

In-depth interviews with thirteen white and thirteen black sorority members at two college campuses show that white sororities encourage romantic pairings ("getting a man") evidenced by their extensive social affairs and formal recognitions for women who achieve relationship milestones, while black sororities focus on careers and community service ("getting ahead") evidenced by their reliance on sorority alumnae for career networking and by their extensive involvement in community service. The authors argue that the key to understanding the variation lies in the different histories and current structural positions of the groups. For black sororities, historic images of strong, independent black women and the modern reality of black female marriage and poverty rates have shaped the sorority structure. White sororities have emphasized finding a man as a source of support, an orientation at odds both with a modern reality that dictates labor force participation for all women and with members' career aspirations.

GETTING A MAN OR GETTING AHEAD

A Comparison of White and Black Sororities

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YOUNG WOMEN on the threshold of adulthood must pass through a maze of conflicting expectations about how a woman should organize her life. For white women, traditional societal expectations encourage her to devise a plan that relies on men for financial support, and thus, even at young ages, many concentrate significant amounts of energy in the pursuit of a man. The media, schools, parents, and peer groups all endorse this notion of female accomplishment (Cowie and Lees 1981; Handler 1995; Holland and Eisenhart 1990; Lees 1986; Martin and Hummer 1989; Sanday 1990). Yet, these young women receive a concurrent message about the importance of economic self-reliance in an era of rising rates of divorce and single-parent

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families. More glamorous versions of this message emphasize the joys to be found in careers.

Young black women also receive the cultural injunction that feminine success entails marriage to a man, but such messages are tempered to a greater extent than they are for white women by admonitions for independence. As Collins (1991, 42) discovered when asking African American women students about lessons their mothers taught them about men, most answers stressed self-reliance and resourcefulness: "Go to school first and get a good education—don't get too serious too young"; "Make sure that you can take care of yourself before you settle down"; and "Want more for yourself than just a man." Higginbotham and Weber's (1992) quantitative analyses led them to similar conclusions. Whereas between 18 and 22 percent of white parents stressed marriage as a primary goal for their daughters in the sample, the corresponding figures for black parents were only between 4 and 6 percent. Even more tellingly, whereas between 56 and 70 percent of white parents stressed the need for an occupation to their daughters, 94 percent of black parents stressed this, leading the researchers to conclude that, "Unlike white women, Black women are typically socialized to view marriage separately from economic security, because it is not expected that marriage will ever remove them from the labor market" (Higginbotham and Weber 1992, 429; see also Ladner 1971, 131).

In this article, we examine one arena in which young women collectively try to make sense of these conflicting scripts¹ and shape their biographical trajectories: college sororities. We would be wrong to assume that young sorority women are simply passive recipients who internalize messages promoted by their communities. College life offers young people on the brink of adulthood their first extended brush with extrafamily life and the opportunity to develop alternative orientations to social scripts (Sanday 1990). Corsaro's (1997) and Corsaro and Rosier's (1992) theory of interpretive reproduction, although concerned with children's sense-making processes, applies to sorority members as well: These young people collectively interpret, negotiate, and often refine and transform the

information they receive from the adult world rather than passively internalize it. Sorority women's impetus for making such interpretations and refinements is to create sense out of the conflicting messages they receive. On one hand they are taught that finding a man is the key to organizing life, and on the other they are taught that having a career is the key. To interpret and respond to this conflicting information, they draw on historical frames of reference, which are based on their understandings of the past experiences of people they define as similar to them. Each sorority member actively contributes to the group's ideology according to her own historical frame of reference, and thus sorority culture is produced and reproduced.

Our interview data show that the results of this process of interpretive reproduction have led to sorority structures that vary dramatically by race: While white sororities are structured to largely ignore the career message and concentrate on the more traditional goal of pairing ("getting a man"), black sororities are organized to facilitate economic self-sufficiency ("getting ahead," in the words of these women) and to contribute to the betterment of the black community. We attribute these variations to the different historical and structural realities that have shaped black and white women's lives and the way these young women interpret and incorporate these orientations into their sororities.

It is not surprising that sorority experiences differ for black and white women. Whether scholars characterize the interaction of race and gender as "intersecting systems," "interlocking categories," or "multiple bases of oppression," they agree on the importance of examining how gender dynamics are affected by race and class in different contexts (Andersen and Collins 1992; Collins 1990; Dill 1979; hooks 1989; King 1988; West and Fenstermaker 1995, 9). King (1988) and hooks (1989) underscore the importance of understanding the social location of black women and point to their invisibility, as frequently the experience of black women is considered to be synonymous either with that of black men or white women. As Deborah King (1988) noted, "It is precisely those differences between blacks and women, between black men and black women, between

black women and white women that are crucial to understanding the nature of black womanhood" (pp. 45-46). While many aspects of black women's and men's experience are similar, nevertheless, as bell hooks (1981) noted, "No other group in America has had their identity socialized out of existence as have black women. We are rarely recognized as a group separate and distinct from black men" (p. 7). Angela Davis (1981) noted another cleavage between the histories of black women and men: "If the most violent punishments of men consisted in floggings and mutilations, women were flogged and mutilated, as well as raped" (p. 7).

Nor does sharing a sex category ensure similarities between black and white women. While we do not want to ignore the structural impediments that patriarchy and capitalism impose on all women, it is crucial to acknowledge the different ways that these structures have played out in the lives of black and white women (Barrett and Phillips 1992). As West and Fenstermaker (1995) noted, "depending on how race, gender, and class are accomplished, what looks to be the same activity may have different meanings for those engaged in it" (p. 32). This article shows that sorority membership has different meanings for black and white members. In turn, these meanings stem from current marriage and labor force realities and from historical differences in the races' orientations to family, work, and community. These current and historical factors appear in the sorority structures that these young women help to create as they respond to differing emphases on how a woman should organize her life.

BACKGROUND

Historically, black women did not have the option afforded middle-class white women of following the dictates of the dominant gender ideology that called for female passivity, domesticity, and reliance on men for their livelihood. As a result of racial discrimination, black men often could not provide the sole support for a household, thus leading to married black women's

much higher rates of labor force participation compared to white women's (Amott and Matthaei 1991; Dill 1988). Due in part to the scarcity of good jobs at good wages for men, African American culture came to rely on an extended family system in which women provided material help to one another (Cherlin 1992; Stack 1974). This emphasis on familial ties with women has lessened the economic basis of the husband-wife bond that is so salient in the white culture (Cherlin 1992). These factors—men's marginality to the family's economy and women's high labor force participation—allowed the image of strong, self-sufficient black women to become a culturally available category for young black women to emulate today.

The history of work and family life is not the only heritage that valorizes strength in black women: Political examples can be found in the civil rights struggle. Indeed, women formed the backbone of the year-long Montgomery, Alabama bus system boycott, often opting to walk miles to their domestic and service jobs rather than take the bus (Barnett 1993; Jones 1985). According to Jones (1985), general grassroots support for the movement came from ordinary women, many of whom were "militant . . . in the community, outspoken, understanding and willing to catch hell, having already caught [their] share" (p. 280). Here, again, the notion of "strong, black womanhood" was a culturally available category for young women within the black community.

Modern structural conditions further encourage black women's greater reliance on paid work over marriage as a means of support. Black women are less likely than white women to marry, stay married, or remarry (Cherlin 1992). In fact, black women spend a total of 22 percent of their lives in marriage, compared to 43 percent for white women (Cherlin 1992). The chances of marriage for highly educated black women are even more slim: The ratio of single, black college-educated women to men is two to one (Strong and DeVault 1994). African American college women's own observations of family life, added to the media's popularization of these facts (along with those about black, female, single parenthood) probably further encourage self-sufficiency.

Turning to college women in particular, Holland and Eisenhart (1990) found that black college women anticipated being the most viable economic contributors to their future families and that they believed it was unwise to rely on men too much. While women of both races at the campuses they studied spent a great deal of time on thoughts of romantic relationships, the black women were less focused on finding a man. Holland and Eisenhart speculated that, like the white women, black women may have desired a male-centered life but were forced to adjust their aspirations to accommodate a reality that offered fewer marriageable men.

African American sororities were founded to provide an avenue for engaging in community service and general racial uplift (Davis 1982, 93; Giddings 1988). Their direct precursor was the black women's club movement, which flourished at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries (Glover 1993, 8-9; Lerner 1979). These clubs, which led to the founding of the first black sorority in 1908 (Davis 1982), sought to improve the lives of vulnerable members of the community by creating leaders to be involved in black community development. Giddings's (1988) history of Delta Sigma Theta described how the sorority's founders sought to provide a training ground for women leaders who could then influence the political and social issues of the day (see also Davis 1982; Lerner 1979; Shaw 1996).² Indeed, the sorority's first activity was participating in the women's suffrage march on the eve of President Wilson's inauguration in 1913. In the 1930s, the Deltas established traveling libraries in the South, where libraries were forbidden to blacks. In the 1960s, many chapters participated in freedom rides and sit-ins, where their involvement was so great that it inspired a new project: fund-raisers to obtain bail money for members. More recently, the sorority has helped create housing for elderly and handicapped African Americans. The community action orientation of this and other African American sororities (Davis 1982, 93) is congruent with the cultural image described above of black women as the strong, vocal center of the African American family and community. Finally, African American sororities have been instrumental in furthering

members' careers (Glover 1993), an attribute that our interviews show is highly salient to current members.

Historically, the cultural dictates, desirable attributes, and structural conditions that white women faced have been very different. The cultural model that society has favored for them has promoted passivity, subservience, and domesticity—attributes that are a far cry from a model of strong womanhood. A white woman's worth traditionally has been tied very closely to having a man, and, until recently, middle-class white women have expected to rely on men, rather than the labor market, for financial support (Cancian 1989, 19). Economic dependency gave rise to the cultural correlate that women who could afford to do so should shape their lives based on intimate relationships (Blumstein and Schwartz 1989, 125).

In the first half of this century, cultural norms for young white women encouraged conformity, traditional gender behaviors, and strict sexual mores (Fass 1977; Horowitz 1987). These norms touted romance, love, and marriage as women's ultimate goals, with attractiveness and social skills offered as the keys to attaining them. The post-World War II period saw the institution of "going steady" develop along with the ritualization of other stages in romantic relationships, adding to the significance of relationships (Modell 1989). Many women students devalued intellectual pursuits as interfering with the more important goal of finding a husband (Modell 1989).

The second wave of the feminist movement in the 1970s allowed young women to experience greater educational opportunities and some freedom from oppressive gender expectations. These cultural trends were paired with changing economic and social conditions, such as a rising divorce rate and a stronger financial need for married women's income. As a result, more white women have entered the labor force, and fewer are relying on men for financial support. A new message that encouraged independence was now available to college women.

Despite these major changes in the social and economic world that young white women face, a preference for the gender relations of the 1950s seems to hold for some college women.

Holland and Eisenhart (1990) claimed that for the white college women in their sample, "the business of being attractive and maintaining relationships with men was as salient to them as it was for their mothers and grandmothers."³ The peer groups they analyzed valued neither academics nor female friendship bonds but instead concentrated on male-female romantic relationships. Most of the white women in their study considered other women to be peripheral; they turned to them to conduct the main activity of finding a man, and these friendships were at the mercy of the demands of boyfriends and romantic pursuits (Holland and Eisenhart 1990).

The tendency to concentrate on men is even more pronounced in white sororities, which encourage an ideology about gender arrangements that is based on the woman-homemaker, male-breadwinner cultural model described above. Predominantly white sororities were founded for many reasons: to guarantee an exclusive dating and mating pool (Fass 1977, 201), to provide supervised housing (Treichler 1985), and to offer access to campus political power (Horowitz 1987). Risman (1982) noted that ultimately, sorority life helped to socialize members to be male centered rather than career oriented. These organizations have maintained some 1950s ideals well past that decade, even though on graduation many sorority women will be working in the labor force and coping with career demands, underemployment, single parenting, and possibly poverty (Risman 1982). While it is unsurprising that in 1964 sorority members were found to have a greater "need" for heterosexual relationships than did "independents" (women unaffiliated with sororities) (Jackson and Winkler 1964, 380), it is surprising that in 1991 sorority women were still far more likely than independents to endorse male dominant-female-submissive attitudes (Kalof and Cargill 1991). Risman (1982) similarly found that sororities encouraged traditional orientations by teaching members that "their success depends not upon their personal achievement in school or sports, but upon their relationship to boys" (p. 240).

Despite their endorsement of traditional gender arrangements, modern sorority women (like college women more

generally [Machung 1989]) are not planning lives that are exclusively family centered. Handler (1995) pointed out that larger structural changes are not lost on white sorority women and that sororities are changing with the times, for example by offering workshops on career networking. Moreover, sorority women tend to support positions associated with feminism, such as abortion rights and equal pay (Handler 1995). Clearly, white sorority women do not simply accept a traditional set of sorority ideals and incorporate them in an undiluted way into lives that will, for most, include labor force participation. Their task of reconciling these two competing orientations is more difficult. Nevertheless, we argue that, just as black sorority members' cultural legacy affects their current orientations to men and careers, white sorority members' cultural legacy of relying on men as a way of organizing life after graduation still affects theirs.

DATA AND METHOD

Data consist of twenty-six open-ended, in-depth interviews that the first author conducted with sorority members at two state universities (one predominantly black and one predominantly white) in the Southeast. Interviews were divided evenly between white and black sorority sisters. The white women represented eleven different national sororities (out of sixteen on campus), and the black women represented four (which comprises the total number of black sororities on both campuses).

We located interviewees through a "snowball" sampling method in which interviewees referred other interviewees. Interviews, which the first author conducted, tape recorded, and transcribed, lasted about an hour. Interviews took place in private at locations suggested by the interviewee, including university offices, dormitories, apartments, and sorority houses. Respondents signed a consent form at the beginning of the interview that ensured them of confidentiality.

Interviews centered on three broad areas: women's reasons for joining the sorority, the sororities' activities in regard to academic and social life, and women's career plans and the

sorority's role in those plans. We analyzed the data in two ways. First, we figured percentages for questions that could be answered with a "yes" or "no" response. Second, the first author coded these and other data according to categories precipitated by the questions. Thus, examples of coding categories are "importance of boyfriend," "type of community service," and "best part of being in a sorority." Responses within categories were grouped and analyzed for similarities and differences between white and black sororities.

Members of all four black sororities on the two campuses were interviewed. (These four represent the four national sororities; we interviewed five members from one sorority, four from another, and two each from two more sororities). However, the large number of white sororities necessitated selecting a sample. To ensure representativeness, our sample consisted of four women from high-status sororities, five from medium-status, and four from low-status ones. The sorority-ranking scale is one that is understood by members of the Greek system (Risman 1982), who use the terms, *strong*, *moderate*, and *weak*.

The respondents were quite willing to be a part of the study and spoke openly about their experiences. The interviewer was able to relate easily to the respondents in part because of her own sorority membership, her similar age, and sex. Because the interviewer was white, her race could potentially have inhibited the responses of the black sorority members. We do not believe that this was the case: None of the black women she approached refused to be interviewed, she detected no signs of discomfort during interviews, and all of the black women willingly recommended other women for interviews.

Comparisons between the white and black sororities in this study are more complex than is perhaps immediately apparent. The issues that enhance this complexity include membership size, sorority location, and the presence of sorority houses. The white sororities had between 100 and 150 members, compared to between 10 and 45 members of the black sororities. In addition to their larger membership, the white sororities occupied residential houses, which did not exist for the black sororities on either campus. Finally, the white sororities were located on only

one of the campuses identified in the study, while the black sororities are represented on both campuses. Due to the variation in responses that could result from such differences, we consider the implications of these issues in the analysis.

Because this study is confined to campuses in the southern United States, our results might have been different if other areas of the country had been included. Residents of the South tend to hold more conservative gender attitudes, although such attitudes have become far more liberal over time (Rice and Coates 1995). For whites, in particular, ideologies about "genteel ladies" (Rice and Coates 1995) still linger, and these notions may offer cultural support for more traditional orientations about gender among sorority members. How southern conservativeness might play out for black sorority members is somewhat unclear; Rice and Coates (1995) found southern black women to be less conservative than their male counterparts but more conservative than black women in other regions, and they speculate that the myth of the genteel lady may influence southern blacks as well as whites. If so, then our African American respondents may be more traditional than would be the case in sororities nationwide. Thus, we cannot make claims about the national representativeness of our study, but we note that while geographically limited ethnographic research cannot be considered definitive, it can add to our understanding by illustrating the processes by which sororities encourage romantic or career orientations.

RESULTS

FINDING MEN

While reporting percentages based on such small sample sizes ($n = 13$ for both black and white women) has the potential to be misleading, we find some differences dramatic enough to merit reporting. When we asked women, "How important is it to have a man in your life?" 54 percent of the white women (seven

women) compared to only 15 percent of black women (two women) reported that it was very important. One white woman spoke for many interviewees:

My roommates and I are constantly going on about why guys aren't calling us. . . . I feel weird if no guys call me during the week, whether it be a friend or a guy that I don't even like, but just to have a male call me. I need that.

Another spoke strongly of her need for her current boyfriend:

It is the most stable thing that I have ever had in my life. . . . I don't seem to get along well with female friends; I don't know why. Having a boyfriend is something that I know is stable and I feel like I always have something and it is probably the only thing that keeps me sane.

These women's emphasis on relationships with men may reflect the ideology still current with many middle-class, white women in our society that, to some extent, women's worth rests on having a man.

Most black women in our sample did not share this orientation, perhaps because of the lack of eligible black men or because of the cultural proclivities laid out above. Fifty-four percent of the black sorority women (seven women) reported that men were not very important to them. For many, what was important was exploring other avenues for achievement, particularly being strong and independent. As one said,

A man falls after my religion, my sorority, and definitely after my school work. It is something that I would like to have but it isn't that important because I am all into this woman's lib thing and I feel that I can do things by myself. . . . So, if I have a man and he is bringing me down I would just rather be by myself.

In fact, for some black women, the sorority provided an alternative to a dating relationship:

Having a boyfriend is not really that important. That is another reason why I joined the organization because I am not one of those types that always has a man on her arm every day. I knew that by joining the organization, regardless of whether I had a boyfriend or not, I could go to any city and have a bond with most of the sisters that I would contact and be a part of activities with.

As these quotations illustrate, these women are not repudiating the idea of relationships with men; indeed, 15 percent (two women) claimed that having a man was very important. African American women may hold the same romantic goals as white women (Mullings 1997, 120). Elijah Anderson (1990) described black teenage girls' version of romantic love:

This dream involves having a boyfriend, a fiancé, a husband, and the fairy-tale prospect of living happily ever after with one's children in a nice house in a good neighborhood—essentially the dream of the middle-class American life-style, complete with nuclear family. (p. 115)

Franklin (1992, 344) discussed the lessons taught by parents and noted that black girls are taught both to be self-sufficient and to get a man. Holland and Eisenhart (1990) found that college women of both races were obsessed with romance, emphasizing that notions of romantic fulfillment are probably not identical for white and black women, however. Mullings (1977) pointed out that "to the extent that the model is accepted as ideal, it must lead to the devalorization of African American women . . . because their life circumstances preclude the same sort of dependence" (p. 12). While we cannot shed light on the meaning that romance holds for them, we do argue that young black women do not look to sororities as the place to pursue that life goal.

We found sharp differences in the extent to which white and black sororities set up events to encourage male-female pairing. All white interviewees reported the existence of formal ceremonies for a sister who reaches a milestone in a romantic relationship. The most common milestone is being "laveliered," whereby a fraternity man gives the sorority woman a charm to wear as a necklace that signifies the strength of their romantic involvement. Increasingly serious milestones are "pinnings" (when a fraternity man gives his fraternity pin to a sorority woman), getting "promised" (when a woman receives a promise ring as a symbol of an impending engagement), and engagements. Sorority members announce these events at an emotionally charged ceremony known as "the candlelight." In this ritual, each woman keeps secret her laveliering or other new

status until the night of the ceremony. The sorority members form a circle and pass around a candle while singing a special sorority song. The candle passes once for sisterhood, again for a lavalier, a third time for a pin, then again for a promise ring and a final time for an engagement. A woman who has achieved a milestone blows out the candle at the appropriate time, announcing to the chapter the relationship event. Sorority women highly value and eagerly anticipate the ceremony. Clearly, candlelights are a formal, structured event wherein a woman can be publicly praised for her attainment of a man. One sister explained, "It is considered an honor in our sorority to [participate in] a candlelight ceremony. It is considered a very happy and lucky thing to have found a man." In contrast, she described academic achievement as far less important an honor in her sorority. In another sorority with an elaborate candlelight ceremony, the award to the woman with the highest grade point average was significantly less emotionally charged: She was awarded a bag of potato chips.

Indeed, women described the candlelight ceremony as a major highlight of sorority experience, something that many strove to obtain. One woman engineered her boyfriend's joining a fraternity for this express purpose:

The whole thing was that I wanted my boyfriend to join a fraternity so that I could be laveliered. I finally got to have a candlelight and it was the neatest thing. Everyone was so proud of me. I got thrown into the middle of the circle and jumped on and hugged. I had been waiting for a long time and everyone knew that, so when it finally came, it felt really good.

In contrast, the concept of laveliering does not even exist in the African American Greek system; other romantic milestones receive little commemoration. Only five of the African American sorority women reported any ceremonial acknowledgment of romantic relationships, and these ceremonies were only small add-ons to weddings, where the bride "gets chanted by the sorority with a special hymn." The African American interviewees said that romantic milestones mattered only insofar as they contributed to the happiness of a sister, and they saw no reason to have a ritual response to various romantic events.

The emphasis on a social life centering on interactions with men is further exemplified through the high number of date functions that the white sororities sponsored. All but one sponsored four or more a year, usually events like a formal, a semi-formal, a hay ride, a grab-a-guy (where women must find a date within a few hours for a party), and a crush (where each woman invites two men to a sorority party). While a date is not mandatory for crushes, they are mandatory for the other events. According to one member, "the idea is that you bring a date or you do not go."

Informal parties that do not require a date are held in conjunction with a fraternity and are usually at the fraternity house. All "socials" of this nature are open only to the participating Greek organizations. The atmosphere is bar-like: The music is loud and there is little to do but mingle and dance. This format emphasizes pairing with a man for the evening and perhaps for the night. To help facilitate this, women and men drink a great deal to "relax and interact better with each other." Because most sororities do not allow underage members to drink at fraternity houses, they usually stage a "pre-party" that allows all members to drink. According to one sorority member, "Everyone goes to the pre-party, gets drunk and then goes to the social. At the social, there is music and dancing. A lot of people hook up with a guy or at least try to."

These parties facilitate pairing partly because that is what sorority members want: About half reported that access to parties with fraternity men was their prime reason for joining, and many said that meeting men was the best part of their overall sorority experience. In the words of one woman, "It is necessary for us to have so many social events because it is the expectation of a lot of girls to come into a sorority for the social life. They want to meet guys." Another woman reported, "I wanted to see what it was like with the fraternities and all the socials. I knew a lot of people that went to them and I wanted to have that fun also."

Again in sharp contrast, the African American sororities did not actively encourage heterosexual unions. Two women reported that their sororities had no date functions at all, and the

remaining eleven reported only one formal event or “ball” a year.⁴ These balls are part of the sorority’s “week,” a time dedicated to several events centered on sorority unity, including step-dance shows and seminars. These events do not require dates. One woman explained, “No, you do not need a date [for the ball]; a lot of my sorors [sisters] have gone stag. You can come with your best girlfriend if you want to.”

African American sororities’ informal social functions (functions that do not require a date) are also quite different from their white counterparts’. The sororities, in conjunction with another sorority or a fraternity, sponsor parties held at a nightclub and open to the public. The goal is to raise funds for the sponsoring organizations. Sororities discourage or forbid drinking at these events because they believe that excessive drinking will impede the goal of fund-raising. Other informal gatherings—some with fraternities and some without—range from board-game tournaments to pot-luck dinners. One woman described her sorority’s social events as follows: “Some are done in conjunction with a fraternity but most of them we do on our own. We do things like picnics, bowling or spades tournaments.” Another described a typical social with a fraternity: “We might have a pizza party or something to get to know each other better and have a closer relationship. It would be at someone’s house and we would just chill out and have a good time.”

This evidence implies that black sororities place less emphasis on coupling. Many of the activities, such as game tournaments, actually discourage breaking off into pairs and instead promote group dynamics. The wide variety of social activities that the sorority engages in gives the women a chance to interact and bond with women as well as men. We note, however, that the small size of the black organizations as compared to the white ones may account for some of the above differences. For example, the small size of black sororities may have necessitated nondate social gatherings such as bowling parties or card tournaments. If half the sisters of a small, twenty-person sorority do not have dates, a formal party requiring dates would be doomed, unlike in a one-hundred-member sorority. Similarly, black sororities’ small size (along with the lack of black sorority

houses on these campuses) may have been a factor in their hosting open parties at public clubs rather than events that were members-and-guests only. Thus, black sororities' small size may have exacerbated their tendency to downplay man hunting.

This section has shown that the white sororities had a stronger commitment to activities that facilitate romantic relationships. The high number of date functions creates a situation in which women are continuously searching for eligible dating partners. This puts pressure on women to find a steady partner to alleviate the anxiety of finding a different man for each event. The informal social functions do not require dates, but their format and high rate of alcohol use encourage coupling. The candlelight ritual offers women a status-oriented and tangible reason to strive for a romantic relationship. Sorority events for the African American women are usually more than ways to meet men, as exemplified by the fund-raising open parties and by the informal social functions that are more group oriented.

ENGAGING IN COMMUNITY SERVICE

In keeping with their founding principles, African American sororities were much more community service oriented than their white counterparts. The black women described community service as a central and meaningful part of their sorority experience, while white women generally viewed it as a way to facilitate their social lives.

About half of the African American women cited community service as one of their main reasons for joining, while none of the white women reported it as a motivation. The African American women saw their sorority membership as a means to "give back to the community," a way of "uplifting" themselves and their black brothers and sisters:

I joined because I saw the women as strong black women in the community and I saw their purpose as being a way to uplift the black community. I just wanted to help contribute to that because some of the characteristics that I saw in them, I saw in myself. I consider myself a strong black woman and I am always willing to help someone.

Moreover, all of the black women identified community service as the activity that took up most sorority time. This dedication to social improvement went beyond peripheral involvement in a high number of service projects. The women celebrated the idea that their sororities were originally founded to serve the community, and prior community service experience was a membership prerequisite: "If you do not have community service coming in . . . you are showing them that you are not a dedicated person."

All interviewees were able to give detailed descriptions of the local projects their sorority was involved in, ranging from tutoring children in underprivileged areas or serving dinner at the local homeless shelter to sponsoring blood drives and community clean-ups. In addition, the national chapters have designated community service projects that they require local chapters to be involved in: "We have a national project . . . which is geared towards unwed mothers. We go out to schools and have centers that teach prenatal care, help educate them as well as give them some career training." As these examples make clear, most projects centered on direct participation with the groups they seek to help—often in the black community—rather than on raising funds to send to a charity.

In contrast, the white sororities were far less focused on community service. Most had one philanthropic event a year, usually a fund-raiser. Fund-raisers were first and foremost social events, such as dance contests or sports tournaments, that brought many Greek organizations together. Sororities sent the money to a charity designated by the national chapter, a format that does not allow for direct involvement with the people receiving the money. Beyond this main yearly activity, some sororities conducted smaller fund-raisers and projects, but interviewees did not talk about community service with anything approaching the enthusiasm that was typical for the black interviewees nor was community service experience a prerequisite for membership. One sister described her group's involvement:

We donate money to a pediatric ward. It is not a big part of the sorority life. It happens once a spring. It's a lip-sync contest. . . . The social part is big, but as far as helping the children, we

basically send the money away. The purpose of the philanthropy is not a big part but the way to get the money is a big deal.

In sum, the black sororities were far more deeply involved in community service at the practical and ideological levels than were the white sororities.

ENHANCING CAREERS

Sorority membership tends to be a life-long commitment for African American women; graduation signals a woman's transfer to the graduate alumnae chapter where participation is often more intensive. The African American women we interviewed said that their sorority affiliation was part of their identity and would remain with them throughout the course of their lives as "a source of help and support." In contrast, white women's sorority membership was limited to their college years; although opportunities to continue involvement after college graduation existed, no women planned to do so. Besides valuing the sister relationship in its own right, black women expected to realize a career payoff for their membership. White women had no such expectation. We examine these themes below.

Relationships with other women were the *sine qua non* of black sororities, and the organizations ensured continuity with programs that span the phases of the life course. Auxiliary groups of the sororities are made up of junior high and high school girls who participate in many of the collegiate chapters' activities and attend seminars that the graduate chapters host on study skills, etiquette, or on the sorority itself. Girls involved in auxiliary chapters usually seek to join the sorority when they reach college. One college woman said of her membership, "I was in the [adolescent group] for eight years so I knew that when I came to college what sorority I was going to pledge."

Graduating from college was by no means an end to sorority involvement; in fact, many anticipated that participation on the graduate level would be the most fruitful portion of their sorority experience. Graduate chapters sponsor the adolescent groups, are active in the collegiate chapter by donating funds for

seminars, and sponsor their own community service projects and social functions.⁵ Yet, it is the career connections that these groups offer that our African American interviewees felt to be the most significant part of sorority life after college. All thirteen anticipated that the sorority would be crucial in career networking:

It will open doors. . . . The unwritten rule is that you are supposed to help that person [a sorority sister]. They are to come first. If she is a member, I should be able to get that position regardless of my credentials but my credentials should be up to standards before I come to her.

The idea of seeking strong, professional black women as role models and possible mentors was a recurrent theme for these college women, who spoke of ties with graduate chapters as a way to gain access to successful African Americans:

When I came here [to college], I looked at the women who were already members and they were perfect. They had an aura about them and I wanted to be like them. The women in the graduate chapter are mostly professionals, a lot of teachers, administrative women. My pediatrician is a member.

White women's sorority involvement is almost exclusively at the collegiate level; white sororities do not sponsor adolescent auxiliary groups, and graduate chapters are inconsequential to career building. Because white members view sorority membership primarily as a means to a productive social life centering on men, few women planned to participate in alumnae chapters. Indeed, "too much" involvement indicates that a woman is still living in the past:

After college, I would not mind going to rush a few times but I do not want to be one of those ladies that is like the chapter advisor and is always hanging around the house like they are still in college.

Another concurred:

I think that it is important that when you are young that you do things to get them out of your system. I don't want to be thirty and feel like I have to go dancing and drinking at a bar with my girlfriends.

As for career connections, few white women believed that the sorority would benefit their careers. One woman described why she joined:

I don't think it will help me get ahead. . . . I think that the main thing that it will do for me is that I will be able to look back and say that at least I tried it and I did not miss out. I don't think I will have any contact with it when I graduate.

We do not mean to imply that white sorority women were not career oriented; they were. In describing their futures, the majority of both black and white women presented plans that included a husband, children, and a career for at least some period of their lives. Unlike the black women, however, the white women did not regard sorority membership as a means to that goal. It would help only remotely, by increasing a woman's chance of being selected for positions in high-status, Greek-dominated campus organizations that "look good on a resume."

Both white and African American sorority women claimed that sisterhood was an important reason for joining the sorority, but the meaning of sisterhood set the two groups apart. For the black women, sorority sisterhood entailed a lifelong commitment that they expected would remain salient to their identities even after their collegiate years. In contrast, the white women regarded sorority sisterhood as part of the college experience rather than part of their lifelong identity. Moreover, unlike their black counterparts, they did not expect a career payoff for membership. In sum, for both groups, sororities were the key group for facilitating important relationships that are difficult to forge alone. For white women, these relationships are with men; for black women, they are with other women and with black communities.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

White sorority women in this sample regarded sorority membership as a way to lead a productive social life that they hoped would enable them to get a man. The structure of their sororities

encouraged this pursuit of romantic relationships by sponsoring candle-lighting ceremonies, frequent formal date events, and informal functions whose bar-like ambiance and high rate of alcohol consumption facilitated coupling. Despite this emphasis, these women are not living in a time warp, and most had career aspirations: Ten of the thirteen mentioned careers as figuring in their future, although they acknowledged that sorority life will do little to further that goal. In contrast, African American women's sorority participation centered on community service and career advancement. Community service was the largest activity that the sororities engaged in and was a meaningful part of all phases of participation (adolescent, collegiate, and graduate). Interviewees described the role of sorority graduates in career networking as perhaps the most beneficial aspect of sorority life. Moreover, black sororities did not offer much institutional support for romantic relationships: They offered virtually nothing akin to candlelightings, sponsored few date functions, and centered informal social functions on group activities. Not surprisingly, most of the black women in this sample did not feel that having a romantic relationship was a necessity.

These different orientations affected women's sense of sisterhood and levels of commitment to the sorority. African American women's more intense involvement was fostered by opportunities to participate throughout the life course; in comparison, white women's orientation toward the sorority was much more phase oriented, limited to their college years, although their feelings toward it were strong during those years. The two types of sorority appear to be structured to facilitate different agendas: for white women, short-term participation geared to meeting men, and for black women, long-term participation geared to furthering both individual careers and the uplifting of the race through community projects.

We argue that the key to understanding the differences between the groups in their orientation to sorority life lies in their differing current structural positions and historical frames of reference. For the black sororities, historic images of strong, independent, black women and the modern statistical reality of black female marriage and poverty rates have shaped the

sorority structure as well as the ideology and activities of their members. In the same way, the white sororities are responding to their cultural heritage, which has emphasized relying on a man for support and remaining within the domestic sphere. These differences influence the current structures of the sororities and the way that individual women interpret their own experiences.

Yet, white sorority women are in an odd position because this model no longer fits the modern social reality that prescribes labor force attachment for women (Risman 1982). The attempts of white sororities to put "new wine into old bottles"—to offer modern young women the man-centered solution to the question of how to organize a life—still seem to be successful: Sorority membership has been on the rise for the past two decades (Lord 1987). The conflict with sorority ideology that would seem to be inevitable as white sorority women become more independent and career oriented may have been averted by cosmetic changes such as sorority seminars on careers. We speculate, however, that white sorority women compartmentalize their career and their romantic goals and use sororities to further only the latter. This is not to say that the women themselves are not career oriented; it is to say that their sororities are not structured to offer ways to help them achieve that goal.

In sum, both sorority systems grew from different socio-historical roots. They stemmed from an earlier era and reflect those traditions today. We do not mean to glamorize the black sorority structure, because it has its own set of problems, especially in the area of hazing. Yet, it seems that the black sorority structure is more in tune with the probable labor force and family prospects of modern college women. Many features of black and white women's lives are converging. For the first time in history, the labor force participation of white women is equal to that of black women (Reskin and Padavic 1994), signifying the reality that most women—including white sorority alumnae—will be part of the workforce. White family patterns are also coming to more closely resemble African Americans' as white women are increasingly likely to be single parents (Saluter 1992). It seems that African American sororities' orientation toward career

building is more in step with the reality of the modern college woman. The historical frame of reference that young black women bring to sorority life is more consistent with the demands of contemporary society. To ensure its survival, the white sorority structure will probably shift to accommodate the larger social changes that increasingly manifest themselves in individual members' lives.

We see these results as building on the insights of feminist scholars of race who caution against the tendency to assume white women's experiences can provide a template for understanding black women's. Often, the groups' experiences are just too different, as is the case for understanding the bases of their respective sorority systems and the meaning these organizations hold for members. According to Collins (1990, 23-25), black women's experiences provide them with a "unique angle of vision," grounded in their work and family experiences, that will manifest itself in their consciousness and in the organizations that they construct. In the same way, white women draw on different motifs in constructing their consciousness and organizations. By remaining open to racial differences in the ways that young women "negotiate femininity" (Davis and Fisher 1993, 7), we hope to add to the feminist project of understanding women's lives without collapsing the differences among them (see also Stompler and Padavic 1997). In this respect, we concur with postmodern feminist theory, which criticizes the notion that the structural impediments imposed by patriarchy operate similarly for women or that a feminist "privileged knower" holds a view of reality that can speak for all women (Barrett and Phillips 1992).

This study also furthers the project specified by West and Fenstermaker (1995, 13) of understanding the workings of race and gender in situated contexts. As they note, to capture what it actually means for a person to simultaneously experience these categories, research must focus on the particular mechanisms and situations that produce or mitigate inequality. In this study, we have identified mechanisms that perpetuate or mitigate the inequality that stems from women's dependence on men: Candlelightings, formal date functions, and alcohol consumption

encourage it; multigenerational membership, career networking, and an absence of date functions mitigate it. Drawing on Corsaro (1997), we note that sorority women have participated in the creation of these practices, and they have brought to that enterprise their understandings of the past experiences of their mothers, grandmothers, and other people of their own gender and race. Because of different historical frames of reference, black and white women create very different understandings. In showing how black and white sorority members collectively attempt to make sense of given scripts and arrive at interpretations and strategies for dealing with them, we have documented how these different understandings play out in one small setting. It is by adding such incremental pieces of the puzzle that we can hope to understand and perhaps improve women's lives.

NOTES

1. The notion of scripts for social life stems from symbolic interaction theory, which describes how sexual scripts—plans or blueprints that designate culturally appropriate answers to the who, what, when, where, and whys of sexuality—are formed and how they are internalized (Simon and Gagnon 1986; see also Lorber 1994). Scripts are learned through interactions and are influenced by the larger society and by peer groups.

2. College youth of both sexes (particularly at predominantly black colleges) were strongly encouraged to use their education to better the community ("Privilege must always be translated into terms of responsibility, or else it will become shackles to your feet and chains to your hands," Howard University students were told in 1910 [Shaw 1996, 91-92]).

3. Their grandmothers' motivation may have differed, however. As Spain and Bianchi (1996) noted, a decision to earn the fabled "Mrs." degree and attach oneself to a husband's career prospects was a sound economic decision in the face of extremely limited career opportunities for women.

4. The two women who reported no date functions were in a small chapter at the predominantly white university. The chapter's size is probably the main reason that the group does not host such an event.

5. The small size of African American collegiate sorority chapters—between 10 and 30 members, compared to about 120 members for white sororities—promoted a "family feeling" that extended to relations with the graduate chapter, whose members often act as quasi-mothers. This support system of peers and elders was especially important to women who attended the predominantly white university.

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