To Serve All Mankind: How Women in Graduate Chapters of a Black Greek Letter Organization Sorority Balance Work, Family, and Civic Engagement

A thesis presented to

the faculty of

the College of Arts and Sciences of Ohio University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Master of Arts

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August 2012

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This thesis titled
To Serve All Mankind: How Women in Graduate Chapters of a Black Greek Letter
Organization Sorority Balance Work, Family, and Civic Engagement

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ABSTRACT

UPTON, AISHA A., M.A., August 2012, Sociology

To Serve All Mankind: How Women in a Graduate Chapter of a Black Greek Letter Organization Sorority Balance Work, Family and Civic Engagement

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Members of Black Greek Letter Organization (BGLO) Sororities have stood in opposition to institutional racism and sexism through intentionally creating a sisterhood committed to uplifting the Black community (Phillips, 2005; Gray White, 1999; Jones, 2009). These women commit themselves to their community through these organizations, are obligated to their families, and act as professionals. Existing literature posits that the experiences of working Black women vary from the experiences of white women in that black women, until recently, have worked in proportionately greater numbers, and in different jobs than white women (Gray White, 1999; Jones, 2009). This qualitative study explores how women in these organizations balance work, family, and civic engagement. Through the use of in-depth single person life-history approached interviews with graduate members of a BGLO sorority, the research finds that the ability to partake in double duty fluctuates throughout these women's lives and that they rely on the organization to balance.

Approved: _____________________________________________________________

Christine L. Mattley

Associate Professor of Sociology and Anthropology
DEDICATION

How beautiful
How beautiful were those builders
How pleasant to recall from the dim recesses of memory
These lovely women
Stepping out of the shadows of slavery
They brought to Howard University
The freedman’s mystic faith in, and yearning for
Education
They built far better than they knew.

-Soror Marjorie Parker

For the Sorors who have learned to balance it all, and continue to strive to serve all of mankind through our sisterhood, just as our founders intended.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This project could not have been possible without the support of my thesis committee. A special acknowledgement is needed for my committee chair, Dr. Christine Mattley, whose support of my ideas, encouragement, suggestions and edits have been invaluable. Also, Dr. Joan Weston has been a steady source of encouragement through my undergraduate and graduate career, teaching me to be a better researcher and always providing much needed critical eye for my research endeavors.

As this project is about balance, I would be remiss not to acknowledge the people who have provided a sense of stability for me as I learned to balance working, research, applying to graduate programs, sorority membership and having a social life. My mother and sister have served as my anchors, not allowing me to stray from a future they could see even when I could not. My closest friends have cheered me on and have provided much needed distraction when things have become overwhelming – thank you Josh, Jordan, Ashley, Taylor, Chrysten and Tera. My Sorors, like many women in this project express, also provided me with stability and encouragement – thank you Sorors Schylbea, Dr. Gunn, LaTashia, Ivelisse, Belinda and Effie.

Lastly, I must acknowledge all of the participants in my research for making the time to take part in interviews and for being open with me about their experiences. Without the willingness to share their stories, this research would not have gone far. I am eternally thankful.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Sorority women found their way into my life at an early age. Like many girls in my Cleveland neighborhood, women in a Black Greek Letter Organization (BGLO) sorority served as mentors, providing organized activities in the form of leadership training, awards ceremonies, debutante balls, and service learning programs. Many of these women were our teachers, guidance counselors, coaches, or fellow church members. Unlike many of the girls with whom I came of age, I went on to college and after graduating from college became a member of a BGLO sorority, and sought to be like these women. When I joined a graduate chapter, I became intrigued by the ability of the members to simultaneously be active sorority members, working professionals, wives, mothers, caregivers to elderly parents, and be active in other civic organizations. Beyond just recognizing that they could juggle the responsibilities associated with each of these roles, I began to question the how of these women’s actions. I began to seriously inquire how they balance these multiple roles and appear to do it seamlessly. Research on African American women in service organizations connects the creation of these organizations to the Black Club Women’s Movement, which began during the Reconstruction (1865-1880) (Gray White, 1999). This literature offers an important story of what these women accomplished, making the impact of Black women in service organizations visible. However, research on BGLO sororities does not tell how these women are able to serve their community and succeed in their careers while being dedicated members of their families.

1 The acronym of BGLO, is that most often used in existing literature to describe member organizations of the National Panhellenic Council.
This study contributes to the existing scholarship on professional Black women and the ways in which they view their community work, especially when it is conducted through the larger organization of the BGLO sorority. It will also help to explain how sorority women are able to balance their commitment to community alongside their familial obligations and professional careers.

In chapter two, I will discuss current literature on women and work and the history of Black women and work and civic engagement. It will cover topics such as the Black Club Women’s Movement and the inception of the BGLO sorority. Chapter two will also explain the importance of womanism, Black feminism and the counterpublic sphere as they pertain to BGLO sororities. This chapter will also discuss the theoretical perspectives that are useful in analyzing women in BGLO sororities including symbolic interactionism, role theory, role strain, and organizational theories such as the neo-institutionalist approach to the organization and the BGLO sorority as a greedy institution. Chapter three will discuss the methods I used to collect and analyze the data. This study was conducted through the use of single person interviews with 16 members of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Incorporated. A modified life history approach, asking about their life in the organization, was taken and structured interview questions were also used to determine what was important to interview participants about the subject of balance in their lives as members.

The fourth chapter discusses my findings. This study found that the women interviewed discuss their various methods for attaining a balance in their multitudinous roles. It also found that the organization and the relationships built with sorority sisters
help to provide balance for members. These findings offer much insight into role strain theory, as it shows that these women do not deal with classic role strain, but create balance – with the aid of their Sorors. Finally, chapter fifth concludes with a summary and discussion of all of my findings. Additionally, I discuss how this research can contribute to studies of Black Greek Letter Organizations and to studies of Black women and work.
Sociological research on women and work is typically race neutral. There is a serious gap in the literature on African American women and work as many previous works have left the assumption that what white women do, Black women also do. Hochschild (1989), in her study of 50 couples over 8 years found that working women feel torn between the demands of work and family. She found that home life for working women is often a “second shift” because “the career woman pays a cost by entering a clockwork of careers that permits so little time or emotional energy to raise a family” (p. x). Hochschild posits that the image of the working mother is similar to the image of lower class Black women offered in documents like the Moynihan report which defined Black mothers as matriarchs due to a tangle of pathology. She insists that the similarity of these two images is the added burden placed on the women’s personal characteristics. In her study, Hochschild identifies one African American couple, Anita and Ray, whose relationship is strained by disagreements about work. Although she does acknowledge Black women’s historic presence in the workforce through discussing Anita’s view that “to be a woman was to work. That was tradition, maybe not for white middle-class women, but certainly for her and everyone she knew” (pp.133-134) – Hochschild continues the assumption that there is a shared experience of the second shift and does not discuss the idea of women being active beyond just work and family. She does not look into women who may be taking part in a “third shift,” going beyond their professional work and familial work and going into their communities to provide mutual aid.
Hochschild describes the work done in the service sector in *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling* (1983) and draws upon the work of sociologists C. Wright Mills and Erving Goffman in her study of women and men workers in the service sector. She posits that these service workers engage in emotional labor — or labor that “requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others” (p.6) and finds that “the emotional style of offering the service is part of the service itself...Seemingly, to “love the job” becomes part of the job” (p. 5). Hochschild argues that women in service jobs do more, and different, emotional work than men; and that the gender specific characteristics of emotional labor may be “signs of a social work that women do – the work of affirming, enhancing, and celebrating the well-being and status of others” (p. 165).

**Women and Volunteer Work**

Hochschild studies working women and women who work in the service sector, however, women also work as volunteers. Studies of women and volunteer work tend to focus on women in poverty and the positive impact that their participation in service has on their community, their families and themselves (Messias, DeJong, & McLoughlin, 2005). Volunteer work is work done in the community which according to Wilson and Musick (2003), “unlike paid work, it is not contingent on any reward. In actual fact, volunteer work provides any number of intrinsic, psychic benefits” (433). The idea of donating emotional and domestic labor to the benefit of those in need is considered to be a positive aspect of volunteer work (Messaias, DeJong & McLoughlin (2005), Wilson and Musick (2003).
Looking at differences in civic engagement between white and African American women in the United States, Farmer and Piotrkowski (2009) define civic engagement as encompassing not only volunteer work but also political participation and social activism because they believe that within the small amount of research on civic engagement “civic engagement is often equated with volunteerism within the social work literature, thereby obscuring the full range of civic engagement activities in which people engage” (197). In order to minimize feelings of discrimination and oppression Farmer and Piotrkowski suggest that marginalized individuals utilize civic engagement.

**Black Women, Work, and Volunteerism**

Working Black women have experienced both gender and racial oppression, which have complicated the idea of a single study of women and work. As Jones states, “focus on white women exclusively will miss the significance of slavery as a labor system that exploited black women, and will miss the fact that black wives entered the work force in greater numbers, only to face a fundamentally different kind of prejudice compared to their white counterparts” (1985,2).

Historically, the type of work to which Black women were relegated defied ideas of womanhood and propriety applied that were to white women (Gray White, 1999; Jones, 2009). Moreover, African American women were employed outside the home long before the beginning of the women’s movement (Gilkes, 2001). What is regarded as Black women’s work was transformative in nature as shifting institutional changes affected the inequality experienced by Black people (Jones, 2009).
Community Work and Black Women

Hughes (1971) conceptualizes the term work as simply being a bundle of tasks. Community work in this case would be a bundle of tasks done in the community. Community work within the Black community, in this sense, can be defined as the bundle of tasks which act counter-publicly to “combat racial oppression and to strengthen African American social, economic and political institutions in order to foster group survival, growth, and advancement” (Gilkes, 2001, p. 17).

Gilkes (1982) explores the world of Black women who are community workers while having successful professional careers. She posits that these women being recognized in the Black community as community workers “symbolizes their successful resolution of the conflicts inherent in professional identity and Black community membership.” Gilkes also introduces the terms of mobile mothers and rebellious professionals; mobile mothers being “working class women who entered the world of community work after marriage and family involvements combined with labor force participation.” Mobile mothers choose to work full time to alleviate problems facing the Black community. Because of this they “began to seek work in, and were recruited to Black community-based human service settings” (Gilkes 1982). Rebellious professionals, however, descend from the Black middle class or “Black bourgeoisie.” These women rebel against their socialization as professionals and mold their careers to the benefit of the black community. These rebellious professionals and mobile mothers tailor their educational foci on the needs of the black community and all share the commitment toward enhancing life in the black community.
The Black Club Women’s Movement

Black women have both a history of work and of civic engagement, tied directly to their relationship with the black community as a whole. In 1883, the Civil Rights Act of 1875 was declared unconstitutional. Following this declaration, Blacks began being banned from public and private establishments (Gray White, 1999). Beginning in 1890, states began the systematic disenfranchisement of Black men’s right to vote – creating a particularly more powerless situation for Black women (Gray White, 1999; Higgenbotham, 1993). Because of this, Black people had to retreat to the use of their own institutions. She defines these early fraternal organizations that grew out of this retreat as being “mutual aid” societies which “increased in importance as centers of Black social, political and economic life” (Gray White, 1999). Offering their members aid in times of need such as illness, death, and organized savings, they supported members of the community in need.

Black women took on the call for racial uplift through the creation of mutual aid organizations (Gray White, 1999; Higgenbotham, 1993). Inspired by the ideas that formed W.E.B. Du Bois’ philosophy of the Talented Tenth, Black club women like the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) chose the motto “Lifting as We Climb” to symbolize their commitment as educated women to the less fortunate of their race (Gray White, 1999).

The community work that Black women took part in “had a subversive component, for it served to defy a white society that not only saw Blacks as exploitable labor, but also withheld from them the benefits of public and private social-welfare
programs” (Jones, 2009). Because of this experience of exploitation that spread across class lines, a much deeper link with their community was the similarity the club women shared with the women they served. With these less fortunate women, the club women shared not only the same history, but the experiences of motherhood and domesticity. This commonality brings to light the idea of “double duty” – or domesticity and club work becoming additional jobs outside of the actual work and familial obligations (Gray White, 1999). Gilkes (2001) posits that:

In spite of their agency that Black women have exercised to construct a culture that resists the deconstructions of racial oppression, the problems that create crises in their lives and, and the conflicts that emerge. When Black women seek to take their rightful places of leadership still stand as what Du Bois called mighty causes requiring attention and action.

*Mighty Causes and Double Duty*

Black women who take part in community service organizations, tend to familial needs and also work are engaging in “double duty” - or domesticity and their service work becoming forms of work outside of their actual work (Gray White, 1999). This idea of double duty comes from what sociologist E. Franklin Frazier (1957) describes as the “double duty dollar” or a dollar that would not only be used for the worker himself but would go back into the community (Frazier, 1957). This idea of using funds not only for self, but also for the community translated for many Black women in these organizations as not only using themselves for their work and their family, but utilizing themselves as a unifying force in their communities. According to Ida B. Wells, prominent NACW member, motherhood also qualified as a profession; “just like school teaching and
lecturing…, once one has launched on such a career, she owed it to herself to become as
expert as possible in the practice of her profession” (Gray White, 1999).

Black Greek Letter Organization Sororities

While fraternal organizations such as the Oddfellows, Elks, Masons and the Order
of the Eastern Star took root during the 19th century, intercollegiate fraternal
organizations, or Black Greek-Lettered Organizations (BGLO), did not emerge until the
early decades of the 20 century. Inspired by the Black Club Women’s movement and
W.E.B. Du Bois’s Niagara movement, intercollegiate fraternal organizations emerged as
mirror images of their white bourgeois counterparts from which African Americans were
excluded and were the designed to serve the needs of the disenfranchised black middle
class (Butler, 2005).

The first intercollegiate BGLO, Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, formed on the
campus of Cornell University in 1906; followed by Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, which
was established in 1908. Like Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Omega Psi Phi fraternity,
established in 1911; Phi Beta Sigma Fraternity, founded in 1914; and Zeta Phi Beta
Sorority, established in 1920, sprang from the efforts of students on the campus of
Howard University, a historically black institution. Kappa Alpha Psi Fraternity founded
in 1911 and Sigma Gamma Rho Sorority established in 1922 pride themselves on their
founding at predominately white institutions. The latest addition, Iota Phi Theta, was
founded at Morgan State University in 1963.

Black fraternal groups could be divided into two classes: benevolent societies and
old-line secret societies such as the Masons, Oddfellows and Elks. The difference
between the two is that “benevolent societies offer open and mixed-gender membership, have no secret rituals and are organized primarily to provide mutual aid and uplift activities at the community level (Butler, 2005). Old-line secret fraternal orders had restricted membership and used secret rituals as do the divine nine intercollegiate BGLOs that make up the National Panhellenic Council, an umbrella organization founded in 1930 to foster unity and cooperation among the nine historical Black Greek-Lettered Organizations (Butler, 2005). These organizations have built a legacy of activism through civic engagement. Jackson (2004) explains that:

These fraternities and sororities provide important social and professional networks for their members. As Blacks were not initially allowed to join White “Greek Letter” societies, which existed as an integral part of American higher education, the establishment of Black fraternities and sororities allowed Black students to create and to enjoy the social and professional networks necessary for the successful integration of graduates into those jobs for which they had been trained (232).

Black Greek Letter Organization (BGLO) Sororities have had many obstacles to overcome. Throughout their existence they have, like members of the Black club women’s movement, faced institutional racism and sexism. In order to overcome these obstacles sorority women have intentionally created a sisterhood and built a sense of community (Phillips, 2005). Black sororities have been especially instrumental in nation building through their work in racial uplift done through the black women’s movement. Neumann speculates that “in 1935, the sororities joined with ten other women’s organizations to establish a new group, The National Council of Negro Women (NCNW) to promote black women’s concerns at the national level (Neumann, 2008).
The first of these organizations was Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Incorporated. This organization took to their mission of serving all mankind by engaging in racial uplift through helping to form organizations like the NCNW, engaging in anti-lynching campaigns and regular programming in their communities.

Alpha Kappa Alpha

Alpha Kappa Alpha, the first of four BGLO sororities, was founded on January 15, 1908 at Howard University in Washington D.C. Nine women led by Ethel Hedgeman Lyle formed an organization dedicated to serving humanity through their motto Askosis Kai Axiosis, by culture and by merit. After its inception, the chapter invited 7 sophomores to join who were initiated into the sorority in 1909. In 1913 six members, led by founding member Nellie Mae Quander, banded together to incorporate the sorority. This made Alpha Kappa Alpha the first Black Greek-letter organization to be nationally incorporated (Evans, 2008).

From its inception, Alpha Kappa Alpha (AKA) took in active role in civil rights through taking part in the suffragette movement and organizing a 1934 anti-lynching campaign. During the 1930’s, AKA turned much of its attention toward taking on the race work done by members of the Black club women’s movement (Gray White, 1999). The sorority founded the Non-Partisan Council on Public Affairs to protect the rights of Blacks through explaining how they were affected by congressional legislation. Chapters of AKA pursued health initiatives throughout the south in states like Mississippi between 1935 and 1942 (Gray White, 1999) – and as a part of the National Council of Negro
Women, AKA lobbied for the Women’s Reserve of the United States Navy to end its exclusionary practices of Black women in the service (Jones, 2009).

The sorority was extremely active in the World War II war effort as well as the African American Civil Rights Movement, specifically mentioning the role of Alpha Omega chapter’s sponsoring the Cleveland, Ohio Job Corps Center (Ross, 2000). The sorority was founded following the lead of “the history of networking and community building established early in antebellum black communities” (Evans, 2008). Throughout its more than 100 year legacy, Alpha Kappa Alpha has prided itself on service to all mankind as reflected in the AKA motto. Perhaps if the motto were established today, it would likely use different terminology than “mankind” given the word’s gendered implications. Today the sorority “boasts more than 170,000 members in 930 chapters”.

The Importance of the Graduate Chapter to the BGLO Sorority

A defining mark of the BGLO organization is the graduate chapter. Because members are asked to commit their lives to service through the organization, following their undergraduate years, members are encouraged to join graduate chapters (Hernandez, 2008, p. 254). Where undergraduate chapters seek to serve the needs of their campus community, graduate chapters take on the task of serving the community in the city or town where they are located. These chapters also engage further in politics, philanthropy, and in building long standing sustainable community partnerships to do service. Members of graduate chapters oversee the working of undergraduate chapters and are therefore viewed as the more “business end” of the organization. Graduate chapters are also able to recruit their own members through invitation. Many BGLOs, like Alpha Kappa Alpha,
have larger membership at the graduate level than at the undergraduate level. 72 percent of AKAs membership is at the graduate level (Hernandez, 2008, p. 253). Overall, the organization is governed by an international executive board, is broken down into regions and international committees.

Within the graduate chapter there are many roles members can play. Each graduate chapter is made up of an executive board of the president, vice-president, treasurer, secretary, corresponding secretary and a parliamentarian. There are also various committees and general chapter members. The women in BGLO sororities like AKA engage in community work. They divide their bundle of tasks up amongst chapter members through the use of their executive board and committees. Their specific bundle of tasks is determined by their international directorate which mandates adherence to the original goal of service to the community. The international executive board of these organizations tailors the tasks to meet changing social and political institutions as well as to be in adherence with the normative sanctions placed on them by the umbrella organization of the National Panhellenic Council

*Alpha Kappa Alpha as a Counter-Public Organization*

E. Franklin Frazier (1957) described the counter-public sphere in terms of the Black church. Frazier suggested that the black church was similar to a nation, with its members being different from and living in conflict to dominant institutions and society (Higginbotham, 1994). Whaley (2010) builds on Frazier’s idea of the counter-public sphere and explains AKA as being a counter-public organization. Whaley defines counter-public as:
a site that converges cultural and social spaces with political platforms. For AKA, the multiple origins affected how they constituted their counter-public formation, and their cultural, social, and political consciousness affected how they would transform and use the space of a Greek-letter organization for insight and conservative purposes.

Through the joint efforts of organizations like AKA along with other Black organizations/institutions, Black counter-publics are formed to stand in opposition to and to challenge the exclusion of blacks by dominant society (Whaley, 2010).

*Womanism, Africana Womanism, Black Feminism and BGLO Sororities Counterpublic Identity*

In *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* (1984), Alice Walker defines a womanist as a Black woman who is “committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female.” This research is Womanist in nature in that it aids in “organizing our thinking about Black women’s self-definitions, relationships, activities, and history, and their meaning for the Black experience (Walker, 1982; Gilkes, 2001). Womanism is counter-public in that it is a culture of resistance that works in opposition to the dominant culture (Gilkes, 2001). Africana Womanism is a family centered activist approach that seeks to mend the strain felt by Black women (Hudson-Weems, 2001). A Black Feminist approach calls for Black women to connect their struggles with the oppression of women on a global level (Collins, 2001).

Although there has been debate over the differences between Womanism, Africana Womanism and Black Feminism, in the original definition of Womanism, Walker does not differentiate between the terms and uses them interchangeably (Collins,
2001; Hudson-Weems, 2001). These concepts all share the commonality of their stress on the importance of self-definition and self-determination for Black women (Collins, 2001). Collins argues that the debate about the name given to these Black women activists distracts from real challenges faced by Black women (Collins, 2001). For this reason, in this research the terms are viewed as interchangeable.

In the context of BGLO sorority members, one of the important characteristics qualifying for Africana Womanism is the creation of a genuine sisterhood (Hudson-Weems, 1993). The women of AKA have done constructed an international organization with the goal of achieving a genuine sisterhood through their restrictive membership practices. There are 18 characteristics of Africana Womanism. These characteristics include “self-namer and self-definer, in concert with male in struggle, whole authentic, flexible role player, respected, recognized, spiritual, male compatible, respectful of elders, adaptable, ambitious, and mother and nurturing” (Hudson-Weems, 2001). AKA members when engaged in their counter-public work and balancing work life and familial obligations possess all of these characteristics. In discussing womanism within BGLO sororities Neumann argues that:

They helped create a climate in the black community in which womanism could flourish. The activities of the sororities certainly constituted a direct challenge to barriers to women’s participation in the world beyond the family and household. They kept a focus on developing successful young African American women to uplift the community. Women historically served as the backbone of the family, and the improvement in the status of women would also improve the status of the race. The uplift of African Americans began with black women (p. 182).
The Reproduction of Social Class

Kendall (2002) argues that through exploring issues of class, race, gender, child rearing, philanthropy, and community service, that organizations like AKA with closed membership work toward reproducing the culture of the upper-class through what could be viewed simply as doing good deeds. She posits that through having closed membership, these women gain social power and influence which offer opportunities for social rewards based on the work they put into the organization. Kendall argues that sororities give social power in that “the structure of sorority life enables young women to learn how to use reward, coercive, expertise, and legitimate power over others in a non-threatening environment.”

Although members of BGLO sororities, through their work, are privy to social rewards and do gain social power and influence through their works, race stands as a barrier to the power and privilege awarded to women in elite white women’s organizations (Kendall, 2002). For this reason, and because BGLO sororities were founded on the goal of racial uplift, it is less clear whether these women truly seek to reproduce upper-class ideals. Many members of AKA are middle-class, however, Whaley (2010) suggests that “their community development work…often speaks as loud as their words” (p. 26).

Intersectionality and the Matrix of Domination

In Black Feminist Thought (1991), Patricia Hill Collins provides a framework for examining Black Feminism through the use of the concepts intersectionality and the matrix of domination. According to Collins, oppressions such as gender and race intersect
and can often work simultaneously causing injustice (p. 18). On the other hand, Collins explains that the matrix of domination is the:

Over-all social organization within which intersecting oppressions originate, develop, and are contained in the United States, such domination has occurred through schools, housing, employment, government and other social institutions that regulate the actual patterns of intersecting oppressions that Black Women encounter (p. 246).

Analyzing the BGLO Sorority through the framework of Collins allows for a more in-depth look into these women’s motives behind community work through the community organization (p. 206). The methods these women employ in these organizations to resists oppression are what inform their community work (p. 250). Collins stipulates that Black women’s activism through Black Feminism “also shows that while individual empowerment is key, only collective action can effectively generate the lasting institutional transformation required for social justice” (p.237).

Theoretical Perspectives for Understanding the BGLO Sorority and its Members’ Civic Engagement

The theoretical perspective that informs my work is Symbolic Interactionism. Symbolic Interactionism insists that “to understand human action, we must focus on social interaction, human thinking, definition of the situation, the present, and the active nature of the human being” (Charon 2010, p. 29). This perspective places a special emphasis on the process of role taking and on the importance of people defining their
environment (Collins 2010, Charon 2010). Symbolic interactionism, when looking at action stipulates that action derives from our definition of the situation. According to Charon:

Action is directed toward the goals and objects we determine to be important. Seeing action as arising from social interaction, interaction with self, and definition emphasizes cause in the present rather than in the past. The decisions by the actor are made in the present. The past is not the cause of an individual’s actions. Nor are objects in the outside environment the cause (p. 135).

This emphasis on the importance of definition of the situation in looking at action is useful in the study of how women in BGLO sororities make sense of and define their balance of work, family, and civic engagement. The way these women define their situations and take on the role of others helps them to navigate their actions in performing this balancing act. A variety of theories fall under the auspices of symbolic interactionism, one of which is role theory.

Role Theory

Biddle (1986) posits that “Role theory concerns one of the most important characteristics of social behavior – the fact that human beings behave in ways that are different and predictable depending on their respective social identities and the situation” (p. 68). Role theory works off of the assumption that people hold certain social positions equipped with behavioral expectations (p.67). Critics of role theory argue that it does not address human agency and that it places too great of an emphasis on social conformity (Jackson, p.49).
Role Strain

The difficulty in acting out roles experienced with familial roles is role strain. Katz and Piotrowski (1983) found that previous studies positing a connection between the number of roles held by an individual and the strain caused by them do not take into account how the experiences of people within those roles may affect their performance. They, however, found that factors like job autonomy, flexibility, and the amount of hours worked are all predictors of strain. More so, they contend that “the intrinsic satisfaction with a role may affect the relative ease or difficulty in enacting other roles” – with this satisfaction outweighing the stress that could be caused by the holding of multiple roles. Additionally, Farmer and Piotrowski (2009) posit that levels of civic engagement may not be affected by the number of roles women occupy and they argue that “it is possible that the multiple role paradigm is Eurocentric and not relevant for African American women because they have a different history of labor force participation and family roles than European American women (199).

Analyzing members of BGLO sororities in terms of role strain enables an understanding of how these women are able to carry out a variety of roles including work roles, familial roles, possible student roles and their commitments to the sorority and other civically engaged organizations. Experiencing higher levels of autonomy in their career role for women of all professions may allow them more ease in how they handle multitudinous roles. Additionally, the support of family members may ease potential strain within familial roles – although single parenting has not been found as a true indicator of additional stress (Katz & Piotrowski, 1983). Also, the intrinsic satisfaction
felt by these women within their civic engagement roles may explain why taking on these roles on top of other roles appear to be done with relative ease and enthusiasm.

*A Neo-Institutionalist Approach to the BGLO Sorority*

In their seminal piece articulating the core arguments inherent in new institutional analysis of organizations, DiMaggio and Powell (1983) argue that organizational change can be a function of both marketplace competition and cooperative exchanges between organizations within a specific organizational field. Dimaggio and Powell go on to assert that over time organizations within a field become more similar to rather than different from each other. They refer to the process through which these organizations become homogeneous through isomorphism and identify three kinds of isomorphic processes, coercive, normative and mimetic processes that occur within organizational fields. Coercive isomorphism occurs when factors external to the organizational field force organizations to conform. Mimetic processes unfold when organizations model themselves and their functions on other organizations in their field. Normative isomorphism happens as a field matures and organizations within the field began to adopt and use a set of professional standard to monitor and sanction behavior in the field (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

A neo-institutional analysis of BGLO sororities provides insight into why BGLOs emerged from social movements like the Niagara and Club Women’s movements, the antecedents of the BGLOs, and why and in what ways BGLO sororities mimic other nonprofit service organizations. Here, I argue that, in part, BGLO sororities are governed by the National Panhellenic Council (NPHC), an umbrella organization that imposes
normative sanctions on individual BGLO, and thus, enforces homogeneity among the
sororities and fraternities under its auspices. This forcing of homogeneity places a large
amount of demand on individual member’s time and energy and can lead to the
organization itself appearing to ask for the undivided loyalty of its members.

The BGLO Sorority as a Greedy Institution

According to Hernandez (2008), because of demands placed on members of
BGLO sororities to fulfill the workload placed on them by the organization, the BGLO
sorority is a greedy institution. Hernandez elaborates by explaining how:

Lewis Coser defines greedy institutions as groups that “make total claims on their
members… they seek exclusive and undivided loyalty.” They are characterized by
voluntary involvement and they encourage loyalty and commitment by offering
members a desirable social identity and status (p. 264).

Looking at the sorority as possibly being a greedy institution, asking for a large
amount of its members’ time and energy, regardless of their other commitments could
help to explain from an organizational standpoint why members may incur role strain, if
they do, while balancing work, family, and civic engagement.

In the growing study of Black Greek Letter Organizations and studies of Black
women and work in Sociology, there are not yet any studies that discuss African
American women in service organizations like sororities. Existing literature posits that
the experiences of working Black women vary from the experiences of white women in
that Black women, until recently, have worked in proportionately greater numbers, and in
different jobs than white women (Jones, 2009). Therefore, this research will answer how
women who are members of a BGLO sorority balance work, family, and civic
engagement. It will seek to address whether these women incur strain while fulfilling
these roles and how they view their management of it. Analyzing members of BGLO sororities in terms of role strain enables an understanding of how these women are able to carry out a variety of roles including work roles, familial roles, and their commitments to the sorority and other civically engaged organizations. Experiencing higher levels of autonomy in their career role for women of all professions may allow them more ease in how they handle multitudinous roles. Additionally, the support of family members may ease potential strain within familial roles – although single parenting has not been found as a true indicator of additional stress (Katz & Piotrowski, 1983). Also, the intrinsic satisfaction felt by these women within their civic engagement roles may explain why taking on these roles on top of other roles appear to be done with relative ease and enthusiasm. It will also seek to address how these women view other sorority members who seem to do it all, and whether they believe stability is a necessity in giving service.
CHAPTER 3: METHODS

In order to answer the questions posed, this study is based on in-depth interviews conducted with consenting sorority members. Interviews utilized a modified life history approach, asking about their lives in the organization, accompanied by a structured set of open-ended interview questions. According to Kathleen Blee (2003), “life histories allow interviewees great latitude in how they talk about their lives” and “life histories string together life events in sequences, suggesting how people understand the patterning of their political and personal lives” (p. 201). This structuring of interviews helps uncover how members understand and view their civic engagement – in their own words.

The Sample

I chose to study Alpha Kappa Alpha because, being a member of the organization, entrée to this group of women was not too arduous and my requests for interviews asking about these women’s personal lives were quite well received. AKA is also the first and largest BGLO sorority – and would have been a great place to start even without my membership. In order to begin to collect such a sample I attended one of my monthly chapter meetings and presented in front of the chapter asking for participants. Additionally, I accepted referrals to recruit through snowball sampling from Sorors I interviewed to other Sorors who would consent to taking part in the study. Eight of the interviewees came through this snowball sampling – as those who participated in the interviews seemed to know which other Sorors would be most interested in also

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2 Soror is in-group language, short for “Sorority Sister.” This use of group-identified language helps them to navigate their view of the distinctiveness and prestige bestowed upon them by group membership. The reproduction of this special in-group language reinforces the bond of the group which in turn propagates group identity and allegiance.
participating. Eight of the interviews took place face-to-face and eight of them were conducted over the phone.

The sixteen women interviewed for the research represent a broad spectrum of the women in Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Incorporated. These are women in different stages of their lives, and in different stages in their membership in the sorority. Some women were initiated into the sorority as undergraduates, and some as graduates. Some were newly initiated, while others have been members of the organization longer than I have been alive. The women in my study range between ages in the early twenties to late sixties.

Six of the eight face-to-face interviews were done with women who reside in a large Midwestern city. The other two face-to-face interviews were done with interviewees residing in a rural University centered town. The other eight interviews, which were done over the phone, were conducted with participants from varying other states. All of these women, however, were from urban areas. Information they all shared which indicated their social class was their employment – or past employment (if retired) - status. With the exception of one executive of a multinational company, interview participants held various occupations in education, social work, administration, and higher education. Additionally, all of the respondents were college educated.
Table 1. 
Interview Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondent</th>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>Years in Sorority</th>
<th>Current Status</th>
<th>Joined in Undergraduate/Graduate</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Children</th>
<th>Professional/Work Status</th>
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<td>Married</td>
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<td>Retired</td>
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<td>Student</td>
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<td>Employed</td>
</tr>
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</tr>
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<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>Active</td>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td>Married</td>
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<td>Employed</td>
</tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<tr>
<td>Shelby</td>
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<td>Active</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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<td>Active</td>
<td>Graduate</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Employed</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Interviews

The interviews took place at respondents’ convenience, either at their homes, in public places like restaurants, or over the phone. The interviews ranged between forty minutes and two hours, with most interviews being around one hour in length. To begin the life history part of the interview I asked participants to tell me about their life in the sorority, their family, their profession, any other organizations they are a member of and

3 Interview participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect their identity.
how they balance it all. Following this section of the interview, I asked two structured interview questions: “looking outside of yourself, how do you believe other Sorors balance work, family, and civic engagement?” and “Do you believe stability is necessary to give service?” The structured questions were designed to build upon the initial question while leaving open room for further anecdotal responses. The interviews, because of their modified life history base, were largely conversational and there were instances where the structured questions were not asked because the respondent answered before they could be asked.

Analysis

Audio recorded interviews were the basis of the analysis. After the interviews were transcribed, the analysis consisted of an inductive content analysis. Specifically, three steps comprised the analysis. The first step was open coding during which initial themes were located in the respondents’ statements. Second, these emergent categories were axial coded, which means that thematic linkages between categories were formulated. The third step was selective coding which entailed a general overview of the axial codes to look for similarities or differences between categories (Glaser, 1992).
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

According to Hernandez (2008), “sororities can be greedy institutions, and the demands they make on their members are not always easy to meet. This is particularly so for alumni members, who must balance the competing needs of family, work, and often school, in addition to their sororities” (p. 263). The data provided much insight into the various ways women in graduate chapters of the Black Greek Letter Organization Sorority, Alpha Kappa Alpha, view their balancing of work, family, and civic engagement. Their ways of defining and viewing this balance was answered through sharing their life history and in answering the broader question of “how do you balance work, family and civic engagement?” Additionally, in answering two structured interview questions of “looking outside of yourself, how do you think other Sorors balance work, family, and civic engagement?”; and “Do you believe stability is necessary to give service?” interview participants further defined their view of balance of these multiple roles. The data also revealed how many of these women believe the organization, through creating a space for fostering relationships with other women can serve to provide stability for its members.

The Balancing Act

All of the women interviewed spoke to their experiences in balancing their work, family, and civic engagement. These women through telling their own life histories, told how they came into the sorority, began their professional lives, how they have gone about raising children (if they did), how they have gone about caring for elderly parents, and about how they negotiate keeping connected with their loved-ones while working and
being civically engaged. In discussing their civic engagement it was revealed that their engagement was not at all limited to only the sorority, as all of the women interviewed were also active in other organizations and many of the respondents played active roles in their respective churches.

*Experiencing Classic Role Strain*

Almost all of the women discuss their different methods and share different strategies of how they have defined and navigated balance in their lives. Of the 16 respondents, only two discussed what would be classic role strain per Katz and Piotrowski (1982). These two women, interviewees Candace and Stacey, describe the difficulty they incurred in balancing their roles (although they later describe their methods for balancing). Candace describes experiencing a significant difficulty in balancing work, family, and civic engagement after the birth of her first child:

Candace: When you talk about the life balance, that really came along in 2007 when my son came along and that’s where I had, it took me a long time to figure out ok what was important to me because I was very, very active in the community. And it wouldn’t be uncommon for me to be out every single night doing something. When my son came along, obviously I couldn’t do all of that and it obviously was a big shock to my system. A big shock. It was very, very difficult. I could not figure out, I obviously knew what I did before, I couldn’t do it anymore. And that was a very, very difficult time, trying to figure out, like ok now I’ve lost me. Because I can’t do the same things that I used to do, didn’t know what to do. I wanted to make sure I was a good mother. I have a demanding job, my service in Alpha Kappa Alpha I couldn’t do it at the same level. And I had to just figure out what to do, and it actually took me 5 years you know, because I got to a point where I said I can’t do anything, so I didn’t do anything. Although respondent I does not have children, she describes a classic form of role strain she incurred when she became president of her chapter. She describes how her reluctance to allow other members to aid her in balancing her role as chapter president affected her ability to balance without feeling what she describes as struggling:
Stacey: I think I struggled. I really struggled with it being Basileus\(^4\), and I don’t have children. Um, but, I mean, a lot of times I would put things off that I knew I had to do and then there would be like one day where I would try to catch up on everything. When I first became Basileus I think I was trying to do a lot and even some of the Sorors said we can do that, let us help you, and so that’s just the type of person that I am, like really organized. I would rather do it the way I want it done versus somebody doing it and not doing it the way I want it done. So my second year I started to delegate a little bit more and let other people do tasks, which I realized I needed to do, because I wasn’t going to be Basileus forever.

*Achieving Balance: Time Management, Prioritizing and Just Making it Work*

The other 14 participants did not discuss classic role strain, but balance – or the methods and strategies they have figured out to achieve balance. The balance they describe deviates from classic role strain in that they do not discuss stress, anxiety or struggling. They discuss the creation and negotiation of methods to get all of their tasks completed. For these respondents, finding this balance was simple to articulate came down to time management. They describe the idea of maximizing the time they have, creating to-do lists and keeping their priorities in check strategies for carrying out their various roles:

Ashley: You have to be able to maximize your time, that’s what it boils down to. And it’s not that you have to take anything lightly or that you’re not giving anything your full attention it’s just that you have to be able to do multiple things at once.

Henrietta: I think it is a balance and you just have to know yourself and figure out because family is important. That’s key, that’s first. You’ve got to work in order to make a living, and you have to decide yourself what other things you can do that are not going to compromise your family or your work.

Andrea: I think that it’s not being a superwoman because we are never that, it’s just being able to know your priorities, what’s important and then making sure that you make time for it. What’s important to where ok well, I can’t go to this particular function but I’m going to make this one… Almost like a checks and balances. Positives. Something that you know you can be a bit productive with.

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\(^4\) Basileus is the formal Greek title for ‘President’ used by members of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Incorporated.
Roberta: My balance comes from support and I am a self-motivated person. I usually do this by setting timelines. Either written or mental, I set a date and I work to that date.

Sandra: I feel glad now that I can finally get mine back into the picture. But it still has a place in everything that’s going on. It’s not as high, priority wise as it could be, as I would like it to be but that’s just because you know, I’m not as much of a worker-bee as other people so I can still do the things that I have to do but still focus on my kids or anything else that I may have that I might have more of a worker-bee expectation to be involved in.

Tamara: Well for me how I balance it is I always make time for myself and I carve out, ok, this is my quiet time, this is my relaxation time to get my mind, body, and spirit back in order. Um, I may, well, I have not done it lately but I usually go and I have a full body massage or a facial and every two weeks religiously I always get a pedicure and a manicure and we eat out quite a bit. So that’s very relaxing for us so I don’t have to cook because there’s really no one here.

Shelby: I just kind of make things work for me. When you want to do something you just make it work.

Rita: I travel a bit so I don't take on anything that's long term. I take on short term projects.

Janice: Actually I do a lot of AKA work, at work. I will often put together agendas and you know, things like that. So I do use dome of my work time to do AKA work, just because, if I have some downtime or during lunch I will do some of my AKA work, if I need to do research on something.

Stacey: If I’m at the AKA meeting then my mind is focused on that. And I’m trying work on doing that, like if I’m at home with my husband, I’m trying to cut everything else out. I’m trying to be in the moment. Because I think for so many years, there was so much going on, it’s like you don’t know which way you’re going, you don’t know which way you’re coming and you’re not like in the moment. Like you look back and you don’t even remember stuff because you were just going through the motions. So I’m still, like I said, trying to work on that but I think I’m doing a lot better than I did when I was in the midst of it all.

Learning to Say No

Many of the participants described their process of learning to balance as a system of learning what they could and could not do. This process of learning balance was described by many of them as learning to say no to things that they could not take part in, committees they could not chair or sit on, or programs they could not attend. For one of
these women it meant prioritizing and deciding which civic organizations she could take part in:

Candace: I had to figure out what was most important to me. Because I enjoyed all of the things that I did, but I had to figure it out. So I belonged to 5 organizations, so I now only keep two, and that’s Alpha Kappa Alpha and the LINKS5.

For others, learning to say no meant not only figuring out what they could and could not do, but was also about learning to “step back” or to lean on other sorority sisters for assistance. The importance of learning weaknesses or shortcomings for these women is two-fold in that it asks them to learn about the strengths of their Sorors and to rely on the organization for stability:

Katherine: What you basically have to do, like I said, is just know what you can do and what you can’t do. And when you can’t do it you just step back and let someone else do it, because if you can’t someone will do it any way.

Henrietta: You need to have a passion for the things that you do, and for me that’s about giving back. Especially for me I feel that I’ve been very blessed in my life and professionally I worked in the field of child welfare for over 30 plus years and so I have a passion for children. So, um, I just think it’s important to have a passion for things that you do but also realize that you can’t do everything. And when it comes to balancing all of it you need to learn how to say no to some things and realize that other people have skills and talents and that sometimes rather than you stepping to the plate to do something, which can get you off balance, you just have to say, somebody else can do that to

*Balancing Family*

Because the question of balance was left open to respondents’ individual definition, some women’s definition of balance and their strategies surrounding balance were all family-oriented. These Sorors discuss many different aspects of balancing familial obligations ranging from keeping in contact with their family from long distances

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5 The Links Incorporated is historically African American not-for-profit international women’s organization.
to negotiating time to spend with their children on a daily basis. Ashley, for example, describes carving out time to maintain a relationship with her family across the country:

Ashley: For the last four years I haven’t been with them. However, in order to have a relationship in any capacity it has to be nurtured. So whether that means I’m making visits there or I’m on the phone with my sister for 4 hours or what have you, I still have to put the time in.

Rita discusses her method for raising her children while being active which included planning meals in advance, relying on child care and taking her children with her or leaving them for brief periods while she took part in activities like interviewee Janice. Likewise, interviewee Marie describes how her ability to get work done is contingent on her son’s sleeping pattern and participants Tamara and Shelby discuss how they created time for their children by adjusting their other priorities:

Rita: I planned the meals and I cooked on the weekends. I cooked at least 2 or 3 meals on the weekend so all I had to do was heat them up through the week. So the meals would probably last through Thursday and then we would have a simple meal, maybe as my son would call them ‘cowboy beans and hotdogs [laugh]. We would make beans and hotdogs or I would pick up something and you know I’d have several things going on at the same time like laundry; my children were responsible for their chores. They had their chores of cleaning the house. But I also ran a business, I forgot about that. I managed real estate properties also and my children helped me with that. I also had extremely good child care and they were available to me sometimes in the evenings. A lot of time I just took my children with me. I was also involved in an Alumni Association; I was the secretary for that [laugh]. So I often took my children with me to the library when we would have meetings. In tots and teens they were involved so they were able to be with me. And after my children were older then I could leave them, fortunately when they were around 12 then I could leave them for short periods of time while I attended a meeting. I was involved with their school activities and just, I’m very proud of how they turned out

Janice: But it’s a lot of scheduling and trying to take him with me going places, or taking him and dropping him off somewhere and going you know, to do AKA stuff. I mean it’s gotten much easier now that he’s 13, he’s older and he can stay by himself sometimes. But it’s just a lot of time management.
Marie: And even when he’s, you know, the only time during the day that I really get a chance to do other things is when he’s sleeping. So on a good day he’ll sleep for like 2 hours and I’m like great so I get to clean and work on my paper.

Tamara: It was a little bit easier to balance once I, well let me back up, when I became active in the sorority and I had my daughter, and I had somebody watching her it wasn’t that bad because my job was 9-5. And it was, I had it to an art. I’m very organized and I do everything like clockwork, but when I went to [company] it was a little bit of a challenge because it wasn’t a 9-5 job, like it’s like 9-9 and so I always made sure that whatever I did, I left work at 5 and I made sure like Monday, Wednesday and Friday, if I leave work at 5, I don’t turn my computer on until after she goes to bed at 8. And then from 8 to like whatever time, like 8-10, I turn my computer on and do stuff for work. So I carved out a certain time that I was going to focus specifically on my family and focus on my daughter. I wasn’t going to have anything else get in that space. No talking on the phone, no watching TV, it was just the two of us and that was it. So I prioritized, you have to prioritize what you’ve got to do and you can’t let anything else get in that space.

Shelby: When my daughter was younger she was my first priority. If I had grocery shopping to do, I never wanted to pick her up from school and have to drag her to the grocery store and to the bank and like that. I did all of those kind of errands on my lunch. Or if she was with an activity, because she was involved in a lot, I would kind of run and do things then. But I was a parent who was always there.

Likewise, respondent Nicole describes the challenge of balancing work, education, family and being active in a graduate chapter:

Nicole: I think it’s a challenge for anyone to balance working and continued education, family life, and serving in a graduate chapter. I think it’s, and if we take ourselves outside of being in a graduate chapter and just as normal human beings working families, working mothers, fathers etc. it’s tough, especially if you have a job that is not 9-5 where you have involvement in the community and in other organizations. You have to balance your time at work, your commitments at work, committees you sit on at work, if you have to stay over for work then you have to be home for your family and for me it’s a challenge. I was telling my friend the other day that my husband texted me and said ‘I remember having a wife’ [laugh] and we’ve only been married, what, five months. Because I’m always here, I’m always at work, if I’m not doing something specifically related to my job I’m participating in a project for a student organization.
A Spouse in a BGLO Fraternity

For a few respondents having a spouse in a BGLO fraternity was another key element aiding their ability to balance. These women describe how a spouse who is also active in their organization is more likely to be understanding of the time commitment they have made to the sorority. They also describe how a spouse’s membership in a BGLO fraternity may help to ease tension when a large amount of their time is spent on their organization:

Rita: I think it depends on your family dynamics and situations. Like if you have supportive family members and a spouse, or if you have an active spouse, it’s easier and very supportive.

Marie: If I say I’m going to be gone for a couple hours at this chapter meeting, he gets that. And so I, it’s always interesting to me to see women who are in Greek letter organizations in general and the decisions they make about who they marry. Because I think that there’s a certain understanding. You know, we both come from a certain Greek background so when he’s like hey I’m going to be out until I don’t know, I’m like ok, I’ll see you when you get home. Because I’ve been there, I’ve done that, I kind of understand and we’ve both seen friends of ours where one person is a member of an organization and the other isn’t and it kind of breeds tension I think because you just don’t have that experience. You can try to understand it but you’re not from it so it’s not really the same. So I think that um, the fact that my husband is Greek makes a difference and I think also that we are in a similar career path, kind of awesome

Ebb and Flow/ Life Course

Participants described different life stages that they view as either increasing or decreasing their ability to balance multitudinous roles. Some of the life stages they described were being single or recently out of their undergraduate years, just coming into their profession, having and raising small children, and growing older. As participants Sandra and Janice describe:
Sandra: Because, let’s be honest, a lot of us are always, sometimes there is always so much stuff going on within our lives and within our jobs that we have our ebbs and flows, so that’s a situation to be where there’s not a lot of stability but I don’t think it should prevent you from doing the best and giving the best service wise. Janice: You’ll have times where Sorors are very active when they are single, they don’t have family. Then once they get married or once they have children then they tend to step back from the sorority and they’re gone for about 10-12 years and then they come back. And you might have a Soror who you know, she decides, I’m just going to spend time with my children; she decides that this isn’t important to me anymore. So you kind of get every kind of scenario.

The Single Life

Many of the respondents shared the belief that when a woman in the sorority is young and/or single, with less familial obligations, that she is likely to be more active in the organization. However others reflecting on their own experience shared that their activity in a graduate chapter actually waned in the transition between undergraduate and graduate life.

When just joining a graduate chapter from undergraduate.

Hernandez (2008) posits that “once they graduate from college and begin their professional careers and start their own families, many black sorority members seek to continue the camaraderie, community activism, and networks provided by their sororities…as part of a sisterhood that continued after college” (p.254). For Ashley, who joined in undergraduate, continuing to seek that camaraderie and community activism as a single woman in a new city led to increased activity in her chapter:

Ashley: Moved to a new city with no family or friends and the Sorority was the only thing that I knew, it was kind of, that and work, it was kind of if I needed to stay up until 3 o’clock in the morning assembling whatever the case may have been at the time it was fine because I didn’t exactly have a family or you know people to go home to and take care of. If I missed a meal because I was working it was fine because it was just myself that I was worried about. As far as time goes, I think that in different stages it does become more difficult to give so much time.
specifically, when I was in New York and I didn’t have to worry about anyone but myself I was able to be more actively involved and I didn’t have a limit to what I would do.

Interviewees Marie and Cheryl describe the transition period between undergraduate and graduate chapters to be the reason for a decrease in their activity in the organization. Although they describe their activity waning, they also discuss how important the relationships with the women in their undergraduate chapter were to them, leading to them seeking to sustain membership in the organization through financial activity with their graduate chapter.

Marie: Uh, so yeah, [chapter name] was my first graduate chapter and that was my first peep-hole like you, know, so I wasn’t very active only because I was still, I think like fresh out of undergrad and I was still very connected to my undergrad chapter so I was like, those were my friends, like those were my line sisters, like those are who I crossed with, so I wasn’t very active with grad chapter but I was financial.

Cheryl: My time with them was very limited because study was the first thing on my list of things to do so I can’t really confess or suggest that I was particularly active then, I simply had no time to be active, but I did have a network of friends and that’s something that helps to sustain one when one is in law school. Uh, the following year I did join the grad chapter and from time to time I went to the meetings, I wasn’t active my second or my third year, I just, law school was my focus and I just didn’t have time to be engaged. The year I graduated I became fully engaged.

*Staying single.*

Not all women in the organization, or in this study, went on to become married. One of the women who stayed single described how being single meant not needing to slow activity in the organization. Similarly to younger Sorors explaining being single, Katherine sees being single as not having to worry about familial obligations:

Katherine: Now the other part to that is that I don’t have children and I’m not married so once I didn’t have to worry about taking away from anything a family may have needed.
For many of these respondents, a young or single Soror, with fewer obligations to family is more likely to be active in the sorority. They describe feeling limitless in the amount of activity they could partake in and filling the period of time where they “didn’t have to worry about anyone” but themselves with sororal projects. Other respondents, however, believe that there is actually a decline in activity in the transition period between undergraduate and graduate membership. These women speak of their own experiences of the difficulty of leaving the relationships formed with their undergraduate chapter members to take on membership in a graduate chapter. For those interviewees who remained unmarried, staying single meant continuously staying active in their graduate chapter.

*Having Children*

For many of the respondents with children, having children is a pivotal point of this ebb and flow. Whereas some of these Sorors describe their activity as slowing or stopping when they had young children, others describe how they only had to change their strategies for balance when their children were young.

*Before having children.*

Respondent Candace describes her activity in the organization before having her child and how this was altered significantly by the birth of her son:

Candace: At that time the balance wasn’t that busy. You know, I thought I was busy, but it wasn’t until my son came around that I really understood what busy meant. Because I was basically a free spirit, I could come and go as I pleased and you know, I actually rarely said no which is why I was involved in so many things. And it’s not that I didn’t like what I was doing – like I was saying yes and I didn’t like it – I really enjoyed what I was doing. So it took some time to figure
out that ok, this is a part of your life, that a lot of your counterparts did this when they were in your twenties. And now they are your age and their kids are out of college, they’re grown and my friends are grandmothers. Now they’re free spirits and can come and go as you please.

*Having young children.*

Other participants describe their experience or their perception of the ebb and flow surrounding having children a variety of ways. A few of them describe having young children as being a period of decreased or no activity for them in the organization while others describe methods of balancing such as relying on another Soror’s older child to watch their child or bringing their child with them. All of the Sorors who describe these experiences speak of having young children, or children who are not yet old enough to watch themselves.

Candace: You can have it all but just not at the same time. So that’s where I am. I can have it all. I can have been Basileus, and on national committees and all of that but I can’t do it all at the same time. You know, being a mom that is transporting your child all over the place, and this that and the other, you just can’t do it all at the same time.

Rita: because of work and because of being a single parent, I more or less dedicated my time and energy and resources to my children's activities and by the time that they were up and about, that's when I decided to pursue my dreams.

Henrietta: And there will be ebbs and flows, and mountains and valleys in terms of, because I always tell young mothers that are new to the chapter that your responsibility now is to your children. There are seasons in life for everything. And when you have small children or even legacy aged children, and sometimes even teenagers, you have to do what you need to do to make sure that they are developing and growing as they need to be. So that may mean that you work on a committee like scholarship where you can maybe go to one meeting and then the essays are sent to you, you read it, you score it. You may not be able to attend the meeting where you decide on the finalists, you may not be able to interview, but at least you still have your hand in it.

Rita: well I think it’s difficult for young Sorors. I was an older person coming into the sorority but the younger Sorors who were just getting married and having a family and going back to graduate school it was very difficult for them time wise and financially so a lot of them dropped out for a while to take care of their educational and their family needs. I can understand that because I didn’t join the
sorority until my family’s needs were taken care of. The other thing that I’ve found is that once their lives stabilize then they are more able to come back and give their reasonable service. I think older Sorors have the financial wherewithal and the mental and emotional capacity to spearhead offices or committees in order to further the chapter’s goals.

Marie: Uh, I think right now, like I said yes, time wise being a student and being a parent come first. But I um, I think it’s important to be involved, I think it’s important to do things outside of your home and you know, do things besides just for yourself.

Tamara: I have been an active member for the last 15 years. I’m a silver star and a life member, but I have been active for the last 15 years but I took a break when I had my daughter so that I could focus solely on her. Because here’s the family part, I was a single mom at the time and it’s difficult finding babysitters and you know, I’m very particular with my daughter and who watches her and who keeps her so at the time I was not active until she got a little bit older where I could find somebody where she could stay with them. And the good thing is the person who could babysit her was a Sorors daughter and her mom was in the graduate chapter so it all worked out really good.

Shelby: Well, I don’t know, times are different from when I had my kids. And well, a lot of people, well a lot of people kind of bailed out when their kids were little because it’s kind of hard to do all of that.

Lenore: When my children came, I just packed them up and kept moving with them. Sometimes I would get the babysitting services they had [at conferences] or my husband would go and he would keep her. Sometimes my mom might go with me or I left her with my mother. A lot of times I would take her with me. Just take some books and put her in a room nearby or something like that. Or sometimes she’d, my husband would keep her or I’d just get babysitters and then there were quite a few of us who had children at the same time, we just kind of uh, took turns and used babysitters.

Growing Older

For Sorors growing older in both age and/or years in the sorority meant their activity in the chapter began to wane. For older women like Rita, this stage of life means enjoying being retired and limiting the amount of activity in a chapter in favor of more leisurely activities. For other older members like Henrietta, this stage of life means participating in elder care of her mother and cousin, limiting her level activity in her chapter:
Rita: Because I’m in a different stage in my life where I’m retired and I have the wherewithal to travel, those experiences are more meaningful to me and my husband at this point of our lives because of the sacrifices we’ve made. So we do our reasonable service at church and for our Greek organizations but we also carve out a lot of time for ourselves.

Henrietta: I think what it is, I tend to, and my life if different. I have an elderly mom and I’m not a spring chicken. So I don’t go, I don’t have the stamina to go, like usually I go to the candidates nights that are held, that the chapters participate in sponsoring but year it was like no, I’m not going. So, and for me, like right through here is a busy time because of cluster and the MIP, but there were times where I was working so I can’t say there’s any, it may be a little less but it ebbs, it flows and ebbs.

Looking Forward

Many respondents who saw themselves in the ebbs and flows of activity in the organization shared their hopes for the future. Some of the women looked forward to being at a stage in their life where they could be more active, some saw their activity as never waning, and others saw it declining as they hoped to become less active to focus more on their familial obligations:

Marie: So I hope to kind of get back uh, to that once he’s a little bit older and obviously once I’m done with my dissertation. Unfortunately now is just not the time.

Sandra: Um, so I guess that’s kind of my full circle journey when I first came in to where I’m at now. I still, I know there is room for me to be even more active, at some point and time, just not yet.

Stacey: I think I will always be active in the sorority. I will always be doing something. That’s just a commitment that I’ve made to myself. Like I know I don’t have children yet but you know when I do, it’s still something that I’ve committed myself to, like I will still be active, and I will still pay my dues.

Janice: So yeah, it’s really a lot of scheduling, a lot of finding places for him to go and you know, but the upside is I’m doing it now, he’s a 8th grader, so when he really gets into high school 10th grade, 11th grade, 12th grade, I’ll be done, it won’t be as stressful during those years I really need to be focused on him and getting him together and college and all of that.

In discussing how they balance, all of the women interviewed spoke of their experiences in balancing work, familial obligations and their civic engagement through
the sorority. These women discussed the strategies and methods they used to navigate these multitudinous roles. Many of them described the ebb and flow of activity in the organization based on the different stages in their lives including being single, having children and getting older.

Belief of How Other Sorors Balance

Responses about their belief about how other Sorors balance work, family, and civic engagement yielded two different types of responses. While some Sorors simply could not fathom how other women are able to do this, others either attributed this ability to balance to spousal or familial support. There were a few respondents who believed that, even given a perception of balance, there must be something suffering in the lives of Sorors who appear to be able to do it all.

Spousal Support

Respondents like Andrea, Nicole, Shelby and Janice believed that spousal support plays a large role in Sorors ability to balance their work, family and civic engagement. Similarly to those participants who saw having a spouse in a BGLO fraternity as a method of balance, these women see having a spouse who is understanding of the time commitment required by active membership in the organization to be essential to the prosperity of their balance:

Andrea: If they have a very stable relationship with their significant other, their husbands, boyfriends, or whatever it may be, and they have children and they have to work; I think that knowing that that individual is involved in a grad chapter and the person they are with knows this, I think that they should understand that once a month she is going to grad chapter and I won’t see her from about 10 o’clock until about 5 o’clock. And I think that’s important. It’s good to have that communication and for the husbands and the boyfriends to
know oh you know the third time out of the month there is grad chapter or maybe some type of community service.

Nicole: People do it really well because they have probably a great husband at home and they have great, and that helps, but it’s really hard to do, to be a great wife and a mother, have a great job and do great in all of those other areas and give everybody equal.

Shelby: And you know sometimes if you have a husband they can share some of the responsibility of being home to take care of the child. You know, while you’re at a meeting.

Janice: Well most of them that I see that are balancing that have families, they are usually married. Um, which tends to make it much easier I think because you have, if you have kids and you have a husband, you can go do what you need to do and the kids are with your husband. You don’t have to worry about finding a baby sitter, or making sure they have food to eat, you know, trying to figure out all of these things that you need to do before you can do what you need to do. Um, you can kind of leave that to him.

Interestingly, Andrea, Shelby and Janice are all unmarried and very active members of their respective chapters. Respondents Shelby and Janice are both single parents who previously discussed their methods of balance without spousal support.

*Familial Support*

For a few participants, the support of family members is especially instrumental for other Sorors ability to balance. This familial support is described as coming in the form of child care. Respondents Candace and Stacey explain how they believe familial support helps other Sorors maintain their standing in the organization:

Candace: I think for a lot of people they have family to help them. See, I don’t have family to help me so I don’t have anybody like “oh mom would you go pick [son’s name] up.” I don’t have that. So for a lot of folks, that is what helps them be able to balance… I know for a fact as I look at other Sorors, they either have a family or they have someone that keeps their child. And I know a number of people that have nannies. So, you know, it’s that extra help that you know, helps them get through.

Stacey: I see that a lot of the people who have the high positions when they travel they will either have their husband or they will have a grandparent like their mother or father, grandparent to the kid, who is watching the child.

*Something has to Suffer*
A Few respondents believe that something has to be suffering in the lives of other Sorors who appear to have the ability to balance it all. For these respondents, having it all comes at a considerable cost; and they share anecdotes of sorority sisters they know who have suffered because of their extreme amount of activity in the organization:

Ashley: I know there are several people that I knew that had um, a lot going on with other organizations outside of AKA but at the same time their involvement in AKA decreased.
Marie: I honestly don’t know how they do it because I feel like honestly something has to suffer, and I hope to not be in that position and I hope to find a way to manage it, um and it’s funny because whenever I hear stories about why people kind of step down or have decided to not take part in something, it tends to be family related. So it’s like, oh my husband is like I need to come home. Point blank period, like I’m doing too much time in this, and so home and family are suffering.
Stacey: I have also seen several women I have served with go through divorce after they have served at that level, either as a Basileus or as a regional director. I mean several have gone through divorce. Um, I can tell you one story of someone I’m pretty close with, she was Basileus, she came home one day after a sorority meeting and her husband had packed all of his stuff and left her with her daughter and said she had put way too much time toward AKA and he couldn’t deal with it anymore. So that was it.

Is Stability Necessary to Give Service?

In answering the question “is stability necessary to give service,” participants responded by either describing how it necessary to at least be financially stable to maintain general activity in the sorority, or they began to describe how stability was not a necessity.

*Financial Stability... at least*

Active membership in BGLO sororities requires meeting the financial obligations (dues) of the organization. According to Hernandez (2008) “inactive sisters are welcomed back into the fold whenever they are ready to be official (i.e. dues-paying) members
again…If a woman’s lifestyle or economic situation does not allow her to participate in
the way she wants, she can negotiate her relationship with the sorority” (p. 267). This
negotiation however, if it involves paying dues, is often the choice between being
completely active or inactive. For participants like Sandra and Candace, financial
stability is at the root of the ability to give service through the organization:

Sandra: It depends on what kind of stability you’re talking about. I mean, I think
to a degree, obviously it’s nice to have some type of financial stability when you
can stay financially active and can be an active participant in that way.
Candace: Yeah, you’ve got to have some stability. And what I mean when I say
stability – if you don’t have anybody to watch your child and you can’t bring your
child with you, then there are some things you obviously can’t do. I can’t bring
my child to a sorority meeting, and every time I go to a sorority meeting I have to
pay $50 for a babysitter, so that’s $50 every time I go to a chapter meeting. So
you’re going to have to have the ability to pay that amount or the support to be
able to do some of these things, because you can’t always take your child with
you so you do need to have some type of stability.

Stability as Not Necessary for Service: Gaining Stability Through the Organization

Roberts (2011) posits that “BGLOs support members’ unconventional
professional (and extra organizational) pursuits. More important, we can envision how
BGLOs serve as a base of social support that energizes members to meet adversity with
resistance” (p. 68). An interesting finding came about in asking participants whether they
believe stability is necessary for giving service. A few Sorors, in discussing how stability
was not a necessity in giving service, explained this by positing that stability for members
could be gained from the organization.

Andrea: And I think it’s the reason why we should be in grad chapters because it
allows us to work together. If you’re not stable, you might meet Sorors who are
stable spiritually, mentally, financially, and emotionally that can say let me take
my Soror’s hand and walk with her.
Marie: Like I need to have something that’s for me and especially more so now
than before because my husband is a student now and he’s the one who is in class
all day and he’s in the library …And he has, I think more pressure because he has like papers and things like that but because of that I need, I think to have other things to do besides just be a parent... Um, you know I take care of my family, I do what I need to do but my identity is more than just a parent. I’m more than just a mom.

Janice: And then we also are very close and we can lean on each other as far as if something is going on or if we need help, I mean, you know, some of us have kids and you know some have older kids that can watch younger kids and so that’s really helpful in doing things.

Cheryl: So in terms of having support, yes I think that the support that you speak of is the synergistic support that working with other people provides.

Ashley: I think that a lot of people get stability from the organization. A lot of people get stability from within the organization because if you think about it like this, whether you have a chapter of 5 or 500, you have one singular common denominator, and you are all committed to this organization. And whether it’s this committee or that committee, nine times out of ten you will be able to lean on your sisters and they will be able to lean on you. So in some aspects where people may not feel needed in their home life, they are needed in the sorority and that provides a balance for them, you know, or they may not have they may not have the comfort level or the bonding or whatever with friendships outside or with their personal life, but they have that within the sorority and that provides the balance for them. So I think that it kind of works two-fold, but you do have to have a certain mental and emotional stability in your personal life. However, I think the sorority provides the extra if you don’t, if you’re just not all the way there.

For some of the respondents, the only type of stability necessary to give service through the organization was financial stability, as paying dues is the separator between active and inactive members of the sorority. These members describe how being financially stable is important to maintain active membership in the organization and to afford the balance of raising children and attending sorority activities. Other interviewees generally believed that stability was not necessary to give service and, instead, shared the belief that stability for members could be gained through the organization. These women describe how the relationships built with other women in the sorority can serve as a base of stability for members.
CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS

To summarize, in this study, women in graduate chapters of Black Greek Letter Organization sororities spoke of their experiences in balancing work, familial obligations, and their civic engagement through their sorority, Alpha Kappa Alpha. Through sharing their life history and responding to two structured interview questions, these women told of how they came into the organization, began their professional lives, how they have gone about raising children, caring for elderly parents, growing older in the organization, and about how they negotiate keeping connected with their loved ones while working and being civically engaged.

While two of the interview participants discussed what would be classical role strain, the majority of the participants discussed not role strain, but balance. They, instead of discussing experiencing stress or conflict, describe the creation and negotiation of methods to balance of their roles. For many of these women this balance boils down to time management and prioritizing. For some of these women prioritizing means learning to say no to tasks within the organization that they cannot handle, and to rely on other sorority sisters to complete these tasks. For other women this balance relies heavily on their ability to manage their familial obligations through negotiating maintaining strong relationships with their family members. Other important factors for these women in the ability to balance is what they view to be the ebb and flows of their activity in the organization because of various stages of their lives including just joining a chapter from undergraduate, having children and growing older. For these women, these different life stages determine their ability to balance graduate chapter activity.
The interview participants also revealed how they believe other sorority sisters are able to balance. They believe that spousal support and familial support are instrumental to sustaining balance in the lives of their Sorors. A few of these women believe this even when they with the lack of these things are able to create a balance. On the flip side, a few participants hold some doubts about other Sorors' abilities to balance and believe that something must suffer in the lives of their sisters who appear to be able to do it all. One of the most profound findings of this study is that although some of these women believe that financial stability is at least necessary to maintain active membership in the organization, many women believe that if a Soror lacks the ability to balance that it can be found through the organization. These women see their organization and the relationships with other members that it fosters to be a source of support and balance in their lives.

This research begins to fill the gap left by works by scholars like Hochschild in that it adds to the Sociological study of working Black women in a field that generally regards experiences of women and work as being race neutral. The women in this study take on a “third shift” of sorts in that they not only work and care for their families, but they also take part in community work. Hochschild discusses balance, and the women in this study exhibit balance in spite of the difference in their experiences with work because of race. In her work on emotional labor, Hochschild further discusses how women balance – and in order to achieve balance she finds that the women her study draw on emotional labor. This research, however finds that the women in the sample
discover stability and the ability to balance through their organization and thus use the organization as their resource.

Theoretical Implications

Symbolic interactionism informs this study as it is based on the importance of people defining their own environment and how their actions arise from these definitions. The women in this study explain how they define the act of service through their sorority. This emphasis on the importance of definition of the situation in looking at action is useful in the study of how women in BGLO sororities make sense of, and define, their balance of work, family, and civic engagement. The ways in which these women define their situations and take on the role of others helps them to navigate their actions in performing this balancing act.

Regarding role theory and role strain, the respondents in this study juggle the roles that they view as their respective social identities. Aside from two interviewees, the women do not express what Katz and Piotrowski (1983) describe as the difficulty in acting our roles experienced with familial roles. This could be because their level of satisfaction with these roles eases feelings of difficulty or because the African American woman’s experience with work has historically been different, changing their relationship with the multiple role paradigm. While analyzing members of BGLO sororities in terms of role strain enables an understanding out how these women are able to carry out a variety of roles including work roles, familial roles, possible student roles and their commitments to the sorority and other civic organizations – the majority of these women do not express typical role strain but instead discuss balance.
The neo-institutional analysis of BGLO sororities helps to explain how African American fraternal organizations emerged from social movements like the Black Club Women’s Movement and have grown to functioning as nonprofit organizations. The duties these women fulfill in their graduate chapter are indicative of the emotional work performed by employees of a non-profit organization. The amount of activity respondents describe can be viewed as their commitment made to a greedy institution – especially if the organization asks for this time commitment in addition to the roles of family member and working professional – asking for balance.

Limitations

This study is limited in that it only involved 16 participants, half of which were from the same large Midwestern city. A larger and perhaps more geographically spread out sample may have yielded different responses. Additionally, the majority (11) of the respondents were over 40 years old. A sample including more women in their 20s and 30s may have yielded different views of balance and/or role strain.

Contribution to Scholarship

This study contributes to the existing scholarship on professional Black women and the ways in which they view their community work, especially when it is conducted through the larger organization of the BGLO sorority. This study is unique in that it explains the how of how these women are able to balance their commitment to community alongside their familial obligations and professional careers. This study opens up the sociological study of women and work as not race neutral and creates a space for further studies of Black women and work, and women in BGLO sororities – to which
there are very few. This study also provides further insight into the importance of the BGLO sorority, not only to the community but to the women who serve as members of it.

Future Directions

This study suggests that further exploration into the experiences of women in graduate chapters of Black Greek Letter Organizations is needed. Moreover, there is a need to look into how class may affect these women’s experiences with balancing community work. Future scholarship on women in Black Greek letter organizations would benefit greatly from looking deeply into the influence of class on balance. Additionally, further investigation to how geographic location affects the ability to balance would be interesting. Investigation into how women in graduate chapters from rural areas view their balance of work, family, and civic engagement would help to provide a more well-rounded view of their balance.

This study finds that women in graduate chapters of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority, Incorporated, a Black Greek letter organization sorority, balance work family and civic engagement in a variety of ways. Most importantly, this study finds that participants shared the belief that stability for members could be gained through the organization. These women describe how the relationships built with other women in the sorority can serve as a base of stability for members.
WORKS CITED


