of the National Pan-Hellenic Council, you joined an active chapter
of your respective organizations while enrolled as an undergraduate student at a college and/or university in the United States, and are an English speaker and over the age of 18. There will be approximately 20 participants in this study.

What will I be doing if I agree to be in the study?

As a participant in this research study you will be asked to participate in an interview that will take place either one-on-one in person, over the phone, and/or via the computer using Skype with the primary investigator that should take between 1-2 hours to complete. The interview will include questions about your college life and your thoughts on historically black fraternities and sororities before and after attending college as well as demographic questions. Please be advised I will be taking notes during the interview.

Is there any audio or video recording?

There will be no audio or video recording of this research.

What are the dangers to me?

The procedures or activities in this study may have unknown or unforeseeable risks, such as:

A breach of confidentiality

All information obtained in the research will be acknowledged as private and personal by the researcher with the exception of information deemed harmful to self or others that require a legal mandatory report to the pertinent authorities. Based on the focus of the research where you as the participant are sharing your experience and personal knowledge on the subject of colorism and historically black fraternities and sororities and you are in control of whatever information that you might provide, the magnitude is considered to be small and duration of any potential breach of confidentiality is 3 years after completion of the study- which is the length of time that records and recordings will be stored. Confidentiality will be reinforced with the use of pseudonyms throughout the study and in the final text, with the exception of the consent form. Also, be advised that if you select Skype as your interview option, Skype may collect information about you including (but not limited to) your name, address, phone number, email address, age, gender, IP address, etc. You can visit the Skype privacy policy website (http://www.skype.com/intl/en/legal/privacy/general/) if you would like further information. Skype may not know that you are participating in this study and therefore may be collecting identifiable information.

Psychological/emotional distress

There is minimal risk that psychological or emotional distress may occur. Based on the focus of the research where you as the participant are sharing your experience and personal knowledge on the subject of colorism and historically black fraternities and sororities and you are in control of whatever information that you might provide, the magnitude is considered to be small and duration is short. Should assistance be required for you in dealing with possible distress the
researcher will provide a referral for counseling, but you will assume the full costs associated with the services sought.

However, in reference to exploring your personal experiences relative to personal prejudices or biases, depending on your unique situation, you may encounter strong memories or emotions that are uncomfortable. You will be given the opportunity to withdraw from the interview at any time due to potential uncomfortable emotions resulting from the recall of past events.

If you have any questions about the research, your research rights, or have a research-related injury, please contact Patience D. Bryant at (305) 333-1386 and/or email me at bpatienc@nova.edu. You may also contact the IRB or the dissertation Chair at the numbers indicated above with questions as to your research rights.

Are there any benefits for taking part in this research study?

There are no direct benefits for taking part in this research study.

Will I get paid for being in the study? Will it cost me anything?

There are no costs to you or payments made for participating in this research study.

How will you keep my information private?

The confidentiality of the interview process is of the utmost importance. All information obtained in this study is strictly confidential unless disclosure is required by law. However, the Internal Review Board, regulatory agencies, and dissertation Chair may review research records if deemed necessary. Also, be advised that if you select Skype as your interview option, Skype may collect information about you including (but not limited to) your name, address, phone number, email address, age, gender, IP address, etc. You can visit the Skype privacy policy website (http://www.skype.com/intl/en/legal/privacy/general/) if you would like further information. Skype may not know that you are participating in this study and therefore may be collecting identifiable information.

All information will be kept for three years after the completion of the study and then all information will be destroyed by shredding hard copies and deleting computer files on researcher’s password protected computer. The hardcopies of any information will be kept in a locked file cabinet in the P1’s personal home office.

What if I do not want to participate or I want to leave the study?

You have the right to leave this study at any time or refuse to participate. If you do decide to leave or you decide not to participate, you will not experience any penalty or loss of services you have a right to receive. If you choose to withdraw, any information collected about you before the date you leave the study will be kept in the research records for 3 years (36 months) from the conclusion of the study and may be used as part of the research.

Other Considerations:
If significant new information relating to the study becomes available, which may relate to your willingness to continue to participate, this information will be provided to you by the investigators.

Voluntary Consent by Participant:

By signing this consent form, you indicate that

- this study has been explained to you
- you have read this document or it has been read to you
- your questions about this research study have been answered
- you have been told that you may ask the researchers any study related questions in the future or contact them in the event of a research-related injury
- you have been told that you may ask Institutional Review Board (IRB) personnel questions about your study rights
- you are entitled to a copy of this form after you have read and signed it
- you voluntarily agree to participate in the study entitled: The Impact of Colorism on Historically Black Fraternities and Sororities

Participant's Signature: ___________________________ Date: ________________

Participant’s Name: ____________________________ Date: ________________

Signature of Person Obtaining Consent: ________________________________

Date: ________________
References


Hurston, Z.N. (1937). *Their eyes were watching god*. Urbana: University of Illinois.


