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Encircled by Sisterhood: Mentoring Experiences of African American Women in Delta Sigma Theta Sorority

Francene Amaris Breakfield

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**ENCIRCLED BY SISTERHOOD:
MENTORING EXPERIENCES OF AFRICAN AMERICAN
WOMEN IN DELTA SIGMA THETA SORORITY**

by

FRANCENE AMARIS BREAKFIELD

(Under the Direction of Cordelia Zinskie)

ABSTRACT

Research suggests that African American women are minorities by race and gender and the intersectionality of these constructs poses obstacles for African American women seeking to attain positions of power. Mentoring can aid African American women in overcoming these barriers.

The purpose of this qualitative inquiry was to explore the mentoring experiences of five African American women, the researcher and her sorority sistercircle, who are members of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority and how their experiences have contributed to their identity and educational, career, and psychosocial success. This study focused on mentoring as a support system for African American women facing societal challenges such as racial issues, gender bias, and power struggles.

The participants included the researcher and four women who have had mentoring relationships with the researcher. The dynamics of each relationship are different and intergenerational. Participants all reside in the Metro Atlanta

area, and their ages range from 26-69 years of age. Each participant obtained a Bachelor's degree or higher and is successful in her career.

Black Feminist Thought was the theoretical framework that supported the purpose of this study. This framework supports the uplift of African American women and recognizes the significance and value of the African American woman's voice and lived experiences.

Data collection methods included in-depth individual and focus group interviews, a demographic questionnaire, and analysis of personal artifacts. The interview responses were coded to find common themes and patterns significant to the participants' mentoring experiences.

Based on the findings, it was concluded that African American women who have mentors throughout their lives, from childhood through adulthood, have strong will and are confident in their self-identity which gives them the strength to overcome societal challenges faced because of the intersectionality of race and gender.

Due to the limited amount of research on the mentoring experiences among African American women in sororities, the feedback gathered from the participants' interviews should prove to be a significant contribution.

INDEX WORDS: Mentoring, African-American women, Intersectionality, Sisterhood, Role models, Gender-racial identity, Sorority

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DELTA SIGMA THETA SORORITY**

by

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A Dissertation Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of Georgia Southern University

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DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

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December 2010

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my first mentors, my parents, Catherine Chester Breakfield and the late Rev. I.J. Breakfield. They have always encouraged and supported me furthering my education. They were there for me emotionally, financially, and mentally and I thank them for their constant support. Thanks mom and dad. I love you.

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When I look at you, I see myself. If my eyes are unable to see you as my sister, it is because my own vision is blurred. And if that be so, then it is I who need you either because I do not understand who you are, my sister, or because I need you to help me understand who I am. -Lillian P. Benbow, National President, Delta Sigma Theta, 1971-1975

I would like to thank Dr. Cordelia Zinskie, my dissertation chairperson. She was patient and supportive and I appreciate the opportunity to work with her on this project. I would also like to thank my committee sistercircle, Dr. Ming Fang He, Dr. Meca Williams-Johnson, and Dr. Dale Grant. All of your input and guidance allowed me to finish this process.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The lived experiences of African American women are unique and greatly impacted by the social construct of race and gender. According to Collins (2000), race and gender are major contributors to the injustice African American women face: "U.S. black women as a group live in a different world from that of people who are not black and female" (p. 23). Moreover, the history of African-American women in America differs from other minority women; their experience of coming to America alone and being enslaved makes their struggle unparalleled.

It has taken years for African American women to overcome their history of oppression. Barriers such as racial discrimination and gender biases decrease the number of opportunities for African American women to be successful and retain positions of leadership in their careers. African American women are underrepresented in positions of power at elementary and secondary schools, institutions of higher learning, government, and in corporate America (Bova, 2000; Hill, 1999). Statistics show that less than 1% of college presidents (Adams, 2005), less than 2% of elected officials (Institute for Women's Policy Research, 2004), and less than 2% of executive senior level officials and managers (U.S. Equal Opportunity Commission, 2007) are African American women.

Many African American women in positions of power struggle to attain and retain these positions due to the limited availability of mentors and resources (Bailey, 2001; Patton, 2009). However, there are African American women that

are successful and able to overcome racism and sexism. Having a mentor or peer supporter can facilitate the survival of African American women and promote their success (Collins, 2000; Reid-Merritt, 1996). Research demonstrates that African American women can achieve success in an educational, career, and psychosocial environment in which they receive mentoring and support (Bailey, 2001; Bova, 2000; Fries-Britt & Kelly, 2005; Harris, 1994; Patton & Harper, 2003). African American women, as a collective, support each other. "African American women as sisters and friends affirm one another's humanity, specialness, and right to exist" (Collins, 2000, p. 102).

Educational mentors help their mentees to achieve academic goals. Career mentors help their protégés to learn strategies to be successful and grow within a corporate organization. Psychosocial mentors support their peers in coping with stress and making decisions (Crawford & Smith, 2005; Dennis, 1993). These relationships can be formed formally through a structured program or informally through natural acquaintance or friendships (Pellicone & Albon, 2004).

African American women are a dual minority by virtue of their race and gender. Their multiple minority status makes their presence in some professional institutions an anomaly and therefore similarly situated mentors may not be available. According to Kaba (2008), there is a marked lack of African American presence in positions of authority within the academic and corporate sectors, particularly in those universities that have low minority enrollment and are considered more traditionally white universities. Research has noted that

membership in an organization, like a sorority, can provide African American women with a group of peers in which they can feel safe and supported and aid these women in achieving their goals (Harris, 1994).

Sororities are organizations composed of college-educated women. Some women join these organizations while matriculating at a college or university while others join after they have graduated from college. Most sororities provide opportunities for their members to be mentored. Many collegiate sororities provide academic mentoring through peer-tutoring programs for their members. After college, sorority sisters look to their alumnae members to help with career networking and mentorship. The sisterhood that members often gain from going through the process to join a sorority often provides lifetime friendships and psychosocial mentors (Hernandez, 2003).

The purpose of this qualitative interview study was to explore the mentoring experiences of five African American women, the researcher and her sorority sistercircle, who are members of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority and how their experiences have contributed to their identity and educational, career, and psychosocial success. This study focused on mentoring as a support system for African American women facing societal challenges such as racial issues, gender bias, and power struggles.

The Education of the African American Woman

During the early 1800's, women were denied the right to a formal education. This included white women, poor women, and women that were enslaved (Horowitz, 1987; Spring, 2001). Educators, who were white men, did

not believe women were capable of taking higher-level mathematics, science, and foreign language courses. Even white women from wealthy families that were allowed to attend school could only take vocational courses such as sewing and painting (Knappman & Dupont, 2005).

African Americans were denied an education because their slave owners did not want their slaves to learn how to read, write, or proficiently speak the language for fear of a rebellion. "Maintaining illiteracy and ignorance was considered a means for continuing economic exploitation of the labor of enslaved Africans" (Spring, 2001, p. 215). Therefore, people of color could not attend public school or college. They did not have the opportunity to get an education, earn compensation for their labor, or vote to change their circumstance (Spring, 2001). African Americans faced barriers because of their race. In 1863, after the slaves were emancipated, they were able to participate in the public educational system that was still in its early development (Anderson, 1988).

African Americans in the North were able to start school earlier due to the Northern states' government declaration of slavery as illegal. In 1862, Mary Jane Patterson became the first African-American woman to receive a Bachelor's degree in the United States. She graduated from Oberlin College, which was the nation's first coeducational college and one of the first colleges to admit minority men and women (Harris, 1994; Patton, 2009).

In the late 1800's, the need for agricultural education and research led to the first Morrill Act. This act allowed government funding to build institutes of higher education. The second Morrill Act led to the establishment of land grant

colleges that were specifically allocated to the education of African American students. With the establishment of land grant colleges, African Americans were given the opportunity to obtain an affordable college education from a public institution (Ranbom & Lynch, 1988). Many of these schools later became Historically Black College/Universities (HBCU). In the early 1900's, African Americans were able to attend a HBCU or a predominantly white school in the Northern United States.

As young African Americans began to attend college, they also had the opportunity to participate in student life activities. However, on predominantly white campuses, many African American students were not allowed to join the white literary clubs and social clubs (Horowitz, 1987; Neumann, 2008). In 1906, seven men at Cornell University founded the first African American fraternity, Alpha Phi Alpha. The establishment of Alpha Phi Alpha encouraged other collegiate African Americans to institute sororities and fraternities on their campuses. These organizations are now known as Black Greek Letter Organizations (BGLO's). In 1908, the first African American sorority, Alpha Kappa Alpha was established in Washington D.C. at Howard University. In 1911, two more fraternities were founded. Kappa Alpha Psi was established at Indiana University and Omega Psi Phi was established at Howard University. Two years later, the second African American sorority, Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. was founded at Howard University. One of the goals of all these organizations was to provide the opportunity for African American students to peer mentor each other (Giddings, 1988; Neumann, 2008).

These organizations quickly increased in membership and were established at various colleges throughout the United States (Ross, 2000). However, they were present only on the campuses of schools that allowed African Americans to attend. Many colleges in the South were segregated and it was not until 1954, the landmark Supreme Court case *Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, that school segregation was deemed unconstitutional. "This historical precedent was significant for African Americans, given that education was considered an empowerment tool against domination and hegemony" (Taylor, 2004, p. 50).

During the 1960's and early 1970's, the federal government enforced the integration of public schools and colleges. The *Brown vs. Topeka* ruling granted African American students an equal opportunity to succeed through the public education system. Through protest and boycotts during the Civil Rights Movement, each state eventually implemented integration in public schools and universities (Spring, 2001). After integration, African American fraternities and sororities' chapters increased and were established on predominately white colleges and universities in the South (Ross, 2000).

On November 11, 1969, Delta Sigma Theta Sorority Inc. chartered its 350th chapter at the University of Georgia. Today, 97 years after it was founded, the sorority has over 900 chapters, which include undergraduate chapters on college campuses, and chapters established by women who have graduated from college (Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc., 2009). Fifty years after desegregation laws were passed, women of color continue to have opportunities

to obtain a higher education. According to Adams (2005), before 1970, there were no African American presidents or leaders at predominantly white institutions. Now some 40 years later, African Americans head 52 out of 2100 predominantly white institutions and 14 are Black women. With the increase of African American women earning college degrees, more role models and mentors will be needed to ensure their retention and continued success. According to Kaba (2008), African American women are the new model minority. He reported that African American women have high college enrollment and degree attainment, longevity, and low rate of criminal activity. The increase in African American women completing advanced degrees has resulted in an increase in African American women securing managerial positions in the U.S. labor force and a need for more career mentors.

African American Women in the Workforce

When African women came to the United States they were sold into slavery and initially worked as farmers and crop workers. According to Brown (1931), in 1860 90% of African Americans lived in the South. The majority of the people worked in agriculture farming cotton, tobacco, sugar, rice, and hemp. Others worked in domestic and personal service, which included cooks, maids, laundresses, seamstresses, nursemaids and hairdressers.

With each World War, African American women were thrust into the industrial field to replace men who were at war. During World War I, African American women worked in factories that processed tobacco and made furniture, and paper products. During World War II, African American women worked in the

war industry, which included automotive work, electrical, and transportation jobs. However, when the wars ended, many African American women were fired and forced back into a career of domestic servitude due to the lack of opportunity in other career fields (Lerner, 1972).

As the number of African American women earning college degrees steadily increased, so did the numbers of African American women in professional careers. The first professional careers where African American women flourished were teaching and nursing. “The most significant change for black women workers from 1950 to 1980 was their shift from being farm workers and servants to being service and clerical workers” (Harley, 2002, p. 9).

The 2000 U.S. Census results revealed that the majority of African American women still live in the South with the greatest concentrations in Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, South Carolina and the Washington D.C. areas. The 2007 U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission’s Aggregate Report showed that African American women make up 7.74% of all employees in the U.S. workforce. The majority of African American women work in the service industry and as office and clerical workers. Less than 2% are high-level management and less than 3% are in professional careers. With the small numbers of African American women in these upper management and higher paying jobs, career mentoring and psychosocial support is needed to recruit and retain these women in their positions.

The Strength of the Sistercircle

African American women understand the struggle of other African American women. Even though their lived experiences are unique and individual, there are commonalities among their experiences of living in America. They share a history and a culture.

Beginning in the 19th century, African American women have met regularly with each other for the purposes of communication and mutual support in spaces as diverse as beauty parlors, book clubs, sorority and church group meeting places. The survival of black women in America physically, emotionally, and psychologically, has largely been the product of the support these women have given each other. (Harley et al., 2002, p. x)

One unique part of the African American culture is the ability to create safe spaces in which one can receive support outside of school and work. When African American women first came to America, they relied on each other (Collins, 2000; Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003). Today when they attend predominantly white institutions and/or work in male dominated fields, an abundance of African American women mentors is not available. Collins (2000) stated that due to the oppression of African American women, they are able to generate other routes to group empowerment. Therefore, these women may have to seek out psychosocial mentors to support them such as family members, co-workers, church members and sorority members. These women can form sistercircles for those that need a support group (Bailey, 2001).

A sistercircle is a group of women who support one another. Women come together and meet with the purpose of sharing their experiences and concerns. It is a safe place where women can be honest about their feelings and receive emotional and psychosocial support. "Black women rely on each other- sister circles made up of friends, mothers, siblings, and cousins-as a way of staying connected with and affirming their selves" (Jones & Shorter-Gooden, 2003). The sisters often are not blood relatives but exhibit characteristics of a loving, caring, family bond. A connection or relationship develops between these women through sisterhood and friendship, similar to the bond sorority sisters experience.

Statement of the Problem and Research Questions

This research focuses on issues affecting the success of African American women and their ability to overcome educational, career, and psychosocial challenges. A sistercircle of mentors can serve as a support system for African American women that lack educational and career mentors. Mentoring is an essential element in guiding women through major transitions in life. Mentors can make a positive impact on one's life. They may teach, advise, and act as role models for those that shadow them. Formal mentors and informal mentors have been significant influences on the lives of many for years.

This study focused on the mentoring relationships of the researcher and her sorority sistercircle. The following questions guided the research:

1. What are the mentoring experiences of African American women in a sorority sistercircle?

2. How do mentoring experiences shape the identity of African American women?
3. How does mentoring empower African American women to overcome societal challenges?

These research questions were developed to explore how the relationships among sorority sisters can provide inspiration and how these mentoring experiences help to shape the identity of African American women.

The first question allowed participants to share their viewpoint on how their mentoring relationships have provided empowerment and contributed to their success as well as an opportunity to share their perceptions of sisterhood.

The second question allowed the participants to explore how their lived experiences have helped to shape who they are and who they have become.

The third question explored how these relationships help the participants overcome racial and gender discrimination. It was anticipated that the participants' descriptions of actual experiences would provide examples of different kinds of mentoring relationships with different themes. This study posits that mentors influence mentees by role modeling, developing friendships, giving words of affirmation and encouragement, being supportive and helping to build confidence through sisterhood.

Method

This study used qualitative interview methodology to explore the mentoring experiences of five African American women that are members of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority. The participants included the researcher and four

women who have had mentoring relationships with the researcher. The dynamics of each relationship are different and intergenerational. *Big Sister* represents the mentor, an older motherly figure who mentored the researcher as a teenager. *Line Sister* and *Chapter Sister* represent the peer mentors of the researcher. They share a sisterly bond. *Little Sister* represents the mentee. She and the researcher have an aunt-niece type of relationship. The researcher is the *Sister in the Center* encircled by sisterhood. All participants reside in the Metro Atlanta area and their ages range from 26-69 years of age. Each participant obtained a Bachelor's degree or higher and is successful in her career. Individual and focus group interviews and personal artifacts were used to collect the lived experiences of the participants.

Autobiographical Roots of Inquiry

During my junior year in high school, I participated in a yearlong debutante program, which attracted upper-class girls who were taught various life skills, culminating with a ceremony where participants were "presented" to society. I was not from an upper class home; however, I was asked to participate in the program by the president of the host organization: she later became my mentor. She saw potential in me and lit a torch within me by encouraging me to join the organization when I was able. During my junior year at The University of Georgia, I joined Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, an organization that fostered sisterhood and mentorship, and I gained 26 non-biological sisters that instantaneously became peer-mentors. I shared comparable experiences with my sorority sisters. We were of the same age, at school for the same purpose, and shared similar

struggles trying to survive the challenges that were presented to African American women on a predominantly White campus while attempting to earn degrees. We encouraged and motivated each other educationally and psychosocially.

After graduating from college, I became an active member of an alumnae chapter of my sorority and found chapter members who supported me during the hard times and applauded my accomplishments. My sorority sisters have been by my side throughout my adult life: they supported me during my divorce, they took care of me when I had surgery, they comforted my mother and me when my father passed away, and they constantly encourage me to finish this dissertation. Looking back over the past 16 years that I have been a member, I cannot imagine my life without my “sorors” (sorority sisters). Therefore, I know firsthand how important mentoring can be.

Being a member of the graduate chapter also gave me the opportunity to do career networking and work in my community as a mentor to young girls through local community service projects. Throughout the years I have also mentored several young ladies while coaching and serving as a guidance counselor in the Atlanta area. After pledging at UGA in 1994, I went back in 2004 to pin a former student that I had mentored since she was in high school. It indeed was a dynamic moment in my life to pass the torch of sisterhood to my mentee.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant because it addresses issues African American women deal with in education, corporate America and in society. It is important, as educators, to prepare young African American female students to become successful postsecondary students and to survive in corporate America. This study expanded the limited research available exploring mentoring experiences and any associated identity development of African American women in an organization that promotes and facilitates mentoring. It examined how mentors impact their educational, career and psychosocial lives and their ability to overcome barriers they face due to their race and gender.

The strength of this study is the uniqueness of the topic. There is a need for more scholarly literature about psychosocial mentoring and about African American women being supportive of one another. Bova (2000) suggested researchers conduct further investigation on the psychosocial support that group mentoring could provide for underrepresented groups such as African American females. Harris (1994) recommended that her study of African American women's mentoring experience in Delta Sigma Theta on the college level be extended to study beyond the college years.

There is a gap in scholarly literature about traditionally black sororities and fraternities. There is a lack of data about the mentoring component of these organizations. There is limited information about how the organizations mentor their members as well as how they mentor the youth in their communities through

formal mentoring programs. There is also a lack of information about how the alumnae chapters serve as mentors to the collegiate chapters.

Summary

African American women are dual minority by virtue of their race and gender. They were hindered for many decades by racial restrictions on educational opportunities and career advancement. Initially, they were denied the right to a formal education and the right to attend college. African American women also experienced racism and sexism in the job market. Most African American women were limited to careers as domestic workers and farmers until the 1950's. Due to the increase of African American women in professional careers, the need for mentors is essential in retaining these women. Research shows that educational, career, and psychosocial mentoring can aid in one obtaining success.

Delta Sigma Theta is an organization that consists of college-educated, African American women who support each other and the community. This organization has the potential to give its members the opportunity to help each other cope with societal challenges such as racial issues, gender bias, and power struggles. Members of the organization can mentor one another in their educational and career pursuits.

The purpose of this qualitative inquiry was to explore the mentoring experiences of five African American women, the researcher and her sorority sistercircle, who are members of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority and how their experiences have contributed to their identity and educational, career, and

psychosocial success. This study focused on mentoring as a support system for African American women facing societal challenges such as racial issues, gender bias, and power struggles.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The women stated that only an African American woman could understand the complex intersection of race and gender in the academy and society. They felt they could establish a deeper, more meaningful connection with her because of her firsthand life and academic experiences. (Patton & Harper, 2003, p. 71)

The purpose of this qualitative interview study was to explore the mentoring experiences of five African American women, the researcher and her sorority sistercircle, who are members of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority and how their experiences have contributed to their identity and educational, career, and psychosocial success. This study focused on mentoring as a support system for African American women facing societal challenges such as racial issues, gender bias, and power struggles.

This chapter includes a critical review of the literature that includes an in-depth look at the challenges of overcoming sexist and racial barriers. It includes previous research studies and insight on gender, race, definitions and dimensions of mentoring, the process of developing and maintaining mentoring relationships, and which mentoring relationships are more beneficial to African American females. This chapter also looks at theories of identity formation and Delta Sigma Theta as an organization with members who mentor the community as well as its members.

Race, Gender, and Power Defined

Social Definitions of Race and Gender

The definitions of race and gender have evolved throughout history in our society. Race is defined as a biological phenomenon or classification of peoples.

In Western cultures, peoples are primarily classified by skin color (Pinderhughes, 1989). They use facial features, hair texture, and other physical characteristics to define each race. However, race is also defined by society through social class, dominance, and stereotypes. "Race and gender are socially constructed to produce a social hierarchy of power within society" (Browne & Misra, 2003, p. 12). According to the 2000 U.S. Census, the majority of the population (81%) identifies itself as White American. Historically, White Americans have been the dominant and powerful race within the social hierarchy. Gender is also determined socially. "It is the societal meaning assigned to male and female. Each society emphasizes particular roles of each sex, although there is a wide latitude in acceptable behaviors for each gender" (Hesse-Biber & Carger, 2000, p. 91). The U.S. is a patriarchal society where men are traditionally the head of the household and hold positions of power in education, business, and politics.

The experiences of African American women are different yet connected through a common struggle. "Race is gendered and gender is racialized" (Browne & Mirsa, 2003, p. 12). Therefore African American women and white women, even though they may be the same gender, have different experiences as women in America. Just as African American women and men are both minorities by race and experience a bond of brother and sisterhood, African American women have a unique experience that only another African American woman can relate to. African American women bear the burden of dealing with gender issues as well as racial issues. They experience racism and sexism in

education and work as they strive to obtain advanced degrees and strive to break the glass ceiling in corporate America (Kaba, 2008).

Zimmerman et al. (2003) found that African American women are more aware of their race than white women. White women are more conscious of their gender and class. "Black women view their race as part of who they are. It affects how others see them and how they see themselves" (p. 4).

The Power Struggle

Pinderhughes (1989) defined power as "the ability to produce desired effects on others and influence them" (p. 110). She stated that power is a systemic phenomenon. In the U.S., white males still dominate and have the power. Dominant groups have the power because they control major resources, politics and social institutions (Kaba, 2008). In our patriarchal system, men are expected to take care of their families therefore earning the highest wages. Throughout American history, white males have been policy makers, business owners and slave masters. Wealthy white men were the first group of people that could get a higher education, so, therefore, they were the first to have successful professional careers and access to the best resources. Women in our society have been stereotyped as the "weaker" being in comparison to their male counterparts. The role of the white woman was to be a wife and mother. Initially, upper class white women did not work outside the home. Members of the dominant culture defined the racial status and gender roles of African American men and women. African Americans were labeled as "less than human" and were bought, sold, traded and treated like animals. Their role initially was to

serve their masters and farm the land. African American women farmed and did domestic labor. They were raped and beaten and given the least of resources: they were powerless.

Unequal power and oppression is more prevalent in literature that focuses on higher education and the labor market. Research shows that women are paid less money than their male counterparts holding the same position at the same company (Kaba, 2008). "In spite of the increased number of professional African American women in the workplace, they are still considered to be the least powerful in such workplace and in many organizations as well" (Bailey, 2001, p. 27).

According to the U.S. Department of Labor Women's Bureau website, there has been a slow increase in the percentage of women's earnings as a percent of a man's up to the year 2007. In later years, it continuously fluctuates for all age groups showing that the fight for equal pay still exists. The percentages are greater for the younger age group. The percentages in pay for women as a percent of a man's earnings for 2007 show a decrease from 2005 from all age groups except the age 45-to-54 years group.

Historical Portraits of African American Women

In the beginning of our country's history, women were defined as second-class citizens. White men created the Constitution, created and enforced the laws, and owned property. In addition to land, women, children, and slaves were defined as "property". "Racism was born during a period of unrestricted growth and expansion in the American colonies. Believing that people of color were

inherently inferior was a convenient excuse to maintain and exploit cheap labor” (Reid-Merritt, 1996, p. 95).

The country was divided on several political issues; antislavery was a major one. The southern states that relied on slaves for production of crops and much of its income were opposed to granting African American rights. The South was also against allowing women the right to vote or run for an elected office. In 1861, the southern states seceded from the country and there was a Civil War. After the Civil War, women and slaves were hopeful of new laws being established to grant independence and freedom from their white male owners (Collins, 2000; Knappman & DuPont, 2005).

During the late 1800's, the United States went through many political changes. One major issue was human and civil rights of African Americans citizens. According to the U.S. Constitution, non-white Americans had no rights. At the same time African American men and women were fighting for human rights women were fighting for civil rights (Giddings, 1984). Both groups, African Americans and all women, were denied access to public education and voting rights. Both white women and African Americans fought to prove their patriotism and show that they were citizens hoping their efforts would be rewarded in the end. After the South was defeated in 1868, congress passed the Fourteenth Amendment granting citizenship to non-Americans (with the exception of Native Americans). This amendment still did not include women. Two years later, the Fifteenth Amendment was passed granting the right to vote to all men no matter

race or color; however, women were still excluded. There was a struggle for White men to relinquish power to women (Knappman & Dupont, 2005).

After Black men were given the right to vote, the Women's Suffrage Movement splintered. "Middle-class white women were naturally disappointed, for they had assumed their efforts toward securing full citizenship for African people would ultimately benefit them, too, in their desire for full citizenship as voting citizens" (Philips, 2006, p. 46). As a result, many white women suffragists shifted and separated themselves from the movement, which left the African American woman to fight her own battle. Thus, this was a case where African American women had lost advocates. African American women wanted voting power and citizenship just like their white counterparts. Fifty years after the Fifteenth Amendment granted African American men the right to vote, the United States adopted the Nineteenth Amendment granting women the right to vote. Finally, women were defined as citizens of the United States. However, African American women still faced the challenges of discrimination as their roles within society continued to change.

Women were initially excluded from pursuing higher education, politics, and working in the labor force. Therefore, when women were allowed to attend college, run for office, and earn wages, they entered male dominated arenas and were at a disadvantage. The feminist movement was formed to help support women and help pass laws that would protect women at work and in school. However, the feminist movement focused on the needs of upper to middle class white women. The history of the term "feminism" is also associated with middle

class white women. African American women were excluded and therefore had to create their own voice and movement.

Alice Walker was one of the first to separate the African American female from the “feminist” movement. She defined African American feminists using the term “womanist”. She wrote “womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender” (Philips, 2006, p. 48). The analogy is synonymous to the relationship of Black and White women: we are similar colors yet different shades. There are similarities in their struggle, yet they have different ideologies and are unique culturally, socially, and historically.

Theoretical Framework

Black Feminist Thought is the underlying theoretical framework of this study. Black Feminist Thought is a theoretical framework that aids in one’s understanding of the challenges and unique experiences of African American women. Howard-Hamilton (2003) reiterated the need for researchers to select appropriate theories for understanding the needs of African American women. The author stated that the theoretical framework should be based on the cultural, personal, and social contexts of the subjects. Black Feminist Thought focuses on African American women’s issues. Therefore, theories that focus on men and women who have not experienced racial and gender oppression should not be considered.

Collins (2000) defined this theory as “a critical social theory that aims to empower African-American women within the context of social injustice sustained by intersecting oppressions” (p. 22). The core themes within the theoretical

framework include oppression, the image of the Black woman, self-definition, sexuality, motherhood, and political activism and love relationships. According to Collins, oppression is “an unjust situation where, systematically and over a long period of time, one group denies another group access to the resources of society” (p. 299). Collins also noted that race, gender, class, sexuality, nation, age, and ethnicity constitute major forms of oppression. According to Collins (2006), Black Feminist Thought came from the ideology that no matter what age, social status, sexual orientation or profession, all African American women share like culture and experiences.

Howard-Hamilton (2003) recognized three key themes within Black Feminist Thought: (1) The framework is structured around the experiences that black women have had in their lives, (2) even though the experiences of black women are unique, they intersect on different levels, and (3) even though commonalities are shared, there are multiple contexts in which their experiences can be interpreted. One major concept within Black Feminist Thought is the idea of intersectionality. “Intersectionality is defined as the analysis claiming that systems of race, social class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation, and age form mutually constructing features of social organization of its domains of power” (Collins, 2000, p. 299).

Guy-Sheftall (2003) discussed the roots of black feminism. She reported how Black Feminist Ideology led to the organization of the women’s club movement in the 1890’s and how this framework emerged from the black feminist movement in the 1960’s. This movement evolved because African American

women realized that they were different than the traditional “white” feminist and the “men” of the civil rights movement. They had to deal with two issues. Guy-Sheftall stated the five themes of Black Feminist Ideology that included (1) a legacy of struggle which was based on the double oppression of racism and sexism, (2) a difference of issues that white women and Black men face, (3) the history of struggle unique to Black women, (4) the lack of urgency to eradicate sexism, racism, classism, and other issues Black women face, and (5) the marginalized status of African American women in America.

Black Feminist Thought gave African American women a better understanding of why we have barriers in society and validation that there is a unified struggle.

One of the greatest gifts of Black feminism to ourselves has been to make it a little easier simply to be Black and female. A Black feminist analysis has enabled us to understand that we are not hated and abused because there is something wrong with us, but because our status and treatment is absolutely prescribed by the racist, misogynistic system under which we live. (Smith, 2000, p. xxxvi)

Defining Self

The formation of one’s identity is a multidimensional process. One’s identity can consist of how one defines herself or how society perceives one. These perceptions are also referred to as self-identity and social categorization. There are many variables that go into the formation of one’s identity such as

social constructs, gender, race, culture, careers, environment, family influence, group affiliation and social class (Hecht, Jackson, & Ribeau, 2003).

Gender identity is based on whether a person and society perceives a person as male or female. It is shaped by sexism, double standards, feminist ideology, motivation, and ambition. Racial identity is formulated from what racial group one associates with. It is influenced by history, culture, stereotypes, and discrimination. Both gender and race have historically played a major part in the lives of African American women and are significant to their identity. "Although black women hold other identities that may impact their daily lives, their unique experiences in the U.S. may lead them to be especially conscious of their racial and gender identities" (Settles, 2006, p. 589).

There are several theories of identity formation, most of which consist of three to five stages of development. The first theory of racial identity was formulated in 1971 and was revised in 1991 to specifically address African Americans. Cross created this theory of racial identity with five stages of development. They are (1) Pre-encounter, (2) Encounter, (3) Immersion-Emersion, (4) Internalization and (5) Internalization-Commitment. African Americans in the Pre-encounter stage accept the worldviews of the dominant culture. During the Encounter stage, African Americans reject white culture as they explore what it means to be Black in America. During the Immersion-Emersion stage of racial identity, the person fully emerges him/herself into everything about Black culture and during the fourth and fifth stages, African Americans learn to accept all cultures and appreciate their own (Williams, 2006).

In 1990, Helms developed the Womanist identity development model. Similar to Cross' model of racial identity, there are stages of development that women go through. During the first stage, Pre-encounter, women reject the idea of sexism and assume traditional gender roles. In the Encounter stage, women begin to examine their role as a woman in this society. During the Immersion-Emersion stage, women immerse themselves into a feminist state of mind. They express anger towards the opposite sex. Finally, during the last stage, Internalization, women begin to learn to embrace their gender and can be open minded enough to appreciate men also. Both theories show progression from one's external to internal awareness of self (Williams, 2006; Wyatt, 2006).

Recently, there have been studies conducted that have linked self-esteem to the progression of one's racial and gender identity. Women who are in the pre-encounter stages of racial and gender identity also tend to have low self-esteem. African American women who have high self-esteem have pride of their race and gender. They are open-minded about men and other cultures yet committed to their gender and race and are socially involved in the advancement of their people. Therefore, African American women who feel good about themselves feel good about being a woman and feel good about being Black (Wyatt, 2006).

Bell-McDonald (2007) conducted a study with 88 African American women from different socio-economic backgrounds and educational levels. The purpose of the study was to explore the experiences of African American women across classes. They shared their views on solidarity and gender-ethnic identities.

Ninety-four percent of the women in her study took pride in being Black and in being a woman.

The women express that they feel strongly that being a Black woman supports a positive self-image that being Black is important to their womanhood, and that being a Black woman is an important reflection of who they are in this world. And despite whatever hardships they face, they would not have wanted to be born anything else but Black and female.

(Bell-McDonald, 2007, p. 65)

Self-identity and image are a direct reflection of a person's awareness of self. However people are also labeled and identified by society. African American women have been historically portrayed negatively through the media and through stereotypes (Hecht, Jackson, & Ribeau, 2003). African American women who have learned how to navigate through negativity could help other African American women build positive self-identities through mentoring.

Defining Mentoring

Definition of Mentoring

Benard (1992) defined mentoring as a one-on-one relationship between an experienced caring individual and a less experienced person in an academic or social capacity that continues over time. Bova (2000) defined mentorship as a relationship that aids one in achieving his or her greatest potential. Allen-Sommerville (1994) described mentoring as a relationship that is characterized by mutual respect, trust, understanding and empathy. Mentoring includes

tutoring, teaching, coaching, advising, counseling, guiding, role modeling and inspiring.

There are many types of relationships that embody the elements of mentoring such as coaching, counseling and friendship. However, there are distinct differences that separate mentoring from other relationships. Athletic coaches can be mentors to their students. However, mentors are not always training their mentees and evaluating their performance.

Nettles (1991) stated that coaches are similar to mentors because they teach and create opportunities for their mentees as well as provide social support. However, Nettles also noted that coaches differ from mentors because they observe and give feedback to students about their performance on a specific skill.

In informal mentoring relationships, the mentor and mentee may develop a friendship over a period of time. In friendships, both parties may have mutual respect for each other. In a mentoring relationship, the mentee usually has a greater respect for their mentor (Donawa, 1998).

Casto, Caldwell, and Salazar (2005) found that mentoring does have elements of friendship. The emotions that the mentor and mentee may share can be genuine. The relationship may be friendly because of the caring and sharing that takes place. The relationship is personal yet professional. It differs from friendship because the learning of the mentee is always the focus of the relationship. The mentor also has the power within the relationship.

In an informal mentoring relationship, the mentor may serve as an advisor. The mentor can be the person one can confide in and may offer feedback and advice. “Mentors differ from advisers in that they provide both psychosocial functions, such as role modeling, acceptance and affirmation, as well as career functions, such as sponsorship, coaching, and networking” (Schlegel, 2000, p. 53).

Types of Mentoring

Educational mentors assist students in finding their full potential. Career related mentors function as coaches that assist their protégé with career advancement. Mentors that provide psychosocial support offer role modeling, counseling, and friendship (Grantham, 2004). Students at the elementary, secondary and college level use educational mentors to help them accomplish academic and personal goals. Employees use mentors as role models at the workplace to train lower level workers and groom them for higher-level positions. “Mentors provide career advisement and instruction, support, understanding, positive role modeling, protection and overall assistance to propel students to the next level of development” (Casto et al., 2005, p. 331). Each of these forms of mentoring can facilitate the accomplishment of valued intellectual and psychosocial outcomes (Harper, 2001).

Educational Mentoring

Educational mentoring is significant because in today’s society one’s level of education and socioeconomic status determines his or her level of success. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the more education one attains, the more

opportunities this individual has to earn a higher income (Bureau of the Census, 1994). Mentors can inspire, motivate, and encourage students at the elementary, middle, high, and collegiate levels.

Currently, the majority of mentoring research in education has focused on formal mentoring programs. Studies have focused on the mentoring relationships between educators and students in elementary, middle, and high schools that need academic coaching. In higher education, there has been a growing concern about the retention of African American faculty at predominantly White institutions and a lack of peer mentors (Casto et al, 2005; Fries-Britt & Kelly, 2005). There has also been an increase of research on strategies to increase minority students attending college and graduating from college (Harris, 1994; Patton, 2009). Due to the increase of minority student enrollment, many colleges and universities have developed formal mentoring programs and conducted research on these programs to aid in student retention.

Many predominantly white campuses are creating Offices of Multicultural Affairs and formal mentoring programs that bring minority staff, upperclassmen and minority freshmen together. Based on statistics from the office of admissions on retention rates, these schools realize that it is important to have diversity on their campus. Universities want to retain their minority staff and students, so mentoring programs are established to aid in helping the staff make tenure and the students complete their degree programs.

Catholic University of America started a formal mentoring program for minority students called Mosaic. "Mosaic has three components: a peer

mentoring program, a faculty mentoring program and an ambassadors program” (Joyce, 2003, p. 17). The peer-mentoring program involved older students being a mentor to a freshman. They offered advice and answered student’s questions from a classmate’s perspective. The mentoring program consisted of a faculty member from the student’s department being paired with a freshman for four years. The ambassadors program used extra faculty and staff volunteers to meet with freshman and offer support as an additional resource.

Patton and Harper (2003) discussed the difficulty of students that are attending graduate and professional schools to find mentors in which they can connect. They suggested that minority faculty make an extra effort to reach out to minority graduate students. They also challenged the graduate students to form their own support groups amongst themselves because many times there are no professors available to serve as a mentor.

Fries-Britt and Kelly (2005) conducted an auto-ethnography of their experiences mentoring each other. The narratives share their story of a nine-year mentoring relationship between an African American female college professor advisor and her African American female doctoral student advisee. They were two minorities at a predominantly white university that came together to create a support system. The goal of their research was to incite ways of supporting potential minority faculty and students. The relationship progressed from “teacher-learner” to “career advisor-protégé” to “sister-friend”.

Williams, Brewley, Reed, White, and Davis-Haley (2005) examined mentoring relationships between three African American graduate students and

their African American professors. The students received psychosocial support and educational mentorship that aided these young ladies in graduating from their respective programs.

Career Mentoring

Career mentoring in the workplace is needed to help African American women compete with White American men and women who may enter the labor market with advantages such as knowledge of strategies to get ahead and access to networks. Even though there are public policies and initiatives designed to help eliminate past and present discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, or national origin at the workplace, bias still exists (U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, 2007). Therefore, it is important for African American women to have a career mentor at the workplace to help them compete with the majority who are ahead socially and vocationally.

Virginia Tech piloted a program to retain its faculty of color. The program consisted of several planned activities in which minority faculty could come together to share ideas and get to know one another. The planned activities included a focus group that met monthly. All new minority faculty members would meet with a tenured professor and get the chance to vent and ask questions. They held a monthly breakfast workshop where topics such as mentoring, grant writing, and effective teaching strategies were discussed. They held a college-wide diversity summit with all faculty members. This forum allowed the white faculty to learn more about issues the minority faculty members had to deal with everyday. The human resources department also looked at 30 schools similar to

Virginia Tech and compared other multicultural mentoring programs to their pilot program. This allowed the department to explore what was working or not working on other college campuses (Virginia Tech, 2005).

Floyd (2003) reported that women of color only comprise a small percentage of upper level corporate positions. Research indicates that informal mentoring relationships can be difficult to establish for minorities in corporate America. Women make up about half of the workforce in the United States and only 7% are African American. Floyd reported that within corporate America, women made up 13% of board seats and only 2% of these seats belonged to women of color.

General Mills Corporation (2009) realized that having a diverse employee base is beneficial to a company. They have two programs that assist minorities and majority women to be successful. General Mills has a mentoring program for new minority employees and a program that joins minorities and women in middle management with top executives.

General Mills also realized that informal mentoring relationships are difficult for minorities to establish in corporate America. They have established a corporate mentoring program to help novice minority employees become more familiar with the company. They believe by exposing their minority employees to the company in this manner it will retain employees (General Mills, 2009).

General Mills (2009) also has several networks of minority groups which include the women's forum, the Hispanic network, the South Asian network, the American Indian network, the Black champions network, the Asian American

network, and “Betty’s Family” for lesbian, gay, bisexual employees. These groups offer support for minority groups and have forums in which they can exchange ideas.

Their infrastructure could be a model for other large corporations. It is a new age in multiculturalism. Affirmative action no longer forces businesses and schools to keep a certain percentage of minorities in certain states; however with the growing number of people of color in this country, it is more difficult for top executives to be racially exclusive in selecting their workers (Collins, 2000).

Psychosocial Mentoring

Psychosocial mentoring is often associated with career mentoring. While career mentors focus on networking and improving one’s leadership and job skills; psychosocial mentors help to strengthen one’s esteem and personal development. On a professional level, the relationship between a mentor and their protégé is informal. African American women are at a disadvantage sometimes because they do not have access to other African American women that could provide psychosocial mentoring to them at work. Therefore they rely on friends, family, extended family, sorority and social club members, church members, and other coworkers for psychosocial support (Bova, 2000; Harris, 1994).

There are four functions of a psychosocial mentor: (1) role modeling, (2) acceptance and confirmation, (3) counseling, and (4) friendship (Bower, 2009). Mentors provide role modeling by demonstrating acceptable behaviors. The protégés observe and learn how to act and function from their mentors.

Acceptance and confirmation is when the mentor reassures the protégé that he/she is doing well and encourages the protégé to accomplish his/her goals and achieve success. Mentors help protégés to develop a positive self-image. The counseling function that mentors provide requires a more intimate and personal relationship. They assist their protégés in working out personal problems that may hinder their advancement. The aspect of psychosocial mentoring which is different from educational and career mentoring is friendship. The mentor and protégé sincerely care for each other (Bower, 2009).

In the United States, African American women are minorities by race, ethnicity and gender. This intersectionality of race and gender pose obstacles for African American women (Collins, 2000). Informal psychosocial mentoring relationships with other African American women can be a tool in aiding African American women in overcoming these barriers.

Dimensions of Mentoring

Formal vs. Informal Mentoring

There are two dimensions of mentoring relationships. Dennis (1993) noted that mentoring relationships could be formed as natural or planned relationships. Natural, also known as informal, mentoring relationships develop through friendship. The relationship naturally occurs through two individuals interacting with one another. Planned or formal mentoring develops through structured programming. Mentors and mentees are selected and matched through a formal process.

The role of the mentor is that of a teacher and the mentee is the learner. There is a certain level of respect that a mentee holds for his/her mentor. One major difference between planned relationships and informal mentoring relationships is the freedom of choice. Pellicione and Albon (2004) conducted a research study that focused on informal mentoring as a support structure for college level education majors faced with an overwhelming task. The subjects were given an assignment to complete. Due to their lack of knowledge about how to complete the task, they had to find a mentor to assist them with the challenge. The researchers found that the mentees appreciated the freedom to choose their mentors and they felt that their mentoring program was successful because of the connectedness between the mentors and mentees. Having an informal mentor helped the mentees to be successful in completing their task (Pellicione & Albon, 2004).

One of the main defining features of mentoring, whether it is formal or informal, is that most are positive relationships that benefit minorities. Due to its positive effect, there has been an increase of research on mentoring programs in marketing and education. There are several studies about formal relationships among African American women particularly in the field of higher education. The mentoring programs relevant to education and business are predominantly planned and structured relationships. These types of programs strategically match individuals together. Many times there are structured activities that the mentee and mentor can participate in together such as a company party or a student-faculty social. These formal mentoring relationships are many times

cross-cultural and cross-gendered; however, multicultural mentoring relationships can sometimes be troublesome and may not be the most beneficial type of match. Casto et al. (2005) acknowledged that White mentors need to recognize how issues such as cross-cultural communication and differences in power dynamics between a White mentor and a mentee of color may influence a mentoring relationship.

Multicultural Mentoring

In the workplace, it is often difficult for women of color to find mentors that are of the same race and gender. Even though the field of education is female dominated, the positions of leadership and administrators are predominantly male (Kaba, 2008; Moore, 1999). On the corporate level, White men typically dominate higher management positions (Bailey, 2001; Kaba, 2008). Therefore, African American women may have mentors of another race and gender. However, both women and men tend to prefer mentoring and being mentored by someone of the same sex (Hansman, 2001).

Perceptions of power are different among cross-gender and cross-cultural mentoring relationships. "Mentoring relationships can be characterized as socially constructed power relationships that are designed to advantage certain groups while disadvantaging other groups" (Hansman, 2001, p. 45). The mentor has the power of knowledge.

Patton and Harper (2003) stressed the importance of same-gender and same-race mentoring relationships. They believe that a graduate student that has the opportunity to be involved in a mentoring relationship with someone that is

similar personally, academically, and professionally is very important to African American women and other minority students.

Women Mentoring Women

Women mentors appear to make all the difference in the academic careers of women students (Schlegel, 2000). Women mentors seem to be able to provide advice not only professionally, but also socially, mentally and with better understanding. In some graduate departments, women students are encouraged to find mentors who can help them direct their careers and guide them in fulfilling a successful life with a full-time career while satisfying personal and family lives. Trying to regulate all of these things can become overwhelming. Getting advice from someone who has experienced some of the same issues can alleviate the mentee from going through unnecessary obstacles. The mentor could also provide assistance in helping the mentee make correct decisions the first time (Patton, 2009).

In the following excerpt, Collins (2000) discussed the power of African American women listening and being available for one another:

One can write for a nameless faceless audience, but the act of one using one's voice requires a listener and thus establishes a connection. For African-American women the listener most able to pierce the invisibility created by Black women's objectification is another Black woman. This process of trusting one another can seem dangerous because only Black women know what it means to be Black women. But if we will not listen to one another, then who will? (p.104)

Women mentors also appear to make a difference in the labor market as well. Black Enterprise Magazine held a “Women in Power” Summit in 2008. Over 600 African American businesswomen from around the country were in attendance to meet and learn about being successful in the business world. “While women of color face extraordinary barriers they comprise only 2.1% of senior leadership positions, an increase of only 0.3% since 2002” (Nice, 2008). The keynote speaker stated that mentors were the best guides to a successful business career.

The Process of Mentoring

Role of the Mentor

According to Cohen (1995), there are six services that a mentor should provide for their mentees. The mentor should establish trust, offer advice, offer alternatives, be challenging, be motivating and encourage initiative. Mentors should genuinely want what is best for their mentee. Professionally, mentors can actively help their mentees to develop their own personal, educational, and career potential across the social landscape of academic, government, and business environments.

Mentors can provide a number of services for their mentees. Related research indicates that mentors provide social support instrumentally by helping mentees search for jobs (Bailey, 2001; Harper, 2003). Mentors can provide emotional and psychosocial support by listening and advising (Bova, 2000; Casto et al, 2005; Patton & Harper, 2003). Research also indicates that the mentee can gain many skills from the mentoring experience. The mentee can develop career-

networking skills, learn to be successful in school or at work, and how to problem solve.

Significant Studies on Mentoring African American Women

The majority of the literature suggests that once African American women obtain positions of power, it takes a role model or mentor to retain them.

Mentoring helps to build confidence and provides needed support. There are four major research studies that examined how mentors contribute to the success of African American women.

Jackson, Kite, and Branscombe (1996) conducted a study to determine the connection between availability of role models and self-concepts of African American women. The researchers surveyed 159 African American women that matriculated at the University of Kansas and Ball State University. The study found that 76% of the women had a role model. Of the women that had role models, 56% of the role models were relatives, 18% were teachers and 15% were in the media. Seventy-four percent of the role models were other African American women. Based on the results, the researchers concluded that African American women overwhelmingly prefer African American women role models.

There are a limited number of role models on some college campuses, especially at predominantly white colleges. This lack of mentoring may be a factor in the low student retention on many college campuses (Harris, 1994). Although there may be a lack of African American women professors, the women surveyed still had informal mentors in their lives that helped to motivate them.

African American women are pursuing careers in higher-level management and seeking leadership positions. In 2000, Bova, a mentoring researcher, conducted in-depth interviews with 14 African American women. The interviews gave detailed accounts of the mentoring experience of these women. The study revealed that all of the women believed that mentoring was critical to their career development. However, all of the women encountered racism and stereotyping within the workplace. Although they received formal mentors at the workplace, some of the women received psychosocial support from informal mentoring groups such as churches and sororities. The women acknowledged that the emotional support they needed was provided from the outside entities because they could not receive this type of support from their mentors in the workplace.

Bailey (2001) conducted a study that examined the factors that contributed to the success of prominent African American women. The author examined whether mentoring was a critical factor of their success. The researcher interviewed seven African American women that worked in various career fields. The participants revealed that they had a group of informal mentors that supported them throughout their lives. This group of mentors included family members, church members, co-workers, friends, spouses and members of the African American community. The results revealed that all of the women experienced the double jeopardy of racism and sexism. However, the support received from role models helped build confidence and self worth, which helped to overcome obstacles.

In 2009, Patton conducted a qualitative research study on mentoring relationships of African American women graduate students. She interviewed eight African American women that matriculated in a variety of graduate school programs. Some had mentors that were African American women faculty and the others that did not have African American women available to mentor them at the academy had family, friends, or sorority sisters that filled that void.

Defining Sisterhood

The African American sisterhood offers special qualities for phenomenal women. Several of them say that black women provide a safe haven to discuss any and all matters related to the job and to the heart (Reid-Merritt, 1996, p. 175).

In education, there are teachers and volunteers that tutor and train students. There are athletic coaches that encourage their players to focus and maintain their grade averages. There are school counselors and administrators that help students succeed and act as mentors. In corporate America, there are co-workers that help each other and workers that have mentors that help them climb the ladder to obtain high level management positions. Most of the literature refers to these types of mentors. However, there are many other mentors that provide support for psychosocial and personal development.

Bailey (2001) discussed African American women having a portfolio of mentors. This term refers to supportive informal mentor relationships of family, church members, colleagues, friends, spouses, and members of the Black community. Many women are unable to find other African American women as mentors at school and work. This portfolio of mentors or sistercircle acts as a safety net for African American women by providing encouragement and

validation of self worth. Some women receive support from the community (Bova, 2000). The community includes churches, civic organizations, family and friends. Women also received support from their sorority sisters and community organizations in which they were members.

One civic organization that was mentioned in three research studies was Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. One of the goals of the organization is to promote educational and career development. The sorority is known for its mentoring projects in the African American community. Giddings (1988) stated that Delta Sigma Theta is an important source of leadership training for African American women. Harris (1994) conducted a qualitative study of 102 members of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority and the impact the organization had on the students' college experience. Harris found that membership and involvement with the organization gave its members access to mentoring relationships, the opportunity to perform community service, academic assistance, leadership opportunities, and emotional and social support. The results indicated that Delta Sigma Theta provides educational support, career networking opportunities as well as personal development and social mentoring opportunities.

Sorority Sistercircles

The Black Women's Club Movement

African American women began to attend colleges in the mid to late 1800's. There were sororities on some predominantly white campuses, but African American women were not welcome to join their ranks due to the color of their skin (Hendricks-Johnson, 2004; Little, 2002). There were also organizations

that were only for African American men. "In 1897, the American Negro Academy was established to bring together intellectuals to promote scholarly work. Many of these scholars had attended ivy-league colleges, yet they refused to admit women into their organization even though there had been a great increase in African American women attaining higher degrees" (Giddings, 1984, p. 116). However, there were community groups and organizations that African American women could join. Before there were sororities, there were clubs. There were organizations such as the NAACP and the National Urban League. These two groups were civil rights organizations whose membership consisted of men and women.

"The black women's club movement, which emerged on a national level in the 1890's and has been analyzed mainly in the context of racial uplift, is clearly a manifestation of resistance to both racism and sexism" (Guy-Sheftall, 2003, p. 180). During the Black Women's Club Movement, African American women came together to address the social welfare needs of the black community. Similar to their white counterparts, black women's organizations were fighting for women's right to vote (Giddings, 1984; Hernandez, 2007). Both black and white organizations were formed by middle-class, educated, women who recognized that family was important. However, they both also recognized the importance of social and political power. The major differences between the two groups of women were the missions of their organizations. Black women were fighting against racism and sexism. These groups were dedicated to "lift their sisters as they climbed." Their goal was to help the uneducated, illiterate, and poor in the

Black community. For African American women, who had the fewest resources in society, to come together collectively and be able to pool their resources to help the unfortunate was important and progressive. White women's mission was to help "uplift those who were already uplifted." They were not so much concerned with helping those less fortunate than themselves (Giddings, 1984, p. 98).

"Lifting as we climb" was the motto of the National Association of Colored Women (NACW). This organization was at the forefront of the black women's club movement. In 1935, after the four sororities had been established, they joined with several other organizations to form the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW). Their mission was to eradicate segregation and discrimination. (Neumann, 2008)

Beginnings of Sorority Life

As the number of African Americans attending institutions of higher learning increased, so did the need for college support groups, especially on predominantly white campuses. African American women were not allowed to join the white sororities; therefore, they started their own. In addition to not being allowed to join white organizations, black college students were also excluded from participating in any community social events and cultural activities such as plays and concerts. All facilities at the time were segregated (Little, 2002).

Like the organizations formed during the women's club movement, black and white sororities had similarities and differences. They were similar in the sense that they both were composed of college-educated women. They both have certain requirements that members must meet to be admitted. They both

have rituals, ceremonies, and secrets that are special to each respective organization (Hernandez, 2007; Kimbrough, 2003). However, white sororities were formed as social secret societies that at times had rituals that were racist in nature (Harris, 1994). Their mission was to socialize with the members of the white fraternities and to date and search for possible mates (Berkowitz & Padavic, 1999; Hernandez, 2007). They were looking for possible career networking opportunities with sorority alumnae. Once a member had graduated their sisterhood ended. Most of their activities and work is done during their matriculation at the college (Horowitz, 1997). White sororities are structured on maintaining the middle-class lifestyle.

Black sororities were formed as social groups that were service focused. Their mission was to become self-sufficient. They had personal and community goals and their members are active beyond the college experience (Hernandez, 2007). Three of the four Black sororities were founded at Howard University: Alpha Kappa Alpha (1908), Delta Sigma Theta (1913) and Zeta Phi Beta (1920). Additional chapters within the sororities quickly spread to predominantly white institutions out of a need for peer, cultural, and social support. The fourth sorority, Sigma Gamma Rho, was founded in 1922 at Butler University. Sororities are known for providing social opportunities for its members; however, what makes Black sororities unique is the opportunity to give and receive mentoring, the mission to support the Black community and a lifetime commitment of sisterhood. "Black sisterhood has been a powerful force in the lives and achievements of all black women" (Harley, 2002, p. xi).

Delta Sigma Theta... Scholarship, Service, and Sisterhood

Delta Sigma Theta is the second oldest predominantly African American sorority in the United States (Giddings, 1988; Harris, 1994). The organization was born out of a need for social change. The sorority has five core components in which its service initiatives cover: educational development, economic development, physical and mental health, political awareness and international involvement (Giddings, 1988). Since its inception in 1913, political activism and women's rights have been in the forefront of its mission (Neumann, 2008). The organization implements a host of national and local programs that are for the betterment of the African American community.

Delta Sigma Theta currently implements several programs on a national and local level. Many include aspects of mentoring. Educational mentoring programs include Dr. Betty Shabazz Delta Academy, Delta GEMS, and the Debutante Program. These programs provide members with the opportunity to mentor young ladies in their community. The sorority also has a formal career-mentoring program, Leadership DELTA, where collegiate Deltas are paired with more seasoned Deltas as career mentors. Individually, Deltas in the community have also served as social mentors and role models. Even during the pledge process, younger Deltas referred to as "Little Sisters" are paired with older "Special Big Sisters" that help guide them through the process.

Since its inception, Delta Sigma Theta Sorority has been an influential force within the African American community. The first major social activity that this organization participated in was the 1913 Women's Suffrage March. Over the

past 96 years, the sorority has mentored the community through programs and gained many achievements in public service. Of the four black Greek sororities, Delta has the largest membership and is known as the most politically active (Neumann, 2008). Delta Sigma Theta Sorority currently has more than 200,000 members in over 950 chapters in 44 states and 7 geographical regions (Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc., 2009).

In order to gain membership into the sorority, one must have high scholastic achievement, a record of dedicated community service, and potential leadership ability. Members are college educated, politically active, and advocates for social change. The requirements for membership have not changed much over the past 97 years and neither has the mission of the organization. The programs that the sorority implements in the community do change. They are parallel and current to the needs of the Black community.

The sorority was incorporated in 1930 as a national organization. One of their first programs focused on race issues such as anti-lynching. They started the National Vigilance Committee. Its mission was to protest segregation and advocate for better employment opportunities for African Americans (White, 1999). The second national program was the National Library Project. Delta sisters would travel to rural areas of the south where African Americans did not have access to library materials. They would donate reading literature and books to poor communities. During the 1940's and 1950's, the organization continued their plight to eradicate illiteracy and started the National Victory Book Drive to provide servicemen with books, the Job Analysis Program that helped African

American women acquire skilled and unskilled jobs, and the Traveling Library, later renamed the Delta Bookmobile, which established libraries in North Carolina, South Carolina, and Georgia (Giddings, 1988; White, 1999).

Initially, Delta's programs were focused on helping the less fortunate. In 1947, Dorothy I. Height was elected as the organization's National President. She also served as the president of the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW). She was very instrumental in the Civil Rights Movement and under her leadership she initiated the Delta Five Point Program. It categorized Delta's programs into five categories: educational development, economic development, physical and mental health, political awareness and involvement and international awareness and involvement (Giddings, 1988). During the first 50 years of its existence, most of the programs focused on educating the African American community and helping them to build their economy.

During the 1960's, there were several collaborative efforts amongst the black sororities and civic organizations. Many members of Delta Sigma Theta were also members of the NAACP and the NCNW. The sorority contributed monies to support these organizations and their efforts (Neumann, 2008).

The sororities offered crucial financial support to the NAACP, helping to keep that organization alive to pursue legal remedies for racial discrimination. The sororities also independently offered support to the civil right movement. Money raised by more than a thousand Delta chapters across the nation paid the fines and bonds of those arrested during sit-ins and other civil rights demonstrations. The fund also paid

tuition for students who promoted integration. (Neumann, 2008, pp. 175-176)

The Civil Rights Movement was pivotal in the lives of African Americans in the United States. The policies and laws that were enacted because of the collaborative efforts of civic organizations, black churches, black sororities, and citizens that believed in integration and equal rights changed the country. In the summer of 1963, the sorority conducted a mentoring program, Wednesdays in Mississippi. Delta members would visit women in their homes to lend them support and resources. Three other mentoring programs that were implemented during the 1960's were Project Headstart, Delta Teen Lift, and the Unwed Mothers Program. These programs allowed members to teach other African Americans survival skills and gave the Delta members a chance to make one-on-one connections with members of their community.

During the 1970's, Delta Sigma Theta began to receive grants from various departments of the government and from organizations to conduct more programs in the Black community. They received funding from the Department of Justice for One America, which was a program to help rehabilitate women offenders. They received funding from the National Urban Coalition to help train minority youth for careers in the Health field. They received funding for programs to help youth in low socio-economic areas and monies from the U.S. Department of Health and welfare to provide programs to aid college students with academic and career counseling. Delta also implemented the Right to Read program which focused on helping the functionally illiterate. They also started a Life

Development Center in five major cities. These centers provided services to help improve the quality of life for people from youth to seniors.

During the 1980's, Delta began their Summit Programs, which are informative workshops for its members and those in the community. Summit I focused on social issues facing African American women. Summit II focused on supporting Single Parents. During the 1990's, Summit III focused on the survival of the young Black male. They covered topics such as health and hygiene, financial advice and the importance of education. Delta also established Project Cherish, which helps to beautify and preserve African American historical sites and landmarks. There were programs that promoted multicultural education in schools (African American Cultural Literacy Project). The Deltas partnered with Habitat for Humanity and the NAACP.

In the late 90's, Delta established one of its largest mentoring programs to date, The Dr. Betty Shabazz "Delta" Academy. The Delta Academy is a program allows Delta members to mentor middle school aged girls (11-14). The program was developed to help young ladies achieve academically and to build self-esteem. Local Delta chapters mentor young ladies in their community service areas. They provide enrichment in mathematics, science and technology. The young ladies that participate complete community service projects with the Delta members and learn a sense of sisterhood with their other Academy classmates. The curriculum includes science experiments, field trips, etiquette classes, and exposure to college and cultural activities. The major purpose of the program is to teach leadership skills to young women (Guster, 2009; Ross, 2000)

From 2000 to the present, Delta has implemented several new mentoring programs including Project SEE (Science in Everyday Experiences), Delta GEMS (Growing and Empowering Myself Successfully), Leadership Delta, and Summit IV, which addresses issues that impact African American women. Project SEE is a grant-funded program implemented by the National Science Center. The purpose of the program is to increase the number of young minority women in the field of science education. The Delta GEMS program is similar to the Delta Academy however the students are high school aged (14-18). Their curriculum includes post-secondary guidance such as financial aid seminars, standardized test preparation, assistance with the college application and scholarship process amongst other academic support and social mentoring. The five components of the Delta GEMS program include sisterhood, service, scholarship, money management, and wellness. Leadership Delta is a program that pairs collegiate Deltas that are in their junior or senior year of college with a mentor. They learn career building skills through workshops on resume writing, networking and interviewing skills. The mentors are employees of General Electric Company, and, upon graduation, the mentees are encouraged to apply for positions within the company. The participants come from various cities across the nation (Allison, 2008).

Over the past 97 years, Delta Sigma Theta has proven to be an organization that not only focuses on scholarship, service and sisterhood but also has developed mentors within the organization and mentored people of the African American community. The organization offers educational, career and

personal development support and networks to its members (Giddings, 1988; Harris, 1994, Reid-Merritt, 1996). “One of the greatest benefits of membership is the lifelong network that is established among members, both locally and globally. These networks enhance graduate school options, career advancement, and job mobility” (Patton & Harper, 2003, p. 70).

Summary

African American women are double minorities by race and gender. They share common experiences with women who are not African American because they are the same gender as well as similar experiences with their African American brothers because they are the same race. Yet, African American women share like culture and experiences with other African American women. Historically, they fought to get equal rights and citizenship in the United States and through their struggle they formed community groups that offered support. Black Feminist Thought is the theoretical framework, which supports the purpose of this proposed study. This theory promotes the uplift of African American women and recognizes the value of the African American woman’s lived experiences in the United States. This theory also supports group empowerment among African American women.

Mentoring can aid African American women in facing challenges in their pursuit of higher education and their quest to obtain higher-level managerial positions in corporate America. African American women mentors are often difficult to find in male dominated careers and predominantly white settings. Therefore, African American women must seek alternate support from their

community. They rely on informal networks of African American women who support one another; these formal networks are also known as sistercircles. Sororities and women's social clubs are sistercircles that offer mentoring to its members.

Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. is the largest Black Greek Letter Organization in the United States of America, with over 200,000 members; its mission is to support the community through a variety of programs. Members of the sorority have the opportunity to be mentors as well as be mentored.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

As members of two oppressed groups, that of black Americans and that of women, their life stories cannot be isolated from their distinct perspectives, values, and roles. This means that scholarly treatment of black women's lives and viewpoints also must be distinct in its conception, methodological approach, and analysis. (Etter-Lewis, 1991, p. 55)

The purpose of this qualitative interview study was to explore the mentoring experiences of five African American women, the researcher and her sorority sistercircle, who are members of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority and how their experiences have contributed to their identity and educational, career, and psychosocial success. This study focused on mentoring as a support system for African American women facing societal challenges such as racial issues, gender bias, and power struggles.

This chapter explains the (a) research questions, (b) rationale for the research approach, (c) the relevance of the theoretical framework, (d) description of the research sample, (e) summary of information needed, (f) data collection methods, (g) data analysis, and (h) issues of ethical considerations and trustworthiness. The chapter ends with a brief summary.

This study focused on the mentoring relationships of the researcher and her sorority sistercircle. The following questions guided the research:

1. What are the mentoring experiences of African American women in a sorority sistercircle?
2. How do mentoring experiences shape the identity of African American women?

3. How does mentoring empower African American women to overcome societal challenges?

These research questions were developed to explore how a sorority can provide opportunities for mentoring and how mentoring among African American women can be used to cope with societal challenges.

Rationale for Qualitative Research Design

I selected the qualitative approach to conduct my research because of the nature of research questions that were posed and how it relates to the purpose and theoretical framework of the study. The answers to the research questions would be difficult to answer using a quantitative research approach. I was interested in hearing the stories of the participants' mentoring experiences, and I explored the commonalities among the mentoring experiences of the individual participants.

Feminist researchers believe that "the social world is governed by power relations that influence acts and perceptions" (Ulin, Robinson, & Tolley, 2005, p. 16). Both qualitative and feminist researchers seek to understand human behavior. African-Americans and women have not had a "voice" in educational research for very long. I wanted to share the life stories of the participants and a qualitative study allowed me to do so.

Before written expression there was spoken word. Storytelling is one of many African traditions. Even during slavery, stories and hymns were used as a mode of communication amongst slaves because they were not allowed to learn to read and write. Their verbal stories were all that they had. "Stories, narratives,

and Bible principles are selected for their applicability to the lived experiences of African-Americans and become symbolic representations of a whole wealth of experience” (Collins, 2000, p. 258). One reason I chose to use qualitative inquiry was because of its history in Black feminist scholarship.

Research Design

This qualitative interview study allowed African American women to share their mentoring experiences through individual and focus group interviews. The researcher served as both researcher and participant in this study. According to Donawa (1998), inserting one’s self into a friend’s story and sharing that experience is a way of coming to understand that person better.

This qualitative inquiry used Black Feminist Thought as the underlying theoretical framework. Black Feminists advocate the use of qualitative research designs and are researchers in the field of multicultural education. Feminists also support the use of qualitative research designs as a valid form of research and expression. Telling their stories gives the participants a voice that, only within the last twenty years, could be heard. Cultures shape stories in different ways, and stories pass on women’s consciousness as it has shaped specific cultural, racial, and class experiences (Jaggar & Rothenberg, 1993).

In qualitative studies, artifacts can also be used to gather data and develop interpretations in conjunction with personal stories. Physical artifacts, photographs, and personal items can be used to help share stories. “Feminist theorists have been influential in this area as well in their efforts to use the documents and artifacts of marginalized groups as a means for making their

voices heard in historical and narrative accounts” (Given, 2008, p. 403). The participants of this study used personal artifacts to help them discuss the meaning and significance of their mentoring relationship with the researcher.

Participants

According to the 2000 U.S. Census Bureau, there are 34.6 million African Americans in the United States, which accounts for 12.3% of the U.S. population. Sixty percent of the African American population is female. The official website of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. reports that the organization has approximately 250,000 members worldwide. Therefore, members of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority account for approximately 1% of the African American female population.

A purposeful sampling procedure was used to select this study’s participants. “Purposeful sampling focuses on selecting information-rich cases whose study will illuminate the questions under study” (Patton, 2002, p. 230). It also is based on the belief that the researcher wants to learn from the sample.

The researcher selected four individuals based on their mentoring relationship with the researcher, and the researcher served as the fifth participant in the study. The criteria for selection of participants were:

- All participants are active members of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority
- All participants are between the ages of 26-69
- All participants have a Bachelor’s Degree or higher
- All participants are successful in their various careers

The participants pledged Delta Sigma Theta at three different universities in the South; their pledge processes were unique, and they have a variety of different

occupations and educational backgrounds. The participants were identified by pseudonyms in order to maintain anonymity. The researcher contacted the participants and provided them with information about the study.

Instrumentation

The participants were given a demographic questionnaire to complete (see Appendix C). This instrument helped the researcher gather data about the participants' educational background, career choices, and types of mentors they have had throughout their lives.

Four of the five participants were interviewed using a semi-structured qualitative interview guide (see Appendix D). The fifth participant is the researcher, and I contributed a narrative of my mentoring experiences and participated in the focus group interview. The individual interview questions were adapted from two previous studies (Bailey, 2001; Harris, 1994) that conducted qualitative research about the mentoring experiences of African American women. The individual interview protocol had nine questions. The focus group interview consisted of seven questions (see Appendix E) that evolved from the themes that emerged from the individual interviews. The questions in the individual and focus group interviews were used as prompts for the participants to share their lived experiences.

The first set of questions in the individual interview allowed each participant to share information about her formal education and career background, how she has obtained success, and what or who led her towards a career pathway. The second set of questions focused on the dynamics of her

mentoring relationships, and each participant was able to share if she had been mentored and/or served as a mentor to someone else. The last set of questions allowed each participant to share how being a member of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority has impacted her life. At the end of each individual interview, each participant was also asked to share a personal artifact that was symbolic of the sisterhood shared between the researcher and the participant.

The focus group interview questions served as a guide to spark conversation about identity formation, overcoming challenges, the cycle of mentoring and the meaning of sisterhood. “Only through hearing and interpreting the stories of others through interviews can the evaluator learn the multiple realities and perspectives that different groups and individuals bring to an object or experience” (Fitzpatrick, Sanders, & Worthen, 2004, p. 37).

Data Collection

Upon receiving clearance from Georgia Southern University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB), the researcher began scheduling interviews with the four participants. The researcher recorded her own experience and then collected the lived mentoring experiences and explored how these experiences contributed to participants’ success.

Due to the use of human subjects in the study, it was required to have informed consent of the participants and ensure confidentiality. The participants were contacted via email and through telephone calls. Each participant received a letter (see Appendix A) and informed consent form (see Appendix B). The informed consent form included the purpose of the study, the benefits and

potential risks, and the importance of the research. After the researcher had received the signed consent forms, the researcher and the participant scheduled an interview time. A 45-90 minute semi-structured in-depth individual interview was conducted with each of the four identified participants. The individual interviews were conducted at the homes of the participants. Each participant was given the demographic questionnaire to complete before the individual interview began. The information from the questionnaire was used to create a biographical portrait of each participant.

Prior to the interview, the researcher informed the participants of their responsibility. All of the participants were asked similar questions from the interview guide, and follow-up questions were used to probe participants' responses for more information when not provided, not clear, or during too brief accounts. Transcripts of tape-recorded interviews were coded and securely stored. Each interview was audio taped and transcribed by the researcher.

Each participant was asked to bring a personal artifact that symbolized the relationship between the researcher and the participant. At the end of each individual interview, the participants explained why they brought that item and how it symbolized their mentoring relationship with the researcher. The researcher was able to gain knowledge about the participants' mentoring experiences through these individual interviews.

After completing individual interviews the researcher conducted one focus group interview with all participants involved. The focus group took 2 hours. The researcher had a note taker to record important notes from the focus group

interview, and it was audio taped and then transcribed. The focus group interview was conducted at the home of the note taker who lived in a central location.

During the focus group, the researcher asked questions (see Appendix E) that were developed from the responses of the individual interviews. The researcher introduced the participants to each other, and the participants had the opportunity to answer each question and comment on the responses of the group members. It was an informal and comfortable setting. The researcher served as the mediator and facilitator but also as a participant. The group members were respectful to each other and listened to all responses. They were encouraged to ask each other questions and to make comments about responses given.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data is analyzed through deductive reasoning. “It moves from the general to the specific...deduction begins with “why” and moves to “whether” (Babbie, 2004, p. 25). Data analysis for quantitative research occurs after all of the data has been collected while qualitative approaches analyze the data throughout the research process. A quantitative researcher can use a computer program to assist them in analyzing descriptive statistics. However, you could not analyze one’s life story through numbers or charts. “Qualitative researchers who work with theory building and analysis from more grounded approaches similarly recognize that the management and analysis of data require conceptual clarification” (Hughes, 2002, p. 24). Qualitative studies use inductive reasoning. Typically, they identify patterns and themes within the findings also known as “open coding”. Coding is a way of categorizing significant pieces of data. “Codes

are a type of shorthand; the names or identifiers that you attach to chunks of data that you find relevant to your study” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008, p. 102).

In this study, the data were analyzed based on the responses provided by the participants. The data used came from the interviews and demographic questionnaire administered to the participants. The researcher used coding to look for patterns and themes in the participants’ responses. After each interview, the researcher listened to the audio taped recording of each participant’s story. Afterwards, the researcher transcribed the audiotape. The researcher used email and phone calls to clarify any statement that was inaudible. The researcher also took notes during the individual interviews and had a note taker during the focus group interview. After reviewing all notes and reading through the transcriptions the researcher used “key words in context” and “pawing” to pull themes from the data. Searching for key terms and pawing are methods used by qualitative researchers to help them to find key themes within transcription texts (Bernard & Ryan, 2010). An interview matrix was designed by the researcher and used to find common themes among the personal narratives shared. I made notes in the margins of my transcribed document of key words and then pawed through the key words using different colored highlighter pens that signified different themes.

Ethical Considerations and Trustworthiness

There are three major criticisms of qualitative research: (1) validity of autobiographical works, (2) separation of subject's and researcher's voice and (3) ethical concerns. The first criticism questions the trustworthiness of researchers that are telling their own life story. Critics are wary of the objectivity of someone telling their own story, and the validity is often questioned; however, many qualitative research studies use autobiographical narratives. In this study, the researcher shared her mentoring experiences and further explored how they were related to being a member of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority and having a sistercircle of mentors and mentees.

“The self is the only thing that can be known and verified, researchers have relied upon a technique they call methodological reflexivity”
(Alvermann, 2000, p. 5).

Reflexivity includes using scholarly material to support the narrative. This discourages negative feedback or questions of validity.

The second criticism is when a researcher tells a story they are relying on their own memories or the memory of the participant. The researcher and the participants described childhood experiences and relied on their memory of how things happened many years ago.

The third criticism is the ethical issue surrounding telling one's story. Of course, a researcher is counting on their participants to be honest and truthful; however, there is the risk that the story may be fabricated. Also depending on the type of story disclosed, the researcher may be challenged with having to keep

some information confidential. The participants' welfare and well-being comes first.

This qualitative interview study focused on the mentoring experiences of the participants and their perceptions of how their affiliation with Delta Sigma Theta Sorority has affected their lives. My role as the researcher was to protect my participants' anonymity and maintain confidentiality.

Based on my reading, it seems that researcher as participant is negatively criticized because of the skepticism of one being able to separate the researcher from the subject. "The relationship between the knower and the known is made less obscure and perhaps 'safer' when researchers practice reflexivity and take steps to ensure that ethical consideration is given to their participants' needs" (Alvermann, 2000, p. 6). However I feel that, as the researcher, I was honest and ethical in reporting, and I feel that my participants were very open and honest as well.

Summary

The researcher explored the mentoring experiences of a select sample of African American women in Delta Sigma Theta Sorority. This study is a qualitative interview study designed to collect data about the participants' mentoring experiences. Purposeful sampling was used to select four participants; the researcher was the fifth participant. The data were collected through demographic questionnaires, individual and focus group interviews and personal artifacts. Interviews were audio taped and transcribed. Data were analyzed and coded to find similar patterns and common themes.

CHAPTER 4
REPORT OF DATA AND DATA ANALYSIS

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative inquiry was to explore the mentoring experiences of five African American women, the researcher and her sorority sistercircle (members of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority), and how their experiences have contributed to their identity and educational, career, and psychosocial success. This study focused on mentoring as a support system for African American women facing societal challenges such as racial issues, gender bias, and power struggles.

This study focused on the mentoring relationships of the researcher and her sorority sistercircle. The following questions guided the research:

1. What are the mentoring experiences of African American women in a sorority sistercircle?
2. How do mentoring experiences shape the identity of African American women?
3. How does mentoring empower African American women to overcome societal challenges?

This chapter is divided into three sections. The first section describes the participants in the study. The second section contains the stories of the participants' mentoring experiences and personal artifacts shared during the individual and focus group interviews. The third section presents the common themes and patterns of the study.

Demographic Profiles

Table 1 describes the personal demographics of the participants. Five sorority sisters were selected for the study. All five were African American women that reside in the Metro Atlanta area. The education level of the participants included one with a specialist degree in school counseling, two with a doctorate degree in education, one doctorate in ministry, and one with a juris doctorate. The total years in Delta Sigma Theta ranged from 5-49 years of membership and their ages ranged from 26-69 years of age.

Table 1

Demographic Profile of the Participants

Participant	Degree	Occupation	Yrs. In Delta	Age
Big Sister	Ph.D.	Retired Principal	49	69
Line Sister	Ed.D.	School Psychologist	16	38
Sister in the Center	Ed.S.	School Counselor	16	37
Chapter Sister	D.Min.	State Representative	18	40
Little Sister	JD	Defense Attorney	05	26

Portraits of the Participants

This portion of the dissertation provides a portrait of each participant. Each portrait begins with background information about the participant. Then, a narrative of the relationship between the participant and the researcher and the discussion of a personal artifact that the participant shared with the researcher is presented. Finally, the portrait ends with the personal story of the participant.

Big Sister represents the mentor, an older motherly figure who mentored the researcher as a child. She pledged Delta Sigma Theta during the 1960's, earned a doctorate and was the first African American female principal at a large elementary school in Atlanta. *Line Sister* and *Chapter Sister* represent peer mentors - a sisterly bond. They serve as educational, career, and psychosocial mentors to the researcher. The researcher (Sister in the Center), Line Sister, and Chapter Sister all pledged during the early 1990's. Lastly, *Little Sister* represents the mentee with whom the researcher has an aunt-niece type relationship. This participant was a former student of the researcher and pledged in the 2000's and recently graduated from law school.

Big Sister

Big Sister is a native of a small rural town in Alabama. She received her Bachelor of Arts degree in English from Alabama A&M University. She pursued further study in English and Literature at New York University prior to obtaining her Master of Arts and Specialist Degrees in Reading and Doctor of Philosophy in Administration and Supervision from Georgia State University. She was a classroom teacher, assistant school administrator and school administrator for several years before she retired and joined the staff at a small college in Alabama where she currently serves as an adjunct professor in the College of Education and Professional Studies Department of Educational Resources. In her capacity as educational consultant, she has participated in professional conferences and meetings where she conducted workshops and presentations focused on educational issues.

Her professional activities have included writer and editor of technical manuscripts and educational reports, developer of original educational materials, program developer in communication skills, and evaluator of educational materials and programs. She wrote and produced the script for a special reading program produced for educational television by a school system in the Atlanta Metro Area. She was also the featured instructor for that program.

She was initiated into Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. at Delta Delta Chapter, in Huntsville. Since her initiation, she has served the Sorority on the national, regional, and local levels. Big Sister is a charter member of the East Point/College Park Alumnae Chapter where she has been an active member since the chapter's chartering in 1979. She has served as a State Coordinator and as Chair of the National Delta Leadership Academy. She maintains membership in educational and civic organizations and has an impressive record of current and past volunteer services. She has been recognized for dedicated service as an educator and as a Delta.

She was selected for participation in this project because she was my mentor. She was an educational mentor to me during my high school years and has been a psychosocial mentor to me since my college years. She was my first introduction to Delta Sigma Theta Sorority.

Big Sister and Me: Learning the Legacy

My mother was a first grade teacher at an elementary school in Atlanta. I attended the school for which my neighborhood was zoned. However, every day after school, my dad would pick me up from my school and drop me off at my

mother's school. I was in school all day long. Many of the teachers and students at my mother's school thought I was a student there because they would see me every day. In 1988, the school appointed the first African American woman principal. She was well educated and very businesslike. When I first met her, my mother introduced us and I remembered thinking there is something different about this lady. She possessed two traits that made an impression on me. First, she was brutally honest and secondly, she rarely took "no" for an answer. When Big Sister asked you to do something, you felt obligated to say yes; I, too, possess these traits and perhaps this commonality between us was why I was drawn to her and why she took me under her wing as if I were her own. Once I had gotten to high school, she asked me if I was interested in participating in a mentoring program that her sorority sponsored. I asked my mom and she allowed me to participate. I was a junior and excited about meeting the other 9 young ladies from the surrounding high schools that were participating as well. The Deltas (members of the organization) took us on field trips; they had people come in to provide grooming and etiquette tips and strategies. They talked to us about college applications, and the importance of taking the SAT and ACT. We met once a week with a young lady from Spelman College that taught us a dance routine for the opening act of a show, which was a lot of fun. This was my first introduction to Delta Sigma Theta Sorority. I thought the ladies were "cool." They were nice and friendly, and they not only had a good time with us but they seemed to have a good time with each other as well. I had an overwhelming feeling that these ladies genuinely cared about me.

After participating in the debutante program, Big Sister talked to me about my plans after high school. She asked me, "Have you decided what college you're going to attend?" I told her that I was planning to attend the University of Georgia. She said, "Well the first thing I want you to do when you get to Georgia is find the Deltas, 'cause you're going to be a Delta. You let me know when you pledge and I will write a letter on your behalf." I kept that in mind.

During my junior year in college, I contacted Big Sister because I was ready to pledge. Unfortunately, she had a death in the family and was not in town and unable to write my letter. However, when she came back, she checked in with me to see if I was o.k. I communicated with her through my mom to let her know I was pledging and again once I had crossed and completed the process. She sent me a gift and a card. I was honored. I remember going up to the school to see her with my Delta jacket on. I was so proud, and so was she. Over the years, I run into her at Regional and National Convention meetings, weddings of Delta members in which we both know, and shows and events that we do as an organization.

I see her as an educational mentor because she played an important role in my development. She taught me valuable life lessons, and she gave me the opportunity to participate in the debutante program; she opened a door to an unforgettable experience for me. The lessons learned and the time the Deltas spent with us were invaluable. Seeing her in that position of power as the leader of one of the largest elementary schools (students and staff) was impressive to me. I do not credit her with the reason I went into education; however, she

definitely was a role model for me. She was the first Delta woman I saw with power and vision. She was not only a leader in her career; she was also a leader within the sorority. Her name is known nationally within our sorority. She saw something in me that I couldn't even see for myself. Whenever I introduce her to my friends or talk about her I say, "She is the reason why I am a Delta". Her kindness and care has impacted my life because Delta is a huge part of my life. I cannot imagine life without it.

The personal artifact that Big Sister brought to the interview was a picture of me (the researcher) when I was in high school getting ready for the debutante ball. This signifies the beginning of our relationship and my first interaction with Delta Sigma Theta Sorority. Big Sister remembered a conversation we shared years ago:

I remember when you were a senior and I asked you, after the Debutante Ball was over, where you planned to attend college and you said UGA. I told you that there were Deltas at UGA so look and see what they do and if you like what they do that's what you need to do.

Her encouraging words gave me the confidence that I needed to pursue my goals of becoming a member of Delta Sigma Theta once I entered college.

Big Sister's Story: The Educated Sister.

Big Sister values education and noted that she was influenced by her teachers in high school to pursue a career in education and also had the support of her family when she decided to go to college. During her era, there were not many career choices for African American women. She stated:

When I went to college there were only a few areas that African American females could get into or major in and be successful and that was nursing and teaching and maybe a couple of others...social work. So I chose teaching because I was inspired by my teachers who taught me in high school.

Even though there were only a few career fields that African American women could pursue, Big Sister excelled and earned the highest degree and pursued the highest school-level position (Principal). She was successful educationally and professionally. Her high school teachers served as educational mentors to her. Once she began to work, her sorors served as psychosocial and career mentors to her. She found sorors that were fellow educators that helped her navigate through the process of pursuing a graduate degree and seeking leadership positions within her field.

She became acquainted with Delta Sigma Theta as a child, through a family friend, and decided to join for the fellowship and sisterhood. When asked why she became a member she responded:

It opened up avenues for you to help others while developing friendship and enjoying fellowship with others of your sort of same background. Educational background in some areas, socioeconomic background and the whole idea that Delta was built on Christian principles allowed you to attach that to your religious experiences and church you know the whole idea of being founded on Christian principles so there were a lot of things...the spiritual, as well as the secular part of sisterhood. Building the

sisterhood and being able to develop a lot of friends on the way as you go along from college through the collegiate chapter to the graduate chapter just developing friendships...I still have some of the friendships that I had developed in college.

Big Sister identified herself as a Christian, a Delta, and an Educator.

These three identifiers are significant in her life. She is an active member of her church, an active member of Delta, and she continues to serve students. Even after retiring as an elementary school principal, she still teaches as an adjunct professor at a local college. She serves the church, the sorority, and students with a passion and they all are a part of her self-identity. They also overlap; she has had leadership roles within each organization and she teaches in each organization. She has served as a Sunday school teacher at church, a teacher by trade, and she teaches sisterhood workshops within the sorority. She uses her talents to serve her community.

The challenges that Big Sister faced are different from the other participants, because she grew up during the Civil Rights Movement in Alabama. She attended segregated schools and a HBCU. Her choices of colleges were limited because of the racial turmoil during those times. Her experience is different and unique because she became successful despite the odds. She overcame during a movement of social injustice.

Line Sister

Line Sister is a practicing School Psychologist for a large metropolitan Atlanta school system. She has been working in the field of psychological

services for 13 years and has primary responsibility for students in elementary and middle school. Her practice spans the general, special, and gifted education fields, and in addition to supporting the needs of students, she serves as a consultant to teachers, staff and administrators at the building and county level.

She also serves as adjunct faculty for two private universities where she teaches across disciplines in both the psychology and education departments. She is an educational consultant whose most recent contracts have been with the Clayton County Health Department and Babies Can't Wait program, where she worked as an Early Intervention Specialist.

Line Sister was initiated into Delta Sigma Theta in the winter of 1994 at the Zeta Psi Chapter located on the campus of the University of Georgia. She is currently an active member of the Douglas-Carroll-Paulding Alumnae chapter where she serves as chair of the Nominations Committee and Co-Chair of the Educational Development Committee. Her most treasured role is being mother to her nine year-old daughter.

Line Sister and Me : Friends 'til the end.

On October 31, 1993, I received a call from a member of the Zeta Psi Chapter of Delta. The voice on the other end was the dean of pledges for the Winter 94 line at UGA. She asked me was I ready to embark on the most tedious and interesting journey of my life, and I was happy to say YES. When I arrived at our first meeting, I met my 26 Line Sisters. Some I had never met before, and others I had known since high school. After weeks of bonding through various

group activities, we were initiated into the chapter. One Line Sister in particular has been close to me throughout the past 16 years.

When we graduated from UGA, she immediately left UGA and went to graduate school. I was still unsure as to what I wanted to do with my life. I decided in my last semester of college that I wanted to go into school counseling; therefore, I needed to enroll in a graduate program. I liked working with children, and I liked the security of working in public education. I knew that the pay was not the greatest, but I knew that I would be able to maintain a secure and meaningful lifestyle with this career. I remained at UGA for two more semesters working and applying to graduate schools. In the fall of 1995, my Line Sister called me to check on me. She wanted to know how my search for a graduate school was coming. She then encouraged me to apply to the graduate school she was attending. She was in school psychology and really liked the program so I applied and started school in January of 1996. She helped me find an apartment and adjust to a new place and, introduced me to her circle of friends and professors in the department. She helped me get a job as a graduate assistant and helped me obtain student aid. It was my first time living on my own in a new city. However, it was comforting to know that she was right down the street and a phone call away. We had a lot of fun for those two years we were in school together.

After graduating from graduate school, she stayed and completed her Specialist Degree while I left and moved back to Atlanta to start a new job.

After she graduated a year later, she was looking for a job in the Atlanta area and I encouraged her to come to the county where I was currently working. She landed the job and worked directly across the street from my school. Even though we do not have the exact same job, we serve the same population. School psychologists and school counselors work closely with each other in the public school system. Over the years, we have consulted with each other on ethical issues and various scenarios that pertain to our jobs. It is good to know that I have her as a resource and a fellow educator in student services.

Over the years, she has always been there for me. She is like my sister. We were in each other's weddings, there for each other through each other's divorces, supported each other during the death of our loved ones, and encouraged each other throughout the doctoral process. We have mentored each other. The dynamics that are different in our relationship, compared to Big Sister and me, is that Line Sister is my friend. The power in the relationship is mutual. At times she is the expert and at other times I am. The level of respect is also mutual. However, in my relationship with Big Sister, she has the power and I have a great deal of respect for her. She is the teacher and I am the student. My Line Sister and I teach and learn from each other. She has been an educational, career, and psychosocial mentor to me.

At the end of the individual interview, Line Sister shared the meaning of her personal artifact she had brought. Line Sister had a picture of both of us after we had completed our pledge process. She felt that it represented the beginning of a new identity for us. The picture was taken during a time when we were free

from the responsibilities of being independent adults and the beginning of our life as Deltas. Line Sister stated:

I brought this picture because it represents a time when we were all incredibly naïve about life. Life was good because we were having fun. Life was good because we were pledging Delta and Delta was going to change our lives and we were gonna be Delta women and it seemed like all things were going to be right with the world. As we sit here today we know that that was not true, but it was important to remember that time because that time was a time when everything was possible.

Line Sister's Story: The Soul Sister.

Line Sister was raised in New York by her maternal grandparents. They were her first mentors. They worked hard to give her the opportunity to attend the best primary and secondary schools. They did not have a formal education but saw the value in receiving a good education and encouraged her to pursue a college degree and supported her in that endeavor. They served as educational and psychosocial mentors during her childhood and adolescent years.

After attending school in Massachusetts, she relocated to Georgia and enrolled at The University of Georgia. She did not have any knowledge of how to get financial aid and struggled until befriending a young African American woman on campus who began to help her navigate through her college experience. She not only helped her educationally, but guided her professionally as well.

Line Sister has had several mentors throughout her professional career. School psychology is a white dominated field, so she used her career mentors,

who were African American women psychologists, to help her along the way. She discussed one in particular.

Arletta B... is a beautiful person. She was my first supervisor in my current role in my current position. Arletta is fantastic not just because she knows what she's doing and has a fantastic leadership style because she also believes in the people she hires ... she doesn't micromanage you, her expectations are very high ... She will advocate on your behalf when you need support. As itinerant people there are times when we'll go into schools and we'll be asked to do something that is absolutely unethical or illegal or not in the best interest of children and she will in a way that does not disturb the flow of your relationship with the school... advocate for you and support you. There are also times when she will spank you if you need to be spanked. But she does it in a way that's almost like parental cause she's old enough to be my mother ... she will tell you the truth and once you get over your feelings being hurt you'll realize that she was absolutely right and it will probably move you forward in your career.

Line Sister and Arletta no longer work together, but have maintained their mentoring relationship over the years.

Line Sister was first introduced to Delta at The University of Georgia. She had several friends that lived in her dormitory that were interested in becoming Deltas. Through that association, she began to attend various Delta events and programs with her friends and learned more and more about the organization.

From those positive experiences, she made the decision to pledge her junior year. When asked about the impact Delta has had on her life her response was:

Some of my best friends are Delta women and the people who stand for me when there's trouble, stand for me when there's happiness, are typically Delta women and so even though during the years (a stretch of 10 yrs) when I was inactive... Delta women have always been with me...walking with me and within the last three years while I've been active in my alumni chapter there's this whole new set of women who I probably never would have been exposed to who have become very good close friends. Working on community service projects and older women who have so much wisdom and value to pass along just in terms of how to walk in the world as a woman. I never would have met these women because we are not in the same professional field. They're older, much older; some of them are in their 60's. One of them is in her 70's. I never would have met them because we're not in the same social circle.

Geographically we reside in the same county, but had it not been for Delta I would not have been exposed to them. And that's important because some of those women have helped me through some things ... some of those women really have helped me carry a torch when I didn't know that I could carry it by myself.

Line Sister identified herself as being a mother to many, self-motivated, hard working, and ambitious. I think Line Sister has accomplished many things and acquired success largely because of her tenacity and motivation. Mentoring

was important to her and assisted her in accomplishing goals educationally and professionally, but she is also very aware of her strengths and works hard at accomplishing the many goals she sets for herself. This is evident by what she has accomplished educationally and in her career. It is also evident in her role within the sorority and at home as a mother. She has multiple identities and is able to sort and effectively use them all.

The barriers Line Sister faced were initially socio-economic barriers. She was raised by her grandparents in Brooklyn, New York. Unlike Big Sister, she was not in the segregated south and attended racially integrated schools. However, she was the first person in her family to attend college and she did not have anyone to guide her through the process of how to be successful in college, until she met her peer group and sorority sisters at The University of Georgia. She also experienced challenges at work. She is in a field of work where African American women are few and far apart. I think that her mentoring experiences and strong will and self-determination have helped her to overcome her barriers and have helped her to attain success.

Chapter Sister

Chapter Sister currently resides in Dekalb County with her husband, who was her college sweetheart, and their four children. Chapter Sister is the President and owner of a consulting firm that specializes in Human Resources, Policy Analysis, and Campaign Management. She began her career in politics in South Carolina where she began working on a variety of campaigns as a teenager. Her passion for politics led her to run numerous successful

campaigns. One of her proudest achievements was serving as the Campaign Manager for an African American woman that ran for Mayor. She worked tirelessly to elect this disabled nurse and Gulf War Veteran. This successful campaign led to her client becoming the first African American elected to City Council in 1993.

In 2004, Chapter Sister served as a director in South Carolina for the Democratic National Convention and worked with America's Family United throughout the southeast. She is a strong advocate in her community and currently works with various Parent Teacher Associations (PTA) in two counties. She previously served as the PTA President at the school her children attended. She also volunteered as a coach for both the soccer and cheerleader teams at the local YMCA. Since 1997, she has served as a Girl Scout Leader for numerous troops.

Chapter Sister is also a minister and attended seminary school where she received a Master's degree and Doctorate Degree in Divinity and Theology. Through her dedication and faith, she strives to promote anti-discrimination for everyone. She has a ministry which reaches all age groups and cultures. She is currently an ordained minister in the African Methodist Episcopal Church and a workshop trainer of ministers.

She is an active member of numerous community service organizations including Jack and Jill of America (East Suburban Atlanta Chapter), Delta Sigma Theta Sorority Inc. (Stone Mountain-Lithonia Alumnae Chapter), Coalition of 100 Black Women (Stone Mountain Lithonia Chapter), The National Council of Negro

Women (DeKalb/Decatur section), Inc., The NAACP, Eastern Star, and The National Association of Black Political Scientists.

She completed a Masters' in Public Administration/Personnel Management at Kentucky State where she also worked as an assistant professor. She also worked in the graduate office and served as an outreach coordinator whereby she recruited graduate students from across the country. Between 1999 and 2001, she served as an instructor, graduate teaching assistant, and Adjunct Professor at a college in Atlanta where she taught several classes including Politics and Global Issues class, American Government, Constitutional Law, and Urban Politics. Chapter Sister is currently a Ph.D. candidate in Political Science where she is ABD and completing her dissertation.

Chapter Sister and Me: Reflections of Sisterhood.

After moving back to Atlanta, I joined an alumnae chapter. Alumnae chapters allow sorors that have graduated from college to remain active in doing community service, support projects financially, participate in various sorority programs and stay connected to the sorority through various forms of networking opportunities. Over the past 10 years, I have served on committees and held various chairperson positions within the chapter.

In 2005, I stood up at one of our monthly chapter meetings and addressed the 300+ sorors in the chapter. I explained that I was a doctoral student and at the time I had just completed my coursework. I was recruiting other sorors that were doctoral students to join me in starting a support group. There were 13 of us. We started meeting monthly and setting goals for one another. Two sorors,

who had already graduated, served as coaches. We met for four years. Three graduated in 2007 and one graduated in 2009. After the first group graduated, our group disbanded. However, we all have remained pretty close and five of us are still working earnestly toward the goal.

One of the members in particular and I are very close. We met through the support group but have been mentors for each other over the past 5 years. I try to push her to finish her degree but I think she has other goals she wants to accomplish first. She decided to run for a political office instead. I helped out where I could with her political campaign efforts, and I learned a lot about running for office and the political process. I have met so many politicians, businessmen and women, lobbyists, and community leaders through her. She is a great resource for networking in addition to being a good friend; she inspires me. She is also a minister and her sermons are powerful. I look up to her because she is spiritual and a strong mother and a mover and a shaker. I aspire to be like her in some aspects. She is a little older than me but our relationship is more like a sister rather than a Big Sister-Little Sister relationship.

At the end of the individual interview, Chapter Sister pulled out her personal artifact. Chapter Sister brought a gift that I had given her in 2006. It was a stuffed toy elephant. Elephants are the unofficial mascot for the sorority. The elephant had the year embroidered on its foot. It served as a time stamp of when we first met. I gave the gift to all the members of the "Doctoratebound" group. The gift was to remind the recipients of the goal to graduate. Chapter Sister reminisced:

We had sorors that were working on their doctorate. It was about 10 of us and we all came together and we start meeting once a month and so at the first meeting you gave out these little elephants and it says “name” Doctor-to-Be. And it’s stamped 2006. I keep on my nightstand and I look at it ever so often. It reminds me that I am doctorate bound.

Chapter Sister’s Story: The Radical Sister.

Chapter Sister grew up in South Carolina. She is the older of two children. Her grandmother was admitted to college as a young woman but had to drop out to care for her ailing mother. Chapter Sister’s grandmother and mother began to encourage her to go to college at a very young age. They were her first educational mentors. Therefore, she felt that she had no choice but to go to college. She started out a pre-law major but ended up a political science major. Chapter Sister got married and had two children during her four years at South Carolina State. During her junior year, while pregnant with her second child, she also pledged Delta. She first became acquainted with Delta while in college. The Deltas were friends of her husband and soon took her under their wing. Since her collegiate days, Chapter Sister has worn many hats professionally and in Delta.

After graduating she moved with her husband, who is in the military, to Kentucky where she earned a Master’s Degree and served as an alumnae chapter officer, a collegiate advisor, and was an instructor at the university. After earning a Master’s Degree in Kentucky, she moved to Atlanta and was called to the ministry. She obtained a seminary degree and another Master’s Degree while teaching political science at Clark Atlanta University.

Chapter Sister has many mentors and role models, some of which she has never met before. Being in the field of politics, there are three Delta women who influenced Chapter Sister to go into politics: Shirley Chisholm, Barbara Jordan, and Carol Moseley Braun. She said:

Carol Moseley Braun inspired me... I keep a picture of her in my car over my visor of her and me together. And I kind of look at that and that keeps me on path like one day you will be a US Senator and/or an ambassador just like her. So her picture stays in the car.

Many of her mentors are in the organizations that she is affiliated with: Jack and Jill, The Lynx, the AME church, the NAACP, the Black Caucus, and Delta. At the Georgia State Capital in downtown Atlanta, where Chapter Sister works, there are only 12 African American women that serve out of 180 people in her field. Her career fields, politics and the ministry, are both male dominated fields. She sees the benefit of African American women mentors as the key to success. I asked her what her perception was of African American women mentoring each other. She stated:

It kind of gives other African American women a place... very encouraging. It's like a place where you can feel safe to express your ideas. They kind of go through the struggle with you. They push you along, be your biggest cheerleader. If they need to they can be your biggest critic to help you get to the next level...especially with Delta. Most Deltas will try to encourage each other and push each other to the next place.

Chapter Sister identified herself as the contemporary clubwoman, social activist, and one who advocates for those who cannot advocate for themselves. This is evident in her career, in Delta, and her personal life. She is a member of many clubs. One thing I found interesting was the reason why she is a member of so many organizations. She said that she joined elitist clubs not because she is upper class but because she wants to infiltrate them so that she can help them to see the importance of community service and advocacy for those less fortunate. She advocates for others through her position as a politician and as a minister. She also serves on the political awareness and social action committees in Delta. Her identity permeates her career and social life.

Chapter Sister has overcome many barriers. She talked about the challenges of being a darker skinned African American in the south. She experienced resistance when she was appointed as a college professor in rural Kentucky. She was disappointed when the people at her church did not support her quest to become a minister because of her gender, and she overcame racial and gender barriers as she entered politics. She inspired us all in the focus group interview just from the strength she has had to break records and overcome such barriers. One thing that I think that is different about Chapter Sister, in comparison to the rest of the participants, is her faith and spirituality. Even though Big Sister and Little Sister mentioned their church membership as an important part of their lives, Chapter Sister has faith and strength that comes from within and her spirituality motivates her and has shaped a large part of her identity.

Little Sister

Little Sister is the oldest of three girls. She was born and raised in Rex, GA and recently bought a home in Jonesboro. Little Sister is an attorney with a law firm in McDonough. She has been working there for six months. She graduated from UGA law school in June 2009. She volunteers with the public defender's office doing pro bono work for those who are not able to pay for a private attorney and she specializes in criminal cases. She also serves as a mentor for the mock trial team at the high school where she graduated from in Clayton County.

Little Sister and Me: Passing the Torch.

I met Little Sister during my first year as a high school counselor in Clayton County. She was a junior at the high school and she was a student on my counseling caseload. I knew her younger sister, who I had advised during my term working at the middle school. Upon meeting her, I immediately realized that there was something about this young lady that was special. She was unsure of what she wanted to do after high school but she had a lot of motivation and perseverance, which were key to being successful, in my opinion. During her senior year, she worked in the counseling office as my office aid. We had daily conversations about various things that were on her mind. She was like a daughter to me. One day she inquired about my college experience at UGA and my experience in Delta. I shared with her my experiences and encouraged her to apply to UGA. She completed several college applications, and I wrote several letters of recommendation on her behalf. At the end of her senior year, she was

accepted to UGA and I told her to keep in touch. I, like my Big Sister, let her know that I would definitely support her in her quest to become a Delta. I gave her advice on what to do and the tools she needed to pursue her goal.

I maintained a connection with the sorors at UGA and kept in touch with Little Sister's progress academically and socially. During her sophomore year, she was ready to pledge but was unable to due to a family loss. She was worried and stressed out but I told her "Delta will be there next year. Don't worry about it." The sorors genuinely liked her and she was able to pledge during her junior year. I was so proud to go back to my alma mater and home chapter to pin her as she completed her pledge process. She was my legacy. I saw in her what Big Sister saw in me. She had that "Delta Spirit" and exhibited many qualities that I possess. After completing her bachelor's degree, she went on to complete law school and is now practicing in McDonough. I am so proud of her.

At the conclusion of the individual interview, Little Sister also brought a gift that I had given to her. This gift was a broken gold bracelet. I gave her the bracelet as a congratulatory gift for her becoming a member of Delta. Even though the bracelet was worn and broken she still kept it and treasured it. Little Sister remembered:

You gave me this (a Delta bracelet) and I'm not going to cry...you gave me this bracelet and it has Delta Sigma Theta all around the bracelet and it's a chain and to me when its functional it shows that the bonds of Delta are strong and can't be broken and the reason I kept it is because it reminds me of our relationship because every time I see you I think about

the day I crossed Delta cause I got this (the bracelet) the very same day I became a Delta.

Little Sister's Story: The Sentimental Sister.

Little Sister's parents did not attend college but encouraged her and her sisters to pursue a higher education. She grew up in a small rural town in Georgia in a tight knit community. When she was little, she remembers a dentist that attended her church. She was the first adult that she knew of that attended college and she also happened to be a Delta. As she got older, her teachers mentored her and also, like her parents, encouraged her to go to college. Little Sister says that she became interested in law through the court TV shows she would watch during the summer. She also experienced the heartache of a family member that was wrongly accused of a crime. She saw how the attorney fought on her loved one's behalf and that influenced her to go into law. During her senior year of high school, she joined the Mock Trial Team and this solidified her love of law. She knew that she had to go to college to fulfill her dream. So she planned to major in English and then go to Law School. Her mock trial coaches, who served as educational mentors, guided her and supported her plan of action.

When Little Sister arrived on the University of Georgia campus, she had a similar experience that Line Sister and I had. She had learned quite a bit about Delta from me. Ironically, the first person she met in her dormitory was a Delta. She reminisced:

I got to UGA and the first day I moved in I was so nervous ...there was a lady that had on a red and white DST shirt. Delta Sigma Theta and I was

like, “Oh God, she lives in my building!” And she was like, “Hey what’s going on I’m your CA (Cultural Advocate).” You know cause at UGA they try to foster relationships among minority cultures. I lived in an all girl dorm and her name was Sarah C. and she was a member of Zeta Psi. She said we’re doing SOS today. I can’t remember what it stands for but it’s a yearly program where they welcome the freshman to school. So how perfect was that to have this Delta, my CA, helping me out, telling me to come get some free water and some snacks. And I went down there and I met the ladies of Zeta Psi and they were SO fierce. Hair was laid and on point, nice ladies, they spoke well, they didn’t seem stuck up, they weren’t trying to be all up under you either. They were very –about the business.

After obtaining a Bachelor’s degree she went to UGA law school. The law school like the University is predominantly white. She did not have any African American female law professors. She turned to her older Delta sisters, who were 2nd and 3rd year law students, for guidance and support. She did, however, join a group where she was able to connect with other African American attorneys.

She stated:

As many dynamic women as I met in college I never had a real lady mentor until law school... as soon as I found Black women that were lawyers I clung to them...I found the Georgia Association of Black Women Attorneys (GABWA). Oh I hung on to them.

She has since joined GABWA and has found many career mentors through this organization.

Little Sister identified herself as a Pentecostal, Southern, Double Delta Dawg. The “dawg” term refers to her affinity for The University of Georgia. She later explained that in career networking, where you go to school is important. She attended UGA as an undergraduate and as a law student making her a “Double Dawg”. Little Sister is also a Southern Belle in that she is very prim and proper and conservative in her views. She is active in her church like Big Sister and Chapter Sister and mentioned that her faith was important to her. Her spirituality gives her strength and motivation to achieve her goals and it has helped her to overcome barriers.

Little Sister expressed similar barriers as Line Sister. She is a first generation college student that came from a home where her parents struggled financially. She says, they were not poor but she could feel the financial strain when she got to college. It was challenging for her to find the finances to maintain a certain lifestyle. She also struggled with trying to explain to her parents that college was different from high school. She found support from her peer group and sorority sisters; they helped her to be successful.

Sister in the Center (The Researcher)

I received my Bachelor of Science degree in Psychology from the University of Georgia. I pursued further study in Educational Leadership after obtaining my Master of Education Degree and Specialist Degrees in School Counseling from Georgia Southern University and Georgia State University, respectively. I am currently pursuing a Doctor of Education Degree in Curriculum Studies from Georgia Southern University.

I worked in Clayton County School district as a middle and high school guidance counselor for seven years and currently serve as Head Counselor at Newton High School in Covington. Over the past 13 years, I also performed several auxiliary positions, which include Head Cheerleading Coach, Step Team Coach, Assistant Girls Track Coach, Class Sponsor, and Faculty and Student Event Planner.

I was initiated into Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. through the Zeta Psi Chapter, University of Georgia in January 1994. Since my initiation, I have participated in the Sorority on the national, regional, and local levels. I am currently a member of the Stone Mountain Lithonia Alumnae Chapter where I have been an active member since 1999. I served as the chapter's stepmaster for eight years and currently serve as the chair of the Arts and Letters Committee.

I have been recognized for my dedicated service as a Delta. I was the recipient of my chapter's 2009 Spirit Award and was nominated for the 2010 Regional Recognition "Alumni of the Year" Award.

My story: The Encircled Sister.

I was born and raised in Atlanta. I am an only child born to a Baptist minister and elementary school teacher who constantly reminded me of the importance of education. College was an expectation, and I grew up knowing that I would earn a doctorate degree. My mother has a Master's Degree in Education from New York University, and I was pushed to go further. I am a high school guidance counselor and have been in the field for twelve years. My goals are to

teach at the collegiate level and pursue a career as a director of guidance and counseling at the county or state level.

I had many people that influenced me throughout my lifetime, and most of these were African American women. They were the leaders that I saw in my world. I went to an all Black elementary, middle, and high school in which 95% of the teachers I had were African American women. My elementary and high school principals and guidance counselor were African American women. I attended an all Black church. My whole world was comprised of people who looked like me. So needless to say when I arrived at the University of Georgia whose population in 1995 was 30,000 students (5% were African American), I experienced total culture shock. I was out of my element. I was in the real world and had to learn how to communicate and navigate in this strange place.

I enrolled in the B.E.S.T. (Black Educational Support Team) program. This program paired freshman with a junior or senior mentor. This was helpful to me because my mentor was there to answer all my questions. She knew who the fair professors were, she knew where the Black churches were, she knew where I could go and get my hair fixed, she knew where my favorite stores were located and she knew where all the soul food restaurants were. All of these were necessary for me to feel as if Athens was just a home away from home.

During my time at UGA, I noticed a group of ladies that were facilitating the bulk of educational programming and social activities on the campus. Many of them held leadership positions in many campus clubs and organizations. Some attended my church and others lived in my dormitory. They threw parties

and planned programs and did community service. They always looked like they were having a good time. I wanted to be a part of that sisterhood. I did my research and started to attend their programs. My mentor from high school (Big Sister) had already told me, "You are going to be a Delta" so in my mind I had no other choice. During the fall of my junior year, I attended a RUSH meeting. After weeks of learning about the organization, I, along with my 26 Line Sisters, started my life as a member of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority.

When I reflect on my relationships with each of these women, I wonder how my life would be different if I had not met them. I cannot imagine. Without Big Sister's influence I do not think I would have had the opportunity to be exposed to Delta Sigma Theta. She was the only Delta I knew as a child. I am not sure I would have pledged at all. I did my research on all four sororities and I was exposed to images of the organization through the media. I saw the movie "School Daze" and, I saw the Disney "Step Show" on TV; "A Different World" was my favorite show. However, I think my participation in the debutante program and Big Sister's support impacted me more than the images in the media. I was able to witness sisterhood firsthand by observing the mentors in the debutante program. After reading the history of the organization, and seeing the young Deltas on the UGA campus, I knew 100% that this was the organization for me and I knew Big Sister had confidence in me which inspired and empowered me.

What would my life be without my peer mentors, Line Sister and Chapter Sister? I do not think that my graduate school experience would have been as successful as it was without Line Sister, and I have made many career

connections and received spiritual advice through Chapter Sister. My relationship with Little Sister shows how the cycle of sisterhood perpetuates the motto “lift as we climb”. I feel obligated to mentor. I know firsthand the positive affect that it can have on a young lady and I am confident that Little Sister will also be a Big Sister one day.

I would describe myself as a charismatic, creative, funny, Black, college educated, Delta Diva. I love art, I love to laugh, apparently I love being in school, and I also love my sorority. I think that my self-motivation gives me the tenacity to follow through with the goals I set for myself; however, I realize that I have had mentors throughout my lifetime to help teach me how to reach those goals and how to attain success once I have reached a certain level. I also realize that my spirituality and faith play a part in my will to succeed. I think that God gave me the talent of creativity and even though I am not an artist by trade I use my creativity on my job and in Delta. It is a large part of my identity.

The challenges that I have faced have been both racial and gender biased. I have experienced incidents of harassment at work, not being hired because of my gender, and attending classes where I am the only African American in the class. My peer mentor group, which mainly consists of sorority sisters, helped me to get through these, sometimes painful, situations.

Findings

The purpose of this qualitative inquiry was to explore the mentoring experiences of five African American women, the researcher and her sorority sistercircle, who are members of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority and how their

sisterhood has contributed to their educational, career, and psychosocial success and their identity. This study focused on mentoring as a support system for African American women facing societal challenges such as racial issues, gender bias, and power struggles.

The participants shared their personal stories through individual and group interviews, a demographic questionnaire, and personal artifacts. All five participants were successful in their educational pursuits and successful in their various careers. They each had mentors throughout their lives that encouraged, inspired, and empowered them to try hard and accomplish their goals. Each of the participants has had positive sorority experiences and have been mentored by sorority members and have served as mentors to other African American women. Each of the participants are self-assured women with high self-esteem and, with the support of family, teachers, co-workers, church members, and sorority sisters, these women were able to overcome barriers.

The underlying theme of this study is sisterhood. The common themes obtained from the data collection and analysis reflected the following: (1) having a foundation of supporters during childhood and adolescence, (2) having continued support from mentors throughout adulthood, (3) perpetuating the cycle of mentoring and achieving success through sisterhood, (4) being confident in one's identity, and (5) having the ability to overcome barriers. The next subsections are a discussion of the findings with quotes to support the five common themes that emerged from the participants' experiences.

A Foundation of Strong Support

All five participants were inspired and supported by a community of mentors during their childhood and adolescent years. These mentors included family members, friends, church members, teachers, coaches, and clubwomen and community leaders.

One of the many themes of Black Feminist Thought is othermothering. This is the concept that not only blood mothers can care and support children but neighbors, aunts, grandparents and teachers can be “fictive kin” and help raise children as well. The following excerpts show how a community of supporters has mentored the participants.

Big Sister had the support of her family when she decided to go to college. Her teachers encouraged her to go to college and go into education.

My high school English teacher and my high school music teacher inspired me and of course I was encouraged by my whole family...my mother, my sister, my brother, cousins, friends... everybody.

Line Sister had the support of her grandparents. They felt that getting a good education was the key to living a better life.

My grandparents raised me and in our house there was always an expectation that you go to school. And my grandparents were not college graduates. But they were graduates of high school and they just knew as migrants from the South to the North that the way that you get ahead is through education. They made sure that I had all these opportunities.

They had no idea how to get me there but they exposed me to people that

could help me get there and so that was the primary impetus even for me going to college.

The Sister in the Center credits her parents and teachers for supporting her throughout elementary and high school.

I remember when I was about 1st or 2nd grade and my dad asked me what I wanted to do when I grew up. I had 3 interests. I wanted to be a ballerina, a Dallas Cowboys Cheerleader, and a pediatrician. He wasn't too crazy about the first two but he told me that whatever I decided to do I needed to get the highest degree in whatever field I chose. I guess that's why I'm still in school.

Chapter Sister was inspired by her grandmother and mother and she was also supported by the African American women in her church when she dropped out of high school. She shared:

So these women who were in the church who are Deltas said, "You can do more than this." So I said, "I done messed up my whole life." Started working in a dry cleaner, and these women started praying for me, and then I realized that my life was going so bad, spiraling down and I could hear them praying for me... I could hear them saying "You don't have to be here and wallow in mess"...So I regrouped. They got their money together, and they sent me to South Carolina State, everybody, everybody, and I went and it changed my life. But I had to go through all of that to get to where I am now. So now I make it my life's mission to help other people, not do what I did.

African American women who are in the political field also inspired her. Their accomplishments motivated her to go into politics.

Little Sister felt the need to be a role model for her younger siblings. She was the first person in her family to attend college. She had her parents and teachers to encourage her throughout her journey as well as peer support.

I always knew I was going to go to college even though neither one of my parents went. I knew I was going cause they said, "You are too smart not to go." So college was always in my realm of possibilities, which is different than a lot of my friends who didn't have parents that went to college cause they figured they'd just go to work.

After collecting all of our mentoring stories, I realized that even though we all had mentors, there were different kinds of mentors during different phases of our lives. During our childhood, there were grandparents, aunts, parents, teachers and people that we saw on T.V. that served as role models. They encouraged us and supported us to set goals and all of our mentors expected us to be successful even though they were not all college educated.

Mentoring Relationships throughout Adulthood

The participants not only had support during their childhood and adolescent years but they also found mentors in college, at the workplace and within the sorority. Another key concept of Black Feminist Thought is sisterhood. There is a legacy of African American women supporting each other and it is a relationship that is helpful and needed as expressed in the following excerpts.

Big Sister realized the importance of African American women supporting each other. She has had supporters within her sorority who enabled her to acquire several positions of leadership within the organization. When asked her perspective on the significance of African American women mentoring each other her response was:

It is very important that we mentor because if we don't, we are going to lose a whole generation of young African American females. We have a lot of good role models and I think it's incumbent upon us to find out how we start matching role models with our young females.

Line Sister has had several African American women co-workers to encourage her throughout her career. She shares her perception of the importance of mentors throughout adulthood.

I've always had an African American woman mentoring me so I really don't know what life looks like without that. You think about my grandmother who was always a great rich support. Adriane, who I still rely on, personally and professionally still talk about our kids, when I had one we talked about our husbands, and how to navigate those relationships. We talk about our parents...she has a similar parental/family set up as I do. I don't know that I've ever lived life without a mentor whether it was formalized or not. I've always had Black women to help me and I would venture to say that someone would say that about me that I'm a source of help.

The Sister in the Center relied heavily on her peer group during her adulthood. She received support during her college experience and throughout her career from sorority sisters and friends.

There are lots of people who have parents and teachers encourage them as children. That's what parents and teachers do but I think the difference between me, and my high school friends that dropped out of college was their parent support kind of stopped once they turned 18. So for kids like that they've gotta find some support once mama's gone.

Chapter Sister received support from her sorority sisters during her collegiate experience and during her political campaign. She expressed how older, more experienced sorors helped her in her new position.

When I got elected to the House, the legislature, the women who groomed me in the legislature are Delta women. So they are very protective of me, cause I'm the youngest one that came in. The Dean of the Black Legislators who is running for Secretary of State, I knew her also from the AME church... but they were there for me. They told me stuff and made sure they told me what I needed to know when I got there. And they are very protective. I learn from them on a daily basis.

Little Sister had the support of her peers to help navigate during her undergraduate years at The University of Georgia and during her years in law school.

I think when I got to college it was important that I had peers that were serious about education as well. My best friend who is also a soror,

Stephanie, she was a first generation college student and she was the child of an immigrant. So she was very driven and so was I. My friend Lauren J. both of her parents are lawyers. All three of us are best friends we're known as the "3 Musketeers". So having peers that were serious about their academics and wanting to make good grades was important to me.

I decided to separate the two groups of mentors because they were distinctly different types of mentors. The participants had family and community to encourage them throughout their childhood, which helped to shape their identities early in life. I believe that the encouragement they received during their childhood and adolescent years helped them to build positive images about themselves. The parents, grandparents, and teachers had great expectations for them and that motivated and taught them to set high goals for themselves.

As adults the mentoring dynamics changed. The mentors that they gained as adults not only encouraged them but also taught them how to navigate through college, law school, graduate school, and on the job. The mentors they had as adults guided them and helped them to overcome the barriers they faced in pursuing higher degrees and higher level positions at work. Their adult mentors were friends, sisters, and teachers who served as educational, career, and psychosocial mentors.

Perpetuating the Cycle of Mentoring and Achieving Success through Sisterhood

During the individual interviews, I asked the participants to define sisterhood. The researcher wanted to know what sisterhood meant to them and during the focus group interview, their definitions were shared and we discussed the differences between sorority sisterhood and other types of sisterhood. Our sorority promotes mentoring each other and mentoring others. The participants also have a sense of wanting to give back. This cycle of mentoring helps to increase the success of African American women. It exemplifies the motto of the National Council of Negro Women "Lift as we Climb". Each participant has not only been mentored but has been a mentor to other African American girls and women. The following are the responses to the question, "What is your personal definition of sisterhood?"

Big Sister

Sisterhood is a special bonding and coming together with a common goal. You cannot see sisterhood, neither can you hear it nor taste it; but you can feel it a hundred times a day. It's a pat on the back, a smile of encouragement. It's someone to share with, to celebrate your achievements with, to laugh and cry with. It is about pulling together in love, respect, and trust. Sisterhood is about belief in another person.

Line Sister

Sisterhood is that thing that you can't quite put your finger on. But you know it when you see it and you know it when you feel it. And you know it

when you give it. It's being able to depend on somebody to do what he or she say they will do and not have to keep asking. It's that thing where if you need to talk with someone you know that person is not going to tell your secret. It's about being able to let yourself be vulnerable enough to be weak and let them be strong for you until you can pick yourself back up and so all of those things are sisterhood to me and that spans beyond Delta. I have sisters I have step sisters I don't have any sisters that I am super close to other than the women that I have adopted as my sisters in my life and that's Delta that's non-Delta. That group of women that's your inner circle not necessarily because of what they give to you but because of how they enhance your life...if that makes sense yeah. So that's sisterhood.

The Sister in the Center

For me, sisterhood is fidelity. I didn't grow up with sisters. I am an only child so my first time experiencing sisterhood was through Delta. As I grow older and learn more about sisterhood I realize that Delta sisterhood is different than others. I don't know if it's different because we take an oath or because we pledge but there is something special about Delta sisterhood. I know ALL Deltas are not sisterly I'm not saying that but from my experience...speaking on behalf of MY sistercircle I rely on them. I trust them. My sisters have mentored me and been a family to me. It's hard to describe. It is unconditional love from a circle of girlfriends, who share compassion and are dedicated to a cause.

Chapter Sister

Sisterhood means a place a venue where you have people that may not be your biological sister but they really are like your sisters. So no matter where we go in this world, when we see somebody wearing Delta symbols they show us love and appreciation. They don't have to know anything about you they know you are a soror and they will do anything they can to reach out and help you, which is a beautiful thing.

Little Sister

Sisterhood encompasses a lot of things. I think sisterhood encompasses love, support, but I have also learned recently it means conviction. Letting people know when they're not right. Sometimes not supporting the bad things. And I think the true level of love is to have another woman say, "You know what I love you too much to see you make these bad choices, I love you too much to see you throw your college career away over a man or throw your chances of being a lawyer away because you have a quick temper and you want to fight." I have two sisters of my own. I know some women don't have biological sisters but I do, yet I think to have a peer group of women and then to have older women that are invested and I mean sincerely invested (not just I'm going to look out for you) but sincerely invested in my success and sincerely invested in making sure that I didn't mess up...is priceless. At the end of the day, they were sincerely invested in my success and making sure that I didn't fail.

The spirit of sisterhood was shared during the focus group interview. I was the only person that knew all of the participants but by the end of the interview we were laughing and crying as if we had known each other for years. The participants were able to “let down their hair” and share intimate and personal stories with strangers because of the trust we have as sorority sisters. Big Sister was the quiet member who was constantly nodding her head in agreement and understanding. Line Sister was the more vocal member of the group and commented on everyone’s responses. Chapter Sister shared her wisdom and brought everyone to tears with her open and honest narratives about the challenges she faced throughout her lifetime. Little Sister was excited about being a part of the group and took away pearls of wisdom from the older group members. I tried to balance the role of researcher and participant. I shared my stories and thoughts but also remained neutral while facilitating. The dynamics within this group of sisters reflects how sisterhood is always in perpetual motion.

Being Confident in One’s Identity

The five participants of this study are confident and tenacious women. The environment where they grew up, educational experiences, and family influence helped them to develop perceptions about their identities and how they became the women they are today. One major theme of Black Feminist Thought is that African American women are shaped by their experiences. Even though they may come from a different class, religion, and eras, there are commonalities of their experiences. Black Feminist Theorists believe that African American women have multiple identities that are shaped by a variety of people in their

lives and some are influenced by stereotypes. The following are narratives about how the participants identify themselves and how they became who they are.

Big Sister describes herself as a Christian woman who is a Delta woman. She is an educator and a strong Black woman. She came from a time and place where “I’m Black and I’m Proud” was the mantra of the people. She pledged in the early 1960’s and was working as a teacher during the 1970’s. It was a time when African American women were identified as strong, proud, and radical.

Line Sister identifies herself as ambitious, hardworking, self assured and at times narcissistic in her personal and professional life. She attributes the influence of black women in helping her find her identity.

The big moments in my life have all been influenced by black women, except when I got married. Black women have been either a catalyst or a hand to pull me through the door or a hand to hold me up when I was tired, or a shoulder for me to cry on because I was sad. Yeah, my identity is the product of my experiences and having some black woman somewhere praying for me, caring for me, holding me up, standing there and telling me don’t quit.

The Sister in the Center describes herself as self-motivated, blessed, a risk taker and a peacemaker. She believes that her identity is a culmination of significant encounters and experiences that she has had throughout her lifetime.

I think that all of my experiences have helped to shape me into the woman I have become. My Delta experience, my pledging experience, my interactions with my teachers growing up, my college experiences and

even things I have gone through on my job. I am a work in progress and forever changing and evolving until I find who it is God wants me to be.

Chapter Sister describes herself as a young, socially conscious, overachiever who advocates for those who cannot speak for themselves. She said, "I feel like Lorraine Hansberry...Young, Gifted, and Black." She also considers herself a womanist and a contemporary clubwoman. She shared a story of how a teacher helped her to realize the strength of who she was.

When I signed up to go to kindergarten in 1975, the school had only been integrated for four years. On the first day of school, a little white girl rubbed me to see if the color would come off, and that was really shocking to me. And they asked "Why you so dark?" I was in a class with all white kids. I was the only Black in the class so they tried to turn me around to see if I had a tail because they had been told little Black kids had tails. So I came home crying and told my mother. She said, "It'll be okay" and luckily all the women that was around her understood and they also reassured me that it'd be okay. I was always conscious of my skin complexion from what started at 5 years old. I only had two black teachers from K-12th grade. One was a Delta; one was an Alpha. Miss Cooper was my 6th grade history teacher who changed my life forever. At that time I was in middle school and the *only* black girl in class again...(the story of my life) and she always told me, "Even though you have to do more than the others, you are more than enough." Her confidence in me helped to shape my character and my identity.

Little Sister describes herself as a southern black woman who is a Pentecostal Christian, a role model, and an advocate for others. She believes that her spirituality has helped to shape her identity.

Just keeping the faith has helped me become who I am and I am not saying that I am perfect. But I was raised in the church my whole life and I always remember where my strength comes from and I know no matter how bad it gets... it's going to be okay.

One interesting concept that I was not anticipating to come from the analysis was the spiritual aspect of one's identity. Three of the five participants mentioned that their relationship with God was important and mentioned people at their church as supporters. I think that the faith that they have is also an important part of their identity. As Delta women, we are identified as strong Black college educated sisters. I think that society sees us in that light and I think that we perceive ourselves as strong sisters as well.

Each participant's identity was also reflected through the personal artifact that was shared with the researcher. The items symbolized the sisterhood and bond the participants share with the researcher. These items served as a reflection of how they identified themselves as Deltas and sorority sisters.

The picture that Big Sister shared portrayed her standing over me with her hand on my shoulder. She was guiding me yet the expression on her face seemed to reflect a sense of pride. The role of mentor was evident in the photograph and our relationship, like the photograph, has lasted for twenty years.

The picture that Line Sister shared brought back fond memories for the

both of us. She expressed that it was taken during a time when we had “no cares or worries”. In the picture we are “shooting a pyramid”. This is a hand gesture that many Deltas do. It can be done individually by forming a pyramid using both hands or two people can join hands and form the triangular symbol. This picture shows how we rely on each other to form Delta and how our friendship has evolved.

The stuffed elephant toy that Chapter Sister brought served as a physical reminder of what she needed to accomplish. Chapter Sister uses keepsakes to remind her of the goals she wants to accomplish. For example, the picture she kept of Carol Moseley Braun in her car. The picture reminds her of her goal to one day become a U.S. Senator.

Little Sister’s broken bracelet warmed my heart. I could not believe that she still had it but as she said, when functional, that bracelet symbolizes the bond that we have as sisters. The circle of sisterhood is strong, solid, untarnished, and unbreakable. It obviously meant a lot to her because it was something she treasured. It was a gift from her mentor and the first gift she received as a Delta.

Ability to Overcome Barriers

Each participant had experienced challenges during their lifetimes. They include socioeconomic struggle, racial conflict, gender bias, trials of being a first generation college student, and religious intolerance. Another major theme of Black Feminist Thought is the legacy of struggle. These theorists know that all Black women do not share the same experiences; however, they tend to receive

the same treatment and share similar stories of societal challenges. African American women share solidarity in their daily struggles. Each participant shared stories of overcoming barriers during their lives.

Big Sister grew up in the 50's and 60's, a time in which the country was experiencing racial upheaval and the desegregation of public schools. She pledged in 1961. Her choices of colleges to attend were limited to a HBCU because at that time African American students were not allowed to attend a white college because the university system of Alabama was not integrated until 1963. She was also limited to choice of major. There was a limited amount of jobs available for African American women in the early 60's. Big Sister experienced racial and gender biases within the educational system and vocationally because of legal segregation. It was the era in which she lived that limited her opportunities.

Line Sister stated that her most challenging obstacle to overcome was "the hood barrier". She grew up in a poor inner city neighborhood. She battled limited financial resources coming from a low socio-economic environment and the challenge of being a first generation college student. As a child, she did not realize she was poor but she did know that no one in her neighborhood attended college. However, her grandparents instilled the urgency and need for a higher education. She stated:

I come from the hood, like, not the play-play hood but the inner city, Brooklyn hood. And so you know like people were saying at the table, nobody in my family went to college. Nobody on my block went to college

cause you know, white people (lived) five blocks up. I don't know what they were doing, but in my circle nobody was doing anything. I shouldn't say that... People were doing things they just weren't going to college. They weren't thinking about school. You know school was not something you had to do and so you know I was lucky enough to grow up with parents, with grandparents who didn't go to school, but knew that was the way you get out of the hood.

The Sister in the Center encountered gender bias early on in her career and had to learn how to cope as the only African American at her first job.

Well it's no fun being the only Black girl. I was the only Black girl in my graduating program from undergrad and grad. I was the only Black counselor at my first job. I don't like being places where I'm the only one that looks like me. It's out of my comfort zone. I felt alone at work. I just concentrated on my students. At least there were some Black girls that saw someone at the school that looked like them. I remember getting written up one time by my principal trying to advocate for a program for young Black girls at my school. It was a battle and they couldn't understand where I was coming from.

Chapter Sister has had many obstacles to overcome. She had two children while in college and had to deal with people that doubted her ability to graduate due to being a young unwed mother. She encountered gender bias when she became a minister and experienced racial discrimination when she served as a young college professor at a rural predominantly white university.

She remembered the hurt she felt when the men and women at her church did not support her entering the ministry:

Another barrier was when I had to answer my call to ministry. I had to deal with the barrier of being a female, because men, who I thought were Christian God fearing men, treated me differently when I answered my call to ministry. And even some women said, "Your job is not to preach, your job is to sit here and listen to men tell you what thus sayeth the Lord". So that was a barrier and it was a really hard barrier because I trusted these men and women most of my life cause I grew up in a Baptist church. People that I considered being my friend, mentors, telling me God couldn't have possibly called you to preach because you are a woman. So, every occupation I've had including when I went into higher education was a challenge. I started teaching at Kentucky State when I was 26 years old. The first class I taught were continuing ed. students and those white people were so mean to me. Rural Kentucky, Frankfort is really rural and they would say stuff like, #1 "She's too young and she's black, and what could she possibly tell us?" So my whole life experience I had to try to be more. I had to go the extra mile to validate not just who I thought I was, but who God says I am.

Little Sister, like Line Sister, experienced socioeconomic barriers while matriculating at college. She started crying and got very emotional discussing how she struggled financially through school.

I don't take anything away from my parents because they really did a lot to put me through school but you know sometimes you don't wanna have to get a better loan to take this class or get another loan to do this and do that. I thank God that I have a very nice job now, great degree, and have a nice job so that has been very freeing. We never struggled; we always ate you know we were always clean, we always had clothes, but to really not have to worry about finances was hard. That's stuff we don't talk about. Even from a middle class family, there are still financial barriers that you have to face. I'm not from the hood, I can't ever say I'm from the hood, cause I grew up in house with a front yard and back yard but there's still financial barriers in middle America that people don't talk about.

The participants came from different eras and different socioeconomic backgrounds but they all had different barriers to overcome. The individual stories brought tears to the eyes of the participants when they shared their stories during the focus group interview. Line Sister asked, "Why is this such an emotional thing to talk about?" and Chapter Sister responded, "We know our own story. We lived it and we survived, but when we share our stories with others and we hear similar stories it's confirmation that someone else feels just like me and somebody else has gone through what I went through and that's comforting and freeing." They were not painful tears that we shared but more of tears of relief and an unspoken joy that was felt in knowing you are not the only one.

Summary

The participants shared their stories about their educational, career, and psychosocial mentoring experiences. They shared how their identities have developed and how they have overcome challenges throughout their lifetime. The researcher's findings included five common themes among the participants' narratives: (1) having a foundation of supporters during childhood and adolescence and (2) having continued support from mentors throughout adulthood, (3) perpetuating the cycle of mentoring and achieving success through sisterhood, (4) being confident in one's identity, and (5) having the ability to overcome barriers. The five common themes were discussed in the findings with supporting quotes from the participants. The five themes were identified as common themes within the mentoring relationships among African American women and Black Feminist Thought.

CHAPTER 5

SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS, AND IMPLICATIONS

Introduction

This chapter includes a summary of the study, analysis and discussion of the research findings, conclusions, and implications based on the findings. The researcher also makes future recommendations for research based on the analysis of the data gathered in the study.

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative interview study was to explore the mentoring experiences of five African American women, the researcher and her sorority sistercircle, who are members of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, and how their experiences have contributed to their identity and educational, career, and psychosocial success. This study focused on mentoring as a support system for African American women facing societal challenges such as racial issues, gender bias, and power struggles.

This qualitative interview study was completed using largely individual and focus group interviews. Along with each interview, the participants were able to share and discuss the significance of personal artifacts that symbolized the relationship between themselves and the researcher. The researcher conducted individual interviews with each participant and facilitated a focus group interview to discuss topics that evolved from the individual interviews. The researcher scheduled the interviews with the women at their homes and the focus group was conducted at the home of a mutual friend of the researcher, who also served as

the note taker for the group interview. All interviews were audio taped and transcribed by the researcher. An interview matrix was designed by the researcher and used to find common themes among the personal narratives shared. Anonymity of the participants was maintained through the use of pseudonyms.

Analysis and Discussion of Research Findings

This study focused on mentoring as a support system for African American women facing societal challenges such as racial issues, gender bias, and power struggles. The study addressed the following three research questions:

1. What are the mentoring experiences of African American women in a sorority sistercircle?
2. How do mentoring experiences shape the identity of African American women?
3. How does mentoring empower African American women to overcome societal challenges?

The key finding in this study revealed that African American women who have mentors throughout their lives have strong will and are confident in their self-identity which gives them the strength to overcome societal challenges faced because of the intersectionality of race and gender. This chapter analyzes, interprets, and synthesizes the findings and is organized by the following categories.

1. The mentoring relationships between women and those who support them. (Research Question 1)
2. Identity formation of successful African American women. (Research Question 2)
3. Mentoring as a tool of empowerment in facing societal challenges. (Research Question 3)

These categories are directly related to the study's research questions and were used to code the data and present findings in the previous chapter. The participants' responses to the interview questions relating to their mentoring relationships were reflected in the five overall themes that emerged from the personal narratives. They include (1) having a foundation of supporters during childhood and adolescence and (2) having continued support from mentors throughout adulthood, (3) perpetuating the cycle of mentoring and achieving success through sisterhood, (4) being confident in one's identity, and (5) having the ability to overcome barriers. The researcher's findings support data collected by other educational researchers who have conducted studies on successful African American women and mentoring.

Analytic Category 1: The Mentoring Relationships between Women and Those who Support Them

The first research question sought to explore the relationships between African American women and their mentors. All five participants in the current study had people in their lives that supported them. They had mentors during their childhood years that provided encouragement, support, and guidance. Even

though these women came from different environments and lived during different eras, they all had family members, teachers, and community members who served as mentors. All of the participants also had mentors throughout adulthood that included professors, co-workers, church members, and sorority sisters who gave them educational, career, and psychosocial support.

During their childhood, all of the participants shared that they had a parent or grandparent that set high expectations for them. Line Sister shared “In our house there was always an expectation to go to school.” The Sister in the Center also remembered that her father did not give her the option to quit school after high school. “College was like the next grade. My dad wouldn’t have it any other way.” I believe that the high expectations that parental figures set led to the participants setting high expectations for themselves.

The findings of the current study support those of Watkins (2009) who documented the educational experiences of African American women. She recognized that we learn our first lessons at home from our parents and those who help to raise us as children. She found that many survival skills and self-reliance comes from home.

The findings of the current study reflect the importance of mentoring as noted in the review of literature. Mentoring relationships help one to achieve their goals and consist of mutual respect, trust and understanding (Bova, 2000; Sommerville, 1994). Line Sister stated that she did not remember a time where she did not have a mentor in her life. Little Sister shared that through her peer

mentoring relationships there was a mutual respect and understanding between her friends and herself.

The participants of the current study not only had support from family during their childhood but also from African American women that were not blood relatives such as church members, teachers, and friends of their mothers. In Collins' (2000) declaration of how to raise resilient African American children, she discussed the importance of Black motherhood and othermothering. These women are not blood relatives, but a network of women in the community that serve as guides for young Black children. There is a history of African American women sharing the responsibility of raising the children of the community. The children have a bond with their othermothers that are as strong as the bond between their birthmothers and themselves. Little Sister expressed her "appreciation of having many teachers in elementary, middle, and high school to help guide and shape" her into the woman she became. Chapter Sister remembered how the women of her church and her othermothers helped her get through school.

There were several types of mentors that helped support the participants of this study throughout their adulthood, including sorority sisters, co-workers, peers, church members, and college professors. All five participants shared stories of their mentoring relationships with members of the sorority. Line Sister, Chapter Sister, and Little Sister also had mentoring relationships with other African American women that served as career mentors.

Big Sister recognized that being a Delta afforded her the opportunity to make lifelong friendships similar to Casto et al. (2005) who found that mentoring does have elements of friendship. The current study found that all of the participants had unique definitions of sisterhood yet recognized that the mentoring relationships and friendships they had formed with their sorority sisters were valuable and aided them in finding success.

The findings of the current study are in agreement with those of Bova (2000) and Harris (1994) in that African American women receive psychosocial mentoring from their friends and extended family because mentors are not always available at school or at work. The Sister in the Circle voiced her frustrations of being the only African American female at her job, and how she relied on her sistercircle to be there when she needed to vent about frustrations experienced at work. Little Sister shared similar disappointment when she realized that there were no African American professors at her law school.

Based on the current findings, the sorority imparts its members with the opportunity to build leadership skills and encourage career mentoring. Harris (1994) found that the sorority, in addition to providing sisterhood, also provided the participants with the opportunity for leadership development, to uplift each other, and identify their strength through the organization. Big Sister found similar aspects from her mentoring relationships with other sorority sisters. She felt that "Delta allowed her to develop leadership skills." Chapter Sister also found career mentors when she started a new job at the State Capital.

The findings of the current study support those of Bailey (2001) who researched the factors that contributed to the successful careers of prominent African American women. In accordance with Bailey, the participants of the current study have multiple supportive relationships, which included family, friends, church, and community members, who were essential to their success.

The participants of this study also felt that their mentoring relationships helped them with their careers. Line Sister discusses her mentoring relationships with her co-workers. She is in a field of work where African American women are a minority so to have other African American women that are more experienced in her field was helpful. She shared that one former boss was “a real mentor and not just someone you work for...she helped me move forward in my career.”

Little Sister expressed a connection between herself and two African American professors at the University of Georgia. She said that they were supportive and helped her get through her undergraduate experience. She shared, “I had two professors one from the history department and one from the English department, and I tried to take every class I could from them. They helped me, impressed me, and wrote my letters of recommendation for law school.” Williams et al. (2005) and Fries-Britt and Kelly (2005) asserted that the relationships between African American professors and graduate students evolve from teacher-student mentorships to peer mentoring experiences where they can learn from each other. All of the participants of the current study had professors that mentored them. I feel that the participants expressed the importance of their

educational mentoring relationships, and how it helped with their retention and graduation from college.

One thing that all five participants have in common was they had sorors who mentored them, some during childhood and some during adulthood. Another observation was that all five participants have been mentors to others. The cycle of mentoring permeates the organization. It is evident in its programming and throughout the history of the sorority.

The late Dorothy I. Height was a well-known civil rights activist and a former President of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority. In her 2003 memoir, *Open Wide the Freedom Gates*, she stated that sisterhood among Black women is powerful. She wrote “Delta was a sisterly arena that tested and nurtured my leadership capabilities- a network of sisters extending to the east, west, north, and south, across the oceans and seas” (p. 249). The participants of the current study had similar sentiments about the organization and its sisterhood. Chapter Sister shared her story about feeling welcomed by sorors when she traveled to different cities across the country.

Big Sister expressed her feelings about mentoring each other. She stated “We could save a whole lot of Black women through motivation and support“. The findings of this study support Patton and Harper (2003) who discussed the importance sororities’ play in leadership development and career networking. Therefore, based on the findings of the current study, the participants felt that their mentoring relationships were important and helped them to become successful African American women.

Analytic Category 2: Identity Formation of Successful African American Women

The second research question that guided this research was how does sorority affiliation help to shape one's identity. Typically, women that are interested in becoming members of Delta have already established themselves. They have achieved academic excellence, held positions of leadership on their campus or at their jobs, and are confident women. Delta does not create an identity for its members; its members are already self-defined. However, Delta does provide an unlimited opportunity for its members to learn and grow through cultural and educational programming and social action. Membership in Delta affirms the gender and racial identity of African American women who are already empowered and self-confident. The participants described themselves as self-motivated, strong-willed and hard working, all of which are traits needed to be successful. They are also traits that the organization looks for in selecting women to join their ranks. The findings of the current study corroborate those of Harris & Mitchell (2008) who found that members of Delta Sigma Theta have supportive relationships with other African American women which contributes to their self-definition.

One common identifier among the participants of the current study was the importance of religion in their lives. Little Sister stated that her faith in God gave her the strength to get through difficult times and Chapter Sister expressed how her faith was essential to her motivation to succeed. Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003) assessed the impact of racism and sexism on the identity,

spirituality, and career success of African American women. Similar to the participants of their study, the current participants found strength within sister circles and through their spiritual faith, and these experiences shaped their identity and self-image.

In Chapter Sister's definition of sisterhood, she labeled the sorority as a safe space to share and listen to each other, which supports the work of Collins (2000) who discussed the power of self-definition as a way African American women can have a voice. Collins identified family, church, and community organizations as safe spaces where women can be themselves and share their stories. The Sister in the Center felt that her membership in Delta has become a large part of her life. Collins also believed that "sorority affiliation was part of (one's) identity and would forever serve as a source of support, networking, even beyond the undergraduate years" (p. 70). The view of the participants in the current study coincides with this statement as they felt that Delta was a part of their identity.

Several of the current study's participants discussed their experiences of being a Black woman. Their responses are reflective of Zimmerman, McQueen and Guy's (2003) idea that African American women "view their race as part of who they are. It affects how others see them and how they see themselves" (p. 4). I felt that the five participants exhibited characteristics of African American women who embraced their race and gender, yet were open-minded enough to appreciate men and people of other races.

Analytic Category 3: Mentoring as a Tool of Empowerment in Facing Societal Challenges

The third research question addressed the barriers that African American women must overcome in order to be successful. The participants faced a variety of barriers throughout their lives which include racism, sexism, socio-economic, discrimination at school, work, and within the church. The researcher found that having a strong support group and positive self-awareness helped the participants to conquer these challenges.

One barrier that one participant faced was a test of her faith. Chapter Sister shared her dismay when her church members frowned upon her becoming a minister. Collins (2000) also discussed how African American women are known as the backbone of the Black church as long as they stay in the background.

Another barrier that all five participants shared was the obstacles they faced in college. Big Sister was limited to what school she could attend due to legal segregation. Little Sister and Line Sister were first generation college students. Chapter Sister faced racial discrimination while serving as a professor in rural Kentucky and The Sister in the Center had difficulty adjusting to being the only minority student in her classes. In addition to these obstacles, some faced financial difficulties as well. Harris (1994) noted that it is important for African American female college students to have support from organizations like sororities to overcome such obstacles.

Three of the five participants were also a part of a support group for Deltas that were working on their dissertations. This network of sisters provided peer support to each other. The aid they received from this informal educational mentoring group was significant in helping them to complete their graduate degrees. These current findings support previous studies that focused on the mentoring relationships of students in graduate school (Patton & Harper, 2003; Williams et al., 2005) that found that graduate students need psychosocial support and can find support from their peers.

Another major barrier that the women faced was unfair treatment at work. The Sister in the Center shared the hurt she felt when a principal told her that he could not offer her a job because he had to hire a man for the position. Chapter Sister expressed the difficulties of trying to “climb the ladder of success when men built the ladder, held the ladder, and put oil on every rung”. These findings corroborate the idea that there is a lack of African American women in corporate America that hold positions of power, therefore making it difficult for African American women to find mentors that will help them advance within their careers (Kaba, 2008; Moore, 1999).

Conclusions

The underlying theme of this study was sisterhood. Sisterhood was the connecting force that ties this study together. Sisterhood connects the purpose, research questions, qualitative interview study, participants and their mentoring experiences, Black Feminist Thought theoretical framework, themes and findings.

The conclusions of the current study support those of Jones and Shorter-Gooden (2003) who addressed the importance of caring and love among African American women. Having emotional support helps African American women to cope with the challenges they encounter throughout their lives.

Based on the findings of this study, the researcher found that it is important for African American women to be encouraged and supported throughout their childhood and adulthood. The mentoring experiences of the participants helped to shape their identity and helped them to overcome barriers that African American women encounter. In exploring their identity development, it was clear that the participants believed in themselves and advocated for themselves in addition to being mentored. Membership in Delta Sigma Theta gave the participants the opportunity to be mentored and to mentor others in addition to a lifelong sisterhood and sense of belonging.

Each participant experienced support from her family, teachers, coaches, church members, and community that led to positive experiences that helped shape her identity. The participants were exposed to positive people, images, and experiences, which they believed, help shape them into being resilient and strong willed women. The researcher found that their self-motivation helped them to set high goals for themselves. The participants had a sense of agency or will to stand up for themselves. They not only had advocates but were able to advocate for themselves as well.

Each participant had mentors throughout adulthood who helped her become successful. These women had mentors to help them navigate through

college and mentors to help guide them throughout their careers. The participants had co-workers, sorority sisters, college professors and peers to help them get through college and help them be successful in their careers. The participants had socioeconomic and financial barriers to overcome. Some had experienced discrimination at school and work and others fought prejudices within the church and the community. The participants shared similar backgrounds, characteristics, and experiences that exemplify a sense of solidarity among them which corroborate the idea that regardless of social background African American women have collective self-worth (Bell-McDonald, 2007).

After exploring and analyzing the stories of the participants, the researcher concluded that sisterhood is not a requirement to become successful. It is not mandatory or compulsory; however, the women who are fortunate to be a part of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority benefit from the mentorship and sisterhood that it provides.

Implications

The implications for this study were derived from the findings and conclusions. Primary and secondary school educators that work with young African American girls should be aware of the future challenges these young ladies will face. African American teachers have a responsibility to help these young ladies avoid the struggle that they themselves may have encountered as children. Through guidance and mentoring they can help young girls to prepare for the challenge.

College personnel that work with African American women should be aware that providing mentors on the undergraduate and graduate levels helps with retention. If the college or university does not have a mentoring program for minority students in place, it is recommended that they offer extracurricular activities and organizations that give the students the opportunity to receive peer mentoring. Whether it is a sorority, a social club, or a national organization (i.e., NCNW), the school should provide some form of support especially at predominantly white institutions. African American professors should also be encouraged to mentor African American students and take an active role in advocating for students' civil rights.

Corporations must implement mentoring programs where top-level minority executives are paired with entry-level employees to help them navigate their way to the top through career and psychosocial mentoring. If there are no higher level employees that can serve as mentors a support group where employees can gather, peer mentor, and discuss issues or barriers that may occur would be helpful.

The findings also imply that there is a level of seriousness in young professional African American women today. There seems to be a sense of urgency to obtain success and this form of self-respect could be a theme to be further developed.

Local sorority chapters in the community can advocate for needy African American women and children. Delta Sigma Theta and the other three sororities

of the National Pan Hellenic Council should continue to serve the people of their communities through programming and scholarship.

Recommendations for Future Research

The researcher recommends additional research on the impact of mentoring on the success of African American women. A larger sample size should be considered and possible investigation using members of the other three Black Greek sororities. Additional research will validate the findings of this study.

The researcher recommends that research be conducted on the importance of parent support and the importance of teacher support throughout childhood and adulthood. This information could be helpful to teachers who teach African American girls from low-income backgrounds and young ladies who will be first generation college students.

Theorists of Black Feminist Thought not only address issues of gender and race but also focus on class and power. The researcher recommends further investigation of how class and power play a role in the mentoring experiences of African American women. Since some of the participants of the study also mentioned how their religious beliefs gave them strength to overcome barriers, it is also recommended that further exploration of how their spirituality affects their identity development.

The researcher recommends that curriculum specialists research educational policies that reflect the cultural needs of African American women. I recommend possibly investigating gender separate classrooms and/or schools

as a policy strategy to improve retention and student motivation. I would also recommend researching funding and implementation of extracurricular programs at the elementary, middle, and high school levels that address the needs of young African American girls.

Limitations

There were three limitations to this study. One limitation was the assumption that African American women could only benefit from African American women as mentors. There are women that have had successful mentoring relationships with male mentors and mentors of another race. Another limitation to the study was the small sample size. This qualitative study focused on five women and their voices will not speak or represent the experience of every African American female in the United States or every member of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority. The third limitation was the difficulty to access certain information about a sorority. A researcher that is a non-sorority member may have a hard time accessing members or understanding certain experiences and vernacular that a member would understand. Information about many sororities is not public knowledge and there are some things that cannot be revealed.

Dissemination

The researcher plans to disseminate the findings of this study by submitting a completed copy of the dissertation to Dissertation Abstracts International. The researcher plans to share the findings of her research through journal publication to ensure the topic will be available to a multitude of readers. The researcher is open to share this research with any person interested.

Concluding Thoughts

My goal was to explore how mentors could help shape the identity of African American women and help them overcome barriers in order to achieve success. Being a member of a sorority gives African American women access to mentors, and fosters an environment to gain leadership skills and provides programs where one can mentor others. African American women face barriers due to their race and gender and having mentors and a strong self-identity helps these women face challenges and achieve success.

I learned that encouraging children is important. In my role as a high school counselor, I have met many students who were not supported during their childhood and the esteem issues that follow can be debilitating. I also realized that even though every African American woman does not attend college and join a sorority, every African American woman can be empowered and encouraged by a member of the sorority. The outreach that we provide in the community touches many lives.

I was able to take the lived experiences of five African American women and explore their relationships with other African American women who serve as mentors. The participants were happy to share their experiences and enlightened and inspired by each other's stories. It is my hope that the reader is inspired as well. My concluding thought: One finds strength, guidance, and unconditional love when encircled by sisterhood.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

April 2010

Greetings Soror:

As you know, I am a graduate student in the Curriculum Studies program at Georgia Southern University. As part of my doctoral research, I am conducting interviews to help determine the influence of mentorship amongst African American women.

Your participation in the process will help me to explore your mentoring experiences and your perceptions of how your affiliation with Delta Sigma Theta Sorority has contributed to your educational, career, and psychosocial success.

Participation in this research study will include completion of a demographic questionnaire, an individual interview, and a small group interview.

Please consider this invitation as an opportunity to provide insight regarding key factors that aid African American women maintain and achieve success. Furthermore, your participation in this study will help identify characteristics associated with African American women who have achieved success in education and business.

Based on your prior achievements, I believe you would make an ideal person to interview for this study. The interview will be recorded on audiotape however these tapes will be destroyed at the completion of the study. Anonymity will be ensured by the use of pseudonyms. Your privacy is of utmost importance.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You are not obligated to answer any questions you don't feel comfortable answering. There is no penalty for deciding not to participate in this study. You may withdraw without penalty or retribution at any time.

If you consent to participate in this study and to the terms above please let me know. I will contact you within one week to confirm your decision. If you have any additional questions, please feel free to call me at 404-314-6978. You may also contact me by e-mail at nike2dst@bellsouth.net.

Sisterly,
Francene Breakfield

Appendix B

COLLEGE OF GRADUATE STUDIES

DEPARTMENT OF CURRICULUM, FOUNDATIONS, AND READING

1. My name is Francene Amaris Breakfield, and I am a graduate student at Georgia Southern University working on my doctorate in Curriculum Studies. I am interested in exploring the mentoring experiences of African American women.

2. Purpose of the Study:

The purpose of this qualitative research study is to explore the mentoring experiences of a select sample of African American women who are members of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority and their perceptions of how their membership in the organization has contributed to their educational, career, and psychosocial success. The proposed study will focus on mentoring as a support system for African American women facing societal challenges such as racial issues, gender bias, and power struggles.

3. Procedures to be followed:

Participation in this research will include a qualitative interview. Interviews will be recorded using an audiotape recorder for the purpose of transcribing the information accurately. The researcher will keep the audio taped information in a secure vault. The tapes will be transcribed, and then destroyed after July 2013. The researcher will be responsible for scheduling all interviews that will take place in a geographically neutral setting agreed upon by both parties. All participants have the right to refuse to answer any questions during the interview and may terminate the interview at anytime, or have any information deleted from the analysis.

4. Discomforts and Risks:

African-American women re-living their experiences can be sensitive for some. This methodological approach to this research project calls upon the subjects to answer questions, which are personal and may be characterized as sensitive topics for some of the participants. Ergo, the interview questions may elicit slight embarrassment or latent emotional reactions related to the recall of certain life events.

Participants have the right to refuse to answer questions, at anytime during the interviews.

5. Benefits:

- a. The benefit to participants includes their ability to take part in a study that will possibly increase the fund of scholarly literature addressing mentoring relationships among African American women and the ways in which their intersectional identities impact their educational, career, and psychosocial success.
- b. The benefit to society includes the possibility of gaining more knowledge about the experiences of women, particularly successful African-American women who are members of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority.

6. Duration/Time:

I anticipate that it will take between 45 to 90 minutes to complete. However, the researcher understands that the interview time may vary based on the respondent and level of rapport.

7. Statement of Confidentiality:

Participation and participants' names will be kept confidential. Pseudonyms will be used to keep the true identity of the participant confidential. Copies of the study results are available upon participant's request. The researcher will store the audio taped information in a secure vault to ensure confidentiality. The tapes will be transcribed, and then destroyed after July 2013. The personal information shared on the demographic questionnaire will only be seen by the researcher. These questionnaires will be kept with the audiotapes in a secured vault and shredded after July 2013.

8. Right to Ask Questions:

Participants have the right to ask questions and have those questions answered. If you have questions about this study, please contact the researcher named above or the researcher's faculty advisor, whose contact information is located at the end of the informed consent. For questions concerning your rights as a research participant, contact Georgia Southern University Office of Research Services and Sponsored Programs at 912-478-0843.

9. Compensation:

Participants will not receive any monetary or other incentives for participating in this study. Participation in this study is completely voluntary.

10. Voluntary Participation:

Participation in this study is voluntary and may be terminated at any time without risk or penalty.

11. Penalty:

There is no penalty for deciding not to answer any questions during the interview. Participants may decide at any time that they don't want to participate further and may withdraw without penalty or retribution.

12. Deception will not be involved in this study. Participants will be informed of the purpose and intent from the onset of the study. Prior to conducting the interview, participants will be informed of their rights.

13. All participants in this research study are over the age of 18 years old. If you consent to participate in this research study and to the terms above, please sign your name and indicate the date below. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep for your records.

Title of Project: THE MENTORING EXPERIENCES OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN IN DELTA SIGMA THETA SORORITY

Principal Investigator: Francene Amaris Breakfield
2989 Winding Grove Drive
Lithonia, Georgia 30038
(404) 314-6978
nike2dst@bellsouth.net

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Cordelia Zinskie
Department of Curriculum, Foundations, and Reading
P.O. Box 8144
Statesboro, Georgia 30460
(912) 478-0672
czinskie@georgiasouthern.edu

Participant Signature

Date

I, the undersigned, verify that the above informed consent procedure has been followed.

Investigator Signature

Date

APPENDIX C

Demographic Questionnaire

Pseudonym _____

Birthdate _____ State of Birth _____

Educational History

Name of College/University	Major	Degree	Dates Attended

Career History

Place of Employment	Position	Begin Date (Mo./Yr.)	End Date (Mo./Yr.)

People who encouraged my accomplishments are (check as many as apply):

__ Professors__ Coworkers__ Family__ Church Members

__ Coaches__ Supervisors__ Peers__ Groups (civic, sorority, etc.)

__ Teachers__ Colleagues__ Others__ Strangers

Who would you consider to be your support networks for academic, career, and personal achievement? Please explain.

APPENDIX D

Individual Interview Protocol*

1. Tell me about yourself. Include significant experiences and people who influenced your educational and career choices.
2. Who encouraged you to achieve success? How was support given?
3. How have other African American women inspired you?
4. When did you become interested in Delta Sigma Theta Sorority?
5. What does sisterhood mean to you? How is it manifested in your sorority?
6. How has your sorority involvement impacted your life?
7. What were the positive and negatives of your sorority involvement and from your perspective how can the negatives be improved?
8. Describe the personal artifact that symbolizes our relationship and what it means to you.

*Adapted from Bailey, 2001; Harris, 1994

APPENDIX E

Focus Group Questions

Three topics: Self & Social Identity, Overcoming barriers, Sisterhood

Self identity

Personal characteristics, level of education, career, gender, race, physical aspects, SES, position in the family, social roles, membership/group affiliations

1. How would you describe yourself? Using personal, professional, and social identifiers
2. How did you become the woman you are today?

Barriers

Racism/sexism- everyday subtle, special case of blatant, name calling, insult ones intelligence, job (pay, promotion, position), education (denial of scholarship, classroom teacher/student, grade) social (civil/laws), relationships, power struggle, socioeconomic and financial struggle

3. Discuss your experiences of barriers that you have overcome?
4. What strategies or resources did you use to overcome those barriers?

Sisterhood

Define sisterhood (read previous answers from individual interviews and poem) discuss

5. Can you give examples of sisterhood in and out of the context of Delta?
6. What makes sorority sisterhood different from other types of sisterhood?

Discuss the part of the Sorority Oath that addresses intersectionality

7. How has sisterhood helped you overcome barriers?

Personal Artifacts

Discuss significance of artifacts and conclude

APPENDIX F

Georgia Southern University
Office of Research Services & Sponsored Programs
Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Phone: 912-478-0843

Fax: 912-478-0719

IRB@GeorgiaSouthern.edu

Veazey Hall 2021

P.O. Box 8005

Statesboro, GA 30460

To: Francene Amaris Breakfield
2989 Winding Grove Drive
Lithonia, GA 30038

CC: Charles E. Patterson
Associate Vice President for Research

From: Office of Research Services and Sponsored Programs
Administrative Support Office for Research Oversight Committees
(IACUC/IBC/IRB)

Date: March 31, 2010

Subject: Status of Application for Approval to Utilize Human Subjects in Research

After a review of your proposed research project numbered **H10287** and titled “**The Mentoring Experiences of African-American Women in Delta Sigma Theta Sorority**”, it appears that (1) the research subjects are at minimal risk, (2) appropriate safeguards are planned, and (3) the research activities involve only procedures which are allowable. You are authorized to enroll up to **5** subjects.

Therefore, as authorized in the Federal Policy for the Protection of Human Subjects, I am pleased to notify you that the Institutional Review Board has approved your proposed research.

This IRB approval is in effect for one year from the date of this letter. If at the end of that time, there have been no changes to the research protocol; you may request an extension of the approval period for an additional year. In the interim, please provide the IRB with any information concerning any significant adverse event, **whether or not it is believed to be related to the study**, within five working days of the event. In addition, if a change or modification of the approved methodology becomes necessary, you must notify the IRB Coordinator **prior** to initiating any such changes or modifications. At that time, an amended application for IRB approval may be submitted. Upon completion of your data collection, you are required to complete a *Research Study Termination* form to notify the IRB Coordinator, so your file may be closed.

Sincerely,

Eleanor Haynes
Compliance Officer